# Glittering Orientations

## Towards a Non-Figurative Queer Art Practice

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A thesis submitted to Birmingham City University in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

April 2014

Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham City University

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# Abstract

Contemporary art practices that have most clearly been identified as 'queer' have tended to be figural representations of sexual bodies and sexual communities. This thesis argues that queer encounters with non-figurative art can occur through audience experiences of different modes of disorientation and uncertain re-orientation. The discussion presents and develops Sara Ahmed's work on *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and specifically investigates ideas of 'orientation', 'disorientation', 'facing' and 'extension' in art practice in order to theorise queer encounters with art. In doing so, the research develops an expanded notion of queer beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities; not to exclude such identities but rather to add to existing queer art practices a further troubling of representation and bodily uncertainty that is focussed on experiencing art.

The aims of this research are threefold: firstly, it is to investigate the value and limitations of representational 'queer' art. Secondly, it is to explore the possibility of creating queer art installations that do not contain overt representations of sexual bodies or sexual communities. The final aim is to examine how experiencing disorientating art practice might engender queer encounters. In the process of understanding experiential encounters the discussion critically explores the relationship between phenomenology and queer theory.

The research aims are specifically explored through the making of five art installations. My first installation; *Club Cave 27* was created with attention to stripping away overt

representations of sexuality or sexual identity.  The second and third installations *Glitter* and *Scott Walker* engage with troubling ideas of orientation and investigate the potentially queer materiality of glitter.  The fourth show *Desk Works* was concerned with enacting disorientating encounters whilst the use of desks came about through my experience of feeling primarily orientated towards writing in a 'practice-led' Ph.D.  My final installation *queer:reading:room* further enacts disorientating experiences through bodily uncertainty.  Taken together, the five installations constitute a body of non-figurative queer art practice that is generated primarily through disorientating affects.

In making the audience 'feel a bit queer' through experiential, embodied queer encounters, this research also critically explores the kind of knowledge claims connected to experience; that of standpoint epistemology or situated knowledge.  The enactment of disorientating bodily experiences through art practice develops a significant epistemological position (with all the attendant ironies of that status) by queering standpoint epistemology in a way that encourages queer ways of knowing through bodily uncertainties.

# Chapter 1. Introduction

As an artist attracted to a post-minimalist aesthetic but also to queer theory, I wondered whether queer theory could still be relevant to my 'type' of art practice: one that did not use figurative strategies.   For despite David Halperin's assertion that queer could be a "horizon of possibility" (1997:79); "That there is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers" (1997:62), contemporary art that has been most clearly identified as 'queer' has tended to be figural representations of sexual bodies and sexual communities.  See here, for example, the work of Del LaGrace Volcano or the spectrum of art practice in Claude Summers' *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Art* (2004). My research then began as a way to explore more expansive ideas of queer through examining  what non-figurative queer art might look and feel like and to experiment with how far queer could be stretched through art practice before it loses what Jonathan Katz calls "social traction" (Katz interview, 19 May 2009).

## 1.1     Research aims

This study, through art practice based research, has three interconnected aims.  Firstly, it is to investigate the value and limitations of representational queer art.  Secondly, it is to explore the possibility of creating queer art installations that do not contain overt representations of sexual bodies or sexual communities.  The final aim is to examine how experiencing disorientating art practice might engender queer encounters.

This study attends to making the audience feel 'a bit queer' which requires an embodied, experiential exploration of queer encounters.  Encounters that offer the possibility of an experience for the audience that realises Deborah Britzman's (1995) and William Haver's (1997) assertion that "what is important is not that 'anyone might be queer', but that 'something queer might happen to anyone'" (Havers, 1997:288).

In the process of understanding experiential encounters this thesis critically explores the relationship between phenomenology and queer theory.  The discussion presents and develops Sara Ahmed's work *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and specifically investigates ideas of 'orientation', 'disorientation', 'extension' and 'facing' and how these terms might operate differently in the context of art practice in order to theorise queer encounters with art.  These terms are laid out in chapter three and unpicked in chapters four to seven.  Crucially, and very differently to Ahmed, it is through a close analysis of my own art practice that I collate different modes of disorientation and uncertain reorientation in making my own claims to knowledge.

Most visual representations that are interpreted as queer involve sexual identity and sexual expression.  Through attention to art practice I aim to find other strategies to displace this situation.  Subsequently, this thesis argues that queer encounters with non-figurative art can occur through audience experiences of disorientation and uncertain re-orientation.  In doing so, my research develops an expanded notion of queer beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities; not to exclude such identities but rather to add to existing queer art practices a further troubling of representation and bodily uncertainty that is focussed on experiencing art.

In making the audience 'feel a bit queer' through experiential, embodied queer encounters, this research also critically explores the kind of knowledge claims connected to experience; that of standpoint epistemology or situated knowledge. Situated knowledge is defined here as an attention to the researcher's position and identity and to the power relations involved in knowledge production.

## 1.2    Methodology

My methodology lies not in one neat chapter, but is woven throughout the thesis as each chapter brings up different issues and insights. My methodology does not exist in isolation from my methods of enquiry. Rather, they are closely connected. My methodology concerns what knowledge claims I am making. More specifically in this Ph.D. it is an epistemological stance about how knowledge about the world is uncertain and contingent. This is conceptually developed as a queering of standpoint epistemology through attention to my art practice. As I go on to discuss in more detail, art practice as a method proved particularly suited to this methodology for its attention to uncertain, experiential and contingent knowledges. In addition, queer theory's attendant concerns about knowledge, power, excess and uncertainty and phenomenology's concern with embodied knowledge proved particularly pertinent theoretical fields to draw on for the conceptualisation of my methodology as an uncertain, or queering of, standpoint epistemology. In chapters four to seven, the *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters I show how these theoretical and methodological tools have enabled relevant and pertinent exploration of my research aims.

It is also important to consider the position of the audience in relation to the art practice and the thesis. In this thesis I have made claims that queer disorientation through art can

be a strategy to create moments of epistemological ambiguity, moments of 'unknowing' and uncertainty into how to approach some objects, some bodies and some ideas. With this in mind, I have purposely resisted a methodological model that relies on empirical evidence linking verifiable knowledge claims of audience experience to queer encounters.

I have shown the failure of questionnaires to straightforwardly gather slippery queer evidence because moments of 'ungraspability' do not reside in assured and accountable language. My claim then to making the audience 'feel a bit queer' relies on conjecture and my own experience of the work as well as, in some instances, questionnaires and their utilisation through a polyvocal writing method and discussions with supervisors and peers. This is a form of conjecture that dwells in productive uncertainty which is consistent with a queer project such as this.

The way I undertook knowledge production was through a "multi method" or "triangulated" approach (Malins and Gray, 1995:9). My research aims were explored from different methodological angles, whilst at the same time I deliberated on the impossibility of complete triangulation. The literatures I draw on are diverse, ranging in field from cultural studies and sociology, philosophy, art theory and pedagogy. This bricolage is a sort of "scavenger methodology" (Halberstam, 1998:13); one that "refuses the academic compulsion towards disciplinary coherence" yet it is also something more than that, enacted through the art practice itself; a new epistemological position, one that is complex and multiple in its possible readings and experience of it.

## 1.3    Methods

The research aims were specifically explored through my methods.  My methods consisted

of theoretical analysis; creation and analysis of five art installations; questionnaire research

following on from my *Club Cave 27* art installation and interviews with photographer Del

LaGrace Volcano and art historian Jonathan D. Katz.  (For further information on research

materials (questionnaire template, completed questionnaires and interviews) please contact

the author at www.lisametherell.co.uk).  These methods are interdependent; closely

connected with my problem and theory, and they have been selected, developed (and, in

the case of the questionnaire, rejected) for their suitability to best address my research

aims.   This is what Martin Bulmer has conceptualised as "the interplay of problems,

theories and methods" (2003:32).  My research concerns how experiences of non-figurative

art could engender queer encounters and I explore these through a perspective

theoretically informed by queer theory and phenomenology.   My methodology,

accordingly, draws on the same apparatus.


## 1.4    Thesis structure

In chapter two, *Representation and Queer Art*, I lay out a culturally inflected argument about

the problems that arise with representation.  I discuss the power that is often hidden in

representation through the unacknowledged discursive regime of the 'real' and I highlight

the limitations on the conditions of visibility for non-normative sexual identities.  Through

discussions with art historian and activist Jonathan Katz I reflect upon the tensions of leaving

sexual difference out of a queer picture.   I then discuss the strategies present in the

particular art practices of Del LaGrace Volcano, Catherine Opie, Jack Pierson and Duane

Michals respectively.  Firstly I explore representation of sexual difference through figuration.

Secondly by citing these representations and critiquing them and thirdly through art

practices that disorientate the audience beyond the figurative.  I am using the term

figurative here to mean representations of the figural.  For each strategy I discuss their

strengths and contextual necessity as well as their limitations.  It is worth saying here that

this is not meant to be a survey of queer art practices (an impossibility as I discuss in chapter

two), but rather a contextual review that situates my research aims.   It is also important to

make clear that this is not a thesis arguing against representation or representational queer

art.  We need representations to live as social beings, and concepts themselves are always

representational.  Rather, it is an investigation into what non-figurative art might be able to

do in a queer encounter with it that more figurative practices cannot.

In chapter three I consider queer theory, phenomenology and their sometime troubled

relationship.  I look at their very different histories and concerns and what bringing them

together has done in more recent feminist, queer and trans studies work and what it also

might do in relation to art practice and in developing an uncertain standpoint epistemology.

I briefly present Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (primarily a Maurice Merleau-Ponty

inflected phenomenology), and her terms 'orientation' and 'disorientation'.  These ideas are

then tested, *troubled* (a specific definition of which is developed in chapter three) and

expanded on through the subsequent four *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters.

Following on from the contextual review chapters of two and three are my four *Practising

Theory into Practice* chapters (see DVD at the back of this thesis, or my website:

www.lisametherell.co.uk for installation films, soundtracks and additional images).  All four

of these chapters have at least one artwork at their centre, with my theoretical and

methodological framework developed through on-going investigation and reflection on the

art practice itself; the successes, the failures and where they led me next.  The installations

are chronological.  Each of the four *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters has a broad

theme, but with a qualified 'and' to enable an exploration into what else the art practice

might do outside of this theme yet still relevant to my research aims.  In this way, I attend to

both my position as a researcher within a higher education context and also to "the

complexity and rich multiplicity of concerns in an artwork" (Vincs, 2007:103).


Whilst acknowledging here the limitations and irony of documenting non-representational

art through representation, each of my artworks is described with a walkthrough to give the

reader a flavour of how it might be experienced phenomenologically, as well as culturally,

empirically and performatively.  My descriptions often involve a theatrical use of the

present tense –the aim being to jar the reader into the 'present' situation of the work and to

engage with and represent how one moves around the work and the space in which the

work is contextualised.

The *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters begin with *Club Cave 27* in chapter four:

*Stripping Representation*.  The making *of Club Cave 27* arose from an attempt to circumvent

the politics of representation by removing all references to queer identities in favour of

something else that might be able to disorientate the audience in interesting ways.  The

signifying force of the found materials is foregrounded.  These materials were partly

responsible for an unanticipated disorientating encounter based on fear and horror.  I

explore these ideas further through the writing of Graham Harman and the art practice of

David Altmejd and assess the value and limitations of horror and fear to a theorisation of a queer encounter.

There were aspects of *Club Cave 27*, such as the audio, that I was not quite sure how to discuss and this chapter became a reflection on the uncertain status of the art work and how this unsettled knowledge stands in tension with ideas of located knowledge. A polyvocal method of description, arising from my questionnaires, is tested out here and I discuss standpoint epistemology, queer modes of knowledge and how one might queer standpoint epistemology. These ideas are then reworked through subsequent art practices in chapters five to seven in order to develop a queering of standpoint epistemology.

Whilst chapter four has *Representation* as its thematic, chapter five revolves around the term *Orientation* and focusses on two installations: *Glitter* and *Scott Walker*. Glitter is the material that I used sparingly in *Club Cave 27* that, along with the sand, began to bring up interesting ideas of how an art work circulates and that I explore in more depth here. Through the use of Carl Andre's floor works I explore Ahmed's definition of orientation as one that requires an ability to extend in space as well being near enough to face objects. I consider how *Glitter* extends and the difficulty of orienting oneself to or of 'facing' an artwork that operates on an uncountable scale and is in constant movement. I begin to trouble Ahmed's use of 'facing' and 'extension' by suggesting a mode of disorientation in which distance is collapsed and, using Yve Lomax's work, where "the middle is everywhere" (2000:46). The *Glittering Orientations* of the title are discussed here; a facing of multiple locations and modes of knowing at any one time. I also consider the queer materiality of glitter as one that spins out towards many references including the celebratory excess of

fabulation and queer club spaces.  In the *Scott Walker* installation I reflect on different kinds of contingent orientation - that of an orientation towards the white cube and the potential bodily disorientation that can occur in queer club space.

Chapter six: (Dis)o*rientations Towards the Writing Desk,* analyses both desk-work and desk works.  I begin by reflecting on the orientation towards the writing desk I felt early on in my Ph.D. research – the pressure to write above and beyond the making.  I describe three phases in this orientation that charted my frustrations and anxieties about the writing and led, through the writing experience, to a realisation of the benefits of writing about and with practice.  I then go on to look at three different desk-works that I made: *Mirrorball Desk*, *This Desk Does not Fly* and *Brown Desk*.  I offer a brief description of each one and reflect on how they engage with different modes of disorientation through ideas of wooziness, uncertain orientations, objects that slip away and how one might linger with queer objects.  These ideas are used to reflect further on how disorienting encounters with art practice can challenge how knowledge is located and in doing so bring queer modes of knowing into phenomenological experiences.

The final installation I write about in chapter seven: *queer:reading:room* is perhaps the most complex.  I pull out some of the most relevant concerns in relation to my research problematics using the specific material thematics of wonky objects, CCTV, glosticks, mirrorboard and the soundtrack.  The title of this chapter: *And the And* highlights the impossibility of fully describing and analysing any of the artworks present in this thesis and I reflect on how a research through practice Ph.D. needs to acknowledge the messiness and

excess present in both art practice and writing practice, which is also to acknowledge "the queer remainder" (Giffney, 2009:8).

Taken together, the five installations constitute a body of non-figurative queer art practice that is generated primarily through disorientating affects.    Indeed, developing a methodology and a body of relevant art practice is what this research through art practice is largely concerned with and offers a significant contribution to knowledge.  That is the developing of queer art practice research that is unpicked and built upon through practice and experimentation, which 'talks back' to theory and is manifest through disorientation rather than figural representation.  Both my methodology and my art practice work to make one see the world a little differently and show the potential for activating queer moments with anyone.

Crucially, the theorisation of a queering of standpoint epistemology and the development of key terms such as wonky objects and uncertain re-orientations emerge from a theoretical engagement with my own art practice as well as an engagment with Sara Ahmed's and others' theoretical concerns.  This is ultimately the value of my research through art practice; finding new ways of knowing that can only emerge through an engagement with both theory and practice; that is practising theory and theorising practice.

To begin, chapter two turns to representation and queer art practice in order to map out the key contexts in which my research through art practice is situated.

# Chapter 2.

# Representation and Queer Art Practices

How can I, and why should I, avoid figural representation when discussing queer art practice?  In this chapter, I begin by discussing some of the issues that arise with the term 'representation' that have led me to avoiding figural representations in my own art practice.  To do this I discuss three different groupings of queer art practice with reference to particular representational strategies that specific artists use.  I do this to situate my own practice and research aims.

This chapter is not a historical survey of queer art practice.  Firstly because the term 'queer' is still intensely disputed and works against such categorisation.  Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner write that

> …because almost everything that can be called queer theory is radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being, any attempt to summarize it now will be violently partial (Berlant and Warner cited in Jagose, 2004:1).

Despite an apparent interchangeability between the term 'queer' and the identifications lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans, Berlant and Warner warn us against unproblematically condensing practices and imply that there is rather different work going on in using the term 'queer'.  The second reason I do not attempt to offer a historical treatment of the term, is that with the richness and diversity of practices and contested definitions, potentially crossing thousands of years and many different countries, this is completely

unrealistic in the space I have here.  Even within a narrower remit of twentieth century western art practices I would still only skim the surface. (For texts that offer a slightly wider scope on queer art practices, see Blake, Rinder & Scholder, 1995; Summers, 2004).  Instead I focus on three specific conceptualisations of contemporary queer art practice that sit in relation to issues of representation and I set out the problematics of my research rationale and support where my own art practice can be situated.

Firstly, in relation to the work of Del LaGrace Volcano, I consider queer art practice that represents lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) identities.  'Queer art' in this grouping operates as a term that can be used interchangeably with 'lesbian art practice', 'gay art practice', 'bisexual art practice' and 'trans art practice'.  Secondly, I evaluate queer art practices that use figural representations of sexual difference but also deconstruct such differences.  I do this through an examination of particular art works by Catherine Opie and Jack Pierson.  I then discuss, with reference to the work of Duane Michals, a queer art practice that does not utilise overt representations of LGBT sexual communities, but rather enacts disorienting encounters for the audience.  This is my starting point for an exploration of different modes of disorientation in art, particularly through my own art practice research, that will develop in subsequent chapters to constitute a body of non-figurative disorienting queer art practice.  The terms 'orientation' and 'disorientation' are picked up on in chapter three: *Phenomenology and Queer Theory*.  I am not suggesting that these three groupings of queer art practice are mutually exclusive or that they offer the only possible queer alignment.  Rather, that in setting out such fields of practice I am able to contextually map out my research problematics and provide the rationale for research through my own art practice.

**2.1    The problem of representation**

> Representation… is not - nor can it be - neutral; it is an act - indeed, the founding act
>
> - of power in our culture (Owens, 1992:91).

Craig Owens sets up two positions between a tradition of Art History that treats

representation as a neutral, disinterested activity and post-structuralist critiques of it that

highlight the domination and control inscribed within a representational system that

differentiates, excludes, incorporates and rules (1992:91).  In this section I want to argue

that because representations and processes of power are intimately interlinked (Owens,

1992; Foucault, 1972), then what can be made visible through representation is

circumscribed to  what can be culturally "legible" (Butler, 1993:238).


As an artist I have made photographic work with my own body, and been uncomfortable

with how such representations might be read by the viewer as lesbian through cultural

signifiers such as short hair.  It feels as if a capturing and fixing occurs when I press the

shutter release button.  This is not about me not wanting to be 'out and proud' as a queer

woman, rather it is a consideration of how, through an action of 'othering', readings can

close down what an artwork can do; that is, a closing down of a potentially unsettling

encounter.


Petra Kuppers argues that the lesbian body cannot simply 'appear' (a phenomenological

situation which I discuss in the next chapter) because the "physical body is the carrier of

meaning" (1998:50).  Being named as lesbian is to be contained within a singular cultural

category not of my choosing.  The visible lesbian for Kuppers  is one that has "no rounded

character, no story beyond their deviant desire" (1998:50).  Looking is not a 'neutral' act.

Teresa De Lauretis writes that the 'problem' of lesbian representation is about "the conditions of the visible, what can be seen and represented" (1991:224). De Lauretis is more optimistic than me, as she differentiates between films (such as Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987)) that offer the possibility to "alter the standard frame of reference and visibility" and films that offer up "positive images…without necessarily producing new ways of seeing or a new inscription of the social subject in representation" (1991:224). However, there is no innocent reading. Non-normative sexual bodies are "marked" (Phelan, 1993), that is to say they are re-marked upon for their 'difference'. This difference, using Foucault's work on sexuality (1990), is part of a power relation that also frames a particular idea of subjectivity in which 'the lesbian' is an epistemological category of assumed knowable, classifiable and quantifiable difference. Kitty Millet, referencing Gilles Deleuze, persuasively describes this as identity "statically grounded in a representation of one mode of Being" (2005:2). Johnny Golding opens up the argument when she writes "there is something not quite right with the identity politics, 'shopping list of oppressions' picture" (1997:xii). Instead, her assembling of difference is grounded in a different taxonomy that includes the desperation in bearing witness to the qualities or differences of lost loved ones in the AIDS crisis:

> …did you know David? Or Brian? Or Jamie? Or Alexander? Or Lorne? Let me tell you what he was like, the music he loved, the nightclubs he frequented, the type of funeral he chose, the kind of breakfast he loved to eat, the humour, the anger, the pastiche in which he would engage, against the drug barons, the tabloids, the employer; against the nightmare of memory or the fear of forgetting. Against the movement itself" (1997:xii).

This unsystematic complexity, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a self-evident "nonce taxonomy" (2008:23) is "that people are different from each other" (2008:22). This queer way of knowing is disavowed through identity categories and through visual representations of sexual difference and this is why a non-figurative queer art practice is needed; to create experiences in which difference is not read simply as 'other' but is *felt* in one's body as disorienting, confusing and troubling. Millet's, Golding's and Sedgwick's modes of difference call to what Jonathan Katz describes as one of "the great lies" of dominant discourse: "the singularity and truthfulness of identity" (Katz interview, 19 May 2009). These ideas are explored further through my art practice in chapters four to seven.

Connected to representation is how we 'read' an image as political in content without considering "how the materials signify, in what ways meanings are informed historically and delimited institutionally" (Foster et al 1993:3). In a 1993 round table discussion of the Whitney Biennial Hal Foster states:

> I was struck reading the catalog texts…by this constant deflection of attention from the texture of the work. The work is seen to have a meaning that one can succinctly name and then use that name to pass from the object to a register of "important ideas". The work is never thought to be layered, to be involved with a multiplicity of ideas, to be worked on (1993:4).

My concern with figural representations is this 'delimitation', or how the work can too easily become only about a particularly circumscribed set of ideas (the content). This can have the effect that the materials – the *work* of the art itself; its making; its multiplicity and the troubling encounters the audience might have with the art object are easily overlooked, leading to a privileged and reductive reading. This is summed up by Rosalind Krauss as "the

rush to the signified" under which the art practice (the signifier) is ignored or subsumed in favour of the message (the signified) (Foster et al, 1993:7). I will pick up these ideas in relation to Del La Grace Volcano's work in the following section. More pertinent questions might be "how do I look?" and "what happens when I do this?" Both these questions potentially lie in experiential encounters with art practices not necessarily dependent on figural representations. Although, as I show later on in this chapter, a 'play of looks' can still occur within such representation.

I have painted a bleak picture of what representation can do and its limitations, and I am very aware that the inevitable conclusion to this would be for no images of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer people to appear. This is not what I am advocating at all, neither am I suggesting that representation is not important. Indeed many queer people will attest to the importance of finding representations that resonate with their own desires. Instead, the reason for my thesis is to consider in what other ways queer might be put to work. In writing about an art practice with representations of LGBT bodies present, I analyse specific works closely to evaluate their power as well as their limitations. Artists have used different strategies to trouble readings of representation in artworks in many different ways. Petra Kuppers (1998), for example, advocates playing with the invisible, the grotesque and the liminal. In the following section I consider the importance and limitations of art practices that use figural representations of LGBT bodies and what specific works might do to their viewers.

**2.2    Contemporary  art practice that uses figural representations of Lesbian, Gay,**

        **Bisexual and Trans bodies and communities**

The history of art by lesbian, gay bisexual and trans (LGBT) artists or *about* LGBT subject

matter is also a history of omission, censorship, suppression, obliteration, obfuscation and

euphemism (Meyer, 2002; Petry, 2004; Green & Karolides, 2005; Horne and Lewis, 1996;

Doyle, 1998; Hammond, 2000; Lord and Meyer, 2013).  As both a political and academic

project, to recognise and challenge this violence has been an important strategy for some

lesbian and gay art history scholars.


*The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Art* (Summers, 2004), states in its very first lines its

reason d'etre: that of researching what representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans and

queer (glbtq) subjects and objects look like and what glbtq artists have made.  Claude

Summers writes:

> The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts surveys and introduces a remarkable
>
> cultural achievement, one that includes both the contributions of gay, lesbian,
>
> bisexual, transgender and queer people to the visual arts and their representation in
>
> the visual arts.  That is, the work is interested in glbtq individuals not only as makers
>
> of art but also as subjects and objects of art (2004:ix).

*The Queer Encyclopaedia* is wide ranging with many references and brief overviews of art

historical periods, historical movements and individual artists, all aimed at highlighting,

uncovering, reassessing and making 'visible' some of the contributions that LGBT people

have given to the visual arts. Whilst an important project to bring together many diverse

artists, Whitney Davis points out the weakness more generally in this project.  He writes that

lesbian and gay scholarship

…was unable completely to fulfil its own interpretative aims: it avoided

thoroughgoing hermeneutics in order to render homosexuality visible according to

the canons of positivism, but it could not, for just that reason, recover the whole

historical field of same-sex eroticism in its constitutive *in*visibilities" (1998:124).

In other words, he highlights the impossibility of cataloguing or recovering the richness of

same-sex desire because of the use of historically specific and extant discursive categories of

lesbian and gay.  The 'invisibilities' Whitney alludes to are those that go unnoticed and

undocumented because there is "little place for an empirical account of homosexuality as a

constitutive *lack* of homosexuality" (Davis, 1998:124).  This of course does not mean this

method is not worth pursuing.  Indeed, many scholars are aware of this method's limitations

(Davis, 1998:124) and are actively engaged, along with artists, in reinvention (Lord and

Meyer, 2013) and fabulation (which I discuss further in chapter five).  Davis' comments do,

however, highlight an invisible 'mass' of queer art that can never accumulate and gets

missed when focussing on the need for visibility.


In the following section I focus on the work of Del LaGrace Volcano; a photographer known

primarily for his representations of lesbian and trans identities and communities.


**Del LaGrace Volcano**

Volcano is best known for his images of lesbians, drag kings and transmen (1991, 1999,

2000) and more recently his collaboration with Ulrika Dahl on the monograph *Femmes of

Power* (2008).  He is one of the few artists that have been at the forefront of queer

representational art for many years and experienced changing representations both in his

work and of his own body and identifications.  His work therefore is a crucial counterpoint

to my own and productively different to what I am trying to do. I interviewed Volcano in September 2008 and August 2009. By the second interview, my relationship with him had developed from an awareness of his work to co-curating a retrospective, *Corpus Queer,* as part of *Shout*– Birmingham's LGBTQ arts and culture festival.

Volcano's work is a celebratory imaging of a community from which to challenge abjection and shame. He has been working to counteract negative or non-existent representations of non-normative sexualities for many years. He unambiguously wants heroic readings of his subjects. He states that:

> …the way in which I position the people I work with, my subjects so to speak, is as heroes, as stars, I want people to look at the pictures that are usually looking back and say, 'maybe these people are different, but wow I really admire them' (Volcano interview, 12 August 2009).

This desire was reflected in the hanging of the show where images were hung a little higher on the gallery walls so that the audience needed to physically look up to them. These heroic representations are a strategy of visibility for a community of resistance, as well as a form of archive of historically specific manifestations of gender and sexuality. Volcano is clear that one of the main purposes for his photographs is to celebrate and make heroes of people with non-normative genders or sexualities, and in doing so, actively participate in creating a family or community of belonging for himself and for others. He states that:

> …we don't see images of ourselves reflected in everyday life and many studies have shown how damaging this is, to not ever see yourself - whether it's as a disabled person, a person of color, or a queer person, or a trans person – if the only way that you're ever seen is as an abject victim, then that is pretty much what you can

become. So I represent people in heroic ways regardless of whether they are

sexually explicit or not but there is no shame, we reject the shame that society wants

to put on us for not conforming to gender and sexuality norms (Volcano interview,

12 August 2009).


Volcano has been making photographs for many years; as lesbian identified in earlier works

as Della Grace to a more trans oriented identity in later years.  His work, censored in the

USA and Canada for its sexually explicit images, considered taboo at other points by lesbians

and feminists for its depiction of bondage dominance and submission, has been a way of

taking pride in a sex positive community in the face of homophobia and transphobia.  His

work also challenged assumptions he felt to be present within some queer communities.

Volcano states that:

> …dykes with dildos...that was considered extremely taboo because, at the time, you
>
> know, lesbians were supposed to be practicing side-by-side sensual, non-penetrative,
>
> sex (Volcano interview, 12 August 2009).

The fight *for*, and dissatisfaction *with* representations of identity is an on-going process that

marginalised communities face in fighting to sustain a visual presence.  This process is

described by Sarat Maharaj as a:

> … struggle to be represented and a struggle to counter precisely the representations
>
> one has produced…this is endless and ongoing an infinitive kind of practice and
>
> thinking  (Maharaj in Rogers and Williamson, 2006:157).

This struggle that Maharaj describes is not a seamless steady flow of more relevant images,

but rather a stuttering and spluttering of intermittent production and distribution.  With the

lack of exposure for other artists Volcano and his images hold (or have held) the burden of

representation.  In co-authoring *The Drag King Book* (1999) with Judith Jack Halberstam, Volcano states that he imagined this monograph would be just one of many, but reflects that

> …it's really very important to me to acknowledge both the privilege and
> responsibility I have, I didn't know it. I just thought that there would be many drag
> king books, I thought that there would be many books about lesbian sexuality.  I
> think that it's, it's criminal that there haven't been…I don't want to colonise that
> space. I stopped doing drag kings, in the hope that other drag king representations
> and books and artists could be shown.  It has not happened (Volcano interview, 12
> August 2009).

This lack of manifold representations of non-normative genders and sexualities is wrapped up in the politics of queer visibility.  This may resonate with some lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people who grew up in need of seeing images of bodies and desires that contained a spark of recognition with their own.  However, Volcano's work emerged in the 1980s, in a pre-internet time in which representations of LGBT subjects were much fewer and the political landscape of non-normative sexuality was lesbian and gay rather than LGBT or even queer.  And whilst Volcano is right to acknowledge the lack of drag king books, this is not the same as the lack of drag king representations: of which today there are many that can be accessed simply by doing a *Google* search.

For some, visibility is central to a struggle for recognition and equality.  Stephen Whittle for example states that:

It is only through being seen that one gains the power to become political. It is an

essential part of gaining a place in a political framework that one is seen in whatever

shape or form (Whittle cited in Rogers and Williamson, 2006:103).

As Whittle points out, for many trans people visibility is a particularly difficult issue. If to be

a 'successful' trans person means to 'pass' then trans bodies can disappear from view and

from politics into cogent categories of 'man' and 'woman'.


Volcano articulates his position in relation to visibility as "…visibility does equal power, in

some respects, but not visibility at any price" (Volcano interview, 12 August 2009). For me

there is a tension between the need for visibility and an ambivalence towards

representation. In creating positive representations of non-heteronormative identities, an

engagement with "the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings

are produced" (Woodward, 1997:14) occurs. This has the effect of positioning diverse

subjects in ways that can limit where they can 'speak' from. In explaining my ambivalence

to representation, I do not want to deny the politically necessary work which queer can do

in this respect. After all, it could be argued that if a subject is not visible at all, then where

they can speak from is not just limited, but is nowhere. However, whilst visibility may be

important for communities to enter political arenas, it also comes with its own set of

problems. Visibility and power are not so easily equated with each other, as there are

different conditions of visibility. If visibility and power were so simply matched, then due to

the sheer excess of visual representations of sexual young women, Phelan (1993) argues,

they would surely be running the world. Visibility instead is conditional on the social nexus

of power that clusters around it; around what we see and how we are seen. Echoing de

Lauretis' conditions of visibility, Nicholas Mirzoeff states that

For visual culture, visibility is not so simple. Its object of study is precisely the entities that come into being at the points of intersection of visibility with social power, that is to say visuality (2005:10).

Halberstam writes that much of Volcano's works are "tributes to a masculinity that Volcano loves and that he wants to seduce the viewer into loving" (Volcano & Halberstam 1999:7). These "progressive embodiments" (Prosser, 2000:6), important to Volcano and others who recognise themselves in his work are part of a representational strategy; one in which other queer viewers can take pleasure and can actively compile their own archives of resistance. The representations present also loosely follow Volcano's changing indentification from lesbian to gender variant.

The comments book for *Corpus Queer: A Del LaGrace Volcano Retrospective* contained many similar remarks to the following:

"Beautiful – it makes me want to walk taller!"

"I loved your photos and definitely identify with some of them."

"Great to recognise so much from my coming out years!"

"…thank you for helping me get to where I am today."

"…lots of memories came flooding back."

"A delve back into history."

Looking at his work now, as a retrospective, the monographs operate as an archive of community pride; primarily a celebration of lesbian and trans communities and bodies. Many of the comments express this pride in queer communities, either remembering times such as lesbian club nights in *Love Bites* (1991) in the 1980s and 1990s, or as in the case of

*Sublime Mutations* (2000), images of queer bodies to delve into as a source of strength, fantasy and positive recognition.  This is all important work, but, this thesis argues, it is not the only work queer can do.

For much of Volcano's work in his 2009 retrospective, the uncertain encounter for the viewer has been lost.  Volcano, in the past, has wanted an uncertain reading of his work.  He tells me a story about a poster that appeared in a gay male club in the 1980s:

> …gay men they would be very upset when they found out an image was actually of a woman rather than a man as they had presumed, because it also made them question their fragile homosexual sexuality sometimes. And I like that, so I kind of kept doing it.

I find it hard to imagine this happening again.  A poster in a gay male club operates very differently to an image in a gallery.  In the club, the image may be read in relation to the bodies around it, i.e. those in the club.  In a gallery, such as the *Works Gallery* in which *Corpus Queer: A Del LaGrace Volcano Retrospective* was shown, one image is read in relation to the others around it as well as the audiences' bodies. We are also informed of the story the work tells and therefore the work is in some ways itself fixed.

**Image 1.** *Corpus Queer: A Del LaGrace Volcano Retrospective* (exhibition detail), 2009

The images in the retrospective, as a 'body' of work, appear to leave little room for doubt or

illegibility.  Although uncertain readings or orientations for the audience may not happen in

Volcano's retrospective, his work is still richly layered and  I focus now on a particular work

of Volcano's – *Ode to Brassai* (1995) to tease out some ideas around 'looking'.

**Image 2.**   Del LaGrace Volcano, *Ode to Brassaï,* 1995, Digital C-Print, 24" x 18"


In *Ode to Brassaï,* three butch/trans subjects in smart suits sit around a table in a low lit

café/club interior.  The person on the left looks downwards, whilst it is unclear where the

other two are looking.  At the back we can see that Volcano is himself in the picture, taking

the photograph with the use of a mirror.  In the title, composition, lighting and subject

matter of the pictures, Volcano overtly references Brassaï's photographic work taken in

Paris in the 1920s and 1930s.  Volcano's restaging of Brassaï alters the power dynamic

between the photographer and photographed.

**Image 3.**   Brassaï, *Young female invert, Le* Monocle, 1932

Brassaï's work offers us wonderful images of a long disappeared world.  However, he also

positioned himself outside of and different to the people which he photographed.  He

achieved this 'othering' through his textual descriptions of "inverts" and "Sodom and

Gomorrah" (Brassaï, 1986)  and also through composition that leaves himself out of the

picture 'looking in on' and physically down on others.  Volcano however, is not 'out of

place'; he is very much a presence in the photograph, and by actively putting himself in the

picture, he is part of this community and instrumental in the representation and even

creation of it.

Volcano does important queer work, as his photograph arguably begins to image a transgender looking.  Halberstam, commenting on *Ode to Brassaï,* writes:

> The mirrors behind the butches give the viewer access to this transgender look that takes in both the queer subjects and the scene before them.  The three butches do not create a circular gaze of relationality and nor do they look into the camera; one looks away to the right, another looks at the butch across from him and the third looks down at the table.  The photographer seems not to be looking at the queers but at the camera and at his own reflected image (2006:87).

Their dress style signifies a butch look that is referencing and enacting the original work of Brassaï who is beyond the time and place of this picture, yet it is also in the here and now.  The subjects cluster around a table and yet their gazes place them elsewhere.  Volcano investigates the relationship between the looker and the looked-at; a relationship which has been investigated through conceptualising the 'gaze'.  Laura Mulvey's (2003:47) influential work on the 'male gaze' theorised, along gender lines, the power relations involved in looking; splitting the pleasure in looking between active male 'looker', and passive female 'looked at'.  Queer and feminist developments of gaze theory (White, 1991; Evans and Gamman, 1995; MacKinnon, 1999) have challenged this model in different ways.  Evans and Gamman (1995:12) argue that this gaze theory has been "inadequate as a tool for analysing the complex ways in which individuals look at, and identify with a range of contemporary images", whilst Halberstam's consideration of a trans gaze is to recognise a multiplicity of looks at play; a "bundle of gazes" (2006: 79).  That is a non-circularity that cannot be reduced to an active male 'looker' and a passive female 'looked at'.  There is a multiplicity of gazes present in *Ode to Brassaï* that complicates any easy identification of active or passive subjects.

Amelia Jones, in searching for an answer to her question "where does identity lie?"

suggests:

> It's a very complex circuit that involves the person we perceive to be in the image,
>
> the person reading the image and the person we perceive the artist having been
>
> (Jones cited in Rogers and Williamson, 2006:103).

As Volcano's photography shows, identity is not merely about the person who is in the

picture, but involves a more complex circuit.   I am interested in the possibilities opened-up

by disturbing Jones' already complex circuit to enable more misrecognition and uncertainty

to take place.   The non-relationality of the subjects looking to/at what we cannot see is

where the work's potential lies for my own queer art practice, in which what is un-

representable may be experienced through disorienting encounters.  This is discussed

further in relation to my own work in chapters four to seven.


What *Ode to Brassaï* does not do, is unsettle the viewer's own gaze.  Perhaps it is unfair of

me to expect the work to do this.  As a viewer, the subjects in *Ode to Brassaï* are read, to

some extent, as an archetypal subcultural 'other', enclosed in a rich, panelled wooden

closet.  The photograph fixes identities as the unchanging 'other' – not the otherness of

Sedgwick's sheer difference (2008:22) "that people are different from each other" or

Golding's (1997:xiii) "singular and plural shadings and tones".  This makes it difficult to think

of an expansive multiplicity or Stuart Hall's (1997) assertion that identity is fluid or Whitney

Davis' take on queer theory that acknowledges the singularity of desirous subjects:

> "Queer theory, then, acknowledges the peculiarity – the specificity, distinctiveness,
>
> and originality – of every sexual and subject position in relation to every other one

and asserts that no such position could be a general model of all sexualities and subjectivities" (Davis, 1998:129).

For despite the criss-crossing of referents of Volcano's work, the relationship between viewer and artwork remains intact; a role-play of difference that gives the viewer little to do, and little opportunity to be unsettled.  This thesis argues that this unsettling is important for a different kind of queer encounter to occur.

*Ode to Brassai* is a complex image that richly plays with gazes.  Some of Volcano's other work is more overtly concerned with political visibility.  Miwon Kwon in a discussion on art and the political argues that some artists

> ...take too many shortcuts, foregoing the responsibility of how the work is made, how it might be read, in order to consolidate politically.  That is what they think they must do: to put the most univocal image (Foster et al, 1993:10).

Volcano does not want "univocal images" and seeks slippages, but I do not think they happen in the retrospective because Volcano never wants the viewer to doubt that the "otherness" is authentic.  This is born out of his need to create heroic representations of sexual difference.  I now go on to look at a different strategy: an art practice that cites representations of sexual difference whilst at the same time deconstructs them.

**2.3     Contemporary Art Practices that cite and critique constructions of sexual identity**

In 2009 I interviewed Jonathan D Katz twice.  Katz is an American art historian who writes on art and sexual difference with a focus (not exclusively) on artists Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage.  He is also an activist and co-founder of Queer Nation, San Francisco, as well as the founder of the Queer Caucus of the College Art Association and of

the Harvey Milk Institute in San Francisco. He also founded and chaired the first department

of Lesbian and Gay Studies in the United States. He recently curated *Hide/Seek: Difference*

*and Desire in American Portraiture* at the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

which was open between 2010 and 2011.

Katz is then very involved in the politics and aesthetics of queer art practices (see also Katz,

1999; 2000 & 2008).  This would be reason enough to interview him, but my particular

interest in his work has been his writing on attempts to "evade the [homophobic]

interpellation".  His conceptualisation of silence attends to the question "…what does queer

speaking that does not depend on old fashioned gay and lesbian identities look like?"

(2000:99).  This seemed to resonate with my own research problematic about how to enact

queer moments without figural representations of sexual difference.  Through our

interviews we discussed the problems of representation, and possible way to destabilise it

through art practice.

Katz does not think that we can completely leave cultural constructions of same-sex

relations behind to maintain a queer agenda.  This feels very different and potentially

reductive in relation to Giffney's interpretation of queer theory as involving

> fluidity, űber-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the
>
> preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that
>
> which is unrepresentable or uncommunicable (Giffney, 2009:8).

However, Katz insists that

> in order to have social traction it's necessary to both acknowledge or cite
>
> contemporary social and cultural constructions of difference while at the same time,

undercutting them, showing their limitations and moving beyond (Katz interview, 19

May 2009).

Without this referencing of cultural constructions of difference, Katz does not see the

specific function or meaning of queer.  He asks:

> …how then does queer function…what's the particular valence or value to the term
>
> queer here as opposed to other forms of social and cultural resistance?  (Katz
>
> interview, 19 May 2009)

In this section I look at particular work by Catherine Opie and Jack Pierson; works that cite

and deconstruct sexual difference.  I appraise their strengths and limitations, and in doing so

I evaluate Katz's assertions.  I begin with Catherine Opie's *Being and Having*.

**Catherine Opie**



**Image 4.**    Catherine Opie, *Being and Having*, 1991, 13 chromogenic prints, 17"x22"

Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* is a closely cropped series of thirteen framed portraits:

representations of lesbian, trans, leather and BDSM subjects.  It exemplifies artwork which

can be described as both figurative and a particular 'in your face' style of queer.  Her

detailed portraits emphasise the theatricality of obviously fake facial hair.  She visualises the

play and performativity of 'doing' gender that Judith Butler (1993; 1996) has conceptualised

so clearly.  Butler argues that gender does not have essential difference at its core

(2003:392) but rather that gender is a performative affect; a "stylised repetition of acts"

(1990:179);  a sedimentation of identity through performing again and again certain

practices to maintain the coherence of gender difference.  She argues that within

heteronormative society, heterosexuality and gender difference is constantly reinforced as

the 'authentic'.  Opie's photographic subjects contest this authenticity.  Their fake hair is

'worn' alongside other signifiers such as tattoos and hairstyles.  She makes visible the

instability of gender coherence, stating perhaps, that we are all performing as drag artists in

some form or another.
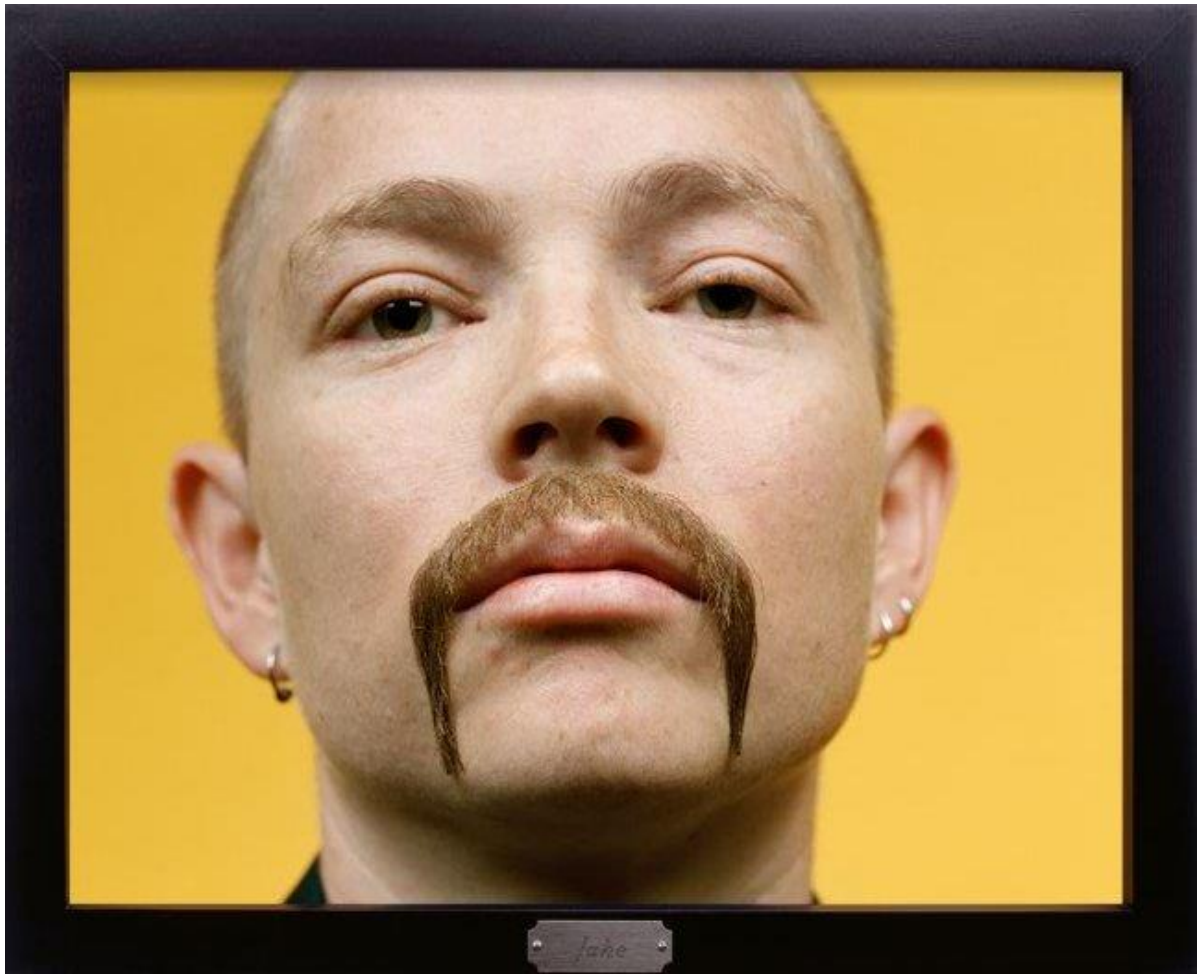
**Image 5.**  Catherine Opie, *Being and Having (Jake)*, 1991

There is at once a playfulness and deadly seriousness at work in these photographs.  Opie's

work is not ambiguous for ambiguity's sake, but instead forms what Halberstam (1998:34)

calls "resolute images of female masculinity".  Opie's work, whilst highlighting the

performativity of gender and sexuality, is also politically grounded in the need for a

supportive, visible, coherent community of gender-variance within which to live.  Harmony

Hammond (2000:150) argues that this collective identity is partly realised through the use of

"gang names" such as *Chicken*, *Papa Bear* and *Wolf*.  It is also reflected in Opies's stated

need to "present people with an extreme amount of dignity" (Opie cited in Halberstam,

1998:35).  In doing so, she creates a "powerful visual aesthetic for alternative and minority

masculinities" (Halberstam, 1998:35).

These were powerful and playful images for me when I first saw them. I still enjoy how they are both humorous and serious. Then, looking again, I wondered why Opie has chosen the false moustache as a measure of signification for female masculinity instead of many more subtle bodily appearances, but perhaps it is the 'wearing alongside' that makes us look again. I realised that this work is thirteen images: thirteen representations. The multiplicity, or singularity of identity reduced to thirteen images. Katz expresses similar feelings in our interview. He describes what he liked about Opie's work "…at the outset [was]…a mobilization of a kind of queer plethora of identifications". Subsequent to this initial reading he continues that "What troubled me is that then didn't happen and it became a knowable sort of skein of sort of resistant dyke identification" (Katz interview, 19 May 2009).

For Katz this shift happened through the success of Opie and the co-opting of her work:

> Nobody had ever heard of who she was. Those works felt playful and resistant, then she became the great lesbian photographer and they became rehabilitated under that category right, through no fault of her own. I am waiting for somebody to stage an Opie Opie which is to say to inhabit those images counter-discursively now (Katz interview, 2 July 2009).

In a similar way to how Volcano could be seen as *the* trans photographer, Opie's images too began to accumulate a burden of representation. This brings me back to Owens' point that representation is the "founding act- of power in our culture" (1992:91). The problem with citing and then deconstructing the citation is that visual language never really gets beyond the discursive limits of the 'truth' of identity. Hal Foster remarks that even visual practices that seem to critique identity still presume an unproblematised subject:

> … there is a turn to the autobiographical because of the need to access political content…What disturbed me is that the project of the art is often to critique identity,

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but the subject is almost always presumed, either as the subject that addresses or the subject to be addressed, or both.  So there is a turn to autobiographical identity often in the very moment of its questioning (Foster et al, 1993:7).

Art practice, including Opie's and Volcano's work, bound up in a discourse of autobiography, presumes to some extent an immediate imaging of political 'reality' without a deconstruction of the instrumentality and discursive power of the status of the 'real', that is to say, a supposedly unmediated 'truth' and 'reality' that resides in the subject represented. Craig Owens, citing Louis Marin, critiques the

perfect equivalence between reality and its representation, so that representations "can ontologically appear as the things they represent, ordered in a rational and universal discourse, the discourse of reality itself".  It is through the suppression of all evidence of the representational apparatus, then, that the authoritative status of Classical representation, its claim to possess some truth or epistemological value is secured (1992:102).

The need for a non-figurative queer art practice is what drives this thesis because, as Owens highlights, representation (and its attendant concerns with identity) is bound up in powerful ideas of 'truth' that deconstruction does not always effectively unpick.  Contrary to Katz then, I argue that in citing difference through figurative representation they are extremely difficult to move beyond.  This reification through iteration has been explored in Judith Butler's later work on 'strategic essentialism',  when, for example 'woman' as an identity category has necessarily been taken up to fight for gender equality, while at the same time this mode of engagement maintains and shores up difference and therefore inequality. Butler instead suggests 'a performativity proper to refusal' (Butler cited in Salih, 2003:259),

which seems remarkably close to Katz's work on performative silence: "an oppositional mode that refuses oppositionality" (Katz, 2000:100).

The artistic medium is important to how we understand representations and the work that they do. Opie's choice of medium is the portrait photograph. Despite her work deconstructing the authenticity of what is being shown, photography can still, to some extent, endow "truth-effects" (Halperin, 1997:13), in relation to what constitutes authoritative speech about queer subjects, whilst Susan Sontag states, that photographs still have the power to "furnish evidence" (cited in Halberstam, 2006:76). This is however a complex, ongoing debate, particularly with the proliferation of computer editing software and internet images, as viewers do not always believe the evidence in front of them.

**Jack Pierson**

Katz points me to Jack Pierson's *Self Portrait* series, as a more successful, yet still limited, example of how citing sexual identity in order to move to a reading of multiplicity might be visualised. Pierson's *Self Portraits* are an on-going series of photographs (31 and counting) in which he has photographed different male bodies and labelled them *Self Portrait #19* or *Self Portrait # 31 (Tony Ward)* etc. Each photograph is of a different man, in different settings, stylised in different ways.

**Image 6.** Jack Pierson, *Self Portrait #4*, 2003, Pigment print. 44" x 54"



**Image 7.** Jack Pierson, *Self Portrait # 31 (Tony Ward)*, 2005, Digital Pigment Print,

43"x 53"

Katz states that these images "in one way or another invoke sort of archetypal queer representations" (Katz, interview, 19 May 2009).  He contends that this strategy works to

> …betray the insufficiency of any kind of knowable representation and also at the same time its darker side suggests the very narrowness of the possibilities that constitute the citation of queerness (Katz, interview, 2 July 2009).

I would add that the multiple portraits visualise an additive identity, where something can be this *and* that: a linkage to Sedgwick's (1994:3) "surplus meaning of texts" that I explore throughout this thesis in relation to art practice.  I wonder, however, whether there needs to be an infinite number of identifications to really grapple with multiplicity.  Even if this were the case, this would not alter the complex power relations involved in looking.  As discussed earlier, Peggy Phelan (1993) reminds us, with the example of the proliferation of images of young, naked women, that visual representation does not automatically translate into power (or multiplicity). Katz's dissatisfaction with how we read some of Pierson's work is that it is a "dry and intellectual" reading (Katz interview, 2 July 2009).  Katz argues that queer artists have been good at making "allied intelligences", but not at "seducing" their audiences "…which is to say reach them bodily, reach them emotively, reach them erotically" (Katz interview, 19 May 2009).  The potential of this seduction strategy is, he argues, the production of "queer viewers" that can occur irrespective of sexual preference but also crucially "bespeak lived experience".  With Duane Michals in the following section and in chapters four to seven with my own art practice research, I show that it is this "lived experience"; the experience of the audience that is important in the generation of non-figurative queer art practice.

Broadening queer out from solely focussing on sexual communities and sexual bodies offers possibilities of an experience for the viewer that realises Deborah Britzman's (1995) and William Haver's (1997) suggestion that "…what is important is not that 'anyone might be queer', but that 'something queer might happen to anyone'" (Havers, 1997:288). By analysing Duane Michals' series of photographs *Things are Queer* I investigate the problems and possibilities that this work raises in relation to the development of a conceptualisation of a disorientating queer encounter with art. Other artists that I could put into this section include Susan Silton and David Altmejd.

## 2.4    Contemporary art practice that enacts disorienting encounters

### Duane Michals



**Image 8.**    Duane Michals, *Things are Queer*, 1973, 9 gelatin silver prints, 5"x7"

The first of Michals' nine photographs presents a familiar image to many of a domestic bathroom, centred on the toilet, sink and bathtub.  In the second image a huge pair of legs have descended, changing this familiar bathroom into a giant's playground.  The camera pans back to reveal that the bathroom has been staged, possibly in the artist's studio, and it is not the legs that are huge, but the bathroom suite that is small.  We may look back to the previous images to try and reassess our meaning making.  In the fourth image the camera continues to pan back, showing that the staged bathroom is actually in a book.  A large thumb across the page is as big as the man in the bathroom.  The camera pans back further to reveal a man reading a book with the image of the bathroom inside its covers.  Zooming out even further, this man is in a corridor, which is itself in a framed photograph.  The final photograph takes us back to the first photograph in the series, which can now be re-viewed and re-evaluated through the realisation that the picture above the sink is that of the man in the corridor reading the book with the image of the man in the staged bathroom.

The body in Michals photographs operates and registers in very different ways to those in Opie's or Volcano's.  Opie's and Volcano's appear as representations of non-normative sexual communities.  Michals' operates as an almost 'invisible' signifier because of the power of the 'unmarked' (Phelan, 1993) white male body to barely register as any one thing, due to its universalising discursive power.  In other words, the subject can just get on with doing what he is doing and 'we' take interest in his actions, rather than in what he 'is' or what he represents. Whilst Opie's and Volcano's work does many things, the bodies represented cannot claim such a status from the viewer because they are marked as different, ie non-normative and operate within the delimiting taxonomical  register of

'knowable' subject.  Visuality then, is bound up with power; with what can be seen and represented (Mirzoeff, 2005; de Lauretis, 1991).

Michals' piece is not non-figurative, but neither is it obviously concerned with recognisable representations of sexual communities or non-normative sexual difference.   Jonathan Weinberg suggests that

> The queer of Things Are Queer is not a matter of specific sexual identities but of the world itself. The world is queer, because it is known only through representations that are fragmentary and in themselves queer. Their meanings are always relative, a matter of relationships and constructions. In contradiction to its title, the series seems to say the things themselves are not queer, rather what is queer is the certainty by which we label things normal and abnormal, decent and obscene, gay and straight (1996:1).

The power of these photographs lies in the ways in which the audience might experience disorientation.  The work re-presents our processes of making sense of the world as highly relational and contingent.  In other words, where we look from and how we look changes what we see.  Michals' work draws attention to how we read objects, spaces and people based on contingent assumptions.  They *enact* uncertainty in relation to knowledge claims which forms the basis for my methodology and is developed in each chapter of this thesis.

When I first looked at Michals' images I experienced a kind of vertigo.  They are able to disorientate the viewer because how we make sense of the world is dependent on our orientations towards familiar objects and spaces.  These objects and spaces do not do what is expected of them: their scale and meaning shift with our gaze from photograph to

photograph.  Looking at these images, unlike Volcano's or Opie's, it is the audience who becomes disorientated.  Considering the queer potential of the disorientating affects of art, it is this disorientation that helps us realise how we are orientated in the first place.  This orientation need not be restricted to sexual identity.  Locating my own work in relation to Michals', has occurred through shifting the viewers' gaze(s) away from an exclusive focus on sexual bodies towards ways of looking and experiencing, particularly in terms of a queer encounter; a troubling of the relations between audiences and objects in the world.

'Queer' is used in *Things are Queer* as a "strategic function" (Halperin, 1997:63) that unsettles our senses; a strategy that describes a circuit of meaning making that is highly dependent on our relational understanding of things.  This is a broadening out of the field that queer is concerned with from a focus on the sexual body and sexual communities to a "horizon of possibility" (Halperin, 1997:79) based on a deconstruction but also enactment of how the world and our knowledges of it are contingent.  The horizon is after all, a perceptual field contingent on where we might 'stand' and where we stand cannot always be triangulated.

In this chapter I have set out my reasons for avoiding figural representations in my own work.  I have argued that representational strategies involve the discursive power of the "real" regardless of whether such images are making truth claims or trying to undermine such claims through performativity.

The queer work Michals' photographic sequence does is through recreating relationships to the world differently.  This is a precursor to what my own installation practice, rather than a

photographic practice, seeks to do through disorientation.  In the *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters (chapters four to seven) I explore in more detail how this might occur, particularly through a critical dialogue with Sara Ahmed's conceptualisations of orientation and disorientation, and an enactment and theorisation of a queering of standpoint epistemology based on queer ways of knowing that I have begun to outline here.

I have argued for queer art practices that can enact disorientating embodied experiences. In doing this, I am bringing into dialogue and tension phenomenology and queer theory.  In the following chapter I discuss their sometime troubled relationship and the benefits and limitations of holding them in tension.  I also set out Ahmed's conceptualisation of *Queer Phenomenology* and her terms orientation and disorientation in order to critique, appraise and flesh them out through my art practice further on in the thesis.

# Chapter 3.

# Phenomenology and Queer Theory

I have discussed the tricky relationship between representation and queer art practice in the previous chapter and identified a gap in which my art practice can be situated. That is within installation art practices that engender disorientating encounters for the audience. My research operates at the nexus between queer theory, phenomenology and art practice research. With this in mind, I now explore and situate the place of phenomenology in relation to queer theory and my research. This chapter is very much an exploration of the problems and benefits of bringing queer theory and phenomenology into dialogue and productive tension. It is a pick-and-mix utilisation of phenomenology in which it is used only where it can provide useful insight into audiences' experiences of disorientation. I am not a phenomenologist, neither do I subscribe to a phenomenological method devoid of interpretation which I consider to be as impossible as much as it is unwanted.

I begin discussing why phenomenology and queer theory have, in the past, seldom been brought together with a brief consideration of phenomenology's and queer theory's very different histories and concerns. I also discuss here how I am using the term 'queer' in this thesis. I then go on to review queer theory's sometime troubled relationship with phenomenology, with particular reference to the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. I describe Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment and I go on to briefly look at more recent work in gender studies, trans studies and queer studies that brings Merleau

Ponty's work and queer theory into creative proximity to rework ideas around experiential knowledge and embodied subjects.   From here, I focus down on the work of Sara Ahmed who has been very influential in my research.  I analyse how and why Ahmed uses phenomenology and queer theory together and I lay out the key terms: 'orientation' and 'disorientation' that she employs in her conceptualisation of 'queer phenomenology'.  These terms are analysed and critiqued in following chapters through discussions of what my art practice research does to Ahmed's ideas.

### 3.1    Queer theory and phenomenology: seldom brought together

Queer theory and phenomenology are seldom brought together.  They appear rarely on the same page when discussing art practice or art history.  In an art historical context, queer theory and phenomenology have tended to be treated as discreet and separate areas of research, or ways of approaching art history.   I use the term 'ways of approaching' because the term 'method' would not be appropriate here.  Stephen Melville, in discussing Rosalind Krauss (1973) and Michael Fried's  (1967) different phenomenological readings of minimalism, describes phenomenology as "anti-methodological" (1998:153) because of its usage here  as "a highly general and consequential way of understanding what kind of thing an object is" (1998:153) rather than as a method to be 'mastered' (for an example of a more restrictive application of phenomenological methods see Moustakas, 1994).  Neither can a queer approach to art history be reducible to a simply applied method because queer's vagaries often react against such organisation.

An example of how phenomenological and queer approaches are separate in research areas can be seen in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*

(Cheetham, Holly & Moxey, 1998).  In this book, two chapters sit alongside each other:

*'Homosexualism', gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory in art history* by Whitney Davis

and *Phenomenology and the limits of hermeneutics* by Stephen Melville.  They are, on first

reading, separated not only physically but also by the conceptual terrain they cover.  I want

to explore a scenario in which they are not so discrete.

The few times phenomenology and queer theory have been brought into dialogue is

through Patrik Steorn's (2009) work on the painter Eugène Jansson and Amelia Jones' (2006)

on the artist Susan Silton.  Steorn specifically uses Ahmed's work to consider the orientation

of art history that has put queer readings of Jansson's work "out of our reach" (2009:2).

Whilst Jones, drawing on Laura Mark's work *The Skin of The Film* (2000), discusses the

"haptic visuality" (Jones, 2006:119) of Silton's practice as well as bodily disorientation when

the differences between figure and ground are visualised.  In doing so, Jones also uses

Merleau-Ponty's (1984) critique of the dichotomy of bodily interiority-worldly exterior.

In the following section I discuss the different histories and concerns of phenomenology and

queer theory.

### 3.2     Different histories and concerns

Phenomenology has a long history that can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth

century and the work of Franz Brentano.  For Edmund Husserl, considered to be the more

modern founder, it is the study of how things appear to consciousness that signalled an

important break from an objectivist rationalism and empiricism.  Dermot Moran and

Timothy Mooney describe phenomenology as: "the unprejudiced, descriptive study of

whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it so appears…a way of seeing" (2007:1).  A phenomenological approach then, is one which values lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty, building on Heidegger, this lived experience is crucially embodied.

Phenomenology became one of the dominant philosophical approaches in the early and mid-twentieth century.  Here, Foucault situates himself in relation to it:

> I belong to the generation who as students had before their eyes, and were limited
>
> by a horizon consisting of Marxism, phenomenology and existentialism (2004:176).

Many writers, both loosely and more closely affiliated with the term phenomenology, have covered vast subject areas including (but not limited to) the study of epistemology (Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Ricoeur), ontology (Scheler, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas), hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur), consciousness, (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty), experience (Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer), intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas), the social (Reinach, Heidegger, Arendt, de Beauvoir), spirituality (Stein), perception (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty),  and ethics (Levinas). Compare this long and 'serious' tradition with the relatively young upstart that is queer theory.

The term 'queer' has had a broad usage, (not always attached to sexual bodies) that has spanned centuries. Its uncertain etymology meaning *crosswise* or *to transverse* is expanded by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick here:

> Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive-recurrent, eddying, troublant.
>
> The word "queer" itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root –

twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist),

English athwart" (1994:xii).

Queer Studies and queer theory, however, emerged much more recently from the

productive clash of Lesbian and Gay Studies with post-structuralism (Jagose, 2004:3) in the

1980s and early 1990s, and through political activism emerging from the AIDS crisis, through

sex debates and critiques, as well as dynamic (Walters, 2005:7) and antagonistic dialogues

with feminism.

Annamarie Jagose, whilst qualifying the lack of consensus around the term, uses the

following working definition of queer:

> Broadly speaking queer describes those gestures or analytical models which
>
> dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex,
>
> gender and sexual desire...queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those
>
> three terms which stabilise heterosexuality.  Demonstrating the impossibility of any
>
> 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms
>
> as 'man' and 'woman' (2004:3).

Jagose's definition can most obviously be seen in the works of Del LaGrace Volcano and

Catherine Opie, discussed  in the previous chapter, in the apparent sex and gender

'mismatches', or "criss-cross gender"  as Volcano describes them (Volcano interview, 12

August 2009).  However, Jagose's definition, whilst important, is not the only possibility and

is not expansive enough for the way I wish to employ it.  Queer is a less reliable signifier

than this.  This is partly where its potential lays but also its difficulty when trying to describe

how I am using the term queer in this thesis.

**3.3     How I am using the term queer**

David Halperin broadens his definition out from sex and identity, with a more direct challenge to the status quo: to queer being "…whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (1997:62).  Noreen Giffney adds further complexity with reference to troubling epistemology.  She writes that:

> There is an unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, űber-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable or uncommunicable.  This theoretical emphasis points to the excess which cannot be categorized, that which is not or cannot be expressed through language; the queer remainder  (2009:8).

Giffney's work importantly brings ideas of queer knowing into an employment of queer that I develop further throughout this thesis.  I want to take Halperin's and Giffney's employments of queer and add a little reminder from Judith Butler that queer:

> will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes (1993:228).

Whilst my art practice would be hard pressed to be described as having Butler's urgent "political purpose" it is developing a methodology to make one see the world a little differently and to show how we all have queer moments due to the twisting in intricate and often unnoticed relations. Queer, as I realise through my practical experimentations, is never "fully owned" because "almost everything that can be called queer theory is radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being" (Berlant & Warner, 1995:344).  The worlds in my installations are brought into being through attention to disorienting moments that

may make the audience feel 'out of line'.  In this way I partly utilise Sara Ahmed's definition

of queer.  She writes

> I have been using 'queer' in at least two senses, and I have at times slid from one
>
> sense to the other. First I have used "queer" as a way of describing what is "oblique"
>
> or "off line"…Second, I have used queer to describe specific sexual practices. Queer
>
> in this sense would refer to those who practice non-normative sexualities (Jagose
>
> 1996), which as we know involves a personal and social commitment to living in an
>
> oblique world, or in a world that has an oblique angle in relation to that which is
>
> given (2006:161).

Ahmed acknowledges that she elides the differences between her spatial metaphors of

"oblique" and "off-line" with "non-normative sexualities".  Merleau-Ponty's use of the term

queer is used primarily to denote an off-line geometry of things (although in his description

of a man lying on a bed and his "inverted face" (2002:294) has a startlingly erotic charge).

Ahmed (2006:161) also uses the metaphor of obliqueness and places it alongside specific

sexual practices, arguing that this is appropriate because the spatial etymology of queer

(see Sedgwick's (1994:xii) earlier quotation) lends itself to such interpretation.  Queer for

Ahmed in this way becomes "a personal and social commitment to living in an oblique

world, or in a world that has an oblique angle in relation to that which is given" (2006:161).


The two definitions: sexual and spatial obliqueness orbit around each other becoming

difficult to unpick.  This is because queer directs its attention *towards*

something/someone/some idea, and whilst it is never "fully owned" (Butler, 1993:228),

neither is it a free floating signifier. This 'towards' is an old concern that Immanuel Kant

expresses in relation to representation as "a representation of things must be a

representation *to someone*" (Brook, 1997:230).  Whilst Husserl's ideas of the intentionality

of consciousness were taken up by many, including Merleau-Ponty in his earlier writings, in

that perception is always directed towards something.  The significance here is that both

this phenomenological take and a queer one always involve more than an 'inner self'

because they are always beyond the self; stretching out towards other things; opening out

onto the world.  Queer could then be seen to be 'orientated', but, as I discuss, and critique

later, it is an orientation that cannot be pinned down to one direction.

The queer disorientation I am trying to activate through my art practice needs to operate a

kind of double movement.  That is to say a pull on the phenomenological body of the

audience at the same time as a pushing away the body of the looked upon 'other' held

distant anyway by its representational frame.

I am using queer in this thesis as a strategy then; as a verb, rather than solely as a noun; a

tactic rather than a naming;  a strategy that can create moments of epistemological

ambiguity, moments of 'unknowing' and uncertainty into how to approach some *objects*,

some *bodies* and some *ideas*.  I discuss in my *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters, that,

as a sometimes tricky methodological, tool this can work in innovative ways when analysing

my own art practice.

Returning to the relationship between queer theory and phenomenology, Whitney Davis

considers phenomenology as a hard-won inheritance for queer theory.  He writes that:

> Some of the central theoretical ideas of queer theory derive from an intensive
>
> engagement with and critique of the Hegelian, Heideggerian, and phenomenological

traditions, influenced by other post-structuralist claims about consciousness, knowledge, and power (see especially Butler 1987).  As such, it would have been impossible for late eighteenth- or nineteenth century thinkers to be queer theorists, although homosexualism and queer theory have much in common (1998:124).

So whilst it may be possible to state that one could not have queer theory without phenomenology (and a whole other set of conditions), this does not explain the active rejection of phenomenology by queer theory's most influential philosophers.


### 3.4    Troubled relations between queer theory and phenomenology

Crucial to queer theory's early critical force has been the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.  Of particular influence is Foucault's work on the history of sexual regulation (1988, 1990, 1992) and the historical contingency of discursively produced subjects (1972, 1979; 1988).  Whilst Butler's (1990, 1993) impact in U.S.A. and Britain (she was not translated until much later into other languages such as French), partly building on Foucault, derived from critiquing essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality by arguing that subjectivity is a relational process constituted through performative acts.  A note here about how I am using the verb 'to trouble' as a kind of queer deconstructive strategy; a way of disturbing normative flows of knowledge.  Influenced by Butler's use of the word in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), as one that invokes both "the rebellion and its reprimand" (1990:xxvii) but also the richness of its definition in the everyday: to cause difficulty, anxiety, distress, vexation, bother, inconvenience; political or social unrest; to disturb; to invite trouble by rash or indiscreet behaviour (Oxford English Concise Dictionary, 1996:1496), it clearly seems able to do queer work.  Indeed, Gary Needham insists that queer and trouble should be together; that "queer should trouble" (2009).

Foucault and Butler are as near as queer theory comes to having a 'canon', despite this term

being at odds with a praxis that seeks to destabilise such rhetoric as the 'authority' and the

'centre' that a canon implies.  Yet these two writers feature prominently in every

introduction to queer theory that I have come across (Jagose, 2004; Sullivan, 2003; Morland

and Willox, 2004).  At first glance then, it is difficult to see how a queer phenomenology

might have any purchase, given that both Foucault and Butler have rejected

phenomenology in one form or another.  In the following section I take a closer look at

Foucault's and Butler's relationship to phenomenology.


**Michel Foucault and phenomenology**

Foucault's analysis of the emergence of the homosexual as a "species" (1990:43) within the

late nineteenth century powerfully conceptualised sexual subjects as historically contingent

and constituted through discursive regimes including the law and medicine.  Queer theory

gained political and conceptual force through utilising Foucault's ideas to challenge

heterosexuality by showing how *both* heterosexuality and homosexuality are discursively

produced.  This enabled an analysis of the power matrix involved in naming sexual subjects

as 'normal' or 'deviant'.  Crucial to this analysis is a deconstruction of an essential,

autonomous, trans-historical self in favour of a highly relational, contingent one, produced

through discursive regimes.


Foucault, while being influenced by both Marxism and phenomenology, clearly discards

phenomenology in his later work:

If there is one approach I do reject…it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject (2001:xiv).

Todd May describes using Foucault's interviews as a way to understand his work as a "hazardous business" (2003:284).  He notes that within Foucault's earlier work phenomenology forms a crucial role and that although rejecting both content and method, he "retains what might be called the spirit or motivation behind the phenomenological project" (2003:285), that of understanding.

Foucault's major criticism of phenomenology in his later work was how the subject had been conceptualised without sufficient attention to its historicity. This subject was both the subject of study (ie the 'homosexual' in the *History of Sexuality*) and the observing subject, that is the phenomenological philosopher; implicated in the history of thought through a failure of adequate critique of the phenomenological method.  Foucault writes:

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework (1980:117).

It is important, in response, to consider whose phenomenological model of subjectivity Foucault is rejecting.  He was reacting to the dominance of an idea of the ahistorical transcendental self that assumed a priori knowledge.  This form of transcendental phenomenology could be most linked to Husserl's earlier work in which his claims to a suspension of judgement termed  'bracketing out', 'reduction' or 'epoch' would, Husserl supposed, enable a way of getting to what was present to consciousness; to  "the things themselves" (Husserl in Moran & Mooney, 2007:67).  Through Foucault's analysis of how

discursive power circumscribes subjects and knowledge, he shows the impossibility of ever achieving Husserl's ambitions.  Foucault therefore understandably rejects an "a priori theory of the subject" (Foucault cited in McLaren, 2002:61) that claimed direct and unmediated access to experience. Margaret McLaren states that:

> Foucault refuses the subject as the condition for the possibility of experience, claiming instead that it is experience that results in a subject (2002:61).

The move from a Husserlian transcendental phenomenology to Merleau-Ponty's existential version is significant in that for Merleau-Ponty, bracketing out was not seen as possible (or even desirable).  He writes quite clearly that "The most important lesson which reduction teaches us is the impossibility of reduction" (2002:xv).

As May puts it, for Merleau-Ponty:

> In order to understand the nature of experience, one must offer a descriptive characterization of the embodied experience of particular subjects (May, 2003:287).

The conceptualisation of experience and the particularity of embodied experience is what Butler critiques of phenomenology and in particular Merleau-Ponty, and it is to Butler that I now turn.

**Judith Butler and phenomenology**

Judith Butler's work has been influential to the development of queer theory.  She uses Foucault's discourse theory to analyse how gender difference is socially constructed, and in particular, how the self- "I" only comes into existence through being interpellated - through being named (1993:225). In other words, that although we are invested in believing that we have a unique inner self, our identities only come into being through societal discourses.

The available subject positions thus become starkly limited to what is culturally legible (1993:238). Her work on power and in particular the forces of the "heterosexual matrix" (1990) enabled a critique of the discursive regimes that posit heterosexuality as the only viable option.

Butler argues that although initially seeming to open up work around sexuality to historical situatedness (2003), Merleau-Ponty's terminology; the use of phrases such as "essential" and "metaphysical", (Butler, 1989:86) forecloses this possibility. Butler writes:

> Insofar as feminist theory seeks to dislodge sexuality from those reifying ideologies which freeze sexual relations into 'natural' forms of domination, it has both something to gain and something to fear from Merleau-Ponty's theory of sexuality (1989:86).

Butler's ambivalence sees both possibilities and perils, but it is ultimately this 'fear' that wins out in her rejection of Merleau-Ponty. Butler understandably critiques Merleau-Ponty's universalist claims around sexual relations and embodied experience by highlighting the often invisible specificity of his embodied subjects such as their whiteness and maleness. In relation to his earlier work *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945, Butler writes that "Devoid of a gender, this subject is presumed to characterize all genders" (1989:98). When Merleau-Ponty writes that "Man is a historical idea and not a natural species" (2002:198), this historicity does not stretch to non-normative sexualities or women in his movement towards a problematic 'natural' sexuality. A phenomenological fondness for terms such as 'essences', the 'non-judgemental' and the 'natural', seems out-of-date to a post-structuralist feminist and queer analysis in which these terms have been shown to operate underlying hegemonic judgements.

Butler also critiques Merleau-Ponty's methods and his experiments; not for what they do, but for the assumptions about experience that he articulates. She writes that:

> For a concrete description of lived experience, it seems crucial to ask whose sexuality and whose bodies are being described, for 'sexuality' and 'bodies' remain abstractions without first being situated in concrete social and cultural contexts (1989:98).

Butler challenges Merleau-Ponty by declaring that his "Greatest obfuscation consists in the claim that this constructed theoretical vocabulary renders lived experience transparent" (1989:98). Ultimately for Butler, it is Merleau -Ponty's supposed universality and transparency whilst at the same time offering an unproblematised subject that is white, male and straight which fails to provide a compelling explanation of embodied experience. Butler shows Merleau-Ponty to be the historically situated philosopher caught up in the discursive regime of a particular time and place in which universal claims can now be critiqued as hegemonic ones. As I show further on with the work of Iris Marion Young and Sara Ahmed, this does not however mean it is not possible to appropriate some of his ideas for a more contemporary situation. Firstly, however, I outline Merleau-Ponty's key ideas on embodiment.

## 3.5    Maurice Merleau-Ponty and embodiment

Merleau-Ponty's ideas of embodiment are twofold: the situatedness of the subject and the "phenomenal body" (2002:121). Both can be articulated in his later (and unfinished) work on "flesh" in his essay *The Intertwining - The Chiasm* (1969). His ideas emerged, in part, from his critique of a scientific objectivism that assumed to "gain access to an object free of all human traces, just as god would see it" (2004:45). This idea can be traced forward to

Harding (1986, 1987, 2004) and Haraway's (1988) work on situated knowledges and in particular, Haraway's critique of the universal "god-eye" (1991:189), which I discuss in the following chapter.

Merelau-Ponty's focus on perception enabled him to show that to be a perceiving subject one must be situated in the world. That we are embodied is the very condition of being in the world: "being is synonymous with being situated" (2002:294). Secondly, his embodiment ideas can be understood through his attention to the "phenomenal body", that is the particular body we experience the world through and which "rises towards the world" (2002:87). This phenomenal body is one

> in which my hand moves round the object it touches, anticipating the stimuli and
>
> itself tracing out the form which I am about to perceive (2002:87).

Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the body is the condition upon which thought depends: that we think *through* our bodies. For him, bodies are located thus:

> All that we are, we are on the basis of a de facto situation which we appropriate to
>
> ourselves and which we ceaselessly transform by a sort of escape which is never an
>
> unconditioned freedom (2002:198).

In this way, Merleau-Ponty does situate his subjects within a historicity, but in a subtly different, more ambiguous and less declarative way than either Foucault or Butler. He does this through his conceptualisation of "flesh" (1969); a term that grapples with what Catherine Vasseleu (1998:23) calls "the interwoveness of language and materiality in perception…embraced as an irreducible complexity that is necessary for a sense of self". Merleau Ponty writes that "flesh is not a contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself." (1969: 146) This return occurs through what he terms the

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"chiasm".  Merleau-Ponty's definition of 'chiasm' as a criss-crossing (of the optic nerve in the brain), has some interesting overlaps with the etymology of queer in its traversing and twisting and that there is never a settling; there is always movement and there is never one or the other but instead an irreducible ambiguity.  (For further discussion of chiasm and flesh see Evans, 2008 and Vasseleu, 1998 and for further analysis of ambiguity in relation to Merleau-Ponty see Weiss, 2008).

Merleau-Ponty's vacillating problem to many contemporary writers schooled in post-structuralist thought is that he neither denies history, nor acknowledges specifically its effect on identity formation.  This work (which precedes Butler and Foucault) does not fit easily with either Butler's work on sexual embodiment nor Foucault's on the effect of discursive regimes on subject formation in which bodily experience (which is historically specific) is the condition of *and* the circumscription of the subject (Oksala, 2009 & 2011).  Despite this, Merleau-Ponty's ideas have been utilised by more recent writers in Gender Studies, Trans Studies and Queer Studies.

## 3.6    Recent writers' utilisation of phenomenology

Most writers that reference phenomenology in Gender Studies, (Fryer, Young, 1989 & 1998, Heinämaa, 2003 Grosz, 1994 & 1995), Trans Studies (Rubin, 1998), Queer Studies (Willox, 2009; Horncastle, 2009; Ahmed, 2006) and Critical Race Studies (Pandya, 2008; Ahmed, 2000 & 2006) have predominantly (but not exclusively) focussed on utilising, critiquing and extending the work of Merleau-Ponty through explorations of  lived, embodied experience. In *Throwing Like a Girl* (1989), Iris Marion Young uses and extends Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment to analyse the particular gendered qualities of "body comportment"

(1989:51). Whilst Annabelle Willox (2009) and Henry Rubin (1998) criticise Foucault and Butler for not getting 'under the skin' of embodied experiences of trans people. Willox points out the political potential of Young's writing:

> ...if the body is always situated and habitually comprehended, then this experience of the body can change due to different relations with other bodies in given situations (2009:98).

For Butler however, Merleau-Ponty's description is not specific enough, and universalises a white male experience. Julia Horncastle takes a more generous reading of Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation of embodied subjectivity. She writes that:

> The embodied self, especially if we follow Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, is one that must be configured in specific, corporeally situated terms. Merleau-Ponty does not do this in queer terms but he raises the spectre of 'impossibility' for any un-marked-ness of the body (thus a non-queer body) (2009:905).

This holds an interesting potential for confluence with my own work - that Merleau-Ponty sits at a particularly awkward (and interesting) position in history and philosophy – his work stands as a signpost to the 'not quite'. Merleau-Ponty died in 1961, a long time before the post-structuralist turn and whilst his work certainly carries the biases of his time, I will explore in this thesis, through my art practice research chapters, how it is possible, in queering phenomenology, to develop an uncertain standpoint epistemology that allows for experiential and uncertain knowledges that are, by necessity, "not entirely articulate and determinate" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002:90). I want to specifically come back to this 'not quite' in chapter four when discussing the twisted, awkward body of the researcher as described by Stéphane Legrand as a "Cross-eyed freak" (2008:287).

I now turn to Sara Ahmed's work *Queer Phenomenology* and explore why she brings queer

and phenomenology together and how she conceptualises 'orientation' and 'disorientation'.

This will then enable me to evaluate, critique and extend her terms through an analysis of

my own art practice in the following four *Practising Theory into* Practice chapters.


**3.7     Sara Ahmed: *Queer Phenomenology***

Ahmed, like many of the recent writers that I have mentioned, utilises phenomenology as "a

resource for Queer Studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience"

(2006:2).  This is also, in part, because "phenomenology is full of queer moments; as

moments of disorientation" (2006:4).  Ahmed goes further by adding that phenomenology

offers queer studies "the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or

what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and

worlds" (2006:2).  I will explore ideas of nearness and habit through my *Practising Theory*

*into Practice* chapters, but now I want to give an overview of Ahmed's book *Queer*

*Phenomenology* (2006) and go on to lay out her terms 'orientation' and 'disorientation'.


*Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* brings together queer theory and

phenomenology to offer a "new way of thinking about the spatiality of sexuality, gender,

and race" (2006:2).  In sexuality terms this means posing "the question of 'the orientation'

of 'sexual orientation' as a phenomenological question" (2006:1).


Ahmed's  writing is not concerned with art practice and yet her attention to how bodies

extend (and fail to extend) in space through vertical, horizontal and sometimes oblique ways

and how worlds are orientated around heterosexuality offer a richness to thinking about the

emergent spaces of queer art practice.  Her work is compelling as a political project aiming for "new directions" and "new worlds" (2006:19) in which sexuality, gender and race are understood through how bodies are directed or *orientated* in ways that allow some objects and some bodies but not others to 'come into view' and become reachable.   One of her aims is to make what she terms "orientation devices" (2006:3) visible.  In doing so, her work is more of a deconstruction of phenomenology than a queering of it; a critique of phenomenology's (and philosophy's) often unnoticed conditions of emergence "by bringing what is behind to the front" (2006:4).

Two particular terms that Ahmed uses are important for mapping out her queer phenomenology and for addressing the central aims of my research: 'orientation' and 'disorientation'.  In the following two sections I set out how she is using these terms in order to test, critique and expand on them through my *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters.


### 3.8     Sara Ahmed on orientation: an outline

For Sara Ahmed, to be orientated is a matter of how we inhabit space.  She writes that:

> If we know where we are when we turn this way or that way, then we are
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> orientated.  We have our bearings.  We know what to do to get to this place or that
>
> place (2006:1).

Orientation then for Ahmed is about spatial relations; to 'have our bearings', to be 'turned' and to be 'facing' (always towards something) in ways that help create or maintain a coherent position in the world.  It requires a proximity: a facing towards near and familiar objects that help us find our way.  Ahmed continues that "These are the objects we recognise, so that when we face them we know which way we are facing (2006:1).

Ahmed asserts that to be orientated is to be directed towards *something* and to follow a line.  A successful or coherent orientation therefore requires a body to be triangulated (to continue the spatial metaphors) through familiar and  proximate objects.  These familiar objects - ones that are within our reach; a door or wall or table but also a lover or a nightclub, all help us to gain a place in the world (however temporary) from which to stand.

Ahmed (2006:69) writes that the term 'orientation' originates from a facing towards the sun; towards the east: a particular direction and construction of space and race that Edward Said has critiqued so forcefully in his book *Orientalism* (1991).  Said describes a European construction of 'The Orient' as that which is "not Europe" (1991:115), as a fantasy place of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1991:1).

Ahmed also considers 'sexual orientation' in relation to spatial metaphors of orientation:

> If orientation is how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with.

The change that Ahmed tracks in the use of the term sexual orientation is one from "direction" towards "identity" (2006:69), using Foucault's work on the rise of the homosexual as a "species".

Ahmed rightly points out that the term 'sexual orientation' is but one example in the history of the use of spatial metaphors that have sought to name sexual practices considered to be 'out of line'.  Consider for example, the terms 'bent', 'deviant', 'invert', 'pervert', 'tendency';

the list goes on and they can all be read through a spatial conceptualisation of turning and direction.

Ahmed's use of the term 'orientation', particularly its root in a need for facing familiar objects and how bodies extend in space is unpicked through chapter five and my *Glitter* installations.  For now, however, I want to lay out what Ahmed means by 'disorientation'.

## 3.9    Sara Ahmed on disorientation: an outline

If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails.  Or we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others (Ahmed, 2006:11).

Orientation for Ahmed is about finding one's way, whilst disorientation is about getting lost. Both Ahmed's project and mine are based on the premise that "'getting lost' still takes us somewhere" (Ahmed, 2006:7).

Disorientation is expressed in a variety of ways in Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*.  These meanings are difficult to unpick as she often elides the difference between spatial metaphors, bodily experiences and cultural identifications.  Whilst I am not denying that they implicate each other, it does become hard to clarify the different usages of the term disorientation.  Disorientation for example is expressed as a state that is experienced as one "encounters the world differently" (2006:20) in becoming re-orientated towards a non-normative sexuality.  Yet Ahmed also describes moments of disorientation in phenomenology in the form of experiments that Merleau-Ponty refers to, such as

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temporary disorientations through visual devices that make the wearer see the world at a forty five degree angle. At other times Ahmed describes disorientation as a more "ordinary" feeling that comes and goes as we move around during the day" (2006:157). Disorientation for Ahmed is also "a failure of organisation to hold things in place" (2006:158), as well as a failure of some bodies to extend in the world due to heterosexist, homophobic, racist and sexist "orientation devices" (2006:3). It follows for Ahmed that this failure to extend is to become an object; one that cannot act or impress upon the world. Disorientation in this sense is not evenly distributed but rather "some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis" (2006:159). Such disorientation can be damaging for example to non-white bodies in which "The disorientation affected by racism diminishes capacities for action" (2006:111). Ahmed is ambivalent about disorientation, recognising that it is not necessarily always progressive. She writes that:

> Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable. Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. Or the feeling itself might pass as the ground returns or as we return to the ground. The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support might then be lost, undone, thrown (2006:157).

Disorientation can create feelings of fear, can be unendurable for bodies that need

grounding and yet Ahmed and myself are also drawn to it.  The importance of disorientation

for Ahmed is threefold.  Firstly, in moments when orientation fails it can help us to

understand how we are orientated by being "in line" and "the right way up" (2006:66).

These states, Ahmed argues, occur through the requirement to follow conventional or

"straight" lines and by deconstructing such lines one can point to new and deviant lines.

Secondly, it can make 'here' (the familiar, the ordinary) strange (2006:160).  Thirdly, Ahmed

is interested in how we might 'face' disorientation.  That is the possibility of liveable

disorientation; also expressed as a "queer orientation" (2006:70, 107); a refusal to

'straighten up' and overcome the oblique.  She asks:

> what happens if the orientation of the body is not restored?  What happens when
>
> disorientation cannot simply be overcome by the 'force' of the vertical?  What do we
>
> do if disorientation itself becomes worldly or become what is given? (2006:159)

This is a tantalising question that remains just on the horizon throughout *Queer*

*Phenomenology*, but is never fully articulated.


Both Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed are interested in disorientation.  Merleau-Ponty references

many different experiments into physical disorientation and disorientated subjects.  So for

example, he reflects upon amputees and their feeling a 'phantom limb'; insects with one

less leg; subjects wearing glasses that tilt the word at a forty-five degree angle etc.  What

these experiments tell us is how each body is not separate from the world, but rather

"caught up in it" and our ability to extend into the world effectively depends upon such

involvements (2002:296).  Merleau-Ponty however glides over the moment when one is re-

orienting oneself to the world but is not quite fully orientated:

If we so contrive it that a subject sees a room in which he is, only through a mirror which

reflects it at an angle at 45° to the vertical, the subject at first sees the room 'slantwise'.

A man walking about in it seems to lean to one side as he goes.  A piece of cardboard

falling down the door-frame looks to be falling obliquely.  The general effect is 'queer'.

After a few minutes a sudden change occurs: the walls, the man walking about the

room, and the line in which the cardboard falls become vertical (2002:289).

This term "after a few minutes" covers a multitude of experiences and possibilities.  It skates

over what is happening in these crucial few minutes.  Ahmed voices the importance of

attending to these moments.  Significantly for my research, Ahmed's livable disorientation is

an orientation towards queer moments when objects "slip away" (2006:171).  This is an

uncertain, confusing and unsettled position to be in  that I am able to productively

investigate further through my art practice.


Ahmed seems to be less interested in how the vertical overcomes the oblique, but what

happens if we linger in disorientating moments, yet these ideas are not fleshed out enough

to fully grasp them, but perhaps that is the condition of slippery objects.  She suggests that

if we stay with such phenomenological moments that have filled Merleau-Ponty with

nausea and horror,

then we might achieve a different orientation towards them; such moments may be

the source of vitality as well as giddiness.  We might even find joy and excitement in

the horror (2006:4).

Ahmed's work on disturbing objects; ones that do not stay put and how we might face them

is tantalising, but again is not fleshed out in enough depth as to how we might attend to

them or what happens in disorientating moments. In the following chapter I use Graham

Harman's work to consider the strangeness of objects and how this relates to my own art practice and a queer encounter with art.

Ahmed's work does not consider art practice. As such, there are modes of disorientation that she has understandably not explored and that I explore in the following chapters. From the vertiginous activating of an awareness of the contingency of meaning as discussed in Duane Michals work, to the disruption of bodily habits. From the physical wooziness following a mirrorball's light to a straying from the horizontal and vertical. From how to 'face' objects that do not stay put to the horror of torture felt by an Iraqi prisoner of war. From the collapse of distance in an installation to a lingering in uncertainty as one encounters an art practice. From the disorientation of queer club space to uncertain re-orientations. All these and more will be discussed and evaluated through my art practice research and in doing so work towards the constitution of a body of non-figurative queer art practice through disorientating encounters with art.

In this chapter I have laid out the problems of utilising phenomenology in a queer project when the 'stars' of queer theory; Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have rejected it. Whilst I have also shown how Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment has been productively utilised by more recent writers. I have developed my own take on the term queer as an expansive strategy in which 'straight' ways of knowing through situating and locating can be troubled. I have laid out Ahmed's slippery terms 'orientation' and disorientation' and shown that these terms rely on particular ideas of 'facing', inhabitance', 'proximity' and 'extension'. These terms are, deployed and critically assessed in the following chapters through an analysis of my art practice. In writing about each installation I identify how and in what

ways my art practice produces different kinds of disorientation and queer modes of

knowing.  This analysis of art practice enables me to further develop a queering of

standpoint epistemology; work that neither art practice nor theory could do alone.  It is to

the first of these *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters that I now turn, with a

consideration of my first installation *Club Cave 27* and issues of representation.

# Chapter 4. Stripping Representation

## *Club Cave 27*

---

In chapters two and three I located the central concerns of this thesis within the terms

representation, queer theory, phenomenology, and art practice.  In chapter three, I began

to formulate ideas for bringing phenomenology and queer theory together through giving

attention to ideas of orientation and disorientation.  In chapter four I discuss my first Ph.D.

research installation *Club Cave 27,* in which I began to manifest some of the problematics of

representation and disorientation through art practice.


I begin by highlighting some of the decisions that went into in the making of *Club Club Cave

27.*  I describe the installation through the use of a polyvocal method in which different

voices can be heard and I consider how and what kind of disorientating moments and queer

affects were activated through the art work.  I go on to explore the signifying force of the

found materials used in *Club Cave 27* particularly those that lead to an interpretation of the

work that is infused with fear and horror.  I evaluate the desirability of disorientation

through fear and horror as a non-figurative queer art strategy and I consider the art practice

of David Altmejd as a more playful alternative.  I assess the use of questionnaires for

collecting and constructing knowledge of *Club Cave 27* and I evaluate the polyvocal method

used.   I consider what still remains unsettled about my work.  This attention to the

uncertain status of the art work is then explored as a possibility to embody a queer way of

knowing.  In doing so I develop a queering of standpoint epistemology that is central to

thinking about non-figurative queer art practice and how one might best research and

represent it.



**Image 9.**   *Club Cave 27*, 2008

## 4.1    Representation and the making of *Club Cave 27*

*Club Cave 27* took place at the *Q Club* in central Birmingham in October 2008 and was

supported by *New Generation Arts*.  The work was developed through my consideration of

some of the issues of representation for a queer art practice.  I have tended to avoid using

representations of sexual subjects in my practice yet I have still wanted to work with queer

theory and to explore whether I could make work that involved a queer encounter with the

audience.  I wondered if I could make a queer form of art practice that could be

encountered as an "excess which cannot be categorised" (Giffney, 2009:8) and that might be

experienced beyond an expression of identity politics.  In other words, I was trying to adjust

queer's "definitional center" (Sedgwick 1994:8) from representations of same-sex sexual

relations towards something that worked to "elude definition" (Carla Freccoro cited in

Giffney, 2009:8).  On reflection, this became the start of an exploration of a queer

epistemology and a consideration of what might be lost and gained through attention to

non-figurative art practice.



**Image 10.**  *Club Zhooshy*, 2007

My work previous to *Club Cave 27* was *Club Zhooshy*: a playful investigation of queer

encounters through disco aesthetics and Polari (a covert vocabulary that thrived in the

repressive 1950s (Baker, 2004:3) comprising Thieves Cant, Yiddish, back-slang and many

other influences that enabled gay men and lesbians "to indulge in high-octane gossip,

bitchiness and cruising, the intensity of which is unlikely to be seen again" (Baker, 2004:1)).

For film and soundtrack of *Club Zhooshy* please see the DVD at the back of this thesis or

www.lisametherell.co.uk).  For *Club Cave 27* I stripped out the camp voices, the mirrorballs,

glosticks and multi-coloured disco lights, the double edge stories of being gay in the 1960s,

and the triple entendres in the Polari language play.  In *Cub Cave 27* I was attempting to

activate a phenomenological, non-signifying, queer encounter, but I was also aware that in

doing so I was removing queer voices.  I kept the low light as a disruption to vision.  I

decided as a starting point to create geometrical forms that loosely referenced earlier

minimalist works such as Robert Morris' mirror cubes *Untitled* (1965).  The sand arrived

through thinking about non-indexical traces of activity – imprints; movements; subtle

changes through the duration of the show.  Then I reflected on what I had made.  This brings

with it its own problems of how to say in words what might "elude definition".   I partly

address this in the following section by attending to the materiality of the work and the

meanings arising from it are articulated through a polyvocal method (Plummer, 2005;

Kincheloe, 2005.  For a polyphonic account of the affective geography of voice see

Kanngieser, 2012) in which different voices are included.  Joe Kincheloe explains the need to

acknowledge polyvocality:

> To produce research that provides thick description and a glimpse of what could be, I
>
> need epistemological and ontological insights that alert me to the multidimensional,
>
> socially constructed, polyvocal, ever-changing, fractal-based nature of the social
>
> world (Kincheloe, 2005:333).

With this in mind, the description of *Club Cave 27* in this chapter is a mixture of my own

responses to the installation and comments that arose out of a small scale qualitative

questionnaire that was given to members of my Ph.D. reading group.  The questionnaire

method was an attempt to elicit responses to the work rather than testable 'facts'. Instead, I have purposefully made it unclear in the following walkthrough who is responding in order to open up the possibility for multiple voices and doubt rather than privileging one 'true' response or meaning (of course I always maintain editorial control). My 'knowing' as the maker of the work gave me particular insights and blind spots and I was keen to consider these alongside other experiences of the work. In this way, I aimed to create a space for surplus meaning – the work does this, *and* this *and* this – in the spirit of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994). Crucially, I began to attend to the kind of knowledge claims that are connected to experience and how one might produce epistemological uncertainty which, as I explore further on, are some of the key contributions to knowledge of this research.

The aim for the following text was to create writing on an art work in which the differences in audience interpretation were subtle enough to still hang together within the one text but with moments of disruption perceptible enough to emphasise the apparatus of a conceptual structure of understanding based on a seamless account of one unmediated reality.

### 4.2    *Club Cave 27* walkthrough

*Club Cave 27* is experienced in relation to both the cavernous room in which it sits and the huge imposing redbrick building in which it is housed. The building, opened in 1903 as the *Methodist Central Hall*, is Grade II listed. Now known as the *Q Club*, it hosts large mainstream club nights (the 'Q' is not a queer marker in this instance) and has over thirty different spaces, large and small, for night time events.

**Image 11.** *The Q Club*, Birmingham, 2006

I discuss the disorientation of night time revellers in club spaces in the following chapter,

but this is a very different encounter.  Entering the building in the day time or early evening

feels wrong.  I am out of time.  The bright strip lights illuminate the deterioration of the

building and the cheap patch repair jobs.  The smell of alcohol and cleaning detergent

mingle with the feel of stickiness underfoot and make me feel covered in something

unpleasant.  The building is impressing upon me and I do not like it very much.  With the

lights up, the promise of night time connections, pleasurable sensations and intimate

liaisons is dispelled through a slight feeling of nausea; an aftertaste of festering and

fermentation.  I want to open a window but I cannot reach any.  This nausea is not so much

one rooted in vitality, giddiness and contingency that Ahmed (2006:4) sees potential in.  It is

rather a repulsion as to the smell and feel of this space which is transitory and bleak in the stark light of day.

I walk up two flights of stairs and through corridors bright and horrible until I reach the door to *Club Cave 27*.  I push the door and it resists but swings slowly open.  I enter into a darker, high vaulted room, theatrically uplit in green.  The light is softer in this room compared to that outside the door and feels a partial relief, but then the jarring sound of the radio chatter puts me on edge.  Different voices can be heard, keying me in to a world outside.  Words and dialogue become audible but then inaudible confounding understanding at points depending on the crackle of static and how near I am to the (hidden) speakers.



**Image 12.**  *Club Cave 27*, 2008

My pupils dilate as my eyes adjust to the lower lighting and the installation begins to emerge. Within this cavernous room and slightly to the left I can make out simple wooden and chicken wire structures sitting on uneven piles of sand. At first appearance these structures seem opaque. The highest is just less than two meters tall. There is a bar in one corner and a DJ platform immediately above my head.

I smell something damp. The smell is of wet sand (I know this because I spray it every day). Others seem to not notice this, or not to register it to me in their feedback (am I mis-remembering?). This dampness is firstly to keep the silicone particle levels down, but it also has other effects. Coming in from the reek of alcohol and industrial detergent, this smell offers something else. What is it? What does it point towards? The prospect of outside? Earth? Life?



**Image 13.** *Club Cave 27* (detail), 2008

Two spotlights are attached to the bottom of the huge arches and throw green light

upwards.  There is a larger light resting on the rough plywood floor which also throws out a

narrow beam of green light.  This light creates shadows of the wooden structures on the

curved walls, making a cityscape silhouette.  As my eyes adjust, it is the mounds of sand that

I notice first, but then I see the floor light shining on delicate dustings of sand, giving

shadows to specks and small clusters, altering their shapes with elongated shadows.  They

become constellations, the shadows stretching out towards other particles forming relations

between those that are caught in the glare of the light and leaving those that are not

illuminated to an undifferentiated territory.
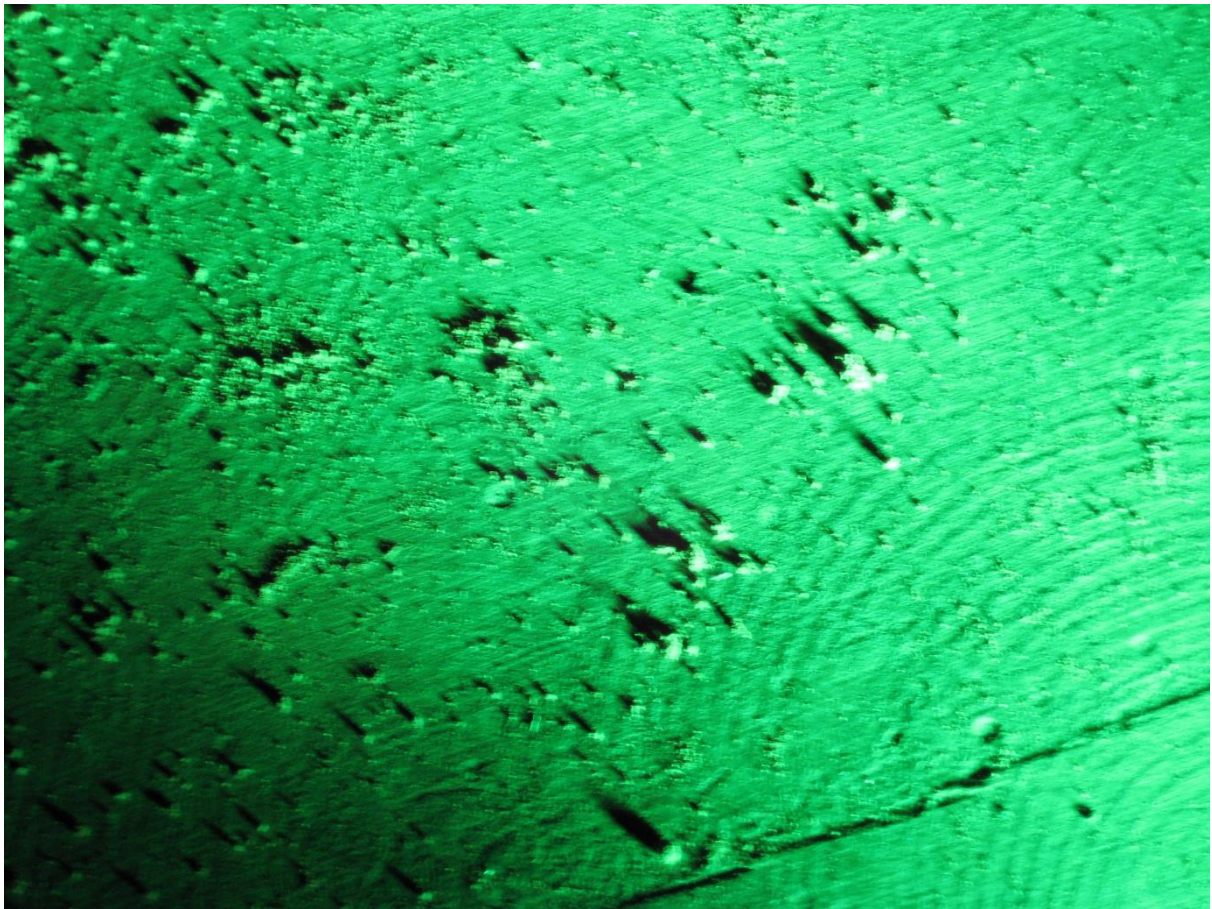


**Image 14.**  *Club Cave 27* (detail), 2008

As I explore in this chapter and in the following one, this art practice manifestation of sand and also of glitter specifically enables me to start thinking about unfathomable relations; uncountable ecologies (Lomax: 2000:92) that might attend to a queer conception of desire and knowledge that is connective, uncountable and excessive and perhaps eludes definition. Significantly for this Ph.D., the art practice here and more generally in this research operates not simply as an illustration of the theory, but rather enables theorisation in ways not always possible without art practice.
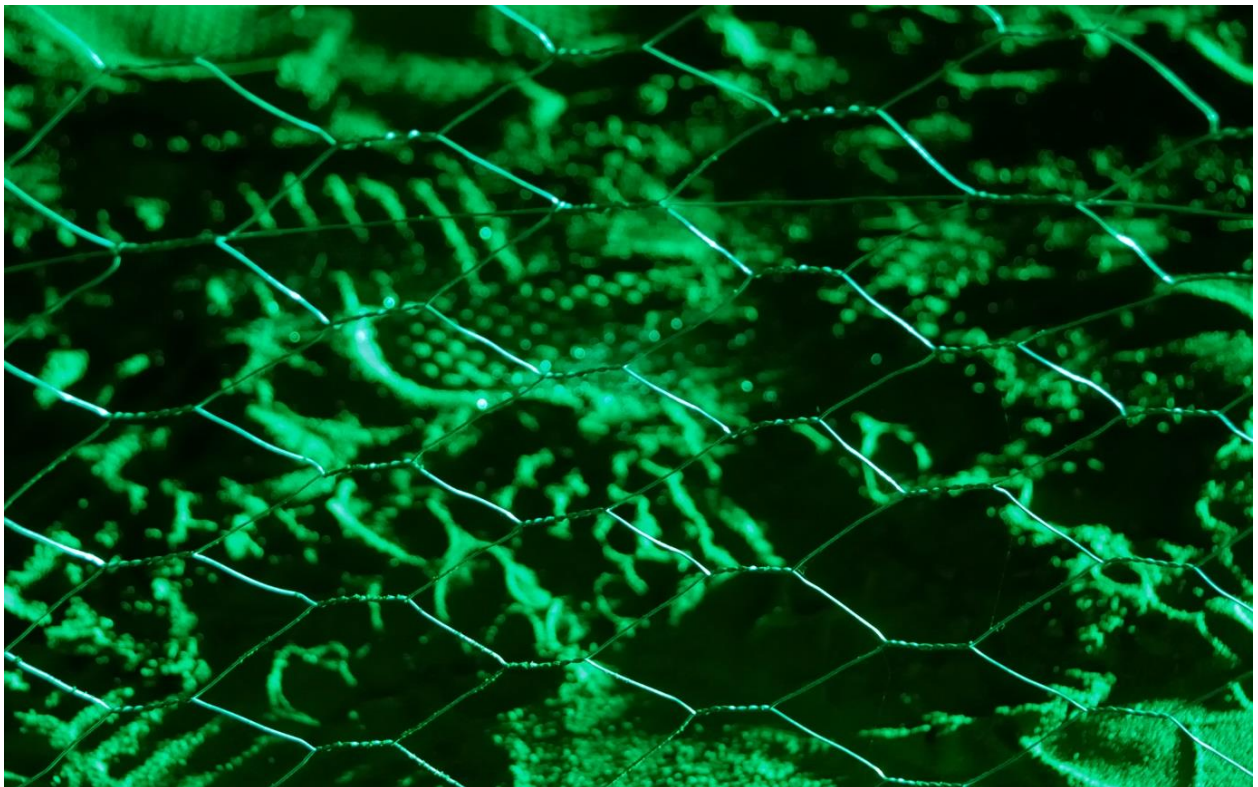


**Image 15.**  *Club Cave 27* (detail), 2008

I walk forward slowly towards the wooden and chicken wire structures.  Underfoot I feel a gradual change in sensation from a hard, rough surface to the softer, more uneven sand. This makes me think of an outside space in an inside one.  I am not sure what I am 'allowed'

to do *with* or *on* this art practice.   I walk tentatively on the sand – because it is dark and because I am walking on art.  Sometimes I sink slightly and feel the sensation of my feet tilting or keeling over, but not completely because I physically resist this pull in order to stay upright - that is vertical.  I do not become oblique; at an angle to the world because it is slightly uncomfortable when I am not vertical and I do not notice anything else – even if I linger for a while.

I have a choice to walk or not walk on the more inclined sand banks, but I cannot chose not to walk on any sand, for it slips, moves and covers the floor.  Like glitter, it creeps into cracks and is carried off on the soles of peoples' shoes and deposited all over this room and beyond.  This raises the question of how to 'face' or orientate oneself to this installation; one which does not stay put, which does not have specific borders.  I discuss this in the following chapter.  I like this sly circulation and think that it will work better with glitter- a material that cannot be so easily assimilated into the detritus of the everyday.  It is also a more immediately camp material that connotes pleasure and desire and so lends itself to fabulation.  I decide to use glitter in my next installation.

Moving closer, I see footprints in the sand- traces of activity.  I try and make my own mark – a personal register of where I have been, but then I try to find my prints again after others have been but forget what shoes I am wearing, or moreover do not know what the tread imprint looks like.  I make more prints and compare them to see which print is mine.  I try and fail to triangulate this inventory of textures, as it is only a matter of time before it crumbles under someone else's foot.  This is not following a line of desire – I'm a bit stuck.

I carry on walking because to experience *Club Cave 27* I need to move around it.  It reminds me of the film *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979) as I am moving around a strange zone.  Although perhaps I can see too much of the installation from this one point because the chicken wire is see through and it is not so dark that I cannot make most things out – perhaps I need less light – to make things less visible in order that other less certain relations might appear.  Or rather to enable an uncertain orientation through frustrated viewpoints.  I move in and out of the glare of the green light and my pupils dilate –a physical reaction to the installation.
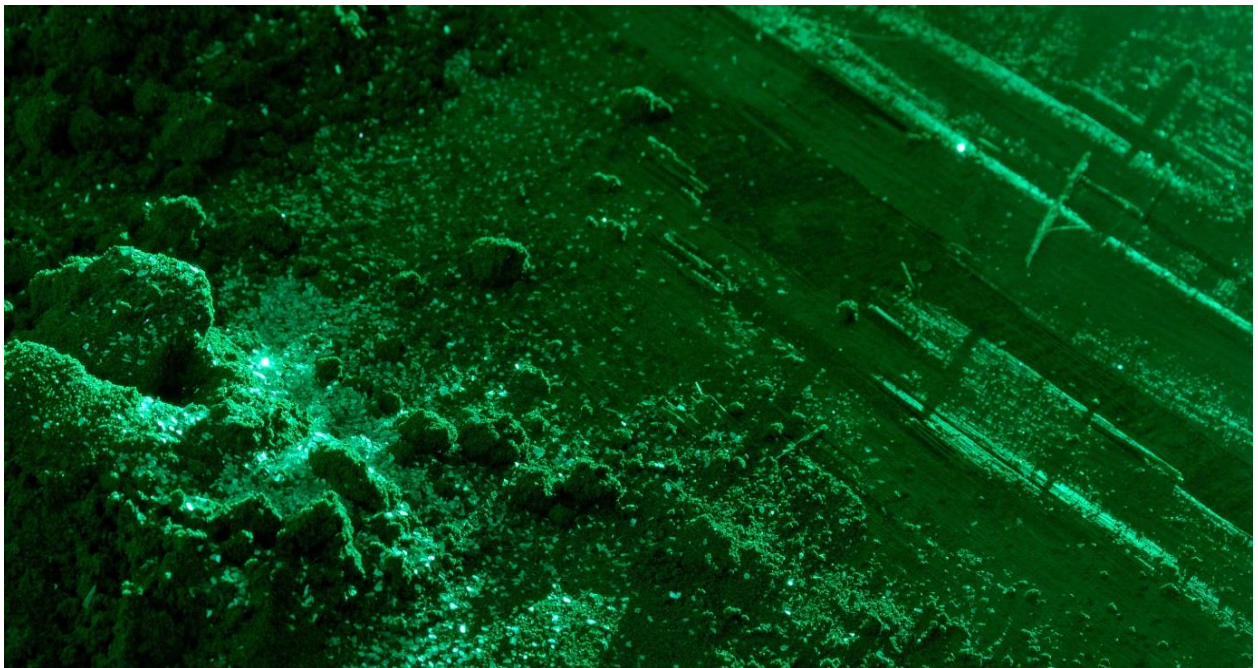


**Image 16.**  *Club Cave 27* (detail), 2008

From different positions I see different things.  I stand and sit on one of the small wooden platforms that has rough carpet tiles on its top.  It is scratchy.  I stand on a platform and feel self-conscious and I do not think anyone is looking and I do not stand on it because I am not sure if I am allowed.  If I had been alone I might have done something different.  From this slightly altered perspective I first notice that some of the sand contains glitter.  I bend down

and feel the sand with my fingers.  I notice more glitter.  Glitter has so many cultural

connotations of fabulation.  However, the green light in *Club Cave 27* does not activate this

glitter in a fabulous, sparkly disco way.  Instead, it is gloomy glitter – perhaps for a more

sombre occasion, although for what event I am not exactly sure.  It is slightly abject, as if it

has been swept up after a night of pleasure but not quite away.  In this light it could be

cigarette ash.


The room is vast, but the cages and platforms operate at a much more human scale – just

above or below head height –some vertically, some horizontally.  There are two types of

wooden structure in the installation.  Firstly the cube-like forms made of rough lengths of

reclaimed timber that are partially clad in abrasive chicken wire.  These have been

understood as cages, whilst the small wooden rostra (from a primary school) have been

interpreted as some form of podium for club dancing (with a gendered dimension).  The

'cages', the noise and the light give a sinister air that I had not anticipated, reminiscent of

for some of prisons, battery cages, trench warfare, and for others, something less able to be

pinned down to any one meaning yet still having a menacing edge.


## 4.3     Fear and horror of disorientation

At what point does something that is not coherent become sinister?  Undoubtedly

disorientation can be filled with fear; fear of the unknown and of whatever one brings to it

of one's own concerns.  Fear also of bodily disintegration; of becoming an object which is

one of Ahmed's definitions of disorientation.  Fear is interesting to this thesis because, like

disorientation, it operates in the realm of ontology *and* epistemology yet it is difficult to

fully account for where it resides because it can be generated by a diverse set of triggers.  By

this I mean that fear is felt bodily; it is an example of bodily affect but one that is often

socially contingent.  For Ahmed, fear has intentionality not dissimilar to phenomenological

intentionality - that is to say that "when we feel fear, we feel fear *of* something" (2006:2).

And, as such, we are bodily affected by this contact but within discursive regimes.  Ahmed

writes of fear that:

> The timing of this apprehension matters.  For an object to make this impression is
>
> dependent on past histories, which surface as impressions on the skin (2006:2).

In *Club Cave 27* the green low light connotes different things to different people - horror

films *such as Saw* (Wan, 2004) or feeling frightened of the Wooky Hole witch.  Whilst the

audio is an edit of many hours of taxi radio talk made by Matt Lambert, this is experienced

by some as police radio when combined with the green lighting and traces of footprints and

an imagined crime scene emerges.  Fear and horror associations here share a recurring

commonality of threats to bodily integrity.  Sara Ahmed writes how disorientation can be

fearful, sometimes "too shattering to endure" (2006:176).  This hints at different kinds of

orientation that are not always sufficiently differentiated by Ahmed, but I want to examine a

specific horrific example.  In the following sections I discuss disorientation through fear and

horror and evaluate their potential as queer strategies for a non-figurative queer art

practice.

Disorientation does not always come in a neat package of political progressiveness.  If we

take the reported use of loud music on Iraqi prisoners of war as an example of

disorientation, the effects are deeply shocking.  One American sergeant chillingly explains:

They can't take it. If you play it for 24 hours, your brain and body functions start to

slide, your train of thought slows down and your will is broken. That's when we

come in and talk to them (BBC News, 2003).

The captive's "train of thought" is blocked from its habitual movements and orientations to

prevent the person feeling that they are on solid ground, both epistemologically and

ontologically, in order that interrogators can use this disorientation to their own ends.

Whether these terrible affects are queer is as difficult to answer as the question 'what is

queer?'  If queer is about practice, action and doing (which I think it is), then there is no

reason why queer tactics cannot be used for politically dubious ends, because queer

enactments do not always follow from a politically progressive framing.   If queer is about

destabilising, or being at odds with the 'normative' (Jagose, 2004; Halperin, 1997), then

queer tactics cannot simply operate from a broad, progressive model of politics, because

this framing is an epistemologically normative arrangement in itself.  Halberstam (2008:153)

states: "Queerness names the other possibilities; the other potential outcomes, the non-

linear and non-inevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to

unpredictable futures." These unpredictable "other possibilities" point to an epistemological

uncertainty that I develop through this thesis.  However, disorientation through horror or

fear is not the kind of strategy that I want to activate.  It resonates too much with the

violence done to queer bodies both historically and on a daily basis in more contemporary

times.  Neither does fear playfully manifest the vitality and giddiness through contingency

pointed to by both Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed.  Ahmed explains the problems associated

with disorientation thus:

It is not that disorientation is always radical.  Bodies that experience disorientation

can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to

reground and reorientate their relation to the world.  So, too, the forms of politics

that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the 'aims' of

their gestures, depending on how they seek to (re)ground themselves.  And, for sure,

bodies that experience being out of place might need to be orientated, to find a

place where they feel comfortable and safe in the world (Ahmed, 2006: 158).

Horror comes with its own sets of "interconnections between things" (Lomax, 2000:46) that

can sometimes find common ground in queer theory.  Robin Wood argues that the horror

film genre has a formula that consists of "three variables: normality, the Monster, and,

crucially, the relationship between the two" (1978).  Normality has often been represented

in horror as white, heterosexual, patriarchal and capitalist.  The monster in horror manifests

as a "meaning machine" (Halberstam, 1995) tracing changing ideas of normality and

difference.  With this in mind, the 'queer gothic' (Haggerty, 2006), whether progressive or

not, is often present in horror through transgressions of social and sexual norms wherein

the status quo (that is 'normality'), shattered at first, can never fully be restored at the end

even if the monster is destroyed.  Cultural representations such as those in horror films are

one way in which queer and fear or horror can find points of commonality.  However, these

points do not necessarily coalesce through modes of disorientation and which are the

purpose of this research to explore.  I therefore want to look at Graham Harman's work on

horror that *can* help think through phenomenological disorientation whilst also considering

its value to the conceptualisation of a non-figurative queer art practice.

**4.4    Graham Harman and strange objects**

Harman is interested in the "strangeness of objects" (2008:336), particularly as articulated

in the horror of H.P. Lovecraft's fiction writing and the phenomenological philosophy of

Edmund Husserl.  Harman (2008) notes that when trying to describe a horrific scene

Lovecraft does not have the words because language fails to pin such alterity down.

Lovecraft instead resorts to abstractions and geometry as a strategy for an art practice that

cannot be fully captured through language.  As I discuss further on in this chapter, parallels

can be seen here with my own arts research and how best to communicate unsettled

research 'findings' and uncertain meanings emerging from the art practice.

Harman is interested, as many philosophers have been, in the relationship between an

object and its meaning or representation.  Lovecraft and Husserl are particularly insightful

for Harman because of what he describes as "the broken link between objects and their

manifest crust" (2008:336).  This troubled relationship between an object and its meaning;

or how it appears to an embodied viewer leads Harman to contemplate the "permanent

strangeness of objects".  Horror here is more reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed's

vital giddiness because at its source is the contingency of our own positionality in a world in

which certainty and the ability to orientate oneself through familiar objects is questioned.

This strangeness is one way to interrogate how representation and meaning can never be

simple equivalences.  Strangeness is however a contested term.  Sara Ahmed, for example,

deconstructs the figure of the stranger or the alien.  She argues that the very figurability of

such terms (the conditions of their appearance) is dependent on the concealment of the

"histories of determination" (2004:4) that is to say the concealment of power relations.  For

Ahmed, strangeness through encounters with what could be seen to be beyond

representation cannot be understood without a critical awareness of the power relations

present in the realm of representation:

> The figure of the alien reminds us that what is 'beyond the limit' is also subject to
>
> representation: indeed, what is beyond representation is also, at the same time,
>
> over-represented.  What is over-represented and familiar in its alien-ness cannot be
>
> reduced or *found* in such representational forms (Ahmed, 2000:1).

With this in mind, and with attention to the materiality of the work, I now consider how

strangeness and disorientation operate in *Club Cave 27*.


In *Club Cave* 27 the sand that is thinly spread dries out because of its contact with the

wooden floor and this sand, if collected, would slip through your fingers quite smoothly.

The sand in other places does not run as easily through my fingers because it is too wet and

clumpy for that action and so I sprinkle it because the material will only do what it is capable

of doing under the conditions under which it exists, or perhaps not, for things can be weird

through their encounter.  The world is full of weird objects and, I would contend with

reference to Duane Michals' work, there are many strange relations towards objects.

Phenomenology and queer theory get this, as can art practice research.  As Graham Harman

argues, "we are never really sure just what an object is" (2008:364) because an object

"partly evades all announcement through its qualities, resisting or subverting efforts to

identify it with any surface" (2008:346).  Resisting easy or certain identification through an

encounter seems a rich source from which to create non-figurative queer art practice.  Close

attention to objects and their relations to the world can manifest this strangeness through

art practice research.

Whilst I do not claim to suggest all strange objects are queer, I think it is possible to utilise objects in ways that can create strange worlds through disorientation and in doing so can engender queer encounters. However, does this point to queer in this sense being just another word for *weirdness*? Is it simply one of Alexander Doty's six meanings of queer as "non-straight things" (Doty cited in Plummer, 2005:365). If so, one wonders if "social traction" (Katz interview, 19 May 2009) is lost. For phenomenology is weird but not necessarily dangerous, unlike the potential of queer politics. This is where a queering of standpoint epistemology is so crucial and can bring something more troubling to the project; by thinking through and enacting queer modes of knowing.

In the making of *Club Cave* 27, my attention was towards loosening epistemological certainties of queer signifiers and bodily identifications and standpoints to encourage more queer modes of knowing. However, this work seems to have engendered fear and references to horror, which I had not anticipated. It was not a generation of fear in the audience – a fearful encounter that I was attempting to activate, but rather a form of playful uncertainty; uncertain embodiments and standpoints – that seeing *is not* believing and an experience that creates or realises that multiple orientations/disorientations are possible.

**Image 17.** *Club Cave 27* (detail), 2008

On reflection, it is the materials that need altering for a different kind of experience to occur. For example, the chicken wire and wood structures have big baggy openings. In the making of these objects, I thought these openings might be imagined and experienced as points through which bodies (bodies of people and bodies of knowledge) might evade capture and take flight. However, in the encounter with these objects they have become interpreted as spaces for holding bodies against their will and not, unfortunately, activating flighty ones. I had been thinking so much about 'stripping back' sexual representations that I had not attended to the materials enough and what they might signify. Consequently, other meanings entered the practice because the found materials already signified and

overpowered what I was trying to make happen.  Of course I can never fully control how the work is experienced or interpreted and nor would I want to.   But I do need to attend to the materials and as such, I need different materials that can register more readily desire and play - perhaps a disintegration of bodily coherence through desire rather than through horror.  One artist who has successfully achieved this by using aspects of horror is David Altmejd.

## 4.5    David Altmejd

David Altmejd represented Canada at the 2007 Venice Biennale with his work *The Index*.  He is also known as the *Werewolf Man* for his creations of desiccated mythical creatures in transformative states.  He uses many different materials, including mirrors, crystals, stuffed animals, hair and cheap gold chains to create installations that invite the viewer to constantly double take.  For His Venice work; *The Index*, the audience looks intimately inside a giant body, and comes across more mirrors, and display cases within which shabby creatures and crystals emerge.

**Image 18.** David Altmejd, *The Index (The Giant 2),* 2007

Some objects can only be viewed through looking at reflective surfaces. The viewer is

uncertain about what they are looking at or even where they are looking; it is very difficult

to orientate or 'find yourself' in many of these fractured mirrors. The effect is troubling for

the audience as they may try and work out what is going on and what relations are being set

up and unsettled. Altmejd's materials are often shiny and dirty, even abject. They attract

and repel. The effect is a dazzling and disorientating bombardment of the visual. The

viewer's gaze is reflected again and again, but not always back to the same spot – not a

simple circularity that leads back to the viewer.

**Image 19.**  David Altmejd, *The Index* (detail), 2007

Altmejd alludes subtly to sexuality in references that may not be noticed by some and in other places it is more obvious.  See for example the fleshy, hairy chicken wattle in the image above that look like testicles.  Whilst the figure may or may not be alluding to the gay slang term 'chicken' meaning a younger man.

**Image 20.**  David Altmejd, *Untitled*, 2006

The werewolves, or Loup-Garous of Altmejd's work are splintered gothic creatures that the

audience may try and make cohere by using our own narratives.  Unlike *Club Cave 27*,

Altmejd's work references horror but does not necessarily engender a horrific experience

for the audience.  His work has a lighter touch than that and in doing so encourages multiple

interpretations.  Altmejd sees the werewolf as a living thing, despite or perhaps because of

its fragmentation – he stresses that his werewolves are not rotting, but crystallizing, and so

are living sculptures. He states that he is interested in "energy related to transformation"

(Altmejd cited in Enright, 2004) and sees his work as "post-apocalyptic" (Altmejd cited in

Enright, 2004), in that the apocalypse is a starting point for "how things grow on top of that"

(Altmejd cited in Enright, 2004).  So for Altmejd, it is the massive potential and release of energy just at the moment the Loup-Garou's  head is being chopped off in which his work emerges, and what happens next is an uncertain narrative.  Indeed, he consistently tries to avoid a unitary single narrative or meaning being read through his work.  He explains it thus:

> I am interested in complexity as a form. I am happy when people are fascinated by the thing itself, when they are absorbed by it and know that it contains something more. Personally, I like experiencing complex objects, but not because I necessarily wish to understand the system. I am seduced by complexity itself (Altmejd cited in Gladman, 2004).

Altmejd's objects are carefully chosen and placed to create this complexity and excess of narrative and form.  This attention to complexity through excess is one that I explore in my *Glitter* floor works in the following chapter.  Altmejd's work is relevant to the aims of this thesis because despite the presence of the figurative in the body of the giant and the excess of information present, neither brings the viewer any closer to a definitive, settled meaning; any closer to epistemological certainty but it is instead a celebration of the surplus of meaning (Sedgwick, 1994), in-between states and the potential of life, as energies constantly have the potential to transform objects; things are indeed queer.


*Club Cave 27* and its attendance to non-representation meant that it was difficult to write about and interpret in a direct way that would fit into a model of art practice based research where the practice serves to illustrate the theory.   There was an excess of meaning (and perhaps a lack of meaning that could be read in a straightforward way), empirically, phenomenologically, performatively and culturally.

In many ways, for example, I have not fully integrated the meaning of the audio aspect of *Club Cave 27* into my experience of the installation.  On one level the voices are representational because they are in the realm of language and meaning.   Words can be heard; snatches of conversation.  Yet slippages in meaning occur as the audio ebbs and flows between recognisable dialogue and radio crackle.  In this way the audio subtly moves taxonomical registers between being representational and also something else that does not signify so clearly.   We may experience the soundtrack as 'too much'.

My uncertainty as to how to 'read' Club Cave 27 has meant that this work remains unsettled and unfinished.  This situation led me to thinking about uncertain knowledges in art practice research. I realised that I required an approach to knowledge that could hold uncertainties (Giffney, 2009: 8) in experiential accounts.  This was how my methodology became focussed on queering standpoint epistemology.  In the following sections I discuss standpoint epistemology, also known as situated knowledge, and what I mean by a queering of it.

## 4.6    Standpoint epistemology

Standpoint epistemology emerged as a feminist critique of knowledge. Conceptualised by Sandra Harding (1986, 1987) and utilised by Donna Haraway (1988), it is concerned with situating knowledge claims.  Haraway critiques what she describes as the universal "god-eye"; the "god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (1991:189).   Instead, she argues that disinterested, neutral and unsituated claims about the world are impossible and serve to conceal power inequalities.  Standpoint epistemology demands that in order to make claims to knowledge one should first carefully consider and account for one's own location

in the world and the "practices of domination" (Haraway, 1988:579) that proceed from it.

Nancy Duncan explains situated knowledge in relation to research thus:

> Situated knowledge is knowledge that is 'located' by researchers who self critically
>
> attend to the cultural, geographical and historical specificity of the conditions of
>
> production of those knowledge claims (1996:3).

For Haraway and Harding, and many subsequent users of their work, standpoint

epistemology involves a political action of 'accounting for oneself'.  So, for example, my

viewpoint will be influenced, amongst other things, by my gender (female), race (white),

class (middle class) and sexuality (queer; used here as a non-identity identity).  As Duncan

(1996:1) writes, knowledge is "embodied, engendered and embedded in the material

context of place and space".


Standpoint epistemology has similarities to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in that both

place embodiment at their heart.  For Merleau-Ponty the body is the condition for all

thought, experience and knowledge of the world, whilst for standpoint epistemology it is

the specific *situatedness* of the body that influences the kind of knowledge which is

produced.


What is not accounted for in a methodology of situated knowledge is uncertainty,

movement and the impossibility of fully accounting for oneself.  The limitations of such an

outlook are brought into focus in this thesis through critically analysing experiential art

practice research; a form of knowledge that can be difficult to account for.  This is why my

art practice is significant and what is revealed only by this particular method of enquiry.  As I

have tried to suggest, 'knowing' art practice cannot be reduced to a discussion of a

discussion.  More slippery ways of thinking and knowing are required to 'grasp' its less concrete, non-verbal and excessive manifestations.

The enactment of disorientating bodily experiences through art practice develops a significant epistemological position (with all the attendant ironies of that status) by queering standpoint epistemology in a way that encourages queer ways of knowing through bodily uncertainties.  That is a queer understanding of how knowledge instability is bound up with bodily uncertainty.  A queer mode of knowing offers a troubling of epistemological certainty and knowledge taxonomy and is articulated by Jonathan Katz as:

> ...entirely individuated, untraceable, illogical, without pattern, shifting from person to person - and for all that no less real.  It is queer too because it is an unauthorized knowledge, in the sense that evades the communal usage (1999:170).

Noreen Giffney adds a plurality of possibilities to Katz's already complex characterisation by suggesting additional queer modes of knowing:

> indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable or uncommunicable (2009:8).

I discuss some of these terms in relation to my *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters.  In the following section I want to develop a queering of standpoint epistemology which forms the central tenet of my methodology.

## 4.7     Queering standpoint epistemology

The locating of knowledge through research is not a passive exercise, rather, as Barfield and Quinn (2004) write, research is a "mode of construction". As discussed in chapter three,

queer theorists have insightfully analysed how knowledge is bound up with power.

Knowledge is not neutral but positions, locates, fixes, and circumscribes bodies – what they

can do and what they can say.  This is not, however, the end of the story, because many

queer theorists (Butler, 2001;  Halberstam, 2006, 2011;  Sedgwick, 1994, 2008;  Wilton,

2004) are also engaged in troubling the certainty of knowledge categorisation arguing it is

contingent and unstable; that knowledge, particularly around sexuality, is not 'a done deal'.

Tamsin Wilton, utilising disorientation, explains the necessity for attending to knowledge

instability.  She writes that:

> Given the complex interlocutions between discourses of the erotic and discourses of
>
> gender that are held in the word 'sex', it seems to me that only a consciously
>
> disorientated and unstable queer-feminist epistemology is adequate to the task of
>
> understanding sexuality and the processes whereby individuals come to fashion
>
> sexual identities for themselves  (2004:12).

Queer theorists have approached situated knowledge in a variety of different ways.  Judith

Butler describes "the limits of self-knowledge" (Butler, 2001:22); that is the impossibility of

ever fully 'giving account of oneself'.  This is held in tension with what she perceives as the

ethical necessity of such accounting.  This has overlapping concerns with the problem of

speaking as 'woman' and shoring up gender difference that I discussed in chapter two.

Ethical tensions arise when a standpoint becomes troubled so much that it ceases to be a

standpoint anymore and loses its accountability.  This is what Katz describes as the problem

of *queer* "losing its social traction" (Katz interview, 19 May 2009); that it can no longer be

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politically effective (for a rather one sided discussion of these tensions in relation to curatorial decisions see Atkins, 1996).  Katz extrapolates with the term queer:

> if you are using words that escape its citationality, which is to say essentially pushing against the borders of what gets constituted as queer, how then does queer function as opposed to other...in other words, what's the particular valence or value to the term queer here as opposed to other forms of social and cultural resistance? (Katz interview, 2 July 2009)

Katz has a point here that in being recognisably queer through an iteration of same-sex desire it is easier to draw on an already legible cultural history of resistance.  In giving up queer's "definitional center" (Sedgwick 1994:8) this becomes harder to do.  However, this loss could also offer the possibility of manifesting less legible queer practices; what Whitney Davis terms "invisibilities" (Davis, 1998:124).  This approach is bound up with how one might destabilise embodied experience and identity, yet still produce accountable knowledge that has an ethics not mired in accusations of relativism (an 'anything goes' approach).  This tension speaks to the problem at the heart of my thesis and also, crucially, what my art practice is able to explore in a very different way to the written work by attention to the kind of affects my work can activate with people through the encounter.  As I discuss in chapters four to seven, this is how I begin to articulate queer encounters with art and queerness in art practice based research.

I want to return to the idea of 'accounting for oneself' because it is central to thinking about situated knowledge.  Sedgwick takes a playful approach.  She explains her reasons for

resisting a clear cut identity position, as she writes that she "could neither disavow nor claim a gay orientation" (2008: xvii). Her strategy, she acknowledges is not straightforward and:

> was certain to put me in repeated false positions. But I increasingly saw that no truer position was available. In the yet unlabelled realm of queer theory, this oblique relation to declared identity, once I found myself located there, seemed much too compelling to forgo. It had my love and loyalties going for it, along with a sinewy demonstrative relation to some complicated ideas. It both satisfied and challenged an ethic and aesthetic of truth-telling that I seem to hold close (2008: xviii).

This "oblique relation" described by Sedgwick as an experiment with the reception of one's sexual orientation could also be conceptualised as a twisted or 'out of line' body and body of knowledge in a more phenomenological sense. In Sedgwick's tactic and in my own art practice , standpoint epistemology's 'need' for embodied knowledge can be twisted to countenance bodily uncertainties. A troubling of standpoint epistemology in this way would be one in which the body becomes unreliable or twisted in its viewpoint. Stéphane Legrand describes the experience, tensions and limitations of a phenomenological method understood through Foucault's archaeological method (thinking the past in the present) as twisting the researcher into "some sort of cross-eyed freak". Legrand writes that:

> we should always accompany our description of the past with a description of the present, that we must turn our attention at the same time towards those 'distant horizons' and (reflectively) towards the very place we occupy here and know. That is to say we should simultaneously (like some sort of cross-eyed freak) look as far back as we can and look at the position (here) from which we are looking (there) (2008:287).

By considering Legrand's "cross-eyed freak" it is possible not only to think about the problems and limitations of thought, but also to the uncertain embodiment of the philosopher, the artist-researcher and the audience and the unthinkability trying to be grasped.

*Club Cave 27* is a particular encounter, not with 'the other' as in an encounter with figural representations of non-normative sexual identities, nor with knowable separate "things-in-themselves". Instead it is something altogether more complex than phenomenological reading alone can provide. My art practice has the potential to reveal, through experiential, embodied encounters, the contingency of embodied knowledge; of known points; and in doing so reflect my methodological perspective on how bodies might be uncertainly situated.

As a way to write into my thesis some of the instability and uncertainty that I have discussed in this chapter I used a polyvocal method using data from a qualitative questionnaire. In the following section I evaluate the success of these methods.

## 4.8    Questionnaires

I initially undertook a survey by questionnaire in order to gather responses as to the significance of this work and its capacity to engender queer encounters. I focussed my questionnaires on peers who were also doing Ph.D. research in the School of Art. The questionnaire asked people to respond to my art practice in four ways: empirically, performatively, phenomenologically and culturally. Their responses were then discussed in a small reading group. This was a small scale, qualitative and discursive method with a

specialist audience that knew my work.  The aim was not to get a broad response, but to

help me reflect on how the work might be experienced, to discuss the work, to push it into

new areas and perhaps highlight existing gaps or trouble spots.

Responses did help push the work into new areas.  For example, some (not all) of the

respondents described the work using words such as "sinister", "scared", "frightening" and

"horror".  These responses enabled me to consider and evaluate horror and fear as possible

strategies of disorientation.  They also made me attend more closely to the materials I was

using and the implications of the decisions I was making in assembling them in particular

ways.  As a result, my art practice was more materially focussed in the subsequent

installations.

However, there were also limitations of the use of questionnaires.  Primarily its inability to

engage with queer modes of knowing that I keep returning to in this research:

> indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility,
>
> unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable
>
> or uncommunicable  (Giffney, 2009:8).

Instead, I found that a drive towards 'capturing' audience responses through questionnaires

eclipsed considerations of what new knowledge the art practice might articulate, such as

the "gearing up" of audience bodies to new possibilities and new, fleeting embodiments.

These encounters with art practice are difficult to write about, often because of the non-

verbal, multiplicitous and messy nature of practice, that can so easily be devalued or

ignored in a drive for academic coherence or because the work does not quite 'fit' into the

research paradigm (Vincs, 2007:101).

The driving question emerging from these responses and discussions with the group became

'But is it queer?' This was an unsatisfactory question because it had reduced a complex,

experiential process and series of affects to a classification through naming. The

dissatisfaction arose from the use of queer as a naming, rather than to consider its use as

something more expansive, excessive, fleeting or strategic that challenges epistemological

certainty. However, these problematics arising directly from the shortcomings of a

questionnaire method to articulate a complex art practice were fruitful in developing my

ideas about queer encounters and queer knowledges. From initial frustration my

methodology arose; that of queering standpoint epistemology as a way to attend to what

Giffney describes as "the queer remainder" (2009:8). I needed a way to explore, through

writing, how art practice can sometimes exceed the ability of writing to interpret it. In an

attempt to manifest excess, uncertainty and doubt and to partially challenge an authentic

authority on the work, I used a polyvocal method when describing *Club Cave 27*. That is to

say that the installation description in this thesis is a mixture of my own and others

responses to it which cannot always be separated out by the reader. This has been partially

successful in that the detailed yet sometimes ruptured description of the installation begins

to question a singular experiential truth. However, I decided to drop the questionnaire

method for subsequent installation because of the limitations outlined above. The *Club

Cave 27* questionnaires had done their work through pointing me to an emergent

methodology (Vincs, 2007:101) that could be attendant to the uncertain and unsettled

status of the art objects in research.

**4.9     Uncertain knowledges in art practice research**

Kim Vincs in her Ph.D. research through dance practice searches for a methodology that can value "the complexity and rich multiplicity of concerns in an artwork" (2007:103). Whilst Barbara Bolt considers how art practice and process that "breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers and generally runs away from me" (Bolt, 2004:1). My methodology has had to be flexible enough to be able to work with alternative knowledge production and to attend to the work of art in its polyvalent, excessive and sometimes uncertain knowledge claims. This is because the kinds of knowledges that art practice can produce cannot always be easily reduced to one signification or mode of understanding.

Art practice enables an encounter or "rendezvous" (Macleod, 2005:2) with the audience that takes in the relationship between the art object, embodied participant and the space in which the two exist. This has been particularly theorised through a phenomenological art historical approach to minimalism. (Boetzkes, 2009; Krauss, 1973; Fried, 1967). As Estelle Barrett (2007) asserts, arts research operates "not only on the basis of explicit and exact knowledge, but also on that of tacit and experiential knowledge". This is described by Barrett (2007) as a "sense activity"; how we think and feel through the handling of materials. So in *Club Cave 27,* the taxi chatter, the green light and the structures assembled together are interpreted by some as being resonant of a crime scene, whilst others experience it as having elements of a Samuel Beckett set or go-go dancing stage. The slipperiness of signification begins to emerge through this installation as well as the (variable) signifying force of the materials. Following David Kolb (1984), Estelle Barrett writes:

we cannot separate knowledge to be learned from situations and experiences in which it is used. Situated enquiry or learning demonstrates a unity between problem, context and solution (2007).

This is partly my experience, but I think something is missing –this is almost too neat an answer, for what exactly is the situation?  Is it the practice based Ph.D? Is it the *Q Club*? Is it the work as manifest in the Q Club?  Is it the making of the work or how it is experienced?  If so where does the making start and end?  A "situated enquiry" suggests a stable place from which to speak and investigate from, yet articulating exactly what the situation is is not wholly achievable.  In part this is due to a situation (and an installation) being not just a collection of objects, but of embodied and on-going involvements.  Yve Lomax offers an expansive suggestion that troubles an easy contextualisation and that has helped me consider how objects operate in and as situations.  She writes:

> Things are not well-formed wholes, even though they may be as round as a ball.
> They too are open rings: interconnections between things which in turn are
> interconnections between other things...the middle is everywhere (2000:46).

Here then we can imagine *Club Cave 27* not with a bounded fixed meaning, but as something that spins out to other things and other involvements.  This is crucial to my queering of standpoint epistemology because it enables expansive, shifting, connective and even uncommunicable and unaccountable encounters with objects.  As MacLeod and Holdridge write:

> Losing track, taking objects as volatile signifiers of a world which we inhabit but do
> not understand but must engage with to survive is a central, social concern
> (2005:150).

In *Club Cave 27*, some of the elements, such as the audio, operated as "volatile signifiers" in terms of their slippery meaning, whilst other elements, such as the chicken wire and wood structures spun out towards other significations due to the materials and specific subjects' associations with such materials. As MacLeod and Holdridge notes, this is not just about art practice research, but also about how we think about the world.  John Law writes that:

> if much of reality is ephemeral and elusive, then we cannot expect single answers.  If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities.  But one thing is sure: if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we're going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways (2004:2).

Macleod and Holdridge contemplate the thinking and knowledge that goes on in research through art practice thus:

> If we care to understand the complex thought being played out in these studies, we gain knowledge.  The small conjunction *and* is ever present like a rhizome, encouraging lateral intellectual growth not just of given disciplines but of life itself and an appropriate inhabiting of our worlds (2005:152).

.This 'and' is Giffney's "queer remainder"; that is the excess meanings that are ever present, even if they are hard to pin down, in queer modes of knowing.  It is also present in Sedgwick's work on queer reading and queer epistemology.  Lee Ronald (2004:56) describes Sedgwick's "additive form of thinking" as "something can be both one thing and another"; it is this and this.  Sedgwick describes the queer investment in such an approach as a valuing of "where meanings don't quite meet up" (Sedgwick 1994:3).  This little three letter word's ability to encourage straying from clear and quantifiable knowledges and the unsettled

status of objects and their meanings are the primary force in my conceptualisation of a queering of standpoint epistemology and how a queer encounter might occur. I now want to suggest that it is precisely through attention to these unsettling ideas and objects that we can begin to productively interrogate art practice and art practice research.

## 4.10   The unsettled status of art works

In a discussion of her own Ph.D. writing Elizabeth Price (2006) describes in close detail the labour involved in making a particular artwork *Boulder* - an object made of packing tape wound round and round on itself again and again over many years. Interestingly, Price actively undermines the status of the art object as a triangulation point for 'proof' or 'evidence' of research findings through her writing about the object. She writes (in italics):

> *Sometimes I am not sure if the boulder has been made in the way that I claim. I know that this text is strategic rather than ingenuous. Many things are invented or extorted, many others are effaced or excluded. How could this be otherwise, for an innocent description would be endless* (2006:130).

In doing so she is also actively constructing the object to be something uncertain and unverifiable. Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge (2005) describe Price's writing as providing an "ambiguous burden of proof of scholarship" whilst at the same time recognising that her investigation of the problematics of verifiability also becomes the basis on which her Ph.D. research is validated.

Price is an artist researcher within a higher education context (as well as a Turner Prize winning artist). Simultaneously she was also troubling this university location as problematic through scholarly uncertainty. This is her position as a researcher and it can be

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awkward. This awkwardness is in some respects necessary because the epistemology of art is messy and complex. In this thesis I argue that this uncertainty about what art objects might be and how we might categorise them can usefully inform a conceptualisation of a queering of standpoint epistemology. In recognising that art objects, people and experience can be complex, unverifiable, uncategorisable and changing we can begin to attend to "the queer remainder" that can often go unacknowledged in a drive for scholarly clarity and coherence. This kind of epistemological approach can be awkward and troubling and can make the philosopher herself impossibly twisted through unthinkability and undecidability; referencing again Stéphane Legrand's "Cross-eyed freak" (2008:287) as well as Giffney's and Katz's queer modes of knowing. The gains however are in the potential attunement this epistemological approach has with the complex and messiness of life experiences.

It is not my contention that because objects are slippery that we shouldn't even try to explore what things can do or can 'mean'. Instead, a different practice is needed to attend to this situation. This is where an attention to complexity can offer insight into thinking about art objects and objects of study in the world more generally. John Law suggests that:

> Perhaps we will need to rethink our ideas about clarity and rigour, and find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight. Here knowing would become possible through techniques of deliberate imprecision (2004:3).

Within this messy conceptual approach is a recognition of the continual movement of being (Lomax, 2005:7), that is crucial if we are to understand the potential of a queer epistemology because it offers to research and ways of being a mode in which bodies (of people and of thought) can be alive to on-going change. Lomax best encapsulates this

contingent knowing through movement as an orientation towards "trying to grasp

something by letting it slip through your fingers" (Lomax, 2005:3).  I explore this idea further

through art practice experiments with desks in chapter six.

In this chapter I have discussed Club Cave 27, which was developed through attention to

stripping back any overt representations of sexuality.  The ensuing installation made me

aware that the edge of signification was a difficult, vital and sometimes impossible place to

work.  This was because although I was taking care not to add objects that could obviously

reference sexual identity, to some extent the signifying force of the found materials and the

act of assembling objects in relation to each other created new, unanticipated and

unwanted significations.  Some of the unanticipated significations that emerged from this

particular accumulation of materials were that of a scene of horror.   I was unhappy with

the horror of queer as a mode of disorientation in this work because as a mode of bodily

disintegration it seems too individuated and nihilistic.  I considered the disorientation

modes that could be read through horror and the strangeness of objects and concluded that

strangeness is more productive for a disorientating non-figurative queer art practice than

fear or horror.  As I show in the following chapter with my work with glitter, Club Cave 27

has made me think more carefully about the materials of my practice and what I need to

work on to generate a more playful disorienting encounter.   What became crucial to my

methodological development was how these signifying forces could also be volatile.

Queer encounters can be experienced through the strangeness of objects because once we

start to recognise unfamiliarity in the most mundane of objects (such as builder's sand),

then we can be reminded how strange and uncertain the world is; that taken for granted

relations and meanings can be twisted so that we are not on solid ground.  Knowing this is

significant to this research because it begins to point towards a queer mode of knowing in

which knowledge is not assured or propositional.

For many of my questionnaire respondents it was difficult for them to see what makes *Club*

*Cave 27* a queer art practice.  This is partly to do with expectations of queer operating

within the realm of sexuality and identity.  I have a challenge here.  The question "Is it

queer?" or "What is it that makes it queer?" seeks to identify a knowable, nameable

location of queerness.  Yet the most interesting and pertinent ideas for a queer practice and

a queer epistemology is one in which certainty is never pinned down and tacit rather than

propositional modes of knowledge are made manifest.   Giffney describes this as allowing

"for complexity and the holding of uncertainties by encouraging the experiencing of states

without necessarily trying to understand, dissect or categorise them" (2009: 8).  I explore

this in more depth through my *Desk Works* in chapter six.

My concern with figural representations, as documented in chapter two, has been how the

work can too easily become only about the ideas (the content).  This can have the effect

that the materials – the *work* of the art itself; its making; its multiplicity and the encounters

the audience might have with the art object are easily overlooked, leading to a privileged

and reductive reading.  In the case of *Club Cave 27,* I tried to make an installation about

uncertainty but the materials fought back and spun out towards other references.

However, this does not mean that the work is settled.

*Club Cave 27* was invaluable in subsequent development of my art practice and theory because it helped me in thinking through what other modes of disorientation and what other materials could be used to enact non-figurative queer practice through disorienting encounters.  In addition, an attendance to the uncertain and unsettled status of the artwork began an important methodological interrogation into standpoint epistemology.   In the following chapter I reflect on two installations: *Glitter* and *Scott Walker*.  I continue this epistemological exploration and the development of a non-figurative queer art practice with a closer focus on ideas of orientation - ideas that were developed as I became less concerned with visualising the non-representational and more engaged with the materials and how one might orientate oneself to a work of art in constant movement.

# Chapter 5. Orientations

# *Glitter* and *Scott Walker*

*Glitter* and *Scott Walker* continue to develop my research enquiry into whether it is possible to visualise a queer art practice without using representations of sexual bodies.   The two installations were made initially as a response to how *Club Cave 27* circulates beyond the scope of the designated installation site in potentially unanticipated encounters elsewhere (for example, in the lead up to the work in walking through the *Q Club*, or the way the sand starts to circulate around and beyond the building entirely).  I wanted to explore further where one's attention 'should' be and how one orientates oneself to an ever changing work.

Through analysis of *Glitter* and *Scott Walker* I continue to investigate what it means to be oriented and disorientated through art practice and what queer effects might occur in these specific examples.  In doing so I directly address my research aim of exploring how experiencing disorientating art practice can engender queer encounters.  I also continue to develop my methodology as a queering of standpoint epistemology through investigating queer modes of knowing in experiencing art practices that cannot easily be mapped.

I begin with a walkthrough of my floor based installation; *Glitter*.  I analyse Carl Andre's work  *Magnesium Squares* (1969) as a way to think through Ahmed's ideas on orientation in visual art terms.  I go on to consider *Glitter* and how this installation highlights the insights, problems and limitations of Ahmed's ideas on extension and facing.  I also look at what

other queer effects the work might have by attending to glitter's materiality and its use in queer club spaces as a form of fabulation. After discussing *Glitter*, I go on to describe the art work *Scott Walker.* I look at one of the normative orientations within many art schools - that of the orientation towards the white cube as the common (not exclusive) space for installation work. I explore how this orientation might be challenged through an art practice that seeks to disorientate through affecting the participant's body physically. I discuss the disorientations and orientations that might be present in queer club space and the problem of trying to queer perception. Firstly I walk you through *Glitter*.

### 5.1    *Glitter* walkthrough

The School of Art, Margaret Street. I walk downstairs into the basement and through the undergraduate students' art studios. I turn the corner into a small installation space demarcated with an archway and three white walls. There are four glittery floor pieces spot lit from above. They spread across the parquet floor and reach no more than 5 millimetres in height at any one point. The floor pieces look, at first glance, like tiny galaxies or perhaps scaled up glittery wounds. At this moment there seems to be little in the space yet there is also a countless multitude.

The glitter is a variety of colours that range from the more familiar sparkly purples, pinks, silvers and reds to the less common and less inviting pus-coloured yellow and flat, fluorescent red. Moving around the space some of the glitter catches the light and sparkles – a metaphorical wink. However, the flatter colours do not catch the light as I walk around; they do not *glitter*.

**Image 21.** *Glitter*, 2010

**Image 22.** *Glitter*, 2010
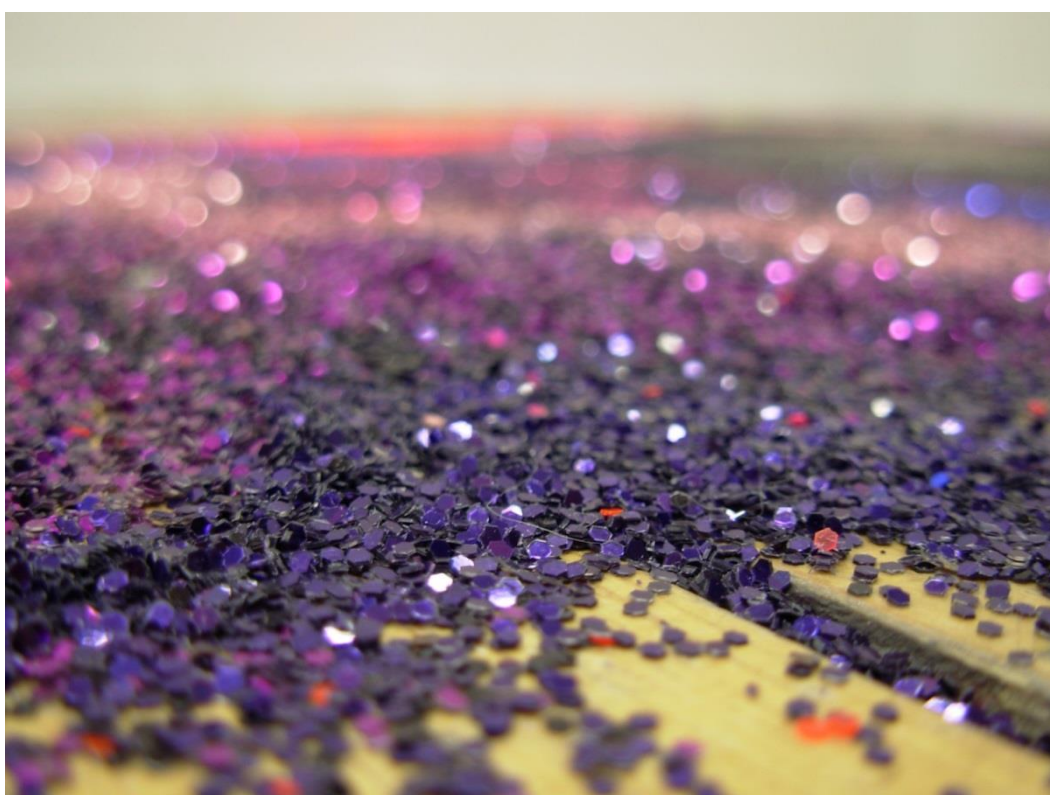


**Image 23.** *Glitter,* 2010

**Image 24.** *Glitter,* 2010



**Image 25.** *Glitter*, 2010

At the 'edges' of the constellations, where the glitter suddenly drops of from where it is more concentrated, I notice traces of footprints and other less identifiable marks or gestures.  Someone has been here before.  Focussing in, the more indefinite the edges become as glitter travels over the floor, bleeds into cracks, is scattered by light breezes and may be taken out of the space and continue its travels on the shoes or body of the audience.
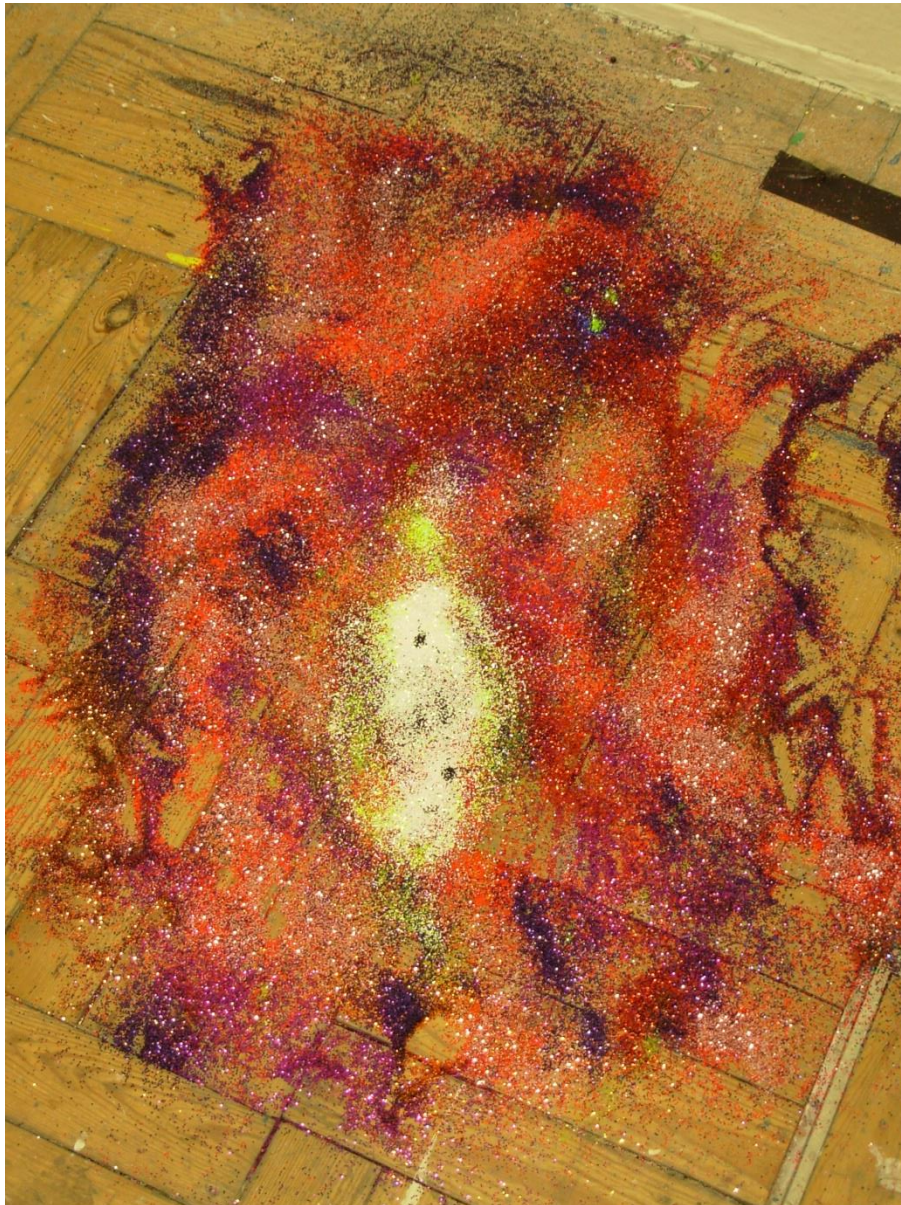


**Image 26.**  *Glitter*, 2010

**Image 27.** *Glitter*, 2010



**Image 28.** *Glitter*, 2010

Looking at the cracks where some glitter temporarily dwells below floor level, it is possible to see other things that situate my work *here* in this specific place – the School of Art. At points, other materials draw the glitter together, makes it coalesce in this particular space with this particular debris rather than releasing a wider ranging slippage of signification. Another way of articulating this is that when the glitter falls down the cracks between the parquet flooring then it rubs up against debris, hairs and traces of past art practice. These proximities change these particular specks of glitter into something almost abject, as if they have been expelled from the body or from previous activity and now lie here repulsive and dirty. Other specks, however, seen within an intensity of 'pure' glittery relations of shiny sparks seem fabulous – a term I unpick further on.

In the following section I discuss how *Glitter* sits in relation to ideas of orientation. Firstly, I set out how Sara Ahmed uses the term.

## 5.2    Sara Ahmed on orientation: extension and facing

Orientation for Ahmed is about the bodily inhabitation of space and the ability to extend in it. To be orientated is to 'have our bearings', to be 'turned' and to be 'facing' in ways that help create or maintain a coherent position in the world. Orientation for Ahmed requires proximity: a facing towards familiar objects that help us find our way. Normative extensions occur along straight horizontal and vertical lines that she considers in relation to heterosexuality. These are the lines of acceptability and normativity. She provides an example of this in "conventional genealogy" (2006:107), in which bodily proximities only emerge through the horizontal lines of marriage and the vertical bloodlines of birth. Any diagonal lines that veer from the official version that assumes anything else is an "end

point" (2006: 199 fn25) are considered "alternative or queer" (2006:199 fn25).  Whilst this version of a family tree provides one version of family it is important to note here that lots of 'straight' families also do not fit this model (Ahmed touches upon this with her own relations in a footnote but does not develop it further).  Think here of 'straight' step families, serial monogamy, families with adopted children, long term and short term foster families.  And whilst not fitting neatly into the reductive "conventional genealogy" Ahmed outlines, neither are they "alternative or queer."  This is because straightness is broader than this genealogy with more textures and variety.

Ahmed does not mention art practice in *Queer Phenomenology*, but by bringing them together in this thesis I explore how using art practice can usefully help develop new theoretical positions.  As I show in the following section, Ahmed's ideas of extension map well onto some of Carl Andre's floor pieces, but less well onto my own.

## 5.3    Carl Andre



**Image 29.**  Carl Andre, *Steel Magnesium Plain*, 1969

Andre's *Magnesium Squares* (1969) pictured here is a floor piece with clear and finite edges.

Despite the defined parameters, they seem to occupy a relation with space that gives them

the potential in the imagination to go on forever:  to reproduce; to extend - a reiteration

through the horizontal (for a discussion of power in relation to Andre's and other minimalist

art works see Chave, 1990) .  Robert Morris supports this line of thinking in relation to how

units and horizontal and vertical forces work in art practices.  He states that:

> Rectangular groupings of any number imply potential extension; they do not seem to
>
> imply incompletion, no matter how few their number or whether they are
>
> distributed as discrete units in space or placed in physical contact with each

other…From one to many the whole is preserved so long as a grid-type ordering is

used (Morris, 1996: 592).

From the individual unit, according to Morris, a universal block is implied and "the whole is

preserved". This is a representation of Ahmed's bodily orientation through horizontal

extension using the heterosexual grid.  Ahmed writes that:

The body that is "in line"…can extend into space, at the same time that such spaces

are the effects of retracing those lines, which is another way of describing

"extension" (2006:66).

If mapped culturally, the units (subjects) are clear, countable and legible: we know how to

face this work (this subject) - we stand in front of it, walk around it; the distance between

audience and art object, subject and object is clear.


## 5.4    Glittering orientations

Andre's floor pieces are unlike *Glitter* in fundamental ways.  My glitter works extend in

space, not just in the imaginary (although they invite an imaginary and impossible mapping),

but they do not seek to preserve the "whole" that Morris discusses.  This is because it is

unclear what this whole is - where it starts and ends, because the material is always shifting

and spinning out towards other things - an unbounded constellation rather than a "grid-type

ordering".


The way my glittery floor pieces extend is not through straight, horizontal, well-trodden

lines.  Instead, the work spreads through uneven and uncertain movements.  Both Ahmed

and Merleau-Ponty use the term 'oblique' as meaning a slanting or sloping line.  Ahmed's

use is also inflected with sexuality when she writes of lesbian and trans lives sharing "an

oblique angle to the straight line" (2006:189 fn2). This spatial metaphor does not however invite a more complex reading of going 'off line'. *Glitter*, has a sly, surreptitious circulation: it slides and is lost in cracks until the right conditions encourage movement. The tiny size and plasticity of the glitter enables them to float around and to hold on to passing coats, shoes and bodies by using static electricity. Imagining lines, however oblique, does not get to grips with glitters' complex and erratic movements. Ahmed states that "queer desire "acts" by bringing other objects closer" (Ahmed, 2006: 92), but what if those objects slip and slide? What if they find their own way? For Ahmed, disorientation occurs when subjects become objects, that is they cannot extend themselves into space, but what about the possibility of objects becoming subjects? A diagonal or oblique line, however metaphorical, is not rich enough to describe the complex movements of connective life. Yve Lomax's conceptualisation of art practice (in her case photography) as an "ecology" of relations; "a set of relations that reach outward to other things" (Lomax 2000:78), begins to do this work. The scattered, unstable glittery excesses in *Glitter* imply a multitude of involvements occurring between each speck of glitter and take a minimalist aesthetic of repetitive units to uncountable proportions. There is a kind of repetition – all the specks are the same size, and yet they are different – they react differently to the viewer and objects; they do not form an indexical grid. So how might one face this work?

> To be orientated is also to be turned to certain objects, those that help us find our
> way. These are the objects we recognise, so that when we face them we know
> which way we are facing (Ahmed, 2006:1).

If the participants become aware of the work being taken out beyond the gallery and continuing its life outside, or circulating in micro worlds over the macro, then it becomes

hard for the audience to orientate themselves towards this space.  It becomes impossible to

'face' the work full on or with reference to proximity because the space cannot be mapped

– where does the space of the art work start and end? Because it is both vast and tiny it

becomes a curious question of fluctuating, mutable scale, an issue already explored in the

question of disorientation by Duane Michals work.  Perhaps *Glitter* is not only  a question of

scale, but rather a disorientation through the collapse of distance.  That is to begin to think

about the measurement of things in space as "distribution" (Thrift, 2008:17) rather than

proximity.  For Nigel Thrift, this is a fundamental problem with Merleau-Ponty's

conceptualisation of "flesh"; that "closeness to the body is the main geometer of the world"

(Thrift, 2008:17).  And yet, my art practice requires an encounter with it through the

presence and proximity of the embodied viewer.


In my glittery floor pieces, it is the viewer's body that is extending this glittery world into

other spaces, but not necessarily knowingly.  This opposes a cause and effect suggested by

Ahmed's reading of what happens when an extension fails:

> disorientation occurs when the extension fails.  Or we could say that some spaces
>
> extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others. (Ahmed, 2006: 11)

It is more messy than Ahmed implies, because if one considers this *Glitter* as a

representation of a life world, then we can begin to attend to how we do not live in one

world – with a relation between a body and a world, but rather we live within ecologies;

within constellations; within relations that can never fully be triangulated or fully articulated

to any one point in space because of this constant movement and spinning out towards

other things.   The work then and the life-world implied does not stay put.  If we cannot

'face' this glittery work in Ahmed's sense of the term, perhaps it might be possible to begin to explore its movement.  Lomax writes of lines in movement:

> Think of making the art gallery a most untimely place. Think of making the lines break through and not settling for well-established points.  Think of all the lines, which are involved.  Rigid lines – sexual lines – institutional lines – supple lines – saddening lines – electric lines.  Lines of prejudice but also vibrant lines.  The lines involved within the formation of the gallery space can never be contained in just one space (Lomax, 2000:52).

The lines here are perhaps less stable and more expansive than in Ahmed's analysis; lines of prejudice, but also other, less discursive, movements.  In thinking of life and art spaces as a complex "meshwork of habitation" (Tim Ingold, 2007:103) there is a potential to value this unsettled state of affairs, referencing Eve Sedgwick's appeal:

> What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other?  What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where everything means the same thing? (1994:6)

As the viewer looks at this floor, they are also (in some places probably unknowingly) treading on the work and altering it, taking parts of it away from the installation space into other realms.  The work is not static, but importantly, neither is the viewer- it is through their movement (or motion) into or around the work that the objects sparkle and start to circulate and perhaps fleeting worlds or rather constellations may momentarily be glimpsed but also slip from view.  The boundaries become blurred as to where the work starts and ends and who is making the work.  For what is pertinent here is not just that the world impresses on subjects and the subjects' ability to impress upon the world; it is also how a

new world might be made within an existing one through movement or perhaps an existing one fleetingly made strange.  This is the queer effect of glitter on orientation; it is a *glittering* of orientation.

The uncountable sparkles; points of momentary focus and orientation, in my *Glitter* works are activated through a relationship between the object, light and the moving body of the viewer.  Pupil dilation occurs only when these three align, but the point is that they align fleetingly and many many times; so many that one cannot count or get one's "bearings" and if one does try to, it is through the slight adjustment of the body – a turn of the head to re-count that re-activates a bedazzling multitude.  In experiencing *Glitter* it is also possible to experience multiple and shifting orientations in the blink of an eye.  I revisit Ahmed's ideas of proximity in relation to the glitter, the light and the moving body and I realise that this requires a closeness to activate a sparkle (although the flatter colours will never sparkle anyway).  Instead, perhaps the collapse of distance is occurring in how one conceives of the place of the art work.

In *Glitter*, I wonder ultimately whether the work is a representation of bodily extensions, rather than an enactment of it.  There is a problem here of trying to 'straightforwardly' map Ahmed's political project directly onto art practice.  Ahmed is discussing how discursive power along lines of race and sexuality can 'stop people in their tracks'.  Powerful discourses certainly circumscribe how and where people can move.  My work points to something else: paying attention to what slips out of the frame of the gallery space.  Potentially this could lead away from identity politics towards something less certain.  Irit Rogoff argues:

The diverting of attention from that which is meant to compel it…the actual work on

display, can at times free up a recognition that other manifestations are taking place

that are often difficult to read, and which may be as significant as the designated

objects on display (2005:119).

This "diverting of attention" speaks to Hal Fosters concerns discussed in chapter two.  That

is the problem of having a "register of 'important ideas'" (1993:4) for a work and not looking

beyond it.  In this way both Rogoff and Foster draw  attention to that which is difficult to

name in a work.


Glitter is a circulating art practice and as such its proximities to the audience remain

conjecture –an uncertainty as to one's own standpoint in relation to it and as such,

continues to develop my queering of standpoint epistemology through uncertain

embodiments and uncertain knowing.


Representations of *Glitter* do not sparkle; they do not fleetingly catch the light as one moves

and it is why this thesis has been very slightly fabulated (if a *slight* fabulation is possible); a

term discussed in the following section; a few specks of glitter here and there.  *Glitter* does

not solely manifest troubling ideas of orientation and I now move on to some of the other

queer effects of this work.  Firstly I look at the materiality of glitter and then I consider its

use in queer culture.


**5.5      Other queer effects: materiality, fabulation and queer club space**

Glitter is not a 'serious' art material.  With the exception of the work of Jim Lambie, it rarely

enters the canon of western art history and is more often found in children's art projects or

adorning bodies, for example, in nail art and make-up. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* definition of glitter is:

> Shine especially with a bright reflected light; sparkle; be showy or splendid; be ostentatious or flashily brilliant; a gleam; tiny pieces of sparkling material as on Christmas tree decorations (1996:576).

At times glitter can be discrete, such as when it falls into cracks, but at others, under different circumstances, it sparkles and shimmers outrageously for an object so small. The glitter itself is tiny and vast at the same time. One piece is insignificant and yet if it catches the light or one fleck gets onto a face its 'out of placeness' cannot go unnoticed and may imply a question in the person discerning this speck about what activities (inappropriate? unproductive? Not serious?) the person 'wearing' glitter has been up to. Accidentally get a speck on your face and the world knows about it – something is changed.

As a consumer product, the primary function of glitter is:

> to adorn or decorate an otherwise basic product. Using glitter adds brilliance, shine, reflection and "pop". This look makes a product stand out as dynamic and unique when compared with flat colored alternatives. Glitter helps products jump off the shelves (Meadowbrook Glitter, 2012).

Adding glitter makes a surface shimmery and desirable to the buyer or onlooker. This is something referenced in Fiona Buckland's ethnography of queer club spaces that I discuss further on. For Meadowbrook this "brilliance" works to increase the marketability of a "basic product". Glitter can also be a form of fabulation in queer cultural capital terms. That is the active creation of shimmering bodies and bedazzling stories that have been

essential for some queer people to survive in the face of homophobic erasure: a double-edged celebratory excess.

Glitter, like Lomax's photography, spins out towards other things. In Lomax's case, she highlights the excess of relations in a photographic 'body':

> A photographic body is not a fixed unit with a static structure…A photographic body is continually entering into relations, composing relations and decomposing relations (2000:216).

The excess of meaning; the unruliness, lies not in the writing or the image, but rather in the relations between bodies, which are themselves "nothing but a composition of dynamic relations" (Lomax, 2000:xiii). In this conceptualisation, it is not what the artwork *is*, but rather what it can *do* that becomes important. Or in Lomax's words: "Not to ask what a thing is but rather of what it is capable", (2000:83) "with what does photography connect?" and "what sort of relations are made?" (Lomax, 2000:78)

*Glitter* "enters into relations" through queer cultural references which include theatricality, disco and camp. Its materiality is one of vibrant excess. Its throw away, low status cheapness seems to call out "fabulous for one night only!" This (seriously) playful surplus is what, I think, *Club Cave* 27 lacked. This excess has the potential to be encountered as an unstable presence that seems apt for imaging a queer aesthetic without figural representations.

Glitter would not 'work'; would not spin out towards other things, if it was simply one speck of glitter. Glitter has no need for an 's' because the multiple and its use as an adjective are

always implied in its deployment .  However, glitter also requires movement and bodies to activate a fabulous encounter.   As Fiona Buckland writes, dance clubs, particularly queer ones valued fabulation because

> In these spaces, participants felt encouraged to fashion themselves and to realize their imaginative possibilities through dress, bearing, social interactions, and dance…in a queer lifeworld, being fabulous was hard currency.  It was exchanged for belonging to a peer group, for being loved and desired, and for self-esteem (Buckland, 2002:36).

Politically crucial in relation to queer culture, it is the coming together of queer bodies; not just as individuals but as a wider group; a community, that my *Glitter* can only do as a representation.  It is therefore to queer club space that I now turn to consider ideas of orientation, disorientation and queer modes of knowing through non-discursive actions.


Buckland argues that participation in queer club spaces has the potential to create queer worlds through embodied, rather than discursive, actions:

> It was a text that could only be understood through movement.  These practices were modes of experience that resisted the reduction of movement and gestures to the status of a sign.  Participants generated and expressed meaning through their own bodies as they moved in a queer lifeworld, conscious of the performance of queerness of the self and the club.  Presence and movement promoted queerness as a state of "fabulousness."  Fabulousness was movement as self-fashioning (2002:56).

Experience in Buckland's example cannot be reduced to a knowability through language because this does not take account of embodied gestures in movement.  In addition, both Fiona Buckland and John Mullarkey remind us that fabulation is not simply 'make believe'.

Mullarkey writes that "Though it connotes fabrication, fabulation is not wholly unnatural, nor unfounded: it is not fictitious or purely relative to individual whimsy" (2007:54). Instead, fabulation is a strategy that can bring queer modes of knowing into existence through the presence of both 'fact' and 'fiction' and troubling the divergence of the two. Fabulation can bring something else, something liminal and queer that cannot be captured in discursive modes into existence; possible, fleeting ways of being and knowing. This is another way to think about a queering of standpoint epistemology.

I have discussed the problems of orientating oneself to a glittery art practice in movement and linked this to a queer encounter with fabulation, excess and unknowability. In the following section I analyse my *Scott Walker* Installation and what it does to ideas of orientation. I look at some of the disorienting aspects of queer club space that Fiona Buckland (2002) describes. I analyse what happens when some of these features are enacted though art practice.

**Image 30.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

**Image 31.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010



**Image 32.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

**Image 33.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010



**Image 34.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

**Image 35.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010



**Image 36.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

**Image 37.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

### 5.6  *Scott Walker* walkthrough

I enter a white room and see five square bendy mirror boards in various states of

dilapidation.  I can choose any of these above as the formation that you encounter, or I

might imagine one of my own. On the walls of the exhibition space are lots of different

photographs of these six battered squares in various assemblages.  Some look like they

might hold together, others appear much more flimsy.  The space itself, with its white walls

and bright lights, is the archetypal white cube. Suddenly Scott Walker starts to sing.


     Mama, do you see what I see

     On your knees and pray for me

     Mathilde's come back to me


It is Jacques Brel's Mathilde.  It is loud.  The lights flicker a little.  Then, as Walker's voice gets

more strung out and the brass section becomes more and more frantic, the lights gets lower

and lower: they flash inversely in time with the music.
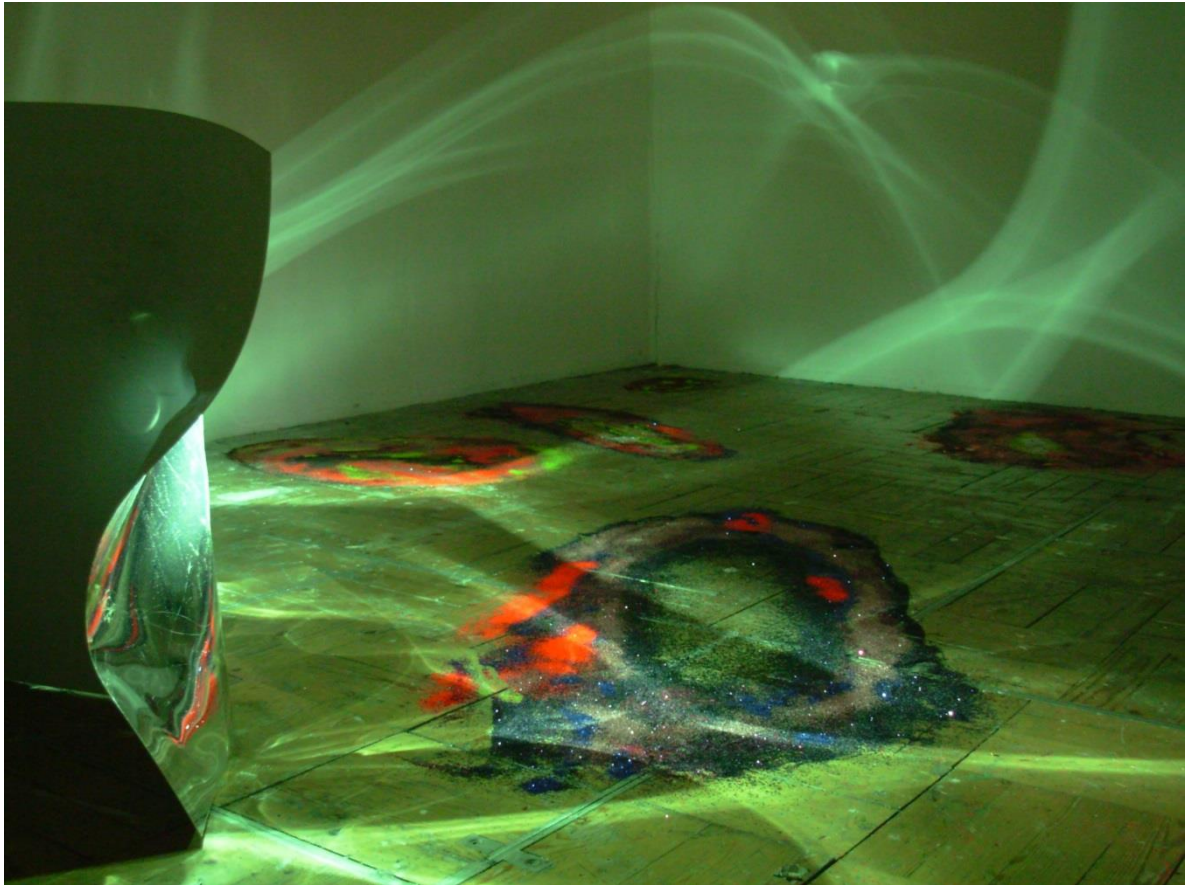
**Image 38.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

Fellas, don't leave me tonight

Tonight I'm going back to fight

Wretched Mathilde's in sight

But something else is happening as well.  Green and blue lights briefly emerge; spotlights pulsate-their strong beams casting crazy patterns on the walls. Filmic projections bouncing off the mirror boards produce unreadable moving images.
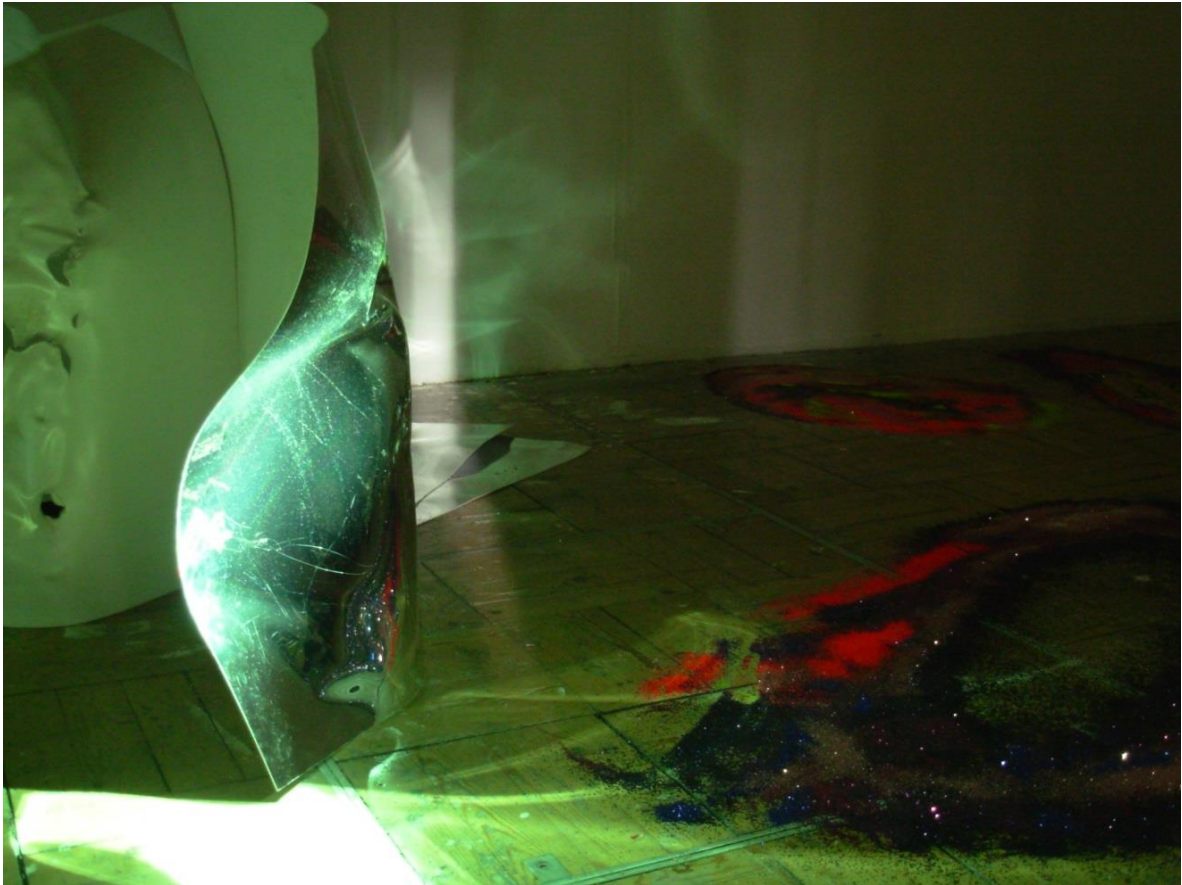
**Image 39.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

Charley, champagne right away

I know you've been saving it for the holiday

But Mathilde's come back to me

Still Scott Walker keeps going-higher and higher – surely he can't get any more hysterical?

But he does: the lights are getting dimmer with pulses of light that make your pupils dilate-

your eyes cannot settle.

**Image 40.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

Go ask the maid if she heard what I said

Tell her to put the best sheets on the bed

Mathilde's come back to me.


My friends, don't count on me no more

I've gone and crashed through heaven's door

My sweet Mathilde's here

Once more, once more…

The final crescendo makes my chest tighten and takes place in near total darkness until the last pounding beat, when the lights flash up and I'm left squinting in the bright lights of the white cube space that I first entered.



**Image 41.** *Scott Walker* (detail), 2010

## 5.7  From orientations towards the white cube to disorienting club space

The art object is partly based on a shoddy, twisted, battered version of Robert Morris' 1960s four mirror cubes. The work is set up and documented again and again in different, temporary configurations; some more abject, flimsy and faltering than others. The installation explores the provisional and contingent nature of making; of art, of writing and of exhibiting. The setting up is performative and highlights the complexity of additive

processes – it is this and this and this too, referencing Sedgwick's (1994) queer modes of knowing.

The art school studio, mediated through the spatial politics of the white cube, is deconstructed and other orientations fleetingly made manifest. The normative white cube exhibition space is set up as just one option amongst many - just one orientation, and the normative turn to this particular orientation is troubled through the deluge of light and sound. Fiona Buckland discusses the disorientation experienced on entering particular queer club spaces in the 1990s:

> The entrances to these clubs were sometimes like a labyrinth, sometimes illuminated with sweeping, spiralling, and flashing lights that destabilized participants' visual grip on the world around them. Over all this was a soundscape, rich with layers of continuous sound, a pulse that made my internal organs vibrate, samples of noise, sirens, sonic booms, samples and repetitions (2002:56).

This environment disorientates the clubber physically through its seemingly labyrinthine layout, but also through the pulsating lights and sound that were felt in and through the body. Buckland puts some of this disorientation down to losing a "visual grip" on the world. Tim Lawrence's (2008) work resonates here as he describes early disco as a queer space for valuing "connective" audio sensations above a more scopic regime of separation (Lawrence, 2008. For an in-depth analysis of scopic regimes see Jay, 1994). This sensory movement is what is occurring in the *Scott Walker* installation. The eyes of the viewer cannot settle, the hysteria of Walker's voice affects the adrenal system and the space is momentarily changed. The crucial difference, however, is in the political force and a coming together of bodies:

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Queer world-making could transform and rupture the force of heteronormativity .

The spatial, sonic, and effects-oriented disorientation of a club produced an effect

akin to the experience of liminality between a queer life-world and other realms of

existence, both spaces and states of being (2002:57).

Buckland describes how clubbers find different ways of orienting themselves in a space

without common reference points such as clocks or windows.  For her, this occurs through

proximities to other bodies or "types of bodies".  This orientation has a double meaning in

the queer club spaces Buckland discusses:

Participants not only had to exert some kind of comprehensible map over the space

with nodes they could locate and orient themselves around so they knew where they

were and where they wanted to be, but they also had to orient themselves in a

queer club, within a matrix of sexuality different from on the street or in the

workplace. (2002:57)

Buckland, like Ahmed, identifies the centrality of the body, its axis and proximity to other

bodies as a way of orientating oneself in this queer space.  Buckland writes:

The body was the prime reference point in these spaces: not only the bodies of

others, but my own.  My body provided constant feedback to judge spatial

parameters, distance, and size.  I perceived the position of body parts, and processed

and stored information about laterality, gravity, verticality, balance, tensions, and

dynamics, as well as integrating and coordinating rhythm, tempo, and sequences of

movements.

What Buckland adds to Ahmed's work on disorientation is sensory and sensual experience,

not easily reduced to discursive regimes.  She continues:

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These sensations produced the body, rather than just the visual apparatus, as the location of experience and knowledge and the primary way knowledge was experienced and shared by participants and myself in the dance club. (2002:10)

My *Scott Walker* installation cannot create this intensity of the club space described above, partly because of the need for proximate 'other bodies' and also because it lacks the urgent political force of a particular time and space, that brought these clubs into being. However, lingering in a space that bellows Matilda whilst at the same time loosening one's "visual grip" on the space through the pulsating lights can begin to create a physically confusing experience for the audience that makes keeping one's train of thought quite difficult, and can momentarily disorientate the viewer through the instability of what this space might be. The place however, reverts back to its white cube situation.


**5.8     Physical disorientation and the problem of queering perception**

With *Scott Walker* I began to affect the audience bodily. The participant is disorientated physically in this work, as their pupils dilate in the light, stress levels may be raised and habitual trains of thought are frustrated, but I am not sure if a queering is occurring. The issue I realise is that I do not think that perception can be 'queered', as I do not think there is such a thing as a 'straight' perception. Ahmed disagrees. She writes that:

the work of ordinary perception, which straightens up anything queer or oblique, is not simply about correcting what is out of line. Rather, things might seem oblique in the first place only in so far as they do not follow the line of that which is already given (2006:92).

There is a problem here of eliding the differences between perception and percept, that is the act of perceiving and the result of perceiving. Part of Ahmed's project is to deconstruct

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phenomenology and emphasize its heteronormative groundings and assumptions. This is compelling, but it is not a queering of phenomenology as such; neither is it a queering of perception or affect. The way I choose to proceed in my art practice in the following chapter is to think more about queering bodies' habitual movements rather than trying to queer perception.

Throughout this chapter I have continued to develop a queering of standpoint epistemology through attendance to uncertain embodiments and uncertain modes of knowing. I have begun to test Ahmed's ideas of orientation; particularly in relation to 'facing' and 'proximity'. Through attention to my *Glitter* art practice, these ideas have been troubled through the problems of facing an uncertain and circulating art practice that could be better understood as a constellation of activity. This work has also begun to bring up the limitations of a conceptualisation of life through oblique lines. I do not however want to completely give up on lines and Ahmed's spatial metaphors 'oblique' and 'off-line' are investigated further through art practice in my subsequent chapters.

In *Scott Walker* I attended to the orientation of the School of Art and I considered strategies of disorientation that occur in queer club spaces. Many of these disorientations are to do with physical disorientation and re-orientation through proximity to other queer bodies. I considered the non-discursive embodied experiential gestures in queer club space and the limitations of enacting them in a gallery setting. I concluded that I did not think that perception can be queered and as such, I focus in my subsequent art practice research on how bodies extend uncertainly in space as a way of queering bodies' habitual movements rather than trying to queer perception.

Buckland argues that in the queer club space, the radical potential or queer world-making

lies in 'worldless' bodies come together despite forces of homophopia trying to minimise

this contact and keep people in line, and importantly how this has the potential to extend

the queer body outside the queer clubspace.  I wanted to do something related but

different in my subsequent installations, partly because I am not in that space and time.

Instead, I decided to experiment with making bodies feel 'out of line' (of course many

bodies feel this frequently) and in doing so perhaps activate a queer encounter.  In this way,

I was also able to explore whether Ahmed's 'oblique lines', rather than being conceptually

limiting, could instead usefully be put to work through art practice.  This subsequent

practice importantly moved away from exploring how objects extend to how bodies extend.

This is a distinction that Ahmed rightly highlights:

> orientation is not so much about the relation between objects that extend into space
>
> (say the relation between the chair and the table); rather, orientation depends on
>
> the bodily inhabitance of that space (2006:6).

Of course it is a long way from the world of the queer club to a gallery or studio space, and I

am not trying to conflate the two.  Buckland and Ahmed are tracking different projects,

noting that it is not objects but subjects: *bodies* that come together – their proximities – the

ways of extending bodies, rather than bodies extending objects that makes a queer space.

What both Buckland and Ahmed offer however is a way to think about disorientation as

bodily uncertainty and I continue to investigate this in my following chapter.


Although the glittery excess is fun, beautiful and tacky, it is also a representation of a

constellation of bodies.  Ahmed reminds us that orientation is more than proximate objects

relations; that it depends on bodily inhabitance.  As such, chapter six is an exploration into

how the body of the audience might extend in queer ways in space, or moreover, how I

might encourage oblique queer ways of extending through art practice.  In this chapter I

also consider the orientation towards the writing desk in my research through practice Ph.D.

# Chapter 6.  (Dis)Orientations towards the Writing Desk

## *Desk Works*

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Throughout the early stages of my Ph.D., I became aware that the pressures to write were out-stripping the need to make art.  As I found myself oriented to the writing desk through this pressure, so my art practice became about attending to the writing desk itself.  Firstly whether tables could be queered to enable a disorientating encounter and secondly how writing appears in research through art practice.  I began my Ph.D. as an artist doing 'art practice-led research'.  Now I describe myself as an artist researcher doing a research through practice Ph.D.  This chapter tracks and reflects upon this change.

In the first section of this chapter I focus on the relationship between making and writing through the common element of the desk.  I do this through a reflection on the orientation towards writing in research through practice Ph.Ds and also through exploring how I made work on and with desks.   This is structured in the form of three phases of making.  Each phase implies a linear chronology that does not capture the swooping and circling back of these activities.  In the second section of this chapter I discuss my work with three desks; *Mirrorball Desk, This Desk Does Not Fly* and *Brown Desk,* which were  shown as work-in-progress in November 2009 alongside an international symposium: *Troubling Desire(s) in Art*.  I describe each of the desks in the show separately and consider in detail what

disorientating encounters might take place, and what these works do to Ahmed's

conceptualisation of disorientation and inhabitance.   I also explore what other queer

effects might occur.  Finally, I consider the limitations of creating individual desks rather

than relational environments.


## 6.1     Orientations towards the writing desk

**Phase one**

Year one of my Ph.D.  I'm in my studio in The School of Art.  The scale feels too small to

make much in because of all the other 'stuff'.  I file 'stuff' away in drawers, boxes and

cupboards.  The kind of work I make means I have a lot of 'stuff'.  I sit at my desk that is

in my studio.  I look at it more or less every day in the first year of my Ph.D.  It reminds

me (everyday) of the written thesis.  I resent this object:  sitting at the desk here in my

studio.  This desk is taking up space and taking up valuable making time.


## 6.2     Writing anxieties: function, purpose and status of the writing

My anxiety and resentment partly arose from my uncertainty as to the function, purpose

and status of writing within my Ph.D.  I briefly introduce these anxieties here in order to

show how my writing practice emerged from a particular set of problematics.


It is not unusual to worry about writing: do I have the ability, clarity, stamina, and

organisation to complete my thesis?  Can I integrate theory and practice; do justice to my

'data'?  Will the research outcomes make an original contribution to knowledge?  However,

Katy Macleod (2000a, 2000b) and Fiona Candlin (1998, 2000a, 2000b) have both

documented how there is something specific about the position and demands made of

postgraduate artist researchers within higher education that can gives rise to intensified anxieties for both the students and their institutions.

Katy Macleod , in her small scale empirical research into the experiences of artist researchers within higher education, found that the writing part of the students' dual submission (either as MPhil or Ph.D.) was causing high anxieties, as many students felt alienated from the writing process (2000b:9).  This meant that writing became a "painful business" (Macleod, 2000b:9); a chore that was not felt to be creative, but instead a rather pedestrian explication of practice.  Partly, this disengagement seemed to arise from a lack of clarity around what use the writing would be to the research as a whole; what its function is.  Macleod states that in her interviews there was

> evidence of research degree students not being engaged in writing which is instrumental to the research being undertaken (2000b:11).

Questions I asked of my work included: is the function of writing to explicate what the artwork is doing or what the researcher is doing?  Is it to be used as a way of analysing data or of generating it? Is it in part to "describe and evaluate the research methodology" (Gray and Malins, 2004:166) or is the process of writing actually a methodology in itself, to be articulated in the art practice?  Is explication art practice's downfall?  Or is it perhaps something else entirely?   These questions are important because they ask both what the art practice does and what the writing does.

I return here to Elizabeth Price's writing on her work *Boulder.*  She outlines her concerns as to the purpose of writing in a doctorate through art practice research:

I am confused about its purposes, ostensible and actual. I am concerned about its

affects. It is never as sharp as the boulder, but nonetheless, it is always so much

more plausible (2006:130).

I have argued throughout this thesis that uncertainty in knowledge production is an

important aspect of art practice. The uncertain and unsettled status of the art work as

discussed in chapter four is also joined here by the uncertain purpose of the art writing.

The privileging of text throughout the Ph.D. process has been observed by Candlin as

manifesting in an overemphasis from supervisors and institutions on the written

component. She cites Elizabeth Price's experience of doctoral research as an example.

Price comments that:

Of particular concern was the relation of any formal critical writing to other

activities, and the relative status of these things within the context of the Ph.D…I

think it is fair to say that probably 90% of the formal discussions I had were about

the status and value of the written component. This was necessary but unfortunate

(Price cited in Candlin, 2000b).

Where has this apparent overemphasis on the written component originated from, or is this

related to a particular institution? Candlin contends that it has emerged from institutional

anxieties about a particular kind of research that straddles two previously separate fields of

knowledge and competencies. She argues that many of the anxieties artist researchers have

are not ones that will easily go away as the Ph.D. progresses, but that they are structural as

well as personal. She states that

> …anxiety concerning practice-based PhDs should not be lightly dismissed because it
>
> is a product of the institutional relations practice-based doctorates put into place
>
>  (Candlin, 2000b).

These relations, Candlin asserts, have a specific context which arose when the historically separate sites of art (art colleges) and academia (universities) were relatively recently brought together and through which the studio art doctorate has emerged.   The bringing together of art and academia has, she says, created "incompatible competencies" (2000:4), as artist researchers and institutions attempt to satisfy the differing demands of academia and of art production.   This is also a matter of how to reconceptualise the reinforcing of oppositional difference between writing and art practice - practices that both come together and fall apart in the thinking through of their complex relationality.  I show in the following section that acknowledging art as a research field means to think seriously about how art and writing can be put to work.  This does not mean this knowledge production has to be through singular, easily articulated, simple ideas.  Indeed, the development of an uncertain standpoint epistemology precisely through utilising both art practice and writing practice in my research highlights how communication becomes disruptive and unreadable in the writing and thinking of art practice and knowledge production.   In this way it could be argued that there is something rather queer about the kind of knowledges present in an art practice based Ph.D. from the very start.

Candlin has a positive outlook for the future as she sees it as "perhaps inevitable that the field of practice-based research will itself become firmly established within higher education" (2000b) as people continue to take up the opportunity to contest the autonomy of academic disciplines and research outputs.

At the time of her research in 2000, Macleod highlighted that there was a scarcity of literature in the area of art practice-based research, pointing to only two short studies. Now the field has been (and continues to be) richly expanded, particularly with the writings of Lin Holdridge (2005a, 2005b, 2006; Macleod & Holdridge 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006); Estelle Barrett, 2000, 2007); Barbara Bolt (2004; Barrett & Bolt 2007); Carole Gray and Julian Malins, 2004; Christopher Crouch, 2007; Timothy Emlyn-Jones, 2006; Kristina Niedderer, 2007 (& with Linden Reilley, 2007) and the online publication of the *Working Papers in Art and Design* series of research papers, University of Hertfordshire. In addition, the growth of funding streams and doctorates in studio art, the proliferation of art research conferences and the availability of conference papers on line have both increased the amount of work on art practice research that is available and have also helped in the development of research communities. The emergence of more writing about practice has helped develop a variety of different models of the studio art doctorate. However, the wider circulation of this research has mostly been via a predominantly textual format. Estelle Barrett (Barrett &Bolt, 2007:1) acknowledges in introducing the contributions to a book on art practice based research that "many of the contributions...constitute a third order replication of completed creative arts research projects".

For my own part, it was difficult to get a full sense of the variety of studio art doctorate submissions. This was due, in part, to the problems of getting hold of full theses through the inter-library loan scheme. Due to the British Library's previous system of copying theses onto microfilm, the images are degraded into black and white, negative quality, rendering them almost illegible, and certainly a very poor second; a minor supporting role, to the status of the text. In addition, any theses that originally contained a DVD or CD as an

important part of the output and the assessment was not provided with the microfilm.  This systematic downgrading sets up a strong and problematic statement for the reader of what the purpose of the writing is; i.e. to illustrate and explain the art object (which can barely be seen anymore, certainly not encountered meaningfully).  This microfilm process (although it has recently changed to a more downloadable electronic format which works as long as data image sizes are not large) does raise important questions about the development of a practice-based research culture and how these new knowledges are circulated and framed through a privileging of text.

**Phase two**

Sitting at the desk in my studio, I begin to track its horizontals and verticals and the roughness of the wood as my hands rest on it.  I notice traces of past (painterly but also less specific) activity.  I think about the kind of activity that takes place on this desk and how I might queer this situation.  I think about what I do on this desk.  I start thinking about making with this desk.  The first desk I worked on was the one already in my studio.  I am not ambivalent to this object.  As stated, I face this object a lot.  It is also to hand when I decide to make.  I look at its dull brown wood and select materials of pleasure and play that have a very different register to that of desk work.  These materials recall queer club or disco spaces: glosticks, mirroballs, pulsating lights. Materials that do not often find themselves either ordered or categorised through art practice, or in the vicinity of desk work.  I place on, under, inside.  I screw and stick, unscrew and unstick.  I re-place.  I buy more – mirrorballs and motors that spin them - and continue this activity.

I think about my next desk.  I look on eBay for possibilities.  I look the legs and desk tops

up and down for signification and how this might be altered.  I buy a desk for a pound.  It

is laminated chipboard.  A brown veneer desk that seems to suggest the opposite of a

glittering orientation –a faded 1970s domestic desk.  This becomes *Brown Desk* in the

work-in-progress show.  By this time I have become an aficionado of eBay cheap desks.

To discuss the desks as being 'to hand' in the phenomenological sense does not quite do

justice to how work is made.  How does this nearness relate to buying on the internet?  I

am caught and moved in the action and not just in the perception of the objects I make.

It is a movement that does not always have perceivable or translatable direction; that

does not always *make sense*.  Computer desks appear on the eBay auctions, but I am not

(or my practice is not) ready for them at this point.  I keep them in mind though.  At this

point in time I want a desk that might spin around – a mirrorball of a desk rather than a

desk with mirrorballs.  To create this I need either a very light desk unlikely to fall apart,

or a sturdy desk that can handle being suspended.  I try mirror tiling a small desk.  The

tiles are too angled and I realise that as a mirrorball it cannot function at all as a desk.

This becomes important because it is unclear what is being set up to be queered.  To

make this stronger, the object still needs to reference the 'normal' activities done at the

desk; familiar and strange, and the spinning desk is a stretch too far  - it just looks a bit

sparkly and too far away from the bodies of participants to have an interesting effect.  I

roam the MA studio spaces (i.e. not very far).  I find a large metal and melamine grey

desk.  A heavy fucker (this is a technical term).  I want to see what happens if I suspend

it.  I want it to almost not be possible to get off the ground.  Why?  Perhaps I'm testing

the limits of what the object can do before it falls apart.  The wires, the wall hooks and

the shape of the legs make the option of a completely free floating desk less possible.  I

am happy with this as a limitation to work from; queer is after all not a free-floating, anything goes signifier.  This becomes *This Desk Does Not Fly*.

I began initially to utilise desks in my own art practice as a slightly desperate mode of working that enabled me to make art on and about the process of research through practice and the sometimes fraught relationship between writing and art practice.  At this point, I felt that the orientation of my Ph.D. was towards writing and I was not involved in a practice that could 'talk back to' or challenge the (written) theories of phenomenology. At this point I could only see writing as 'not making'.

**Phase three**

How do I write about this work?  I sit with it and try different modes of writing.  I write in sketchbooks.   I scribble in margins.  I write in the installations with the sound up and see how my train of thought gets lost.  I meet up with other Ph.D. students for informal discussions of the work.  I discuss it with my supervisors.  I make notes and then I start writing 'straight' academic text about the work, thinking I've always  got these other modes of writing as a safety net.  What emerges though surprises me.

Candlin suggests that:

> if practice-based PhDs could be simply practice-based, then artwork would be more clearly acknowledged as a valid mode of intellectual enquiry and the concomitant anxieties concerning whether or not art can constitute research might be reduced (2000b).

Elizabeth Price provides a more recent reflection on the status of art in Ph.D. research. She states that the problem is "that it is not a degree *in* art" (2011:18). Price challenges the necessity for a long and wordy thesis by stating that:

> Art is a legitimate submission for academic degree at any level because making art is a thinking, theorising process – it is intellectual in and of itself. Whilst it is apparent that not all art is intellectually driven, neither is all writing, academic or otherwise (2011:18).

I have shown throughout this thesis that art is "a thinking theorising process", but what emerged from my writing with and about desks was how thinking can also be done through writing; this has certainly been the case for my thesis, and I do not take such a bifurcated view anymore that art and writing are such different activities. As I write (this does not happen as seamlessly as I imply here) connections emerge – ideas form relationships; proximities with materials in a way not completely dissimilar to how I make an installation. Here Foucault elucidates:

> I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attracts my interest…As a consequence, each new work profoundly changes the terms of thinking which I had reached with the previous work. In this sense I consider myself more an 'experimenter' than a theorist (1991:27).

I realise through the writing that it has made me think differently about my art practice had I not written. I decide to rant less about the pressures to write, but do drop the term 'practice-led' as it implies too much of a linear process –the art work comes first, then the writing follows. I prefer a model of research construction and production (of art practice,

writing practice and knowledge production) through the activities of both writing and making art.

At the time I began making art with desks it was the only way I could see of attending to both the needs of my writing and of my art practice, and seemed a pragmatic approach. Through the course of making on and with desks this has altered. Practising on desks and foregrounding them as art objects became a method to think through my research aims and my problematics that revolved around the nexus of phenomenology and queer theory, ontology and epistemology. My initial alienation towards the presence of writing in my Ph.D. has moved to a reconnection through attention to my research paradigm which situates my problem, theory and method. My art practice then became a way to consider the status of the writing table in Sara Ahmed's work and in phenomenology more generally as well as the status of writing in a research through practice Ph.D. In addition, as I wrote about the work, with the work and in different registers, the art practice was constructed and developed further. Thus in some ways the desks and my writing on and about them became (although again not as neatly as the term implies) "relational objects of thinking" (Macleod 2000b:1).

I now turn to my desk and consider what disorienting effects might be activated through an encounter with them.

### 6.3    *Mirrorball Desk* walkthrough

I walk into the gallery space and see three different desks spaced widely apart. There are points of light both static and moving. The very first desk I notice as I enter the gallery space

is the grey one; *This Desk Does Not Fly,* because it is directly in line with the entrance, but then my eyes get pulled to the *Mirrorball Desk* through tracing where the circles of light have come from which draws me to its more inviting colourful glows and flashes.



**Image 42.**  *Mirrorball Desk*, 2009.

The table is an old, slightly battered, wooden desk with four mirrorballs of different sizes turning and throwing out a multiplicity of small circular lights that slip and slide around the compartment space where my legs would usually go and slip out over the walls of the gallery space as larger circles of light.  I can hear the whirring of the mirrorball motors and see the wires that power them.  Behind this desk, on the wall, is its shadow.  Part of the largest mirrorball can be seen as a shadow too, below the table, and alters the desk's

straight outline into one with a pendulous growth that is both bodily (in shape) and not

bodily (in size).  The kind of body that is in shadow here is an odd one; queer even; it is part

desk, part swelling; familiar and strange.  The desk-shadow-body-not body nexus forms the

centre to which an uncountable multitude of light bubbles thrown out by the mirrorballs slip

and slink together in ever decreasing size due to the wall's proximity to the mirrorballs.



**Image 43.**  *Mirrorball Desk* (detail), 2009
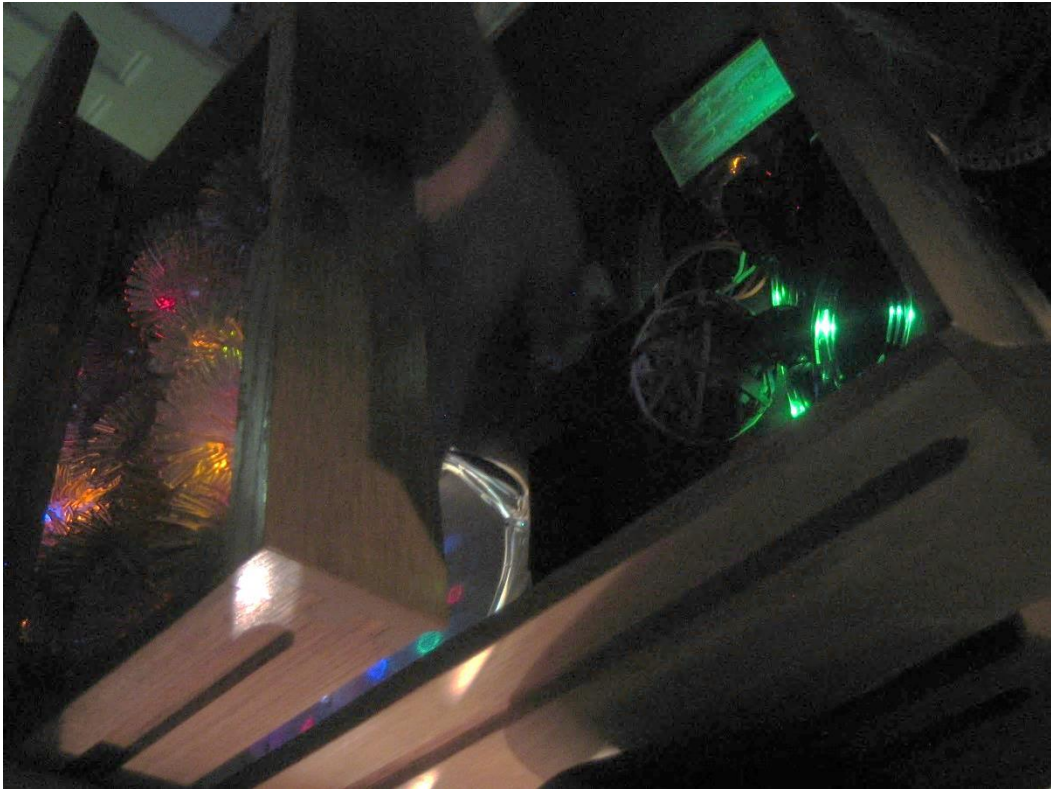
**Image 44.** *Mirrorball Desk* (detail), 2009

On the surface of *Mirrorball Desk* there are various glowing paraphernalia: glosticks with post-it notes attached, envelopes containing glowing spots, glosticks in a desk tidy and glowing rectangles the size of credit cards or perhaps name badges.   The drawers have different flashing qualities.  The top is flashing fast and has many rubbery sea urchin balls inside that I want to touch. I should let them out.  The second has glowing glasses, with glowing office supplies.  On closer inspection there is a mini disco going on in the second drawer as lights flash inside, creating a small demarcated space of pleasure within the desk drawer.  This desk, this object, is also a space.  The third drawer contains about thirty silver circles that slowly change colour.  I know these are infinity mirrors but they do not reflect the viewer or their environment.

**Image 45.** *Mirrorball Desk* (detail), 2009

Sitting at this desk the sliding mirrorball light circles on the wall get blocked by my body and the room gets a little darker. Yet as I spin on the chair smaller lights start to appear on different walls– looking down I see a small mirrorball attached to the swivel chair. Facing the desk my legs do not fit into the alcove because it is full of mirrorballs and this feels a bit uncomfortable. My leg gently touches one of the balls, and I am concerned I'll knock the ball off. The light spots inside the desk space are going up the inside of one leg and going down the other. This intimate gesture feels a little disquieting and I wonder who has noticed.

## 6.4     Mirrorball wooziness

The mirrorballs are activated through a light source.  Placed off centre (not equidistant to each wall), the circles of light on the walls, floor and inside the desk change in size and direction.  Given some resistance, the speed does not stay the same as it slows and then suddenly speeds up.  These moving lights have a physical effect on the audience.  It is not the queer socio-historical references to spaces of pleasure (disco and queer club space) that disorientate the audience.  Instead it is the phenomenological experience.  The speed, light intensity, and size changes all create a woozy feeling in the audience as they may try to follow a circle or circles around the room that shape shift and physically pull the audience around rather than along.  In this installation one's eyes can never rest; never settle; never stop moving. This 'woozy' bodily sensation can make the audience feel dazed, dizzy and unsteady; physically 'out of sorts'.  One definition of disorientation for Ahmed that fits this experience is "when the ground no longer supports an action" (2006:170).  Orientation momentarily turns to disorientation through this woozy feeling as circles of light moving across the wall slip and slide.  This makes attempts at triangulation through these lights uncomfortable and impossible as one's body leans in to the movement then is pulled back in an attempt to overcome an oblique body posture.  This is unsustainable – it is a fleeting, disconcerting feeling that one might then let go of as one leaves the room or one might hold onto physically if a low level of nausea goes out with them.  This feeling of wooziness caused by a  body trying and failing to track changing light shapes has resonances with the physically disorienting effects of what Merleau-Ponty describes as an "instability of levels" that produces "not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea" (2002:296).  The disruption of bodily inhabitance causes this woozy feeling.  This is in part because our own relatively cohesive subjectivities are contingent on

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habitual embodiments which can be disrupted.  As Merleau-Ponty notes, this contingency can often go unnoticed because:

> Space and perception generally represent, at the core of the subject, the fact of his birth, the perpetual contribution of his bodily being, a communication with the world more ancient than thought. That is why they saturate consciousness and are impenetrable to reflection (2002:296).

Merleau-Ponty suggests the disturbance to this assumption; this embodied contingency is horror inducing, which I have discussed in chapter four in relation to *Club Cave 27*.  I propose here alternatives to horror in the analysis of my second desk; other responses than "giddiness and nausea" to this disruption of bodily inhabitance that is an orientation towards uncertainty and a gearing up of one's body to strange worlds.


## 6.5    Queer desk-work

*Mirrorball Desk* seems to be some kind of administrative body for the processing of 'glow' – a ridiculous managerial situation.   The desk-work being done or imagined on *Mirrorball Desk* desk is both systematic (every glostick has to be archived – in this instance using post-it-notes) and ludicrous (How would one archive glosticks?  What would be the point?  What would be the value?)  I start to imagine the taxonomical challenge for such a material.

Should they be ordered by gradients of colour or tone? (Though these alter as the activated glosticks gradually fade - perhaps a mutable archive is needed?) Or should they be archived by date and time snapped?  Or perhaps by who used them; in what place and what they did with each glostick.   Or what was done in the presence of each glostick.  Visualizing this imaginary archive is a way of attending to what slips, for the qualities of glosticks include

disposability, a fleeting moment or a fleeting night that can go unnoticed in accounts of knowledge formation.

Disorientation for Ahmed has the potential to be part of a queer political project because it is a way to understand how we are orientated to "the right way up" (2006:66).  In the case of *Mirrorball* Desk, it is not possible to orientate oneself to this desk as a 'normal', 'straight' office worker, or a 'straight' academic (although what these normative occupations are is contestable).  Using this model, the disorientating effects of *Mirrorball Desk* occur through the overt inclusion of bodily pleasure in an object that normally calls for a split between the head and the body. That is, the supposedly disembodied office life that involves desks day in day out is calling here for the overt presence of bodies of pleasure.  The regular browns and greys of the public body are suddenly corrupted through the pleasurable potential of the disco aesthetic that was discussed in the previous chapter.  Or perhaps not corrupted, but rather the *Mirrorball Desk* brings into being a different kind of desk-work; that is the kind of activities that might take place with this object.  In doing so this desk calls forth a different kind of body, one in which bodily sensations take centre stage.  The kind of body that can 'extend' in this environment is one that can incline to play; can go with the nonsense.  It is one that can, or would like, to rummage in the drawers, perhaps contemplate putting the glasses on in public and feel the potential for the activation of bodily pleasure and desires in one's proximity to this desk.  As Ahmed writes, "queer desire "acts" by bringing other objects closer, those that would not be allowed "near" by straight ways of orientating the body" (2006:92).

**6.6 The Philosopher's table**

Tables and writing desks recurrently appear in philosophy (Ahmed, 2006; Banfield, 2000) often as a way to illustrate an argument when the object is momentarily brought into the foreground before it recedes into the background.  In Sara Ahmed's deconstruction of phenomenology, she argues that this object - the writing desk - supports a particular kind of action and requires a particular kind of organisation of one's life (that is concealed or relegated to the background) to be able to sit facing your desk and away from domestic demands such as child care.  This for Ahmed says a lot about the orientation of phenomenology- that the "world unfolds" (2006:29) from the philosopher's (in her example Husserl's) study; from *his* paper and pen.  How would research,  knowledge, or an imagining of the world look if it were to unfold from the club dancer's glostick rather than the paper and pen?

The objects that are near to hand on *Mirrorball Desk* are not the "inherited proximity" (Ahmed 2006:86) of the writer's pen and paper (or computer and printer).  Instead, these proximate objects at my desk are the glostick and the disco-ball – signifiers and potential activators of a desirous body-world relation and a different kind of register to that of the 'serious' academic sitting and writing at a desk (for a queer critique of seriousness see Gavin Butt, 2005a). Ahmed writes:

> The body acts upon what is nearby or at hand, and then gets shaped by its directions towards such objects, which keep the other objects beyond the bodily horizon of the straight subject (Ahmed, 2006:91).

Art practice is well suited for thinking about "other objects", and how directions might be altered and new worlds geared up to.  Glosticks and glitter are throwaway and low value.

They do not normally occupy the same space as the world of a particular type of work: the world of the writing desk.  Indeed, these low brow objects can point towards activities such as drinking, drug taking and the lack of bodily inhibitions that clash with the imagined body of the academic sitting at their desk following a serious train of thought.  These trivial, frivolous objects are what the audience's attention is directed towards through their presence across the surface of the desk.  And it is through this redirection; through attention to objects that otherwise go unnoticed, that Ahmed argues we might become more aware of how the world is oriented in particular normative ways.

> Queer objects, which do not allow the subject to approximate the form of a
> heterosexual couple, may not even get near enough to "come into view" as possible
> objects to be directed toward (2006: 90).

These objects, these night time events - the proximity to other bodies in pleasurable and unpleasurable ways go unnoticed in the everyday and yet they can profoundly alter our orientations to the world, or perhaps towards a world of the 'not yet'; a world in which points of orientation are less assured.  As I will argue in relation to my second desk, this is an orientation towards uncertainty, or as Yve Lomax writes: "grasping something by letting it slip through your fingers" (2005:3) that seems particularly resonant for considering tentative, uncertain, multiple knowledges in research through practice that continue to develop a queering of standpoint epistemology.

**Image 46.** *This Desk Does Not Fly*, 2009

### 6.7 *This Desk Does Not Fly* walkthrough

The second desk I approach is made of light grey laminate and black metal. It appears to be

quite sturdy. Because I've just come from the all-singing all-dancing *Mirrorball Desk* and

because I can see wires attached to this second desk from on high, I wonder what this desk

'does' and how my body might activate it. This is the only desk to be spot lit from above,

which makes the moving circles of light diminish and then disappear just before they get to

the surface of this table. This desk has three wires attached to it that rise up at diagonals

and connect to the walls above eye level. There is an A4 sheet of paper on the surface of the table top which is smooth and flat.  I try the bottom drawer or perhaps I do not.  I open it a crack, and then see more glowing movement.  If I pull the drawer further the desk comes with it.  I can push the whole table away and it hardly weighs anything, but weirdly, it also lingers a little.  I am not sure of my own strength at this table as it does not resist my pull as I expect.  It is suspended very slightly off the ground on three legs.  The fourth drags a little.

## 6.8    Disrupting body-world habits

I am not seduced by this desk's appearance in the way that I am by bright and colourful *Mirrorball Desk.*  This desk appears more 'ordinary'; 'greyer'. Yet a gentle touch alters this ordinariness.  Of course if this activation does not take place – if the drawer is not opened - the desk is encountered in a different way.  The focus may then become the sheet of paper and the surface it lies upon which I discuss later.

This desk is odd.  It disorientates because one is unsure as to how much one's own body impresses onto this object and vice versa.  Central to Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed's phenomenology is the role of the body in making sense of the physical world.  For Merleau-Ponty (1969) it is through an irreducible ambiguity of experiencing body-world that he terms an intertwining  through "flesh" – that resonates with how the body-world is experienced through this desk;  how the body impresses on the world and how the world impresses upon bodies.  For Ahmed, extending Merleau-Ponty's work, the world can impresses upon lesbian bodies in harsh, disfiguring ways.  In the case of my grey desk, it is the participant's own body-world habits that are called into question, for as the drawer is pulled, so the table comes with it.  This then is a way of experiencing how the world might impress upon, or pull

upon bodies in unexpected ways.  The participants' habitual resistance and body strength

do not work here, but they must find a new physicality or, more precisely, a slightly altered

one in order to 'control' this object and in doing so extend into the space.

The grey desk does not stay in place, yet neither is it completely free to roam or fly.  Instead,

its parameters are fixed through the vertical and horizontal axis of the walls and floor, but

this desk, I would argue, also suggests that this is not the only story and that there might be

possibilities for other, more oblique movements, however faltering.  It was my intention to

invoke these new movements and new stories (movements rather than directions) through

the paper that rests on the surface of the table, but as you will see from this next section, I

do not think it has been successful.

## 6.9    Stories that fail

There is an A4 sheet of paper on the table, that the low light makes it difficult to read, so I

go closer and sit down, or I crane my neck in standing.  The low wattage spotlight draws

attention to the desks flatness; its impermeable 'surfaceness' that does not reflect or let

one in, but deadens.  Assembled to create a situation with this desk is an A4 sheet of paper

that operates almost as a space on the desk top surface that could be interpreted as a space

of language that does not give up its meaning easily but could be a way in.  I peer at this

paper in the half-light but I cannot make out many of the words even though I have written

them –or, more precisely, I have *re*-written them.  There are crossings out and black and

white smudged photocopying on this sheet.

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In a collectivity that you know

it? When a person writes, he

...: Pages 118–24 address your question...

project of this book dates from...

I will describe.

When I was young I laughed a lot when I read... Maurice Merleau-Ponty

*Phenomenology of Perception.*

When His New Master was young, he didn't like His Master's austere + meagre stories. So He climbed trees while His Master looked on, huddled at his desk. The New Master sits at his... They are chained to their library chair... Sensation!

*Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*

outset of the study of perception, we find *in language the notion of sensation.*" Isn't this an exemplary introduction? A collection of examples in the same vein, so austere and meager, inspire the descriptions that follow. From his window the author sees some tree, always in bloom; he huddles over his desk; now and again a red blotch appears—it's a quote. What you can decipher in this book is a nice ethnology of city dwellers, who are hypertechnical-ized, intellectualized, chained to their library chairs, and tragically stripped of any tangible experience. Lots of phenomenology and no sensation—everything via language.

This same laughter bursts from me when I dip into a more

losophy and the movement... more can I say I said it b... about demonstration, even... good for training, for scho...

But the goal of school... appropriate to leave. One... having learned the trade... training comes adulthood; invention.
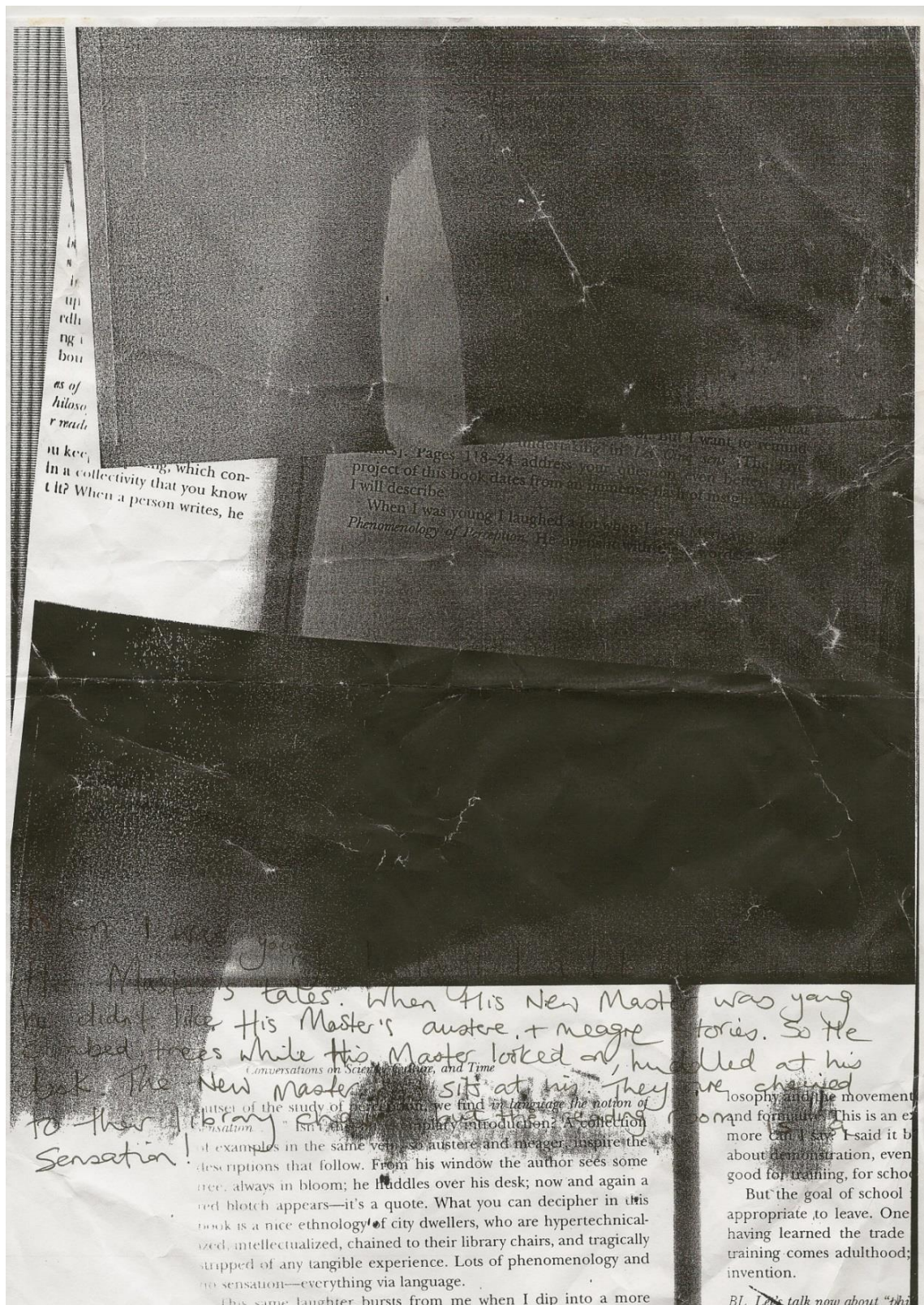
BL Let's talk now about "ph...

**Image 47.** *This Desk Does Not Fly* (paper detail), 2009

The writing is a reinterpretation of a conversation between Michel Serres and Bruno LaTour (1995).  This is the original text:

> When I was young I laughed a lot when I read Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.  He opens it with these words: "At the outset of the study of perception, we find *in language the notion of sensation*...'  Isn't this an exemplary introduction?  A collection of examples in the same vein, so austere and meager, inspire the descriptions that follow.  From his window the author sees some tree, always in bloom; he huddles over his desk; now and again a red blotch appears – it's a quote.  What you can decipher in this book is a nice ethnology of city dwellers, who are hypertechnicalized, intellectualized, chained to their library chairs, and tragically stripped of any tangible experience.  Lots of phenomenology and no sensation - everything via language (Serres, 1995:131).

Serres wants writers to let in the noise and messiness of the world (1995:78) and to attend more to sensation and the senses.  He suggests that to do this, writers need to get away from their desks.  For Serres the desk becomes an object that restricts, flattens and reduces "everything via language".  One way to let in this noise might be through attention to encounters with art practices, whilst another might be through the creation of stories.  I want to particularly emphasise here that Serres' philosophy encourages alternative ways of knowing that can attend to excess.  Telling 'real -fictional' stories about, in and through my work is a fabulation (fable making) that can attend to some of the queer modes of knowing that Giffney suggests such as preposterousness and indeterminacy   Stories can be playful and magnify  the already uncertain status of the art object with what Sedgwick describes as "the surplus charge" (1994:3) of the text.

My interpretation of Serres' words is a story that slides over the surface of the grey desk that is difficult to see in places.  You do not have that difficulty here:

> When I was young I laughed a lot when I read His Master's tales.  When His New Master was young he didn't like His Master's austere and meagre stories so he climbed trees whilst His Master looked on, huddled at his desk.  The New Master now sits at his.  They are chained to their library chairs but their reading room is a sensation!

The story does not quite work.  This began as an attempt at a twisting of normative modes of academic writing, but because of its presence in the work-in-progress show it is unclear what conventions it is trying to breech.  How is a story 'usually' read on desks in art exhibitions?  It is not (perhaps it would work better as part of the artist's statement which does have its own conventions).  The text is not long enough to establish a sustained narrative or a detailed position that could then be twisted (or queered) or brought into doubt.  I thought I would do this instead with the conventions of the written thesis and I began to do this with the enactment of a polyvocal method in discussing *Club Cave 27* – a detailed  description of the installation from which to bring into doubt the observing narrator's position.  However, this became unnecessary when the unsettled status of the artwork and its knowledges became apparent.

I now want to consider what it means to 'face' *This Desk Does Not Fly; a* work in motion, and to extrapolate from this how a researcher might hold uncertainty; in both art production and knowledge production. This in turn will inform the development of a queering of standpoint epistemology through attention to queer modes of knowing.

**6.10 Holding uncertainty**

Yve Lomax's reflections on event theory take place in the form of imaginary dialogues with people, including Michel Serres. I cite a rather long extract here because I want the reader to see Lomax's ideas contextualised within the format of a dialogue :

> I say that as yet something hasn't been thought through. I say that it remains not yet. She asks if I want to move in the direction of this not yet and I answer by saying that I don't foresee that this movement will be a race toward a predetermined goal. And she continues by saying that there is the question of movement in time but also the question of how the existence of the not yet is itself to be considered. And I ask if we are to think of the not yet as signifying the existence of something waiting to be discovered, uncovered.
>
> - 'Or, are we to think otherwise than this?'
>
> She says she is wondering about grasping something by letting it slip through your fingers. She says her question is simple.
>
> - 'What does this way of understanding make for?'
>
> I am not sure if I think the question is simple, but I respond by asking if she thinks her question is asking for this approach to understanding to become an object for study and thought. With a little wry smile she replies by asking if this *object* would be one which is easily recognizable. I say that to grasp something by letting it slip through your fingers makes the object of understanding somewhat slippery, and she responds by saying that for some this is no way to know. (Lomax, 2005:3)

This dialogic format is not separate from the ideas, but is a condition of the ideas emerging. This is I think how my art practice and theory practice operates. In the phrase "grasping something by letting it slip through your fingers". Lomax describes and enacts the action of

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trying to find a way of thinking about the continual movement of being (of becoming and of event theory), but she is also considering the constellations of art and theory, image and word that my research investigates.  This is a highly appropriate way of conceptualizing both experiential knowledge and unrepresentability that occupy the heart of my thesis.  It is the relationship between being and knowing that forms the tensions between phenomenology and queer theory that I have expressed, and also from which my queering of standpoint epistemology emerges.  Lomax is arguably bringing queer modes of knowing into phenomenological experience; the two need not be separate.  Giffney supports this view of the phenomenological within queer theory when she writes that:

> queer theory seeks to allow for complexity and the holding of uncertainties by encouraging the experiencing of states without necessarily trying to understand, dissect or categorise them (2009: 8).

I want to particularly emphasise how Giffney directly addresses the "holding of uncertainties", and does so through experience that implies a phenomenological approach to what slips both ontologically and epistemologically, and an approach that can create bodies (in the widest sense of the word) of uncertainty.  This is where my art practice research is situated.  How might we then tend to these queer states or moments?  How might we 'grasp what slips' or 'hold uncertainties'?  For Ahmed, it is through an "act of facing", and yet also for Ahmed, disorientation and "queer moments happen when things fail to cohere… when things do not stay in place" (2006:170).  She writes:

> We still have to face an object for the effect of the object to be "queer."  What this suggests is that disorientation requires an act of facing, but it is a facing that also allows the object to slip away, or to become oblique (2006:171).

The experience of moving with *This Desk Does Not Fly* becomes about one's own uncertain position and how one faces what is retreating, for as Ahmed argues, "in the retreat of an object a space is cleared for a new arrival" (2006:171). This is a crucial point of convergence between my work and Ahmed's for it is in this potential encounter that a queer art practice might emerge that does not occupy a known set of relations led by discursive certainty. Instead, for Ahmed, this retreat of the object can offer "…the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read" (2006:171). Ahmed acknowledges the potential unreadability in such a facing. Her words here and *This Desk Does Not Fly* both point to how one might live (fleetingly or for longer) with uncertain points of reference; that cannot be mapped fully because of movements such as those that I discussed in relation to *Glitter*; and the effect this might have on different bodies and for different ways of understanding the world. *This Desk Does Not Fly* requires a different kind of facing that is more in line with Ahmed's and Merleau-Ponty's proximate objects, than my previous *Glitter* work. Building on ideas of how one faces uncertainty I now go on to discuss my third and final desk in this chapter: *Brown Desk*.

### 6.11  *Brown Desk* walkthrough

The third desk is lowly lit and in a darker place than the other two. It is made of brown laminated chip board and it has a 1970s domestic office feel, yet it would be too large for my home. There is a faint yellow glow in the drawers and cupboard, but it is not the fluorescent fun of the disco ball desk – this yellow has a mustardy, slightly putrid phosphorescence to it. This table is the least inviting to sit at. I want it to 'do' something like the other desks, but I also know how fragile and badly put together this desk is, as I was

the one that badly put it together.  I don't really want to sit at this desk – even the chair

won't let me swivel.



**Image 48.**  *Brown Desk*, 2009

## 6.12    Lingering and leaning

Does this work disorientate the audience at all?  At first look it is the only 'normal' desk in

the room.  As you approach it, it does not have either the spectacular light show of

*Mirrorball Desk*, nor the dramatic sloping wires that stretch up and away from the grey

desk.  Instead it *appears* as a sturdy, 'serious' desk on which 'proper' work could be done.

However, as one approaches the desk other smaller, seemingly insignificant, objects and

discrepancies start to appear.   There is a small, lone glass ashtray on the surface.  Inside this

is a sprinkling of neon yellow and gold glitter.  This is not doing what glitter 'should' do – it is

not catching the light – it is not 'glittering'.  Furthermore, there is not enough light shining

on the desk for serious work to be done upon it; this desk cannot function.  This seems

initially a desk of refusal.  It does not want to play and it does not want to work.  But then

linger a while and other things start to emerge.



**Image 49.**  *Brown Desk* (detail), 2009
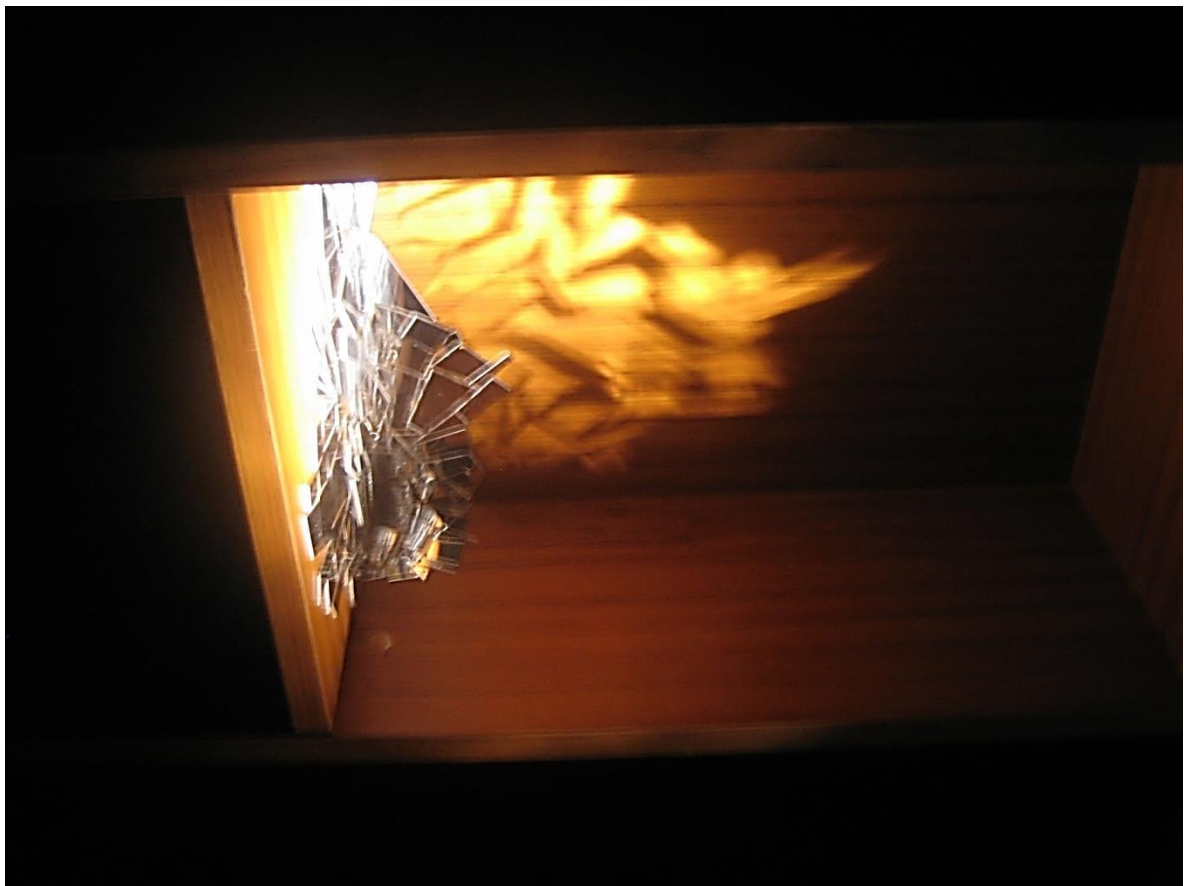
A spotlight on the floor lights up an alcove in the back of the desk.  To see this alcove I need

to walk behind the desk.  If I do (I might not), I will see, on closer inspection, that it is partly

tiled in mosaic mirrors that are not square.  The light throws an exaggerated (a not quite

mirrored) double image alongside the tiles.  This in turn throws out a strange blurry,

phantasmic reflection onto the wall.  Bending down to see the mirrors I notice other mirror

tiles that are hidden from an upright viewpoint as they are underneath the worktop and out

of my line of vision.   If I could stand on my head or at an angle of 30 degrees, imagine what I

might see!

This desk then has subtle tendencies; leanings that enable queer readings depending on

how straight you might be, your physical viewpoint and your interest in lingering.  Lingering

is a particularly apposite term because it can point towards an uncertainty as to what one is

facing; a being in the vicinity combined with a directionlessness movement; a proximity that

does not equal knowability; an orientation towards uncertainty.  This then is about how one

"faces" the world and what one does when objects seem to slip or fail in a way that

resonates more with the work of Lomax than Ahmed.  My object; my brown desk, is

unremarkable until one is prepared to linger with the ordinary and imagine how this desk

might be part of a life-world lived at an angle.  Lingering has the potential to bring other,

hidden objects into reach, but time must be spent in seemingly unproductive, unfocussed

dawdling for this to happen.

I began this chapter with an investigation of my orientation towards the writing desk as a

research through practice Ph.D. candidate.  As I began to write about my own work I started

to realise the importance of thinking about writing as a practice and the uncertain status of

art objects.  I discussed how the desks in this show might activate disorientating encounters

in different ways.  In the case of *Mirrorball Desk* it was a physical wooziness brought on by

the mirrorball activity.  It was also in how an object and its implied activities cannot be read

as 'straight' or 'normal' through its orientation towards desire.  I discussed uncertain

orientations in which one's body-world habits are called into question and must gear up to a slightly altered physicality to activate *This Desk Does Not Fly*. My final desk – *Brown Desk* suggested a subtle disorientation through the act of lingering – disorienting because there is no straight forward facing or direction involved. These different strategies and affects trouble any easy sense of positionality or knowability and in doing so manifest a queering of standpoint epistemology.

The three desks, in conjunction with the writing about them, have made me consider what and how I need to make differently. With the exception of *Brown Desk*, I realised that the other two desks have been aimed at an encounter with them, which is that of an audience facing a particular way – eyes front, towards the object. Ahmed's work offers me a potential to do things a little differently because what she suggests is more about how bodies might come together in different ways through particular objects. The limits of creating queer objects are hinted at by Ahmed: "I would not say that a queer phenomenology would simply be a matter of generating queer objects" (2006:3).

The problem with an individual facing an art object and attempting a queer encounter is that as Ahmed states:

>  The queer body is not alone; queer does not reside in a body or an object, and is dependent on the mutuality of support (2006:170).

Instead, it is more useful to think of queer encounters as a twisting of a relational bodily inhabitance of space. In my final installation: *queer:reading:*room, I began to create an assemblage in which the space is activated, rather than individual objects.

# Chapter 7. And the And

# *queer:reading:room*

In the previous chapter I considered the place of the writing desk in my art practice research.  This was an investigation into the orientation towards writing within the context of a research through art practice Ph.D. and also how different modes of disorientation were activated through my desk art practice.  Chapter seven continues utilising the desk as an object to encounter and think with but considers how embodiment might be queered within a wider installation space.

*Queer:reading:room* is a rich and complex installation in which many materials are experienced and activated through their encounter.  As with the other *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters this will inevitably be a partial reading of the work in order to work within my research paradigm.  In this chapter I focus on particular disorienting encounters, extensions and movements through five aspects: wonky objects, CCTV, glosticks, mirrorboard and the soundtrack.  Along with the previous three chapters it forms the substantive practical investigation, analysis, reflection and theorising of the thesis.  First I begin with a description of the installation.

## 7.1     *queer:reading:room* walkthrough

Before I even get to the installation the sound from the work fills the stairwells and the lift – "ooh wah ooh…boom"  Entering through the dark wooden door of B.13, straight ahead I see

through another door to an office space.  To the left of this is an open corridor-like space which runs into a larger space.  *Queer:reading:room* has predominately two spaces:  a 1990s office space that is contained within a larger, older space.  These spaces are not two white cubes.  The rooms are not hermetically sealed and separate, but instead each room bleeds into the other and into less demarcated spaces, through gaps between the walls and apertures in the ceilings.



**Image 50.**  *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011

**Image 51.** *queer:reading:room* (office detail), 2011

In the office there are three desks.  The largest is black with a grey metal structure and has

loud speakers on the top shelf.  This is the only desk in this room that is not wonky.

Glosticks feed into holes in this desk, trail up a wall and disappear through a gap along the

top of the wall.   On this desk is a white laptop.  The USB points on this laptop connect to 3

USB hubs, which connect to splitters.  These splitters in turn connect to about twenty

electroluminescent wires of different fluorescent colours.  The longer wires trail up the wall,

through the gap and into the larger space, while the shorter wires dangle downwards in the

office space.

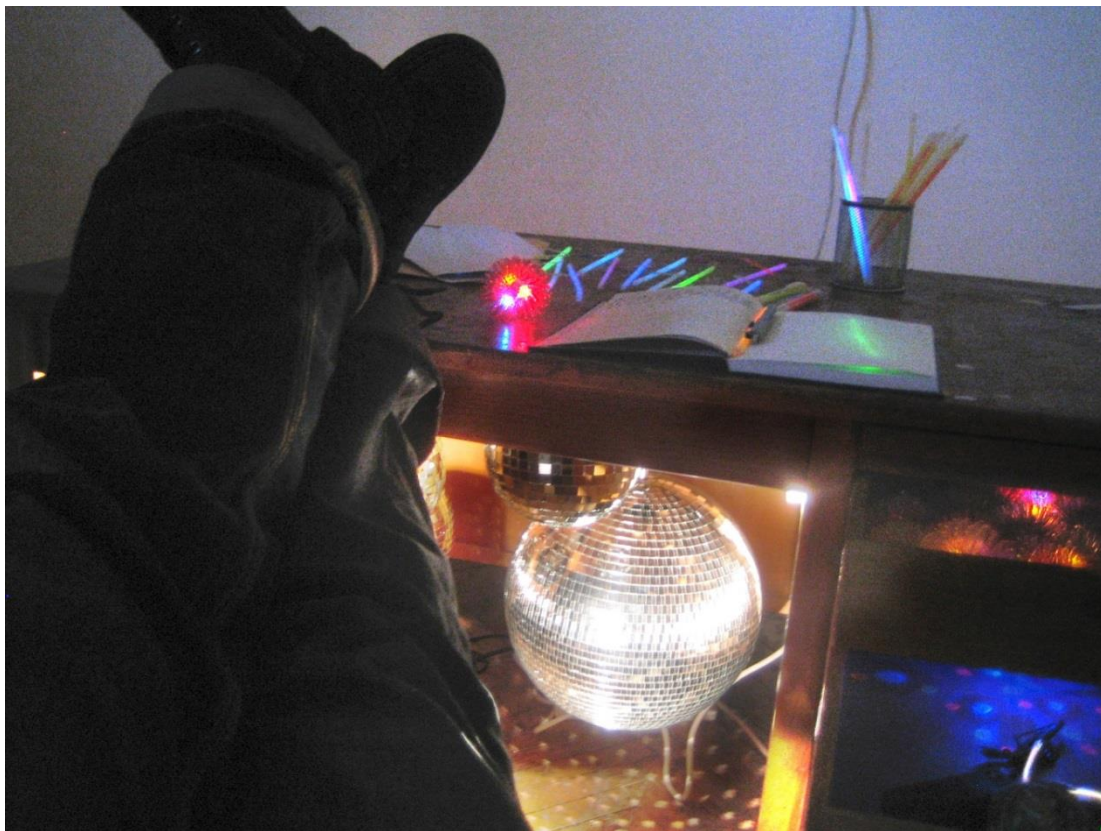

**Image 52.**  *queer:reading:room* (laptop detail), 2011

The laptop has a still image of someone's legs sitting at a desk with mirrorballs in its well.

This picture was taken from another work: *Mirrorball Desk*.  On this image of a desk is a

bright rubber looking urchin ball with an even brighter centre.   Right next to this still image, on the 'actual' desk is another of these balls, but this one is pulsating - flashing on and off. There are more of these balls on the desk, also flashing.  One is next to the left hand speaker.  The sound coming out of the speakers is a cut up of different tracks - early gay disco, but it sounds more like a combination of simple drum machines and how I imagine a retro-futuristic ray-gun battle to sound.  These sound like shooting noises but with moments of dislocated voices cut in.  The rhythm has an uncomfortable syncopation that changes very slightly throughout, as if it is almost always a little bit out of time and off beat.  The words are Carol Vorderman saying "D.I.S.C.O" as an authoritative statement, and then my elongated voice "phenomenology", with the repetition of the word "repetition" and "getting lost".  Standing in front of and between the two speakers I get a sense that the sound switches from left to right and my body rocks when this happens and feels a bit woozy.  I find it hard to concentrate on anything but the sound.  The high notes are a little bit uncomfortable on my ears.  If I look underneath the desk I see a sprinkling of red glitter twinkling around one of the table legs.  A couple of specks adhere to the sole of my shoe.

**Image 53.** *queer:reading:room* (office detail), 2011.

To the right of the black and chrome desk, is a purple desk that tilts forwards and to the left. On the listing desktop there are about twenty A4 sheets of paper and ten mount boards. A few of the sheets have been spray mounted onto the boards and look like artists statements that should be on the wall introducing my art practice. They overlap each other so I can only see in full the ones that are uppermost and partial sections of the ones below them. The top ones all begin with my name in bold large letters and then underneath "PhD Fine Art", followed by *"queer:reading:room"* and "Sound by Matt Lambert" in smaller letters. At the bottom of each one is my website address. After this, each one is different. One says nothing more, whilst another says:

> My work explores an artist's orientation towards the writing desk in a practice-led
> Ph.D.

Another:

My research investigates to what extent it is possible to visualise 'queer' beyond representations of sexual bodies and sexual communities.

Another:

My work is a response to Tim Lawrence's (2008) writing about the potential of early disco as a queer space for valuing "connective" audio sensations.

Another:

This work is a consideration of the relationship between practice and theory in practice-led research.

> Either one ends up with convergent, predictable, and ultimately unoriginal artwork, which, however conveniently it can be articulated in the exegesis, is of little value to the artistic discipline in question, or one ends up with a clear research paradigm, but badly behaved, unruly artwork that refuses to be contained within that paradigm.
>
> Kim VIncs, 2007:101

Another:

My research investigates how the disorientating effects of non-figurative art may engender queer encounters.

Another:

Attention to what slips.

Another:

My research is a practical and theoretical exploration of Sara Ahmed's (2006) work on queer phenomenology.  Starting from the premise that "getting lost takes you

somewhere", the work explores how disorienting moments might alert us to what it means to be orientated.

Another:

…our experience contains numerous qualities [eg colour, taste] that would be almost devoid of meaning if considered separately from the reactions they provoke in our bodies.  This is the case with the quality of being honeyed.  Honey is a slow moving liquid; while it undoubtedly has a certain consistency and it allows itself to be grasped, it soon creeps slyly from the fingers and returns to where it started from.  It comes apart as soon as it has been given a particular shape and, what is more, it reverses the roles by grasping the hands of whoever would take hold of it.  The living, exploring, hand which thought it could master this thing instead discovers that it is embroiled in a sticky external object …So the quality of being honeyed … can only be understood in the light of the dialogue between me as an embodied subject and the external object which bears its quality.  The only definition of this quality is a human definition.

<div align="right">Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 2004:46</div>

Another:

Becoming a perverse reader was never a matter of my condescension to texts, rather of the surplus charge of my trust in them to remain powerful, refractory and exemplary.  And this doesn't seem an unusual way for ardent reading to function in relation to queer experience.

<div align="right">Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1994:4</div>

Another:

I wonder if I've misread something and go back over the passage trying to see where

the shift takes place from scene to 'real'. I can never be certain if the characters have

arisen from the picture or if I've just missed a shift.

Another:

How do you represent all the production, mess, involvements, uncertainty and

inactivity that surround the generation of a Ph.D?

To see all of these 'statements' you would need to move the sheets about.  There could be

more.  I see people on the opening night carrying these sheets and realise that they are

taking them, and I wonder which of the above they have taken with them, and how this

might affect their reading of the work.



**Image 54.**  *queer:reading:room* (office detail), 2011

The purple slanting desk is under a window. The sunlight is partially restricted in this room by the two large whiteboards standing on the windowsill.  The left-hand board contains a linear outline of my Ph.D. written in black marker pen with the title and research questions at the top and the breakdown of the chapter structure and word count below. The right-hand board is less legible and contains words that have been rubbed out in places, smeared or written over in others.  Words that structured my original Ph.D. thesis outline but have since been superseded.  I can make out enough words – or parts of words such as "Intro" and "Methods and methodol" to compare it to the left-hand outline which is more intact. Partly overlaying this whiteboard is a slightly curled piece of two millimetre thick mirror board.  On this mirror the following words have been written with green marker pen: *ambiguity; repetition; flaws; unsettled; contingency; slippage; hard to locate; excess; getting lost takes you somewhere; disruption; disorientation; strange world; woozy*.  The mirror board is about a quarter the size of the white board.  When I move, even a little, it sends the room whirling in the mirror, whilst the words, in pale green, remain in the same place.  If I am near enough it is my reflection as well as the space that wobbles and slides.

To the left of the mirror board is a cheap looking small mirrorball, about six inches in diameter on its own rotating stand and lights.  As the ball rotates slightly off centre, red, green and blue rectangles of light slide across the white wall and glide gently across the edges of the black desk.  To the right of the purple desk, on the wall at my eye level, is a three inch by one inch piece of paper that has been torn out of a magazine.
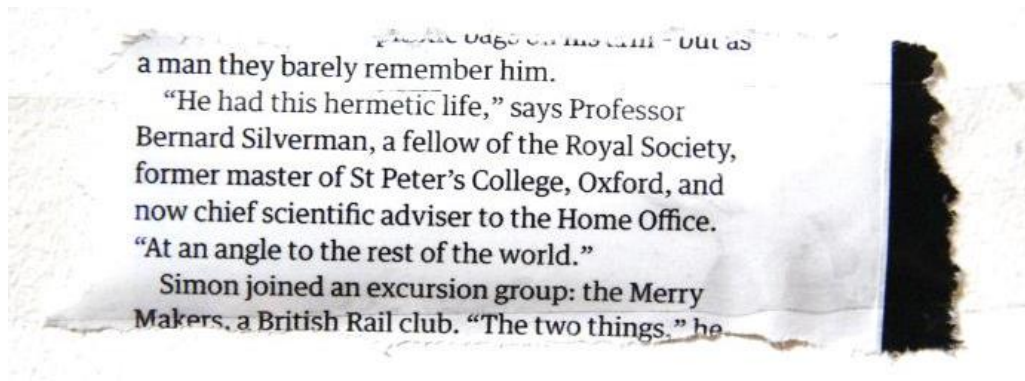
**Image 55.** *queer:reading:room* (office detail), 2011

To the right of this paper scrap is a beech veneer desk that is smaller than the purple one but also tilts at an angle. On this desk is a laptop displaying what appears to be black and white CCTV footage. Every five seconds the recording switches from the office room to the larger space. There are fleeting moments of activity when the back of a head can be seen



**Image 56.** *queer:reading:room* (wonky beech desk), 2011.

moving out of picture.  Some of the objects  move around and disappear, but the person responsible for these changes is largely absent from the video and the scene slightly alters when the camera is elsewhere.

The beech desk sits opposite the large black and chrome one and there is one swivel chair on wheels between the two.  Standing at the beech desk I am aware of the full volume of the soundtrack behind me.  Turn right again and I face the doorway and my right ear is uncomfortable with the sound.  Under the B.13 room number is a pink, shiny plastic index finger that is bent and pointing upwards.  If this was a more realistic representation of a finger, then the nail should join the sides of the finger at the cuticles.  Instead, there is a gap which makes what should be the nail look more like a phallic protuberance, with half of the nail inside the finger itself.  It should also be less shiny and pink.



**Image 57.**  *queer:reading:room* (finger), 2011.

Leaving this room and turning right towards the larger adjacent space, both the light and sound alter. The audio volume lessens slightly but is also heard through the gap in the wall between the office and this room. It bounces off of the cavernous, uneven ceiling and echoes. This space is dark, punctuated by a multitude of fluorescent lights. I notice five clear boxes on my left along a ledge. Two boxes contain glosticks –mostly dull ones yet to be activated, with two or three glowing broken ones. The other three boxes hold plastic glostick connectors, but I cannot see clearly because of the low lighting.



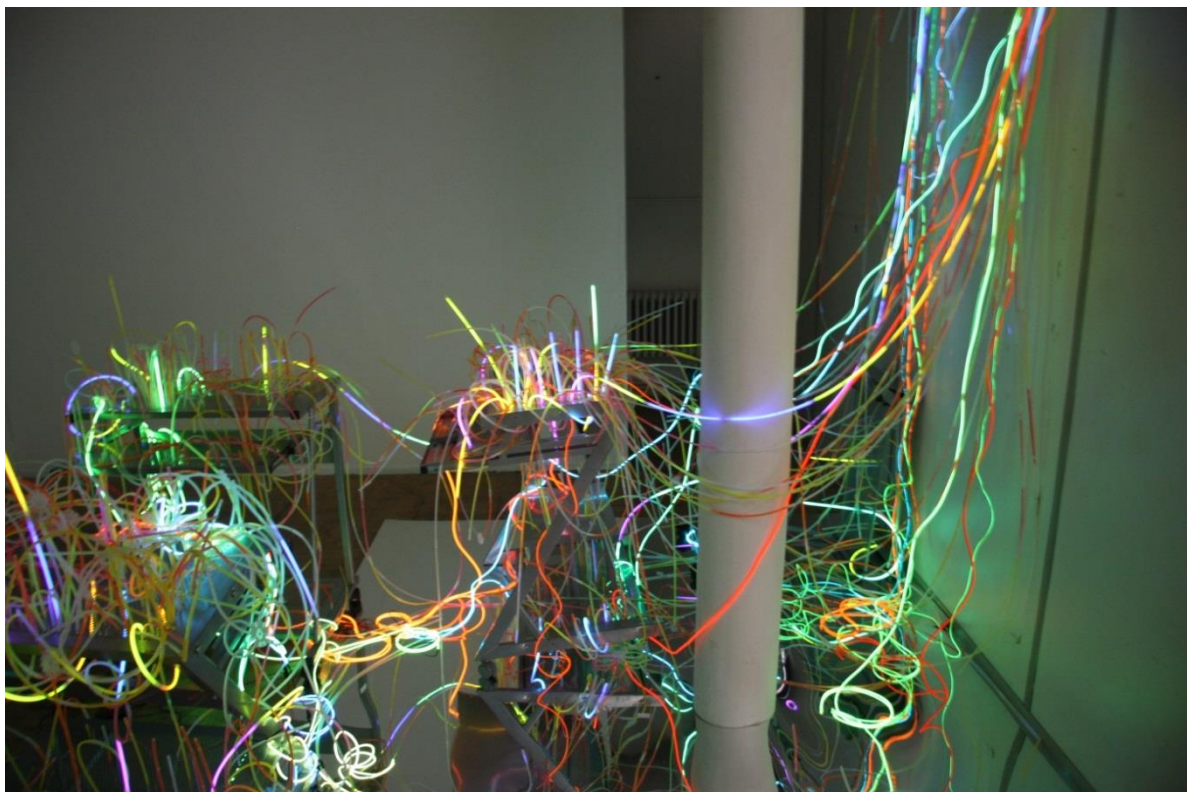**Image 58.** *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011.

In this cavernous space are four grey metal computer desks standing on mirrorboard. They are the type of desk with hundreds of small holes in them. Three of them have a castor missing and sit at a tilt whilst the fourth, smaller desk lies on its side pressed against the partition wall. This wall is the one that forms part of the office room and has glowing wires

and chains of glosticks descending from the gap between the wall and the suspended

ceiling.  These wires swirl down.  Some dangle, some slide onto the shiny mirrored floor, and

are doubled in it, whilst others pass through holes in the metal desks.



**Image 59.**  *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011.

To activate the glosticks you need to break them - to snap them so that the two glass vials of

chemicals mix inside the plastic casing and form a reaction that emits light.  The instructions

on the box say they last 8-10 hours but I know from experience that they last longer, even if

their glow is not quite as bright. This is how the installation looks to me on one day, but it

differs from day to day depending on the glostick activity – how many were activated today

and what happened yesterday and the day before.

**Image 60.** *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011



**Image 61.** *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011
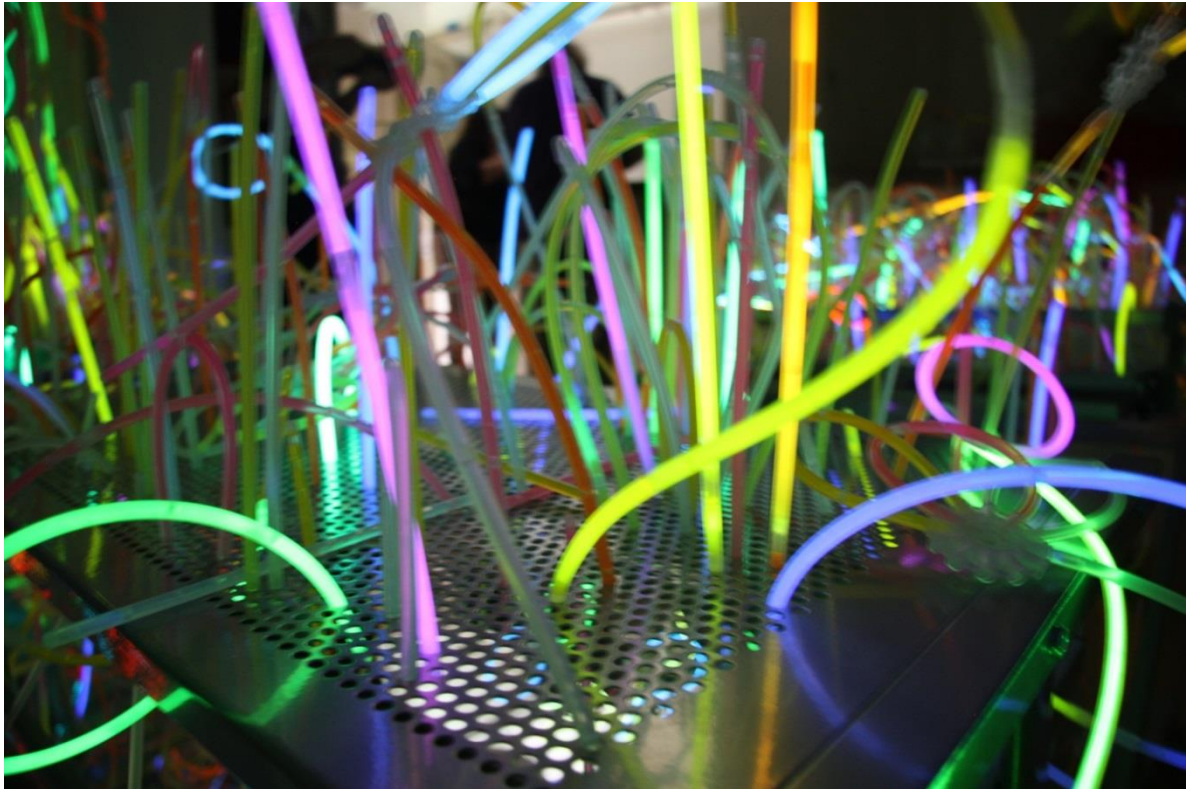
**Image 62.** *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011

Each desk has a multitude of glosticks penetrating through the small holes and weaving

around its structure.  Some of the glosticks are dead and in the dark look completely

washed-out whilst others still have a little bit of colour but look faded in comparison to the

newly snapped ones which are much brighter.  I try and trace a path, a pattern, by following

one glostick and its connections but find this difficult.

The glosticks that have been fed through the holes in the lower shelf of the desk nearest the

mirrored floor double up in the mirror image and also light up the underside of the desks

creating more depth in the mirror image.  This *is* a mirror image but the slight undulations in

the thin mirror board floor mean that the reflected image wobbles and slides

disproportionately and the floor ceases to be hard and grounding (this can be quite a

pleasurable feeling). The white column that might have dominated the space becomes a thin wobbly twisted image in the curious depths of the mirror board that alters how the space is perceived. Even without the partially mirrored floor, the ceiling of this room is cavernous and complicated with what looks like an upside down staircase ascending into it or descending into the space below.

The title *queer:reading:room* has two colons in its structure to make the act of its utterance require lingering over. Written as *Queer Reading Room*, the meaning of queer would be as an adjective –this is a type of reading room that is a bit queer. The colons and lower case letters however work to disrupt the one phrase and invite other readings. Each of the three words are separate yet sitting in close relation to each other and offer the possibilities of reading queerly; of a space for reading; for queering reading; a space in which queer can be opened up and read differently.

There is a lot going on in *queer:reading:room*. For the scope of this thesis and my research aims, I now focus on the following topics; wonky objects, CCTV, mirrorboard, glosticks and the soundtrack. By focusing on encounters with these materials and themes, I also draw out their relation to Ahmed's work on extension, the kinds of disorientations they might evoke in encountering them and how a manifestation of queer art practice might emerge. I begin in the office space and its wonky objects.

### 7.2 Wonky objects and wonky moments

At first I wonder what is disorienting about the installation. It does not contain the physically woozy spectacular visual effects of the mirrorball lights that I have used before and that I felt were particularly effective in sensory disorientation. Sensory disorientation is not however the only definition of disorientation. Ahmed's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty is that "the body 'straightens' its view in order to extend into space" (2006:66). The vertical and horizontals both of the physical world and of cultural practices are in this sense "straightening devices" (Ahmed, 2006:93) that lay claim to and encourage normative practice. Ahmed writes:

> The body that is "in line" is one that can extend into space, at the same time that such spaces are the effects of retracing those lines, which is another way of describing "extension" (2006:66).

I think about the kind of body that might be able to extend in *queer:reading:*room. In the office space, at the wonky tables, it might be those bodies that are 'at an angle to the world', but is this a metaphorical angle (i.e. someone who cannot, or chooses not, to follow a socially straight, heteronormative/privileged vertical line) that is being conflated with the physical tilt of a body when sitting at a wonky desk? It helps here to consider the term wonky and how I am using it.

**Image 63.** *queer:reading:room* (wonky beech desk detail), 2011.

Wonky is defined as crooked, off-centre, askew; loose and unsteady as well as unreliable;

ending the dictionary entry as a "fanciful formation" (Oxford English Concise Dictionary,

2008:1611). The term evokes a presence of irregularity and of unreliability both of surface

and stability yet importantly, wonkiness does not imply complete dysfunction. Its purchase

is that the wonky object does not do what one expects of an upright one; things slide off it.

It implies oblique rather than horizontal or vertical angles and an unsteady rocking

movement. As I have shown throughout my *Practising Theory into Practice* chapters, my art

practice also has the capacity to create wonky moments; moments of epistemological

uncertainty, and uncertain encounters. Lorraine Gamman uses the term "wonky thinking"

(2010) slightly differently when discussing innovative criminal inventions such as shoplifting

bags that can shield from electronic shop detectors; a wonky gaze that gears up to enable

action.  This was partly developed from her work on the queer gaze (Evans and Gamman, 1995), which I discussed in chapter two.

My wonky desks become a place for spatial and cultural metaphors to come together through a willingness to try different angles and see how they *feel*.  Indeed, for me there was something physically enjoyable about sitting and writing at a wonky desk and imagining the words slide off.  It made me wonder why more desks are not made this way.  However, these wonky desks might be disorienting to those unwilling to extend in this way – for people who need or insist on a perpendicular line to travel along.  Or perhaps it is more of an uncertain *re*-orientation as one tries to get used to or to imagine how this world at an angle would work with one's own body.

The wonky desks are queer in that they are marking a difference with the straight desk world, and yet they still function as desks (the beech one does function, but the purple one only appears to: I know that were anyone to put any pressure on it then it would probably give way).  They are both familiar and strange, to cite Sedgwick (1994), because the re-orientation is never complete; because the strange is never fully made familiar or it can never fully pass (though this might be a different set of concerns).  The kind of body that might extend in an encounter with the wonky desk and also in *queer:reading:room* is one that is willing to see if getting lost takes you somewhere.  But moreover, it could also be the kind of body that is *generated* by the encounter, that is a calling forth of new or provisional embodiments that require a 'gearing up' of one's body to this new world; one in which a life might feel liveable.  In Merleau-Ponty's (2002:291) analysis of visual experiments, such as glasses that make the wearer perceive the world at a 45 degree angle a re-orientation

occurs over time as the wearer's body gears up to this new world.  This re-orientation to a strange place no longer strange is not for Merleau-Ponty so much a calling forth of new worlds (although this is invoked too), but rather a calling forth of new subjects that requires a gearing up of one's body to this new world; one in which (understandably crucially for Ahmed) a life feels liveable.

I want to continue thinking through unreliable extensions in *queer:reading:room* as well as unreliable and changing representations in an encounter with CCTV.

## 7.3    CCTV and troubling representation

In the office, on the wonky beech veneer desk, is a laptop playing film footage that has the aesthetic qualities of real time CCTV.  Every five seconds the screen switches from the office space to the gallery space.  Participants may start to recognise the room they are in through making out the familiar vertical lines of the walls and the radiator that runs horizontally along the window.  The possibility of being watched becomes apparent.  From the angle of the shot the camera should be up high somewhere (it is not there).  The participant may be uncertain as to whether they are in the video now or not and the film does not clarify this, as the shots of bodies are fleeting.  The person may try to move around the room to get 'feedback' from the screen to see if they are present.  Objects seem familiar but are registering different traces of activity to the here and now, begging the question – "Is this the room I am in?" and forcing the answer – "yes and no".  This could, perhaps, be an uncertain re-orientation.  The screen switches…
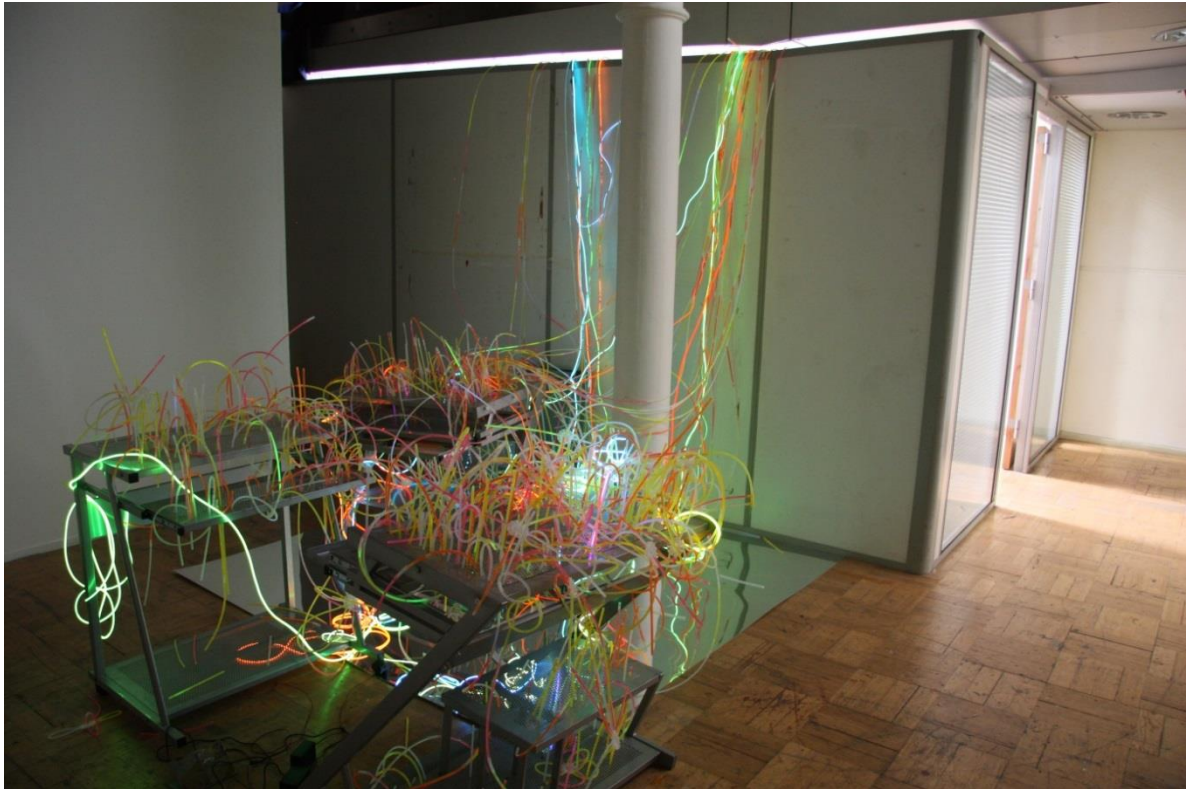
**Image 64.** *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011.

…to the larger space.  On entering this space it appears quite different from its

representation, or the memory of its representation, on the laptop.  At other times,

depending on the glostick activity taking place on these tables, it registers as very similar.

The audience may focus on the second room that is represented in the CCTV footage.

Moving from one room to the other, they travel and carry this memory with them as they

leave the office and enter the gallery space.  Both the moving CCTV footage and the still

image on the black and grey desk are set in relation to the changing objects in the larger

space.  The bigger space that the audience enters is now quite different from its

representation; for example it is very dark in comparison to most of the footage.  But there

is also a familiarity as there are still some seen before objects- for example two of the grey

metal tables are in both the recording and the installation.  In the CCTV footage they have a

few glosticks weaved into them, but this representation is grey and faded compared to the bright, messy glow of the objects in front of the viewer.  The viewer may then decide to return to the office space to check their memory of the room with the CCTV images and attempt another triangulation.  However, if the encounter happens on a day when nobody has worked with the glosticks then the dull fadedness bears more of a resemblance to the CCTV footage.  Both the installation that the audience encounters and the perception and reception of the CCTV representation within it then are contingent on the audiences' own and others' participation in the installation.

It becomes difficult to concentrate attention in one particular way, or to be turned only towards one particular aspect of the installation; one particular orientation. The still images and the CCTV video work together with the constantly changing space to create a failed orientation that is situated in movement rather than in a univocal interpretation or "a race toward a predetermined goal" (Lomax, 2005:3).

Thought processes are represented in *queer:reading:room*.  The office space looks clinical and academic; an uncomfortable, authoritative space that the small mirror ball cannot shake off.  Here we see the whiteboard linear workings of a 'straight' Ph.D. thesis.  The rubbings out and overlaying of a new outline but ultimately recognisable –it has for example a literature review and a methods section.  This was one of the ways I tried to order my thesis.  This register of words is set alongside and indeed partly covered by words written on bendy mirrorboard that make the viewers' world slip and slide.  Turn left and you face a different representation of thought processes that is less dry and more rich and vibrant and messy – electroluminescent wires and glosticks emerging from a laptop and tendrilling off

through gaps in the office wall, making connections with other desks in the darker yet brighter in points and more inviting larger installation space.  It is to these glosticks that I now turn.

### 7.4     Glosticks

I used a few glosticks in my previous desk work; *Mirrorball Desk*.  These registered very differently to the ones in *queer:reading:room*.  *Mirrorball Desk* used about seven or eight and the glosticks were freshly snapped for a one day show.  For *queer:reading:*room, the sheer excess over a two week period creates a changing material proliferation.   Bright glosticks fade to dull and newer, brighter ones are added which must ultimately fade too; an almost melancholic durationality that prevents the work becoming a spectacle or read as a single static object.  As glosticks multiply over the course of the show so does the increase in dead surplus.

On the opening night there was more activity, in part because people were able to watch others interacting with the work, seeing how the glosticks circulate on bodies around the building, adding glosticks to themselves and the installation and so had a permitted line to follow.  Others, at quieter times in the installation's duration, may have felt unsure as to what was the acceptable and legitimate line to follow and so been inhibited to play, or played despite their inhibitions, or in quieter moments played 'alone', or something else entirely. To tentatively, or boldly pick up a glostick and see what it might be able to do and what involvements might be made with it, however fleeting and what other objects might come into reach.  In the following section on mirrorboard I explore these ideas of extension and reach further.

## 7.5    Mirrorboard movements and extensions



**Image 65.**  *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011.



**Image 66.**  *queer:reading:room* (detail), 2011.

In the larger installation space some of the tables sit on mirrorboard. One of Ahmed's (2006:7) descriptions of disorientation is of a body failing to extend in space. This bodily extension fails in the mirrors, as they are never completely flat and so never give a 'perfect' mirror image in which the audience could move seamlessly through. As participants move, even a tiny bit, their own image or rather the world around them wobbles and slides, magnified in what appears to be disproportionate slippages, making the audience aware of their own position as one in constant movement and a enactment of an uncertain standpoint epistemology. In the gallery space the mirrors are in a low lit room and on the floor. This is not a confrontation with one's own image because the face is not the priority unlike many mirrors we may be used to encountering (the bathroom mirror for example). Rather the mirror amplifies our movements, but not as a normative reflection of us but rather as an image of the changing world that we encounter. It is the ground that slips which in turn affects our ability to ground ourselves and make normative attachments. In this way it is disorientating in Ahmed's sense of the word but unlike Ahmed's work, the encounter with this mirror floor is *both* a failure to extend and also a queer form of extension into uncertain territories and embodiments.

These mirrors have the potential to alter what we feel to be near to us. They bring close strange objects (or objects made strange) through the very act of this mediation of image. In the mirror the space and ourselves are both familiar and strange. There is one aspect of the installation that still remains strange and resists any easy re-orientations towards it, and that is the sound piece made by Matt lambert.

**7.6     Sounding disorientations**

The sound is heard before visually encountering *queer:reading:room*.  When standing in a particular spot between the two speakers in the office it is a physical feeling of disorientation that is experienced as the sound from the left and the right switches in a physically confusing syncopated beat.  It is not a comfortable feeling, and moreover, it does not get any more comfortable: there is no more 'purchase' or 'hold' on the sound, at the end as at the beginning.  Unlike Merleau-Ponty's discussion of visual experiments in which a slantwise view becomes vertical and normalised "after a few minutes" (2002:289) as one gets used to the slant, re-orientation or gearing up to this new audio landscape does not work here.  Perhaps this is a fleetingness of manifestation that sound can occupy more so than vision.  That is to say that we know ourselves to be 'upright' through our relationship to seeing/feeling the vertical and horizontal of walls and floors, but audio sensation does not operate on the same register.  In a footnote in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), Merleau-Ponty shows that reorientation towards strange auditory sensations is not easily 'corrected'.  He  writes that:

> Change of direction in acoustic phenomena is extremely difficult to bring about. If we arrange, with the aid of a pseudophone, for sounds coming from the left to reach the right ear before they strike the left, we get an inversion of the auditory field comparable to the inversion of the visual field in Stratton's experiment. Now even with long practice people do not manage to 'correct' the auditory field. The placing of sounds by hearing alone remains incorrect to the end. It is correct, and the sound seems to come from the object on the left only if the object is seen at the same time as it is heard (2002:292, FN16).

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Sound in *queer:reading:room* operates to decentre the audience by destabilising the

habitual, but it does not enable a re-centring or a re-orientation only an oscillation that can

inhibit thought patterns.  I tried writing in the office space of *queer:reading:room*, where the

audio was most affecting.  I was unable to keep on track; my concentration scrambled; my

thoughts kept wandering as the sound penetrated and upset my attempts at careful

description.  It became apparent that this was a place in which one cannot dwell for very

long.  This is not a livable space. This would have been a very different thesis if it were

written in *queer:reading:room*.

In this final *Practising Theory into Practice* chapter I have continued to investigate ideas of

orientation and disorientation.  This was achieved by analysing how *queer:reading:room*

activates disorienting moments and how bodies might extend through proximity to objects,

and also in the wider installation.

Thinking through wonky objects and wonky moments brought together spatial and cultural

metaphors of being 'at an angle to the world' and considered the uncertainty wrapped up in

ideas of wonkiness; that objects may be unreliable, but also still function.  An

epistemological uncertainty was also drawn out here in how one might face my art practice

and what this says about one's own positionality.  The CCTV and the glosticks activity also

worked to create epistemological uncertainty as to the veracity of changing representations

in a changing installation and spoke to Yve Lomax's ideas on how one might grasp what slips

in a world in continual movement.  Whilst the mirrorboard was discussed as a disorientation

through bodies failing to extend in the wobbly reflection, it was also analysed as a device to

make extension possible through an awareness of how their bodies and the world are in

constant movement.  This also alluded to an uncertain standpoint epistemology in which

grounding becomes difficult.  Finally, the soundtrack was discussed as a physically

disorientating work that refused re-orientation.


My description and analysis of *queer:reading:room* are inevitably partial.  They are tidied up

from my scraps, notes and marks to create a coherent narrative for the reader.  With this

veneer, the messiness of both the art practice and writing practice seem to have been

downplayed.  The artist statements on the purple desk begin to hint at some of the possible

multiple manifestations, but they do not fit neatly into my research paradigm and so are not

within the remit of the Ph.D. to discuss here.  At this stage, I will have to leave this excess;

this "queer remainder" (Giffney, 2009:8) for another time.

# Chapter 8.  Conclusions

In this conclusion I review the trajectory my work has taken through the course of this Ph.D. I draw out the themes of this research based on my aims and achievements and I look at directions for future work.  The aims of this research have been to investigate the values and limitations of representational queer art; to explore the possibility of creating queer art installations that do not contain overt representations of sexual bodies or sexual communities and to examine how experiencing disorientating art practice might engender queer encounters.

The achievements of this research have been fivefold and incorporate methodological and conceptual  insights that make significant contributions to debates in the fields of art practice, art practice based research, queer theory and phenomenology.  Firstly, it is the development of a body of queer art practice that does not rely on representations of sexual bodies and sexual communities.  This art practice has in turn informed the critical development - in a hotly contested terrain - of an expanded notion of queer beyond its use as a signifier of LGBT identities.  In addition, the development of a non-figurative queer art practice through disorientation significantly expands existing phenomenological debates on what it means to be orientated.  Fourthly, this research through art practice adds a critical intervention into the status of knowledge in the growing field of art practice based research. Finally, In making the audience 'feel a bit queer' through experiential, embodied queer encounters, this research  has critically explored the kind of knowledge claims connected to experience; that of standpoint epistemology or situated knowledge. This questioning of

embodied experience through art practice has enabled a conceptualisation of a queering of standpoint epistemology through attention to queer modes of knowing including moving contingencies, unknowability and bodily uncertainty, adding a significant methodological contribution to contemporary epistemological debates.  This is what my art practice and my analysis of it through this thesis has been able to show what would not have been possible otherwise.

## 8.1    The development of a body of queer art practice

In chapter two I highlighted the importance of figurative representations of sexual difference for imaging and creating communities of resistance, whilst also critiquing such representation for reinscribing an 'otherness' to the bodies being represented.  There is a need for a non-figurative queer art practice because deconstruction of representations alone cannot always effectively unpick the discursive power embedded in representational 'truth' and the 'real'.  Catherine Opie's, Del LaGrace Volcano's and Jack Pierson's work have not sufficiently unsettled the viewers' gaze or the viewers' position in relation to the art work.  Unsettling is important for a queer encounter; queer work should be troubling and disruptive; it should disorientate.  I began my investigation into disorientation using Duane Michals work *Things are queer*.  His photographic series showed how circuits of meaning - how we make sense of the world - depend on our orientations towards familiar objects. This work also shows the possibility, through art practice, of recreating relationships to the world differently.

My work extends Michals' by exploring in more detail different modes of disorientation and different ways of conceptualising queer art practice and it does so through sculptural works

rather than photography.  In doing so, it adds to a diverse queer art practice, that operates

in a gap in which I focus on making the audience feel a 'bit queer' which speaks to a

queering of the world through embodied experience.   Different modes of orientation and

disorientation were made manifest through my art practice and taken together constitute a

body of non-figurative queer art practice.


**8.2     Expanded notions of queer and of orientation**

My art practice shows that disorientation is queer because it is at odds with the "normal"

(Halperin, 1997:62; Warner, 1993:xxvi) and it can unseat the body from its habitual

orientations thereby enabling queer modes of knowing to surface specifically through

experiential, embodied uncertainty.


David Halperin's more recent work on queer theory is imbued with a more cautionary

message.  He is concerned how "Queer theory proper is often abstracted from the quotidian

realities of lesbian and gay male life" (Halperin, 2003:342).  Halperin is uncomfortable with

the success of queer theory within some higher education institutions, stating that:

> Students nowadays who enrol in graduate school intending to work in queer theory,
>
> whatever their political background or ambitions, seek less to revolutionize the
>
> university than to benefit from what the university currently has to offer them
>
> (2003:343).

The partial success of queer theory has, in a way, enabled my Ph.D. research to take place.

Furthermore, I have immensely benefitted from my location in a specific university and,

moreover, a specific department: the School of Art, in which there is an active and on-going

engagement with queer theory and practice through art practice based research.  This can be shown through the presence of the only art practice engaged Masters course: *Queer Studies in Arts and Culture*, as well as through Birmingham City University's Article Press publications of works including *Queer Textualities* (Rogers, 2013), *The Art of Queering in Art* (Rogers, 2007), *Art Becomes you* (Rogers and Williamson, 2006) and *Making a Scene* (Rogers and Burrows, 2000).

In Halperin's view, however,  queer has lost its radical edge within some higher education institutions.  His investment in a particular way of 'doing' queer spills over into charges of the 'wrong' way of doing it.  Noreen Giffney's work can be seen as a response to this complaint when she writes that:

> Those who employ queer theory for anything other than the location of non-heteronormative – yet non-gay or lesbian – identities risk charges of mis-appropriation, mis-use, and mis-understanding (2004:73).

Whilst I have not used specific LGBT bodies in my work I have articulated a position in which uncertainty can sometimes usefully be considered as a queer form of knowledge and a queer way of knowing.  This is not the "abstracted" position of theory for theory's sake that Halperin is sometimes uncomfortable with, but rather a way in which it is possible to unravel bodily habits and orientations for their normative relations to the world; that is to say the what is 'taken for granted' in straight ways of living.  In this way, my research through practice has been an enactment of the "futural Imaginings" (Butler cited in Giffney, 2004:74) of queer theory.  That is, the

interrogations of all normative and non-normative acts, identities, desires, perceptions, and possibilities, for those relating not even (directly) to gender and sexuality (Giffney, 2004:74).

My research therefore, is an addition to this important emerging terrain.

## 8.3     Modes of disorientation

Throughout this research I have analysed my own art practice and the kind of queer orientations and disorientations that could be activated in an encounter with them.  These terms are considered initially through Sara Ahmed's insightful book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).  Her work, although it does not consider art, was the reason I began to make art practice that specifically focussed on disorientation.  I am aware, however, that we are operating on different terrains with different priorities.  Ahmed's project, one of deconstruction, asks "What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as oriented?" (2006b).  Whilst my art practice seeks to consider how an encounter with art might reveal and disturb orientations that do not reside in a turn towards sexual identity.  Whilst Ahmed's discernments are impressive in many respects, the added dimension of art practice research has enabled me to extend and trouble some of her terms in thinking through disorientating encounters with art practice.

Crucially, and very differently to Ahmed, it is through a close analysis of my own art practice that I collate different modes of disorientation and uncertain reorientation in making my own claims to knowledge.  Most visual representations that are interpreted as queer involve sexual identity and sexual expression.  Through attention to art practice I have found other strategies to displace this uniform situation.  Subsequently, this thesis has shown that queer

encounters with non-figurative art can occur through audience experiences of disorientation and uncertain re-orientation.  In doing so, my research develops an expanded notion of queer beyond lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities; not to exclude such identities but rather to add to existing queer art practices a further troubling of representation and bodily uncertainty that is focussed on experiencing art.

As chapter four demonstrates, disorientation occurred in *Club Cave 27* through fear and horror.  This queer mode usefully emphasises the unsettled and unsettling strangeness of objects and artworks through their slippery, volatile significations.  The installation itself, along with the use of a polyvocal method of describing this work, began an important methodological interrogation into standpoint epistemology.

In the process of understanding experiential encounters this research has critically investigated Sara Ahmed's ideas of 'orientation', 'disorientation'.  In chapter five Ahmed's terms 'facing' and 'extension', central to her conceptualisation of orientation, were critiqued through close analysis of the installation *Glitter*.  *Glitter* did not extend through linear progression, but rather through sly and often unnoticed movements around and beyond the specific focus of the gallery space.  Ahmed's work on orientation relies on particular ideas of proximity and lines of extension.   *Glitter* was both vast and tiny and collapsed distance and could not therefore be 'faced' in Ahmed's sense of being near to it. In thinking through the circulation of an artwork Ahmed's ideas were made more complex.

When confluences of material cultural references and disorientation have subtly occurred – such as in the materiality of glitter –it was possible to cite cultural references to non-

normative sexuality whilst also creating a disorientating experience for the audience.  The

queer materiality of glitter spins out towards many references including the celebratory

excess of fabulation and queer club spaces. It does other things too.  Indeed glitter is an

ideal material to span the ontological and epistemological problematics that I set out in

relation to phenomenology and queer theory.  It is a material I will continue to work with.

Glitter work and the life-world implied does not stay put.  This is the queer effect of glitter

on orientation; it is a glittering of orientation.  It is not possible to only 'face' this glittery

work in Ahmed's sense of the term, because glitters sly circulation provides an undercurrent

of movement and unmappability.


## 8.4     Troubling knowledges

The two parts of the title; *Glittering* and *Orientations*, call fourth different sets of

knowledges and slightly jar when put together.  I have called this thesis Glittering

Orientations because glitter, in an encounter with it, involves a facing of multiple locations

and modes of knowing at any one time.  The uncountable sparkles; points of momentary

focus and orientation, in my *Glitter* works are activated through a relationship between the

object, light and the moving body of the viewer.  Pupil dilation occurs only when these three

align, but the point is that they align fleetingly and many times; so many that one cannot

count or get one's "bearings" and if one does try to, it is through the slight adjustment of

the body – a turn of the head to re-count that re-activates a bedazzling multitude.  In

experiencing *Glitter* it is also possible to experience multiple and shifting orientations in the

blink of an eye.  In the act of embodied looking one finds multiple involvements that cannot

be triangulated; that do not help us 'get our bearings'.  This is a significant epistemological

position - a queering of standpoint epistemology - that specifically emerged through the production and analysis of art practice.

*Scott Walker* and *Mirrorball Desk*, attended to, amongst other things, a different mode of disorientation; that of a physical disorientation through the activating of pupil dilation, increased heart rate, a rise in adrenaline levels and a feeling of 'wooziness'. This operated not so much as a queering of perception but rather as an ability to unseat the body though an encounter with art practice.

*Scott Walker* made manifest the normative orientation to the white cube in art schools and some of the disorientation tactics that take place in queer club space.  In this way, this work puts a troubling embodied audience experience at the heart of queer art practice that does not allow for a disinterested view of the 'other'.  What it could not do however, that queer club space could, was to create physical disorientation and re-orientation through proximity to queer bodies.

Bodies and desks became an important consideration in chapter six.  The presence of the philosopher's desk as one that goes often unnoticed in academic research was challenged here.  Other modes of disorientation became manifest; ones that attended to the role of the body in making (and failing to make) sense of the world.  *This Desk Does Not Fly* unseated habitual actions by requiring a gearing up of one's body to a slightly different physicality to activate it. Whilst *Mirrorball Desk*, as well as activating wooziness, also attended to 'queer desk-work' in which desire, play and clubbing took centre stage in a 'serious' activity (academic writing) that often assumes the absence of such frivolity.  In doing so a

reimagining of what proximate objects and subsequent knowledges could emerge took

place in relation to this desk.   Brown Desk sought initially to be a desk of refusal that

offered a queer encounter only if the audience lingered or moved at an oblique angle.  This

desk was not activated by everyone.  Using the term 'lingering' enabled this desk to become

a reimagining of what it means to 'face' an art object that is close but that does not

necessarily require a turning, or direction.  With all these desks, the body of the participant

was called into question through the troubling of normative orientations towards objects

that are both familiar and strange.  This questioning of embodiment through art practice has

enabled a conceptualisation of a queering of standpoint epistemology through attention to

contingencies, unknowability and bodily uncertainty.


Particular aspects of *queer:reading:room* disorientated the audience.  The wonky desks

became objects with which to think through oblique bodily extensions that are more

resonant of Ahmed's work.   However, in developing the idea of 'wonky objects' through

tilting desks I have been able to show how these objects point towards both an oblique line

and an unreliability in structure thereby troubling what it means to be 'off-line'.


An analysis of the CCTV in *queer:reading:room* revealed a disorientation through the

changing and unreliable landscape of representation that does not settle or cannot be easily

triangulated.  The mirrorboard in the installation showed how extensions can both fail and

take you somewhere at the same time and again stretched Ahmed's work on orientation.  I

concluded with Matt Lambert's sound piece as this work refuses to offer a re-orientation

that seems particular to disorientating audio.  Experiences of all these constituents have

developed a conceptualisation of the unsettled status of art objects and enabled a queer form of knowing that has been crucial to the development of an original methodology.

Taken together, this body of disorientating non-figurative art practice shows how queer does not need representations of sexual difference to manifest Giffney's (2009) and Katz's (1999) queer modes of knowing.  The lack of references to sexual identity means that the work is difficult to read as queer because of how queer work more recognisably circulates through cultural representation.  It is, however, how queer can be put to work rather than what it names that is ultimately its value.  As such, queer disorientation can be seen as a strategy to create moments of epistemological ambiguity, moments of 'unknowing' and uncertainty into how to approach some objects, some bodies and some ideas.  This unsystematic complexity or queer ways of knowing, what Sedgwick calls a self-evident "nonce taxonomy" (2008:23) are disavowed through visual representations of sexual difference and this is why a non-figurative queer art practice is needed; to create experiences in which difference is not read simply as 'other' but is felt in one's body as disorienting, confusing and troubling.

Every artwork in this research points to something stranger and less graspable than Ahmed's initial depiction of the terms 'facing', 'inhabitance', 'extension' and 'proximity'. *Club Cave 27* encourages recognition of the unfamiliarity and multiplicity of signification present in the most mundane of objects (such as builder's sand).  *Glitter* speaks to an orientation of proximity and distance.  *Scott Walker* is an affective experience that cannot be understood through discursive analysis alone.  My desk-works encourage a troubling of embodied knowing.  The mirrorboard *in queer:reading:room* enacts an experience in which

bodies both extend and fail to extend.  The numerous artist statements on one of my wonky

desks encourage multiple mis-readings of the work.  The CCTV points to uncertainty and

provisional positionality.  These concerns, manifest through the art practice and formulated

through the writing of this thesis, trouble embodied knowledge and in doing so trouble the

knowability of an art practice, of the world, and of one's embodied position in relation to

both.  They show the impossibility of fully accounting for oneself through identity politics

positioning because movement, multiplicity and volatile signification are left out.  This

thesis, by adding these further dimensions to queer theory and queer practice, points to

exciting future research.  'Freeing up' queer's "definitional center" (Sedgwick 1994:8) offers

the potential to do a lot more work around experiential uncertainty.


My project works against declarative statements such as 'nine out of ten people

experienced a queer encounter.'  If queer experiences were so straightforwardly and

certainly named, then queer modes of knowing would lose their power to disorientate.

Instead, an epistemological ambiguity is weaved throughout this thesis that continues to

point to the failure of traditional social science research methods to fully capture an

experience.  Arguably, art practice research methods can be well placed to express an

'ungraspability' that operates in the realm of the sensory and tacit rather than in

propositional language. This is an emergent field of interdisciplinary enquiry bringing

together art, social science and digital approaches that I plan to develop in further research

by looking at live methods (Back and Puwar, 2012) that may begin to attend to the senses as

a means of contingent and complex knowledge production.

I have focussed primarily on art practice in this Ph.D. research.  In future research, I also plan to investigate further the potential of writing to activate moments of disorientation, particularly through the stylistics of Nouveau Roman (post Second World War experimental fiction writing emerging from France) writer Alain Robbe-Grillet.  Robbe Grillet's (2010 (1959) & 2008 (1957)) work is interesting because intricately detailed descriptions of objects and scenes still lead to failed orientations and uncertain knowledges.

By enacting disorientating experiences that unseat the body I have shown in this Ph.D. Research how art practice can trouble situated knowledge; the kind of knowledge claims connected to experience.  The enactment of disorientating bodily experiences through art practice develops this significant epistemological position by queering standpoint epistemology in a way that encourages queer ways of knowing through bodily uncertainties.  Whilst Haraway rightly asserts that knowledge does not come from 'nowhere', this thesis argues that situated knowledge is not so easily accounted for through reference to identity location.  Disorientation led the way for queer ways of knowing which had often otherwise been disavowed through representations of sexual difference.  This is a broadening out of the field that queer is concerned with from a focus on the sexual body and sexual communities to a "horizon of possibility" (Halperin, 1997:79) based not only on deconstruction but also on an experiential encounter with how the world and our knowledges of 'it' are contingent.  The unsettled status of the art object; it is this and this and sometimes even this at the same time is experienced by the audience not as a disinterested spectator, but through their own uncertain and provisional embodiments; they feel a bit queer, even if they don't name it as such.

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