

**Dragging Away** Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art Lex Morgan Lancaster



## **Dragging Away**

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**Queer Abstraction in**

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**Contemporary Art** Lex Morgan Lancaster

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For Garrett Morgan Lancaster,  
whose memory drags on

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CONTENTS

ix List of Illustrations

xi Acknowledgments

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PRESS**

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 1   | <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                       |
| 34  | <b>1 EDGING GEOMETRY</b>                  |
| 60  | <b>2 FEELING THE GRID</b>                 |
| 86  | <b>3 FLAMING COLOR</b>                    |
| 110 | <b>4 TRANSFORMING<br/>EVERYDAY MATTER</b> |
| 133 | <b>EPILOGUE</b><br>DRAGGING THE FLAG      |

|     |              |
|-----|--------------|
| 147 | Notes        |
| 165 | Bibliography |
| 177 | Index        |

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figures

- I.1 Nancy Brooks Brody, *West/South, 90° Line*, 2018 2
- I.2 Joy Episalla, *foldtogram (35'2.5' × 44"-August 2018)*, 2018 4
- I.3 Zoe Leonard, *August 4, frame 9*, 2011/2012 5
- I.4 Carrie Yamaoka, *72 by 45 (black)*, 2018 5
- I.5 fierce pussy, from the Family Pictures and Found Photos project, 1991 6
- 1.1 Ulrike Müller, *Miniatures*, 2011 48
- 1.2 Silence = Death Project, *Silence = Death*, 1986 57
- 2.1 Agnes Martin, *White Flower*, 1960 76
- 2.2 Jasper Johns, *Gray Numbers*, 1958 82
- 3.1 Bridget Riley, *Cataract 3*, 1967 103
- 4.1 Harmony Hammond, *Hunkertime*, 1979–80 120

DUKE

UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

- 4.2 Harmony Hammond, *Inappropriate Longings*, 1992 123
- 4.3 Shinique Smith, *Bale Variant No. 0024 (Everything)*, 2017 125
- 4.4 Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *Sort of Nice to Not See You but to Feel You Again*, 2019 129
- 4.5 Tiona Nekkia McClodden: *Hold on, let me take the safety off*, 2019 131

## Plates

- 1 Ulrike Müller, *Some*, 2017
- 2 László Moholy-Nagy, *Construction in Enamel 1, 2, and 3* (also known as *EM 1-3*), 1923
- 3 Ulrike Müller, *Curls*, 2017
- 4 Nancy Brooks Brody, *Wild Combination*, 2006
- 5 Ellsworth Kelly, *Red Panel, Dark Green Panel, and Dark Blue Panel*, 1986
- 6 Ulrike Müller, *Rug (con triángulos)*, 2015
- 7 Every Ocean Hughes, *Beyond the Will to Measure*, 2014
- 8 Lorna Simpson, *The Park*, 1995
- 9 Lorna Simpson, *The Rock*, 1995
- 10 Agnes Martin, *Friendship*, 1963
- 11 Lorna Simpson, *Curtain*, 2011
- 12 Xylor Jane, *Magic Square for SPSP 5385*, 2015
- 13 Linda Besemer, *Large Zip Fold #1*, 2001
- 14 Lynda Benglis, *Contraband*, 1969
- 15 Linda Besemer, *Red-Purple Slab*, 2009
- 16 Lynda Benglis, *Untitled (vw)*, 1970
- 17 Linda Besemer, *Fold #8, Baroqueasy*, 1999
- 18 Carrie Yamaoka, *72 by 45 (deep blue #3)*, 2011/2017
- 19 Sheila Pepe, *Mind the Gap*, 2005
- 20 Angela Hennessy, *Black Rainbow*, 2017

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x LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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D

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## INTRODUCTION

A dark line cuts through the white gallery walls. From afar, this thick line appears to float against and between adjacent walls, but it is heavy metal lead embedded directly into the Sheetrock. Materializing the measurements from its surrounding architecture, *West/South, 90° Line* (figure I.1) reorients and disorients our experience of the space as it shifts our perspective with this subtle intervention. This work is incorporated into the architecture and exceeds it at the same time. Moving around to view the line at different angles changes its length and thickness. We become aware of how the work itself is visually altered by our perspective, and how its relation to the space and other objects also shifts. Recalling 1970s minimalist-conceptualist works by Fred Sandback, who hung yarn from ceiling to floor to alter a gallery space; Sol LeWitt's restrained wall drawings; or Ellsworth Kelly's shaped canvases, this 2018 work by Nancy Brooks

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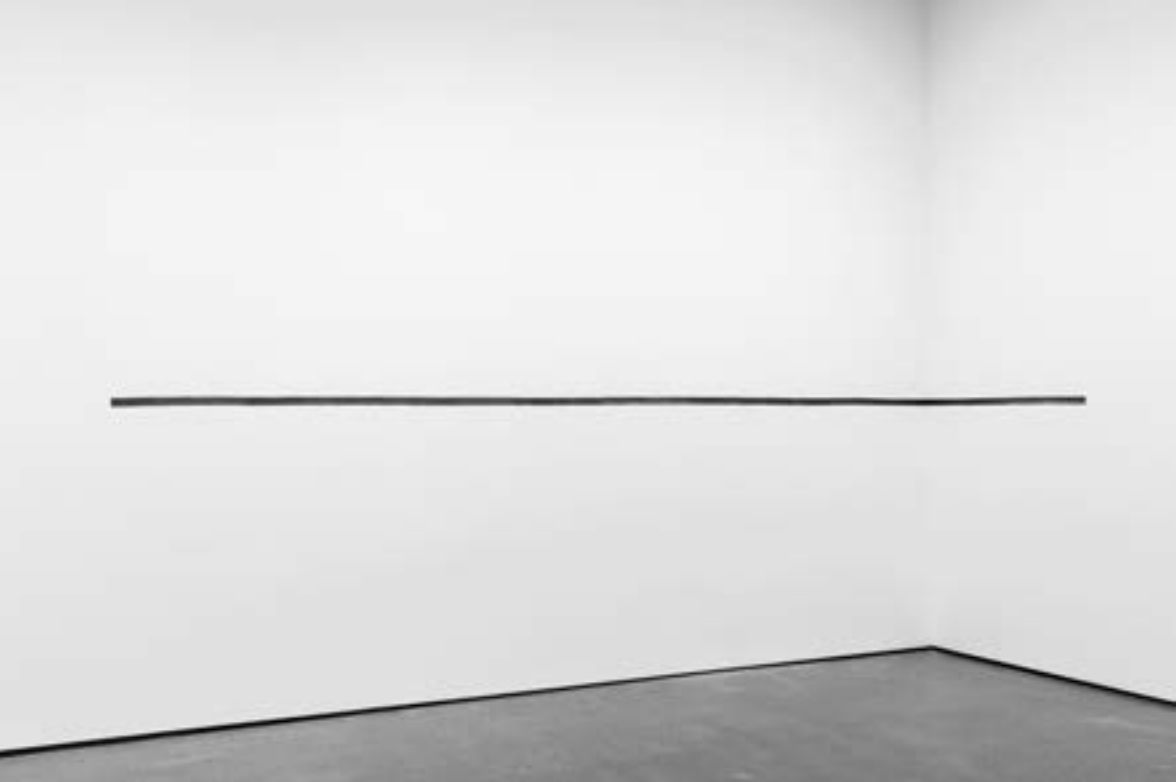


FIGURE I.1 Nancy Brooks Brody, *West/South, 90° Line*, 2018. Metal embedded into Sheetrock wall, 240 × 1¼ in. Chapter One of *arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks Brody / Joy Episalla / Zoe Leonard / Carrie Yamaoka: fierce pussy amplified*, Beeler Gallery, Columbus College of Art & Design, 2019. Photo: Luke Stettner.

Brody drags on its own history of abstraction as it drags along the walls, by rendering the most minor of abstract gestures thickly material and playfully imprecise. Up close, the metal substance wavers with and against the sheetrock in which it does not exactly fit, and in relation, we are not sure where we stand.

*West/South, 90° Line* appeared in the first chapter of *arms ache avid aeon: fierce pussy amplified*, curated by Jo-ey Tang at Columbus College of Art & Design's Beeler Gallery (2018–19).<sup>1</sup> This series of chapters was dedicated to the work of four core members of the queer feminist art collective fierce pussy—Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka—who continue to work together. Turning the corner from Brody's work, we encounter Episalla's *foldtoqram* (2018) (figure I.2): a mural-scaled sheet of photographic paper manipulated to create cracks

and wrinkles from handling, ripples and bubbles from light and heat exposure—abstractions created in a reproductive medium that the artist renders material and dimensional.<sup>2</sup> In another gallery, Leonard's series of *Sun Photographs* (ongoing since 2010) (figure I.3) turns the camera on the very source of light that is photography's medium, and its impossible-to-capture subject. The sun imprints itself as flaming white orbs against a grainy ground, demonstrating how photography can paradoxically destabilize visual perception rather than settle it. In another space, the viewer's body is mirrored and warped by reflective vinyl or polyester film cast in urethane resin by Carrie Yamaoka (figure I.4). These casts are produced in a chance-based process that yields undulating abstract objects that continue to change in an ongoing chemical development. Appearing still wet and fluid, shifting in our vision, these objects always implicate the viewer; by incorporating our image materially, they also imply the ethical responsibility of looking.

All of these artists engage in practices of abstraction, foregrounding the question of why queer feminist artist-activists would use such non-representational, abstract processes—a driving issue of this book.<sup>3</sup> These works demonstrate how formal and material processes of abstraction can *queer* (in the sense of an active verb) older modernist aesthetics by camping or torquing them; undermining the normative uses of media and materials to produce alternative processes and outcomes; using overtly representational media (photography) in ways that undermine easy legibility; refusing material mastery in favor of more messy, affective, unpredictable means of rendering an image or object. I argue that these methods of queer abstraction perform a *drag*—both in the sense of “temporal drag” (Elizabeth Freeman's term) that makes past aesthetics viable for the present, and in their pull away from direct representation in favor of active materializing processes that also exert a destabilizing pull on *us* as viewers.<sup>4</sup>

These artists' formal and material tactics in the studio and gallery are not divorced from their political strategies in the street. fierce pussy's collective, agitprop practices are often representational and direct in their use of language. Wheatpasted on public walls in New York City in the early 1990s, for example, their posters list and reclaim the terms commonly hurled as insults: “I AM A lezzie butch pervert girlfriend bulldagger sister dyke AND PROUD!” Photocopies of family photographs are juxtaposed with the





**FIGURE 1.2** Joy Episalla, *foldtogram* (35'2.5' × 44"–August 2018), 2018. Silver gelatin object/photogram on Ilford Matte RC, dimensions of installation variable. Site-specific installation view from Chapter One of *arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks Brody / Joy Episalla / Zoe Leonard / Carrie Yamaoka: fierce pussy amplified*, Beeler Gallery, Columbus College of Art & Design, 2019. Photo: Stephen Takacs.

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**FIGURE 1.3** Zoe Leonard, *August 4, frame 9*, 2011/2012. Gelatin silver print, 23¾ × 17¼ in. © Zoe Leonard. Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne.



**FIGURE 1.4** Carrie Yamaoka, *72 by 45 (black)*, 2018. Reflective vinyl, epoxy resin, and mixed media on wood panel, 72 × 45 in. Chapter One of *arms ache avid aeon: Nancy Brooks Brody / Joy Episalla / Zoe Leonard / Carrie Yamaoka: fierce pussy amplified*, Beeler Gallery, Columbus College of Art & Design, 2019. Photo: Luke Stettner.

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FIGURE 1.5 fierce pussy, from the Family Pictures and Found Photos project, 1991.

phrases “Lover of women,” or “find the dyke in this picture,” as captions for seemingly benign images of children and friends posing for the camera (figure 1.5). Reclaiming the language used for antiqueer violence—emotional assault that is never separate from material damage—fierce pussy confronts unsuspecting viewers with this language of oppression, which is disarming but also reactivated.<sup>5</sup> These pejoratives may abstract people into concepts (dykes and perverts), but fierce pussy reroutes the violence of that abstraction toward a language of pleasure and even pride. The words still have potential to harm, but when the terms are made tenuous through their exposure and repetition, their implications multiply so that pain and pleasure share the same space. Processes of abstraction can alter the terms and images we take for granted by exposing their contingency—the relationship between the work and everything outside of the work that we use to determine its meaning becomes obviously precarious. This strategy of taking on and torquing the forms that have harmed, forms that are seemingly “not for us” as queers, aligns with the difficult operations of abstraction that I will elucidate in this book.

When fierce pussy began working as an art collective in 1991, the AIDS crisis and racist, heterosexist legislation and censorship galvanized queer artists who produced radical work for the streets as much as for galleries. Along with fierce pussy, Dyke Action Machine, Lesbian Avengers, and ACT UP all used agitprop tactics and direct graphic posters to claim public space for queer identities. The culture wars era fueled the infamous 1993 Whitney Biennial that focused on identity politics and the ethics of representation, now understood to mark a significant shift in the art world.<sup>6</sup> Asserting visibility was a crucial political praxis: representations of queer people were used to insist that we exist, we will not be erased, we will fight for our lives. This insistence on representation and visibility is expected from queer political art. But the phenomenon of queer abstraction vexes our understanding of queer art, and, more importantly, what we think queering does socially and politically. It is the purpose of this book to show how queer abstractions make formal and material *processes* (and not just styles or appearances) evident as critical social and political tactics.

There are more examples of queer feminist artist-activists who produce abstract art, as well as artists who began producing overtly representational art and shifted to more abstract styles. For example, Carrie Moyer cofounded the lesbian public art project Dyke Action Machine! (1991–2008) and also produces abstract paintings in colorful acrylic and glitter. Every Ocean Hughes and Ulrike Müller, of the feminist genderqueer collaborative *LTTR* (a shifting acronym that began in 2001 as “Lesbians to the Rescue”), both began working in performance, video, and collective modes of art making, and later developed more abstract formal languages of geometry that speak to queer cultures (I discuss their work in chapter 1). It is usually not the case that these artists abandon all representation when they take up abstraction, but that abstraction is already part of their practice, and we are only recently beginning to notice how that abstraction might also do queer work. For example, Sadie Benning’s famous early queer videos utilize abstraction, but were not considered in relation to abstraction until they were investigated in comparison with the later abstract paintings.<sup>7</sup>

Still, abstraction presents a problem for our conception of queer art, which is expected to speak directly to nonnormative sexuality and gender politics, often by picturing queer people or eroticized bodies. It is difficult to see immediately how abstraction can address sexuality, gender, and

race, particularly because its content does not picture difference through figural representation or descriptive terms of identity. The assumed relationship between the form and content of the work slips, their binary positions breaking down.<sup>8</sup> These objects are difficult because they not only press our conception of what queer art is; they also demand methods of analysis that can account for how abstraction works queerly and politically. Another aim of this book is to develop such methods for addressing some of the central questions raised by these recent art practices: How is abstraction useful for queer, feminist, antiracist, genderqueer, and crip politics? How can abstraction address difference, injustice, or marginality when its formal and material processes actively refuse bodily legibility? Further, how can formalism—a traditional, seemingly conservative art historical methodology—intersect with queer methods?

Queer abstraction describes a recent movement in art practice as well as scholarly and curatorial endeavors that trace the increasing viability of abstract formal tactics for queer art. These practices of queer abstraction focus on formal and material invention, rather than transparent visibility. Abstraction has become a tool of queer resistance by undermining the demand that artists who are marked by difference must “show up” in ways that are expected and by creating a site to generate alternative spaces and worlds. David Getsy writes that queer abstraction addresses the persistent political desire to work from queer experience and revolt, but that “its priorities often emerge from a suspicion of representation, from a striving to vex visual recognition, and/or from a desire to find a more open and variable mode of imaging and imagining relations.”<sup>9</sup> Abstraction can be dangerous, but it can also be a useful way for minority-marked artists to undermine the viewer’s or critic’s demand that their work bear the burden of representation. Julia Bryan-Wilson describes queer abstraction as “a resource for all those in the margins who want to resist the demands to transparently represent themselves in their work.”<sup>10</sup> Queer abstraction has thus emerged as a crucial site of experimentation and resistance in contemporary art, but it does not have a singular definition or agreed-upon style. Rather, this contested terrain is marked by active tensions between methods and materials that reference the body and those that exceed it; images that represent specific cultural positions and those that undermine or explode beyond singular or binary situations; the explicitly political and the impossibly abstract.<sup>11</sup> These ten-

sions are activated at once by queer art practices and readings of those practices, including mine.

In this book, I argue that abstraction—along with all of its historical and political baggage—offers visual and material tools for queer resistance via processes of dragging. I develop this book’s driving concept, “dragging away,” from the queering potential in the origins of the term *abstract* (particularly its verb form), derived from the Latin *ab*, away, and *trahere*, meaning to draw, pull, or drag. This drag performs in various senses of the term as a pulling force or friction that impedes or obstructs and leaves a mark; a temporal slowing down; a performative troubling of surface categories; a difficult labor; and a resistance. Queer abstraction drags in multiple aesthetic, material, historical, and political ways; this site of scholarly inquiry also drags in that it resists definition and raises contradictions. Below, I will outline three problematic paradoxes or irresolvable tensions at the heart of this book. These are tensions and difficulties that will remain active throughout the book, as their friction accompanies the risks of writing about queer abstraction. And yet, as I demonstrate, the difficulty of drag in multiple senses—its tediousness, its resistant material pressures, its imaginative projections—does not produce an impasse but creates multiple opportunities to expand our conceptions of queer art.

**Between Abstraction and the Body:  
Nonrepresentational Politics**

While abstraction is one way for artists to avoid the surveillance that accompanies the demands of visibility, there is also a tendency to interpret abstraction as a kind of closet when it is deployed by queer artists, particularly when earlier historical conditions seemed to demand it.<sup>12</sup> Abstract form is often read as an implicit bodily reference, reducing abstraction to a signifying content—a phallus here, a breast there; “feminine” curves or wounded flesh—in order to locate its queerness or its social efficacy.<sup>13</sup> Viewers are not likely to identify with abstraction in the way they would with figural representations, and yet, how we engage with this artwork has real ethical implications for how we engage with others in the world. Perhaps some viewers have trouble identifying with abstraction *without* thinking about rich painterly surface in terms of flesh, or thick sculptural

heft as anthropomorphic. But abstraction presents more generative opportunities to explore queering beyond the figure or the encoded image of a body. Taking abstraction seriously as a dragging away from representation, I investigate how queering operates beyond bodily legibility. In doing so, I also make a case that what we call queer is not always a representational look, nor should it be reduced to bodily signs.

So then, who or what does the term *queer* speak for? What might abstraction reveal to us that is useful in thinking about the politics of gender, sexuality, race, and disability, if not through the body? Moving away from a focus on the body may seem to ignore the lived realities of these categories. My analysis offers abstraction as a queer refusal of certain representational logic, but this is not to suggest that queer art and scholarship should do away with references to the body or the figure in all cases. It makes sense that so much political art is focused on the body because our experiences of the world are embodied, and our lives are conditioned by how our bodies are conceived as gendered, sexed, raced, and abled or disabled. And this is precisely to the point, as abstraction can challenge the ways in which representation aims to fix difference on the body's surface. I offer alternatives to this visibility politics by exploring how, for example, queer relations and eroticism can be active in artwork that exceeds or refuses a settled corporeal figure, and what this difficulty can do aesthetically and politically. My argument is that abstraction can take us further toward imagining queer, feminist, antiracist, genderqueer, and crip formational strategies and ways of relating if we do not reduce its operations to a clearly signifying *iconography*.

Queer abstraction might describe what it feels like when others attempt to define us in relation to categories that do not fit, or it may describe an unresolvable position and constant state of misrecognition according to available codes and the limits of language. This state of incoherence prompts my interpretation of abstraction as a complication of the signifying processes that also do violence. Queer abstraction creates a space for exploring the operations of certain unmanageable aesthetics and ways of becoming; for modes of desiring and relating across difference without securing or encoding a subject; for exposing the violence that abstracting can do while at the same time exploding processes of categorization and signification. I maintain that we should take seriously the ways in which identity is lived in and through the body while also taking seriously the

political potential of abstraction to refuse the oppressive meanings forced onto certain bodies.

I consider how abstraction performs catachrestically to undermine notions of the real that would fix difference on the bodies of others, and in this I am indebted to Peggy Phelan's understanding of subjectivity as unrepresentable. In *Unmarked*, Phelan breaks down the assumed correspondence between representational visibility and political power, as representations of difference often reinforce injustice. And yet, the politics of performance, for Phelan, shows how identity is not stably fixed in a name or a body; instead, our identities are always already constructed in relation to the Other.<sup>14</sup> My thinking on the political usefulness of abstraction as a refusal of transparent categories of difference is similarly indebted to Édouard Glissant's demand for "the right to opacity." Theorized specifically as a postcolonial response to Western notions that understanding the Other hinges on an essentializing transparency, Glissant's *opacity* makes space for the unknowability and multiplicity of difference in excess of categories.<sup>15</sup> Queer abstraction deploys opaque aesthetics to strategically refuse representational visibility, sometimes rendering the mediated space of the canvas or screen as one where something appears but is *not* stabilized or fixed. Indeed, queer abstraction reckons with the unrepresentable.

I argue that abstraction is ethically, socially, and politically useful because it can distance the operations of form and matter from bodily coherence, and stage new spectatorial possibilities instead. The viewing experiences I describe are in fact material and embodied. In my analysis, queer abstraction helps us consider differences such as gender and sexuality in terms of their possible experiences, affects, or relational operations without signifying a body or securing a subject. And yet, I discuss artworks that may seem inconveniently to shore up the body. Accordingly, I reckon with the body's potential appearances and slippages in my analysis, not disregarding the fact that bodies might seem to appear sometimes for some viewers. I deal with the implications for nonnormative embodiments where they arise (chapters 3 and 4 especially), but I do so in the interest of theorizing abstraction in more expansive ways. We seem to take for granted that certain forms and materials correspond to bodies, but I consider how abstraction complicates this easy correspondence. I similarly do not shy away from symbols—discussing the triangle, and the



rainbow flag, for example—in order to tackle abstraction’s paradoxical limitations and press at the limits of its political potentials. Abstraction still inevitably maintains some associative ties, some referring capacity, in either the process of creation or the act of viewing and interpreting.

### **Between Abstraction and Description:**

#### **Abstract Catachresis**

When writing about abstraction, I am constantly pressed up against the limits of language and attuned to how words fail me. While abstraction drags away from representation, it also resists description and thus troubles my hermeneutic gestures. A dragging force that obstructs or makes difficult, abstraction slows us down and troubles the possibility of any interpretation sticking resolutely to its forms. The works I discuss in this book are never pure in that they resist essentialism, and they generate multiple interpretive possibilities that may be at odds. Different viewers will certainly bring different desires and demands to the work. While this may always be the case, abstraction challenges our viewing and reading practices in ways that direct representation does not, creating a particularly compelling subject for queer analysis. In this way, abstraction queers by challenging the notion of any straightforward, secure reading. It demands a different kind of spectatorship and scholarship, embracing the interpretive risks and the impossibility of securing one’s argument (if that argument is to assign meaning).

How can I describe abstraction as queer? Queer possibilities proliferate and multiply through abstraction, which challenges our efforts to designate or assign identifiable queerness to the work. This also challenges our expectation that identities are settled and will always materialize clearly on the surface of something (a work of art) or someone. The queer potential of this work will not always be legible to all viewers. But if we say that this work is not queer because it is not always clearly legible as such, we reify the notion that the “truth” of a subject will always be revealed on its surface—a logic rooted in heterosexism, racism, ableism, and transphobia. Further, we should not limit the contexts or kinds of artists that will allow us to join the terms *queer* and *abstract*. Rather, I propose some possibilities for how this work operates queerly, to prompt further questions but never to settle them. At the same time, I am

not at all suggesting that the spectator is always responsible for “reading queerness into” the work: I will demonstrate in each chapter the queering operations that are already there, showing how the work itself prompts particular kinds of visual and material engagement. My interpretations are generated at the intersections of the visual and material operations of the artworks that we can all see, and the particular analytic lenses I have chosen that others may not automatically bring to the work. The openness of abstraction to multiple readings and points of view is what makes it viable for queering in the first place.

“Queer abstraction” might seem a contradiction in terms, if abstraction is viewed as a generalizing mechanism that would erase difference in its move away from representation, and if singular specificity is viewed as a necessary investment for queer politics. I study contemporary deployments of abstraction that are not limiting or universalizing, but excessive in ways that generate runoffs and alternatives to singular or dualistic categories. These artworks demand that we take abstraction seriously as a tactic that deviates and estranges us from the realm of the recognizable, undermining a politics of visibility that settles otherness in an image and fixes identity according to binary categories of difference. Queer abstractions perform this refusal and generate alternatives through formal and material invention: form performs historically and politically in this work. Thus, the book is organized into chapters according to formal and material strategies of abstraction: hard-edge, the grid, color, and spatial tactics. The artworks I discuss range from the abstracting work of photography that alienates viewers from a secure space of representation to the impossibly abstract forms of painting and sculpture (in both the expanded sense and often combined use of their mediums) that make no immediate reference.

Some would consider the terms *abstraction* and *nonrepresentation* to be distinct in relation to art, where *abstract* implies a connection to something from the “real world,” *abstracted from* a figure or object, versus nonrepresentational forms that make no reference at all. My purpose is not to argue for what counts as definitively abstract, and I understand abstraction in terms of its effects and activation of formal elements. Rather than a look, I consider abstraction to be an active, often unruly, *process*; queer and queering similarly operate as fugitive processes rather than a fixed category or image. I argue that the works discussed in this book

operate queerly through processes of abstraction, which may include recognizable imagery and objects. To develop new conceptions of how abstraction can operate queerly, we have to dust off, reconsider, and reclaim that old term *abstract* to make way for the active styling of a queer visual and material resistance. This is not an abstraction that blocks out connections to the real world of culture and politics, but instead one that uses form and matter to trouble normative categories and shift perspectives, perverting abstraction's overloaded history in its wake. It is precisely abstraction's baggage (as a modernist tactic, as a potential tool for homogenization) that makes it such a compelling queer tactic.

I consider certain abstractions queer in their unsettlement of binary categorizations of difference (male/female, hetero/homo), while they also address particular counterpublics and nonnormative affinities. I argue that this abstract artwork *queers* by bending the resistant materiality of abstracted form for political ends, undermining and exceeding the representational, surveilling imperative to appear in ways that are expected. I understand queer abstraction as a *catachresis* that exceeds categorical boundaries of meaning (visually and textually), extending the work of David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, who insist on the catachrestic agency of queering. Queer then becomes an active verb, a force or vector that works beyond particular bodies and identities.<sup>16</sup> Operating as a catachresis, abstraction offers alternatives to stable representation, and does so specifically through formal and material interventions that produce disruptions and exposures within processes of signification. Remobilized in queer, postcolonial, and feminist theories, catachresis refers to an excessive use of language—a term intentionally misapplied or perverted in order to offer a different and potentially transformative description of life's positions and conditions. Catachresis is a moment when language and meaning breaks down, and thus can open space for alternative narratives by generating terms or images for that which is unrepresentable.<sup>17</sup> For example, consider the catachrestic use of language in fierce pussy's posters, where terms attach uneasily to images, building with intensity and near hyperbole. These terms, which are historically misapplied and now reclaimed in queer contexts, signal both the performative possibilities of language and the arbitrary connections between the terms and their meaning. As a radical disruption of signification, the queering process of catachresis paradoxically insists

upon specificity while troubling the defining and definitive regimes of normativity. In the artworks I study, abstraction constitutes its own catachrestic displacement, gesturing to specificities without direct naming, challenging identification even as the objects remain open to fantasy and projection. As a catachrestic operation, abstraction constitutes matter without transparent reference, suggesting a version of catachresis that is visible but cannot be fully grasped.

Considering queer abstraction as both formal and material invention, I join feminist new materialist and affect studies thinkers such as Sianne Ngai in challenging the notion that “abstract” means “not real,” and prioritizing the excessive agencies of sensual encounters between objects.<sup>18</sup> As a kind of material catachresis, abstraction shapes and acts; it is not lost to obscurity but is substantial. Catachresis can function as a formal property or technique that exceeds immediate reference or classification through a promiscuous deployment of materials that cross categorical boundaries, allowing a specific medium to perform in ways that depart from its normal function (sculptures that resemble the viscous qualities of paint, or photographs that are more haptic than representational). Catachresis might also refer to the strained use of an existing formal language of abstraction that shows it to be already arbitrary or brings out its perversely sensuous features.

To describe abstraction is not necessarily to claim that it produces a singular meaning; however, describing abstraction can also limit it. This book explores various interpretive models for analyzing the queer politics of abstraction beyond iconographic logic. My readings will necessarily put words to nonrepresentational forms, making some associative ties to particular operations, for example, between particular materials and how they might resonate affectively. I discuss the loaded forms of abstraction (the edge, the grid, color) as tropes activated by dragging to produce alternative political possibilities or relational models. I also deploy the terms that are used to describe supposedly stable abstract forms (edge) in experimental ways to explore the term’s multiple operations and effects (edging). I am often reading with and against the feminist and queer proposals that the gendered and/or sexed body shows up in abstraction, and in some cases, when it appears to be made ambiguous. Rather than pursue bodily metaphors for abstractions, I pursue these other material and spatial dynamics that are nevertheless sensual. I attempt to use

language in a way that will complement abstraction's openness, shifting between the general and the specific. The formal innovations of this work prompt my analysis, which could be seen to ironically force meaning onto the forms that resist it. This does not stop me from trying, acknowledging that my words will not always stick. Even as I offer one set of possible interpretive moves, these are not prescriptive as queer abstraction remains an open horizon of possibilities.

### **Between Identities and Theories, Subjects and Objects**

One of the dangers of writing about abstraction in relation to categories we assign to identity, as I do, is that it may seem to obscure particular lived realities. Categories are always problematically limiting and yet often necessary for our survival. While I align the operations of abstraction with those of queering, I am not using the term *queer* as an abstraction in the sense of a generalizing term that would describe all aesthetics that trouble categories or visibility. Rather, I take the tension between specificity that speaks to difference and the potential for a more expansive gesture as a productive point of departure. That these queering gestures exceed the specificity of their positions to leak out and stain the ostensibly "universal" is one aspect of their political potential. I use *queer* to describe the ways that we might relate to abstract work more affectively, haptically, and sensually, activating the *form* in *performative* to demonstrate how this work forges alternative relations, perspectives, and spaces. I mobilize theory in order to describe experiences of abstraction, and sometimes this also aligns with *feeling abstract*. In short, many of us live our theories, and theory also helps us to imagine new possibilities from what seems given or self-evident.

There is a live tension in this book between my deployments of *queer* in relation to abstraction, and the artists whose work I include under the banner of queer abstraction. Abstraction is an important exploratory site for politically invested artists from historically oppressed groups, so I take their deployments of abstraction seriously as intentional, and I take their formal and material innovations seriously as vehicles for social and political engagement. My understanding of how queer abstraction works does not hinge on the biographies of the artists who deploy it, but it does proceed from an awareness of their artistic practices and political

investments. While it is the case that what the art world views as acceptable for oppressed artists to make is changing, thus, abstract practices by queer artists and BIPOC artists are increasingly embraced, this book is not concerned with defining the circumstances of that shift. Rather, I am concerned with how abstraction can operate in the service of queer, feminist, antiracist politics and theories. I suggest that abstraction can be called queer in the work of artists who are actively investigating issues of sexuality and gender in ways that forge alternatives to their categorical norms, even when the artist is not queer. This is not to say that the aims and identities of these artists do not matter, and it is usually the case that they are invested in queer politics and nonnormative ways of being due to their own social positions. Considering that the work an artist produces can operate beyond their own positions and continues to circulate in multiple contexts, I take their artistic and social practices as a starting point rather than the end point of my investigation.

While my analysis does not rely on forms of evidence linked to the artist's biography, the question of *whose* abstraction and *whose* politics still matters. The works I have chosen as central case studies, created by these artists—(in order of discussion) Ulrike Müller, Nancy Brooks Brody, Lorna Simpson, Xylor Jane, Linda Besemer, Carrie Yamaoka, Every Ocean Hughes, Sheila Pepe, Harmony Hammond, Shinique Smith, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Angela Hennessy—also signal the core contributions of feminist work to the queer politics of abstraction. While abstraction has become increasingly viable for politically motivated art practices since the 1990s, a previous generation of feminist artists made significant strides toward this current movement, a lineage of art experimentation that I also understand to be at the heart of this current tendency. For example, in 1977, Harmony Hammond wrote in the first issue of the feminist journal *Heresies*: “If ‘the personal is political’ in the radical sense, we cannot separate the content of our work from the form it takes.”<sup>19</sup> Filmmaker Barbara Hammer argued that “radical content deserves radical form,” contending that conventional narrative cinema fails to address her as a lesbian spectator, and advocating for more abstract experimental cinematic forms that embrace play, complexity, multiplicity, and difference.<sup>20</sup> From the vantage of 1970s lesbian feminism, Hammond and Hammer contend that the radical political import of their art practices depends on a more expansive understanding of what makes certain forms and materials via-

ble for political art and collective movements. Black feminist artists such as Howardena Pindell and Senga Nengudi have similarly expanded our conceptions of what abstraction can do in relation to identity and politics since the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> There are important parallels between categories of identity and difference that would describe the artists in this book, and the political strategies and aesthetic processes they deploy in their work.

Restating the terms of a politicized identity category that would describe many, though not all, of the artists whose work I discuss, I use *queer* to describe the formal and political resonance of their practices. Some artists included in my study, particularly Lorna Simpson and Shinique Smith, are not queer (as far as I know). When I describe an artist's *work* as queer, I am referring to the operations and interpretations of the work itself and the ways in which that artist's practice contributes to contestatory gender and sexual politics, which can be separate from a discussion of the artist's cultural position in that regard. Simpson's work has operated politically in relation to gender, sex, race, and even sometimes invokes queer content (gay cruising and John Waters in the work I discuss). Shinique Smith's work constitutes an ongoing political engagement with abstraction, and has been taken up by queer scholar Renate Lorenz as a form of "radical drag" that refuses direct access to bodily categories according to race and gender.<sup>22</sup> My project acknowledges the fraught histories of these terms as categories of identity while pressing off from that history to make space for the artwork to perform in excess of singular categories tied to their maker. It would not be politically advantageous to fully separate the work from its maker (that would repeat early formalism's claim to universal transcendence that does not account for difference); however, if I stopped with the artist's biography it would limit the potential of their work and disavow the powerful contingencies of its spectators. There are particular formal and material operations that politically engaged artists deploy through abstraction, and this book proceeds from a desire to investigate those operations.

I will argue that queer abstraction offers a contestatory site for refusing signifying logic that can be useful across multiple discourses and political modes of resistance. The visual and material processes occurring in the works I discuss align with certain intersections—between queer and feminism, between queer and trans (a position I would call genderqueer), between queer and critical race politics, between queer and crip. I do not



attempt to theorize these different intersections of *identity* via abstraction; rather, I propose that abstraction offers new sites of experimentation that help us imagine alternative formations, and these align at various moments with ways of thinking of gender, sexuality, sexed embodiment, race, and/or disability beyond their singular embodied manifestations. For example, I attend to the genderqueer potential of abstraction when the work plays with seemingly gendered forms and materials; I attend to the crip potential of abstraction when I am discussing the work's deforming, destabilizing operations. These intersecting political sites of possibility are also sites of deep frustration and tension. Queer theory's embrace of a more expansive and nonspecifying understanding of *queer* as a verb cannot be so easily mapped onto other areas of difference. Queer cannot account for all nonnormative subject positions, and queer movements have their complicated histories of exclusion and misappropriation. I will not, on the one hand, ignore these potentially messy intersections in the interest of creating a falsely neat and tidy queer theory of abstraction; at the same time, I cannot fully attend to all of these complex intersections in a single book. I will attend briefly to each intersection below in order to highlight how I am building on scholarship in these areas.

#### Between Queer and Feminist

This book furthers some of the work of feminist art historians who have revealed the minoritized, heterogeneous, and ephemeral qualities of modernist abstraction. For example, Anna Chave and Ann Gibson have challenged dominant accounts of abstraction as a transcendent universal language, showing how abstract forms are nevertheless marked by ideologies and oppressive systems of power.<sup>23</sup> While these scholars demonstrate that modernist abstraction is not a universal language, the tension between seemingly unmarked aesthetics and the visual suggestion of certain minority positions marked by gender and race calls for further exploration in a contemporary context. I often cite the work of feminist scholars in my analysis of abstraction's potentially gendered implications (in both alignment with and departure from their readings). While queer and feminism are not so easily joined due to certain essentialist forms of feminism that maintain an investment in the category "woman," queer theory has also built on feminism's challenge to essentialized notions of gender and sexuality.<sup>24</sup> In my analysis, queer feminism refers to a social-



political sphere and set of discourses and tactics that unsettle the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality in relation to embodiment and desire and the alternative possibilities and worlds that these tactics aim to create.

#### Between Queer and Trans

This book builds on the scholarship about practices of abstraction described as transgender, particularly the work by Jack Halberstam and, more recently, David Getsy, whose *Abstract Bodies* revises established narratives about 1960s sculpture through the lens of transgender studies.<sup>25</sup> In his other work, Getsy understands the queer and transgender capacities of contemporary abstraction to trouble taxonomic categories of gender and sex, as artists use it to speak from experiences of difference without recourse to the “evidence” of sexual acts or eroticized bodies.<sup>26</sup> Gordon Hall similarly finds possibilities in minimalist sculpture for theorizing nonnormative gendered embodiments and understands abstraction’s willful silence to resist easily decipherable narratives of bodies.<sup>27</sup> While transgender studies scholars such as Eliza Steinbock and Jeanne Vaccaro have used the term *transgender* in expansive ways to discuss formal and aesthetic issues, the body remains central to this field as the primary vehicle through which transgender experience is understood.<sup>28</sup> Transgender studies scholars have also problematized queer theory’s use of *trans* as a metaphor while ignoring the precarious material realities of transgender people (gender trouble, like abstraction, is not inherently liberating).<sup>29</sup> My insistence that queer abstraction’s refusal of bodily signification is one of its most politically useful operations will not play out in the same way across queer and trans practices nor in the readings of those practices.

On the one hand, my insistence that abstraction should not be reduced to signs for the body may seem immediately at odds with transgender studies and its focus on embodiment. On the other hand, my discussion of abstraction as queer in ways that thematize gender variance in terms of nonbinary potential might seem to problematically subsume trans experiences under the banner of queer.<sup>30</sup> But some queer experiences also include gender nonnormativity. To say that queering can only speak to sexuality would foreclose queer experiences at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and sexed embodiment—the specific term *genderqueer* might get us closer to describing this experience.<sup>31</sup> Acknowledging that queer politics maintain alliances with, as well as distinctions from, trans

investments, I discuss abstraction as a tool for queering that undermines surface legibility with reference to the ways we read both gender and race as transparently visible on the surface of the body (particularly in chapter 3).<sup>32</sup> My readings often make use of queer interpretive methods that focus on the relational possibilities of abstract form and matter, but I also consider how understandings of gender are as informed by relationality as queer sexualities and fantasies. We are gendered and raced by others, in relation to others, and that process or projection often involves some amount of desire, identification, or disidentification. My use of the term *drag* to describe queer processes of abstraction also implies the gendered or ungendering performances that make space for new possible becomings. Perhaps, then, something about gender is always at stake in my understanding of queer abstraction.

#### Between Queer and Black

Important foundations for understanding the politics of abstraction have been established by scholars and curators focusing on critical race perspectives and specifically Blackness in contemporary abstraction. My understanding of queer does not bracket out race, and concerns about race do not drop out when, for example, a Black person is absent from the image. Indeed, my conception of queer abstraction demands that we consider issues of race and gender without the presence of a body. Scholars and curators have countered the tendency to limit the significance of artworks by Black artists to what can be read as explicitly racial about the work, while Black artists' works are rarely the basis for formal and object-based debates.<sup>33</sup> Insisting on what Bennett Simpson terms a "freedom from representationality," or racially and biographically determined interpretations, new propositions for political tactics of "post-Black" art take up experimentation with medium and form as a crucial territory for resistance (departing from a focus on content and figuration).<sup>34</sup> Adrienne Edwards, who curated the exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, argues that "blackness in abstraction proliferates as a resistance to figuration and realism in visual representation, and in so doing it elides transparency, immediacy, authority, and authenticity."<sup>35</sup> Black is then not only a surface color (of skin), but a medium and mode of production and critical position for refusing a clear visibility or "authentic" portrayal of one's cultural position. (I explore the particular possibilities for color as a tool for queer

abstraction in chapter 3.) Phillip Brian Harper's concept of "abstractionist aesthetics" demonstrates the possibilities for abstraction's distance from the sign to open space for reimagining the cultural codes to which it has such a difficult relation.<sup>36</sup> That is, in producing a distance between the sign and its ostensible referent, abstraction creates a catachrestic space in which the cultural conditions and positions otherwise defined by the visible signifier can be unfixed, multiply, and proliferate.

#### Between Queer and Crip

My analysis of queer abstraction often attends to the materiality of the artwork, and when the work's material operations are destabilizing and deforming, queering is brought into close contact with crippling, or disabling. Crip, like queer, reclaims an injurious term in the service of radical politics and unsettles fixed identities.<sup>37</sup> While queer theory and disability studies have been brought into alignment due to their shared critiques of normativity, the more theoretical crip approach to disability can be taken as a problematic obscuring of disabled people's lived experiences.<sup>38</sup> Thus, my own approach to abstraction as a refusal of bodily legibility may be taken as either a queer crippling (refusing bodily norms) or, more problematically, ignoring the ways disability is experienced in and through the body. Taking this risk, I will consider the crip perspectives offered by some forms of queer abstraction and their destabilizing effects. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer offers a political and relational model of disability that is not inherent in particular bodies and minds (a medical model), but is a product of social relations. This makes space to lift off from the certainty of identity, from the abled/disabled binary, while offering more expansive ways of understanding disability as actions, events, encounters-between rather than inhering within a singularity.<sup>39</sup> Rather than ignore the crip implications of the excessive and unruly material trouble I often encounter in the queer work of abstraction, I attend to these possibilities in terms of how they affect the spectator. Disability studies scholar Jessica Cooley considers how crip works as a material instability and noncompliance in artworks, a radical potential which she theorizes as "crip materiality."<sup>40</sup> Here, the queer crip possibilities of abstraction are more about the experiences of being with the work, rather than the reduction of abstract form to a representation of disability.

This book aims to make a significant contribution to the scholarly conversations about the politics of abstraction, but it cannot and does not claim to make every contribution or fully address every intersection of difference in relation to these politics. Offering a centrally queer perspective and highlighting the work of particular artists is not at all to say that a political abstraction can belong to only one kind of artist or context. While I am focusing on the United States context in which most of these works and discourses circulate, some of these conversations and artworks cross national boundaries and appear elsewhere. Other studies might take a transnational approach or focus on different national contexts where queer abstraction may manifest in entirely different ways, and where conversations about modernism and the politics of form will also be different. It is my hope that dimensions of critical race, Indigenous, postcolonial, transgender, and crip politics will be taken up and developed further by other authors, and that this will be the first of many books to be written about queer abstraction.

### **Form Performs: Dragging and Camping**

Abstraction may be defined as a drawing or dragging away from the real or concrete representations in art. But the performance of drag (as in drag queens and kings) also implies a stylistic play with gendered signifiers on the body; it is a strategic and often over-the-top reiteration of the masculine and feminine norms that we not only work to enact, but that also exert a drag on us via the everyday reinforcement of gendered behaviors. Judith Butler's now canonical theory of gender performativity posits gender as a compulsory repetition, but also shows how this repetition can create an opportunity to appropriate or exceed oppressive structures, and to throw norms of gender and sex into crisis.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, I understand dragging as a form of critical recitation. Drag can draw out the oppressive strictures of gender and sexuality while at the same time exceeding and torquing those normative impulses in order to render them differently.<sup>42</sup> This strategy of torquing, also derived from the etymology of *queer*, is performed through various formal strategies: for example, a stable object or flat painterly surface projects outward as a radiant environment, or a photographic reproduction is rendered soft

and fuzzy. Drag is often performed through an excessive materiality that oozes beyond its borders, or sensuous surface textures that invite touch and demand more intimate forms of spectatorship.

Rather than locate the queer work of abstraction through an exposure of the subject, I read abstracting as a political action of willful withdrawal, a dragging away. I use *drag* and *dragging* to describe the formal and material tactics of abstraction that undermine normative reading practices, which tend to depend on categorizing according to stable notions of difference. Artist-theorist Renate Lorenz deploys “drag” to describe queer artistic practices that create a distance from the body and normativity while still registering in terms of gender and sexuality, making connections to others without representing them: “What becomes visible in this drag is not people, individuals, subjects, or identities, but rather assemblages; indeed those that do not work at any ‘doing gender/sexuality/race,’ but instead at an ‘undoing.’”<sup>43</sup> Drag both takes up and produces a distance from the norms determined by the two-gender system, whiteness, ability, and heteronormativity. That distancing, or the tension between distance and proximity, is precisely what makes these artistic strategies queer, catachrestic, and excessive. The drag of queer abstraction is a political strategy of denormalization that withdraws signifying conventions in order to make space for new spectatorial positions and possibilities.

The drag that abstraction exerts is not only a formal and aesthetic pull but is also a drag on its own history. This “temporal drag,” to use Elizabeth Freeman’s term, enacts a backward glance that puts the past into a disruptive and potentially transformative relation to the present.<sup>44</sup> Queer abstraction performs temporal drag by reworking recognizable traces of its history while also creating alternatives. Thus, while I examine the terms and incarnations of abstraction’s continuation in contemporary art, I will also consider how queer abstraction retroactively transforms its own genealogy and does so with radical implications for the various forms and techniques of abstraction that it recites. This transformation is not merely the result of reading queerness back into certain historical forms, but a revision that can, just as Edward Said describes the dynamics of history, “dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present.”<sup>45</sup> Rather than simply reuse the aesthetics of modernist abstraction or specific strategies associated with earlier movements, the contemporary works I study draw out the queer actions

that are already there, and are made evident through this transhistorical exchange. Thinking with and against the history of abstraction in the field of art history, I consider the queering potential of this history, the mixed feelings and messy sensations that are reactivated by the drag exerted on them in the present. Contemporary queer abstractions may resemble formal tropes of the past, but they do not merely reproduce the same thing twice; rather, they produce something changed in the process of dragging. Though it may seem that recitations of a problematic history or canon would reinforce its power, the performative force of drag generates alternatives opening out from the gaps and spilling over from the excesses of repetitive gestures. Queering operates as creative praxis that *does* history: in this citational activation of past forms and processes, certain useful aspects of the past are made to perform differently, opening the past up to alternatives in the present.

Drag is closely aligned with the citational practices of queer camp and queer style. Queer practices of abstraction *camp* when they restyle older forms in ways that are eschewing (or actively skewering) the all-too-serious and the straitlaced in favor of the exaggerated, the over-the-top, the unnatural, and the humorous. Roland Barthes similarly views style as a citational practice which may reform or transform through excessive quotation or repetition with a difference. While style is normally taken as the superfluous aesthetic cover for the “real” or “truth” of content, Barthes understands the image as a proliferation of layers, where the “real” is not of depth, but of surface.<sup>46</sup> Style can operate as a queering gesture of camp, an aesthetic sensibility that resists identification even as it enacts a certain representational excess. Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” defines this “sensibility” as a “mode of aestheticism,” a way of seeing the world that delights in the artificial, the marginal, and the exaggerated. To practice camp is to understand the degree of artifice and excess present behind the seemingly natural or serious (“Being-as-Playing-a-Role”), and to be “alive to the double sense in which some things can be taken.”<sup>47</sup>

An important feature of camp is its gratuitousness of reference, and the reiterative aesthetic practices of the artists whose works I study operate as forms of camping.<sup>48</sup> As Fabio Cleto points out, camp is an impossible object of discourse, working through semiotic destabilization in which the subject and object of discourse become collapsed.<sup>49</sup> The meaning attributed to the archive of referents to which the object or performance

of camp gestures, then, fails to account for a legitimate origin point or historical progression, a truth of the subject covered by the artifice of the object. Instead, camp resists the notion of a substantive core or a stable foundation for its recitations, its multiple surfaces unfolding to reveal that its source of playful parody was never pure substance in the first place. By privileging the synthetic, the minor, the “low,” or the frivolous in their stylistic and material recitations of abstraction’s history, queer abstractions perform camp to produce alternatives from even the most difficult forms.<sup>50</sup>

### **Citations Drag: Queer Genealogies**

Dragging, as an activation of material, visual, and historical relations, describes what the artworks I study are doing, and also how I study them. I consider how the citational practices of contemporary artists do not merely reproduce former aesthetics but work with abstraction’s already perverse properties. My transhistorical reading practice produces queer genealogies of this work, tracing the strange legacies of aesthetic tactics that are both historically specific to modernism and expansive in post-modern contexts. This is not to claim intentional appropriations on the part of the artists, but to put this work into contact with older works in order to reckon with a burdened historical language of abstract form and how it might materialize queerly. My approach relies on an intuitive logic and relational charge that Eve Sedgwick proposes in the critical spacing of “beside,” where new connections will emerge between objects, particularly those that seem incommensurate.<sup>51</sup> This approach is shared across other queer studies of contemporary art, such as the 2017 issue of *ASAP/ Journal* on “Queer Form,” where the editors understand this comparative approach to have “pride of place in queer cultural studies,” even while it is vulnerable to critique.<sup>52</sup> I put contemporary objects into contact with some of their potential relations from the past, exploring the possibilities that emerge from that encounter.

Abstractions are not neutral gestures—even nonrepresentational forms have histories. I show how queer abstraction attaches to and appropriates the dominant language of abstraction, which would seem to resist queering. To queer abstraction is, in part, to expose and reroute its

power from a neutralizing and potentially violent erasure to a method for refusing fixity and materializing difference in unexpected ways. While abstraction is neither a modernist nor a Western invention, I am engaging with it here in the United States context as a legacy of modernism that persists in contemporary art. The particular forms that I focus on are modernist tactics that are also politically loaded and have been continuously reimagined in and for the present: the hard edge, the grid, color, and the readymade. My chapters are organized to build on one another in terms of the scale of the work and the scope of critical issues that I address. I begin with the detailed element of the hard edge in smaller works, proceeding with increasingly expansive deployments of the grid and color, and finally addressing large-scale sculptural installations. Several of the artworks utilize elements that appear in multiple chapters, so the hard edge of chapter 1 also appears in the grids of chapter 2, the grid appears in chapter 3 (on color), and color and the grid are important features of the sculptural works of chapter 4. (Color can also be seen as an important feature of the geometric abstractions in chapter 1.) I focus on particular formal and material operations in each chapter, but readers will see their overlap and dialogue across chapters. The chapters build in complexity as I address the import of queer abstraction for different intersections of difference, initially focusing on the queer eroticism of formal processes and then addressing the critical race, genderqueer, crip, and finally the queer national and decolonial potentials of abstraction's drag. In each of the four core chapters, I offer two or three key ways in which queer abstraction operates, and I use the works of several contemporary artists to offer multiple examples of the particular tactic under investigation (rather than an extensive narrative of a single artist's work).

In chapter 1, I begin an investigation of abstraction's political aims and operations through the unlikely aesthetic technique of geometry, particularly the hard-edged line. I consider how the geometric enamel objects of Ulrike Müller, Nancy Brooks Brody, and Every Ocean Hughes reconstitute the hard edge as a queer tactic. The dragging line here produces an indeterminacy and intimate friction—the bending and curving edge both refuses to contain a sign or subject and uses its hardness to produce an erotic edging. Putting Müller's work in contact with the modernist enamel works of László Moholy-Nagy, and Brody's work in

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contact with the shaped canvases of Ellsworth Kelly, I show how these lines of movement reconfigure the space of the picture plane in ways that not only exceed binary logic but allow for movements at the margins.

In chapter 2, I consider the grid as an aesthetic and political tactic in the photo-based felt installation works of Lorna Simpson and their refraction of Agnes Martin's iconic grid paintings. Carrying the difficult history of photographic grids, which produce raced taxonomies of their subjects, Simpson's grids refuse to picture bodies. I demonstrate that, far from only a tool of normalization and surveillance, the grid also operates as a vector for queer forms of relationality. These grids perform their drag through an infinite expansion and excess and produce spaces for transformation. I also bring grid paintings by Xylor Jane into contact with those of Jasper Johns to demonstrate how these seemingly closed systems for encoding information can disrupt it at the same time through their decorative surface and sensual tactility.

In chapter 3, I reconsider color as an unruly medium in the sculptural acrylic paintings of Linda Besemer, and I challenge conceptions of color as mere surface used to mark exceptional bodies as raced and gendered. Color's minor and deviant associations are activated and challenged in the genealogy I trace from Besemer back to Lynda Benglis and the op art (optical art) of Bridget Riley. By wrestling with the tension between the optical surface of color and its viscous materiality, this chapter attends to the fraught ontological implications of painting in the modernist tradition (as opposed to readings of paint as "skin" particularly in the work of women artists).<sup>53</sup> These chromatic abstractions drag via their performative surface play—seemingly synthetic and also resistant to signification, color can also exceed codes of race and gender. The work of color as a surface for imaginative projection is further activated in the work of Carrie Yamaoka, where the viewer is implicated in our own gazing.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on spatial and material tactics of dragging away: unruly and expansive installations that transform everyday matter. I consider how the threaded environments of Sheila Pepe, sculptures by Harmony Hammond and Shinique Smith, and an installation by Tiona Nekkia McClodden perform material processes that deform by unraveling, ripping, and cutting. The deforming processes of these large-scale works speak to vexed queer and crip formations that paradoxically resist fixity or material coherence. Reckoning with their foundations in mini-

malist and postminimal sculpture as well as the discarded readymade and associations with craft, these works drag the art object itself (the canvas or sculpture) to destabilize and make precarious that which seems established or given: the materials they alter, the spaces they occupy, and the perspectives and positions they elicit.

The epilogue reckons with that overloaded sign of queer “pride”—the rainbow flag—to test and push the limits of abstraction’s political potential. Gesturing out from one of my core utopian propositions that we might yet find ways of being together in difference, the rainbow flag brings up issues of queer citizenship and homonationalism (Jasbir Puar’s term) in the United States context and opens out to decolonial and global possibilities across borders.<sup>54</sup> I show how Angela Hennessy’s *Black Rainbow* drags the flag by challenging the ostensible universality of our rainbow politics, dragging on a transcendent gesture of world-making to emphasize the unending physical and affective labors of abstraction.

In each chapter, I explore the continued political relevance of abstract aesthetics for United States–based contemporary artists whose work operates queerly. At the same time, I show how artists deploy and redeploy these forms and materials in ways that reimagine their own genealogies. Their redeployments remind us that abstraction is already political and demonstrate its viability for queer movements now. Locating queer invention in formal and material experimentation as well as reiterative practices, I am staging conversations between contemporary abstraction and the older forms and techniques of abstraction that they drag. Many of the abstract forms used by contemporary artists are borrowed from high modernism and many draw more closely from works created during the 1960s and ’70s, a moment understood to be the start of the contemporary period. Working postmodernism through a transhistorical lens, I trace genealogies of queered and queering forms of abstraction through the work of midcentury painters such as Ellsworth Kelly (chapter 1) and Agnes Martin (chapter 2), iterations of minimalism and postminimalism and various forms of geometric abstraction from the grid to op art. Understanding that all of these artworks have their own citational impulses, and that my earliest examples are themselves reiterations of earlier modernist forms, some distinction can be made between the modernist discourses the artworks engage and the time in which those modernist forms were produced. For example, when I am discussing later works by Kelly

or Martin, it is through that work that I also engage a longer history of geometric abstraction and its utopian political ambitions that preceded it by several decades.

The temporal framework for this project is not a linear historical narrative of modernism through postmodernism, but a close examination of current practices that stage specific conversations by redeploying certain abstract forms. The strange trajectory and genealogy of this book is created by allowing the work itself to lead me through these citational layers, without viewing US modernism as though it were a monolithic historical formation. In making these comparisons, I aim to show how the queer redeployments of these forms in contemporary art reveal new possibilities in the older works, suggesting that perhaps these queer capacities have been there all along but are now made active in the present. Modernism has never belonged only to those who dominate the canon, and my project seeks to show how some aspects of modernist abstraction continue to be operational now.

My queer formalist approach takes the material and visual qualities of artworks seriously as political and theoretical interventions. I conduct the kinds of comparative analysis that are foundational in the field of art history, while also taking the lesson from queer theoretical approaches to history that putting the present in contact with the past can transform both. In addition to Freeman's theory of temporal drag, my art historical juxtapositions might be considered akin to Jack Halberstam's "technotopias": a collision of postmodern space and embodiment, sought by exploring new relations and shared aesthetics between avant-garde and contemporary subcultural visual practices.<sup>55</sup> My focus on the affective and relational charge of abstract forms across time also attends to the difficulty and tension of these relationships, between the potential harm of abstraction and the present work that attempts to retool it. This book is deeply indebted to the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who understands queering as an aesthetic praxis of refusal that does not simply discard that which is problematic and overloaded (in the case of this book, abstract forms that would seem to either gloss over difference or to mark for difference, such as the triangle), but rather works with and through those elements toward which the queer has a charged and ambivalent relationship.<sup>56</sup> This concept of a queer utopian aesthetic practice, as I understand it, is an extension of Muñoz's theory of *disidentification*, a

practice that acknowledges the difficulty of identification and does not claim to dispel its shameful elements; “rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life.”<sup>57</sup> Queer abstraction might similarly describe the ambivalent attachment to abstraction in contemporary art practices that claim abstract forms and styles in order to rework them while also acknowledging their potential for harm. In short, queer abstractions create mixed feelings, and my analysis attempts to account for this affective charge without resolving its tensions.

### **Dragging, Reading: Toward a Materialist Formalism**

One premise of this book is that queer abstraction demands a retooling of older art historical methods that take forms and materials as fundamentally political, while also exposing the already present politics of these methods. Utilizing a process of formalism that is not opposed to matter or culture, I take form and matter seriously as their own social and cultural interventions.<sup>58</sup> Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy describe “queer formalism” as approaches to art making and art historical analysis that consider how gender, sexuality, and desire operate beyond their straightforward depictions.<sup>59</sup> Yet, a queer rejection of purity or essentialism runs counter to the universalism we typically associate with formalist methods. There are clear tensions between the terms of formalism and abstraction that describe earlier modern practices of making and analyzing art and the destabilizing operations that are now understood as queer. My approach to queer abstraction drags on this tradition of formalism that would seem to exclude investments in the social and political potential of art.

Just as abstraction is so often taken to bracket out the social, formalism as a method is presumed to be a politically “disinterested” model (often attached to more conservative positions). Some methodological debates would set formalist art historical approaches rooted in the legacy of Clement Greenberg, on the one hand, against identity politics taken up by cultural studies approaches, on the other.<sup>60</sup> But formal and social concerns need not be mutually exclusive. Forms can provide models for living otherwise, generating ethical and political alternatives via the queer practices called “world-making.”<sup>61</sup> I am exploring the queer possibilities for formalist and materialist approaches here, and I will make an argu-

ment for why these are useful if we are to take abstraction seriously. But these artworks' capacities are informed by multiple factors, and other scholars may wish to focus on those factors that hinge more explicitly on the object's immediate context. Here, I am focusing on the social and political potential of abstraction that emerges from haptic forms and visceral material operations and how they speak with certain modernist traditions and discourses. I do consider form and matter to be suggestive of certain things rather than hopelessly undefined, but my readings consider how abstraction works queerly through affective, sensual, and material operations both within the work itself and in relation to the spectator.

My reading practices are aligned with a new materialist approach in that I take matter seriously as having its own unruly affective and sensational currents, and I consider how artworks queer through their performative materializing.<sup>62</sup> The central case studies of this book often transform certain modernist formal tactics by material means, so I attend closely to the haptic qualities of the artworks and their movements in the processes of taking form. Our visceral response to this work is folded in with its texture. Approaching textural perception in relation to affect, Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* records the flow of intimacy between textures and emotions, dragging with it the association with "touchy-feely," implying that "even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact."<sup>63</sup> The visceral is not divorced from the abstract; both are folded together and flexibly intertwined, as forms and processes of abstraction can also evoke or invite touch and have implications for ways of being in the world.

New materialist thought usefully reconsiders normative understandings of agency, which, Karen Barad argues, is not something possessed by a singular being, but an enactment, something that comes about through relational flows and responses that do not belong solely to the human. Barad's conception of agential matter that "feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns, and remembers" aligns with my understanding of materiality as a crucial queering tactic that does not merely encode aesthetic form with stable bodily meaning, but produces an affective force both visually and texturally.<sup>64</sup> Offering a freedom from representation, abstraction is a performative force, a dragging away from signification or any kind of ontological certainty. Rather than a hardening or fixing of difference, abstracting materializes an active ongoing process, generates excessive

multiplicities, and demands more intimate reading practices to account for the experience of these artworks.

I am utilizing these queer reading practices to attend to the ways in which form and meaning do not easily line up in the works I discuss. I would not say that abstraction is “inherently” queer, but its resistance presents such a generous site of possibility for the socially and politically motivated artists who use it and for queer analysis that can account for its visceral powers. The power is already there but is more fully activated by a formal analysis that considers the material interactions with and between objects. Dragging in a slow reading practice of close looking, I produce intimate descriptions of these objects to demonstrate their sensual and relational force. This force both amplifies and is amplified by a viewer’s particular sensibilities. Cultivating this queer formalism by accounting for something excessive in the object also means staying attuned to how interpretation will always fall short—the catachresis performed when we try to describe how something feels, to translate the sensations that exceed description. I take a materialist approach to formal analysis by attending to the processes of formation and haptic vibrancy of the object, how media take form and interact, and how an object might feel to touch. These readings suggest that being with the work itself constitutes a queer experience. In what follows, I elaborate what queer abstraction might activate in this difficult space of encounter.

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## NOTES

### Introduction

- 1 A fifth chapter also appeared at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Philadelphia, September 13–December 22, 2019.
- 2 On Episalla's *foldtogram* practice, see Casid, "Thanatography."
- 3 These four artists talk about fierce pussy as the fifth artist. Jill H. Casid discusses their work in relation to queer abstraction, in conversation with my work, in a lecture at the Beeler Gallery: Columbus College of Art & Design, "Beeler Gallery—Conversation: Nancy Brooks Brody, Joy Episalla, Carrie Yamaoka, and Jill Casid," YouTube, February 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiVdeTwGHG8>.
- 4 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.
- 5 For a discussion of fierce pussy's ongoing practice, then and now, and particularly their performative use of language, see O'Neill-Butler, "Labor of Love."

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- 6 See Smith, "At the Whitney"; Saltz, "Jerry Saltz on '93 in Art"; Saltz and Corbett, "How Identity Politics Conquered the Art World."
- 7 Lancaster, "The Wipe."
- 8 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss use Bataille's *formless* as a third term to displace "form" and "content" in favor of a performative operation of matter, splitting off from modernism's opposition of formalism and iconology. Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, 15. This interest in excessive deployments of matter that collapse this distinction between the work's form and content intersects with some of my thinking here.
- 9 Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in Ledesma, *Queer Abstraction*, 65–66.
- 10 "Queer Abstraction: Harmony Hammond and Tirza Latimer in Conversation with Julia Bryan-Wilson," quoted in McBane, "Queer Abstraction," 11.
- 11 A spate of gallery exhibitions in recent years have addressed this broader shift in both contemporary art practice and understandings of what constitutes a queer aesthetic. For some curators and critics, this "new" queer aesthetic has less to do with the artist's identity or overt sexuality and more to do with the artist's deployment of materials in nonnormative or excessive ways, embracing the devalued or craft-based mediums and processes. This approach might describe two parallel Chicago-area exhibitions, *The Great Refusal: Taking on New Queer Aesthetics*, curated by Oli Rodriguez (Sullivan Galleries at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, September 14–November 10, 2012), and *All Good Things Become Wild and Free*, curated by Danny Orendorff (Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, September 11–November 17, 2012). See Eler, "Queer Art's Not Just about Gender." *Surface of Color*, curated by Paul Pescador (The Pit, October 2015), challenges the notion that identity and issues of cultural difference be depicted explicitly through figuration or performance. See Ahn, "Forging Queer Identity with Abstraction." For others, concerns with form and content overlap in that the work may not be explicitly sexual, but still either pictures bodies or is read according to bodily reference enacted through suggestive form even as it does so in an expansive and indeterminate sense. Examples of this approach include *Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome* (curated by Tirza Latimer, Red Line, 2014); *Eyes, Lilacs, and Spunk: Queer Aesthetic from Suggestion into Abstraction* (curated by Aaron Tilford, Visual AIDS, 2014); *Read My Lips* and the attendant roundtable on "Queer Abstraction" at Knockdown Center (2016).
- 12 Writing about mid-twentieth-century abstract art by Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Agnes Martin, Jonathan D. Katz understands abstraction to constitute a "queer code," a means by which gay artists could express desire and sexuality through a veiled formal language. See Jonathan D. Katz, "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction," in Cooke and Kelly, *Agnes Martin*, 170–96; Katz, "Dismembership."
- 13 This treatment of abstract form understood as a coded reference is a broader



tendency that David Batchelor has traced as a method of bringing modernist abstract art into the realm of social art history. He uses the example of Anna Chave's readings of Rothko, Flavin, Andre, Noland, and others as "highly schematized *depictions*" that have "reduced abstract art to the condition of resemblance-based representation by treating it as cryptically iconic." See Batchelor, "Abstraction, Modernism, Representation," 49.

- 14 Phelan, *Unmarked*, see particularly chapter 1, 1–33.
- 15 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–94. Zach Blas also understands this ethical stance as fundamentally aesthetic and useful for feminist and queer politics: "Opacity, therefore, exposes the limits of schemas of visibility, representation, and identity that prevent sufficient understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples." See Blas, "Opacities: An Introduction," 149.
- 16 Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," 3–7.
- 17 Gayatri Spivak proposes that the political use of words, and perhaps all language in the deconstructive view, is catachrestic. In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, she highlights the term "woman" as a catachresis, a metaphor without a literal referent (141), while also asserting that the task of feminist political philosophy is to "accept the risk of catachresis," to use it strategically rather than ignore it in an attempt to establish "truth" (182). David L. Eng has defined "historical catachresis" as a problem of naming that works to dislodge a reified version of history by denying the possibility of any singular historical context. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 59.
- 18 Ngai, "Visceral Abstractions," 33–63. See also Rizvana Bradley's special issue "The Haptic: Textures of Performance," which, as Bradley explains in "Introduction: Other Sensualities," aims to consider "the haptic as an explicitly minoritarian aesthetic and political formation," 129.
- 19 Hammond, "Feminist Abstract Art," 70.
- 20 Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," 70.
- 21 See Cowan, "Texturing Abstraction."
- 22 Lorenz, *Queer Art*, 53–56.
- 23 See Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power"; Chave, "Minimalism and Biography"; and Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*.
- 24 Teresa de Lauretis's foundational edited volume on queer theory, for instance, offered the queer as precisely a way to connect feminist and gay and lesbian studies (while at the same time maintaining the distinctions and the difficulty in connecting these terms). De Lauretis, "Queer Theory," iii–xviii.
- 25 Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* offers a reading of abstraction as a strategy for destabilizing representation in ways that speak to difficult transgendered embodiments which paves the way for my study of the resonance of modernist aesthetics in contemporary art practice. David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies* considers how artists and viewers of 1960s abstract sculpture

- “mapped bodily or personifying metaphors onto patently un-figurative, non-representational sculptural objects” (9).
- 26 Getsy and Simmons, “Appearing Differently.”
  - 27 Hall, “Object Lessons.”
  - 28 See Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*; and Vaccaro, “Felt Matters.”
  - 29 See Namaste, “Tragic Misreadings”; Stryker, “Transgender Studies”; and Keegan, “Against Queer Theory.” Gayle Salamon also gives a useful overview of the vexed relationship between transgender studies and feminist and queer studies in part 2 of *Assuming a Body*.
  - 30 Getsy insists that we differentiate between a queer abstraction that has to do with relations (love, desire, kinship) and abstraction that thematizes trans experience and politics, which has more to do with combating normative gender ascriptions. Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” in Ledesma, *Queer Abstraction*, 67.
  - 31 On the term *genderqueer*, see Love, “Queer,” 173; and Honkasalo, “Genderqueer.”
  - 32 *Trap Door*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, does important work to tackle the issue of visibility as a trap rather than a path to liberation for trans people, though the focus is still largely on how trans people can claim agency over representation rather than refusing it or undermining it through abstraction.
  - 33 See English, *How to See a Work of Art*; and Mercer, *Discrepant Abstraction*. Phillip Brian Harper, in *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, argues against current norms of aesthetic reception that insist that Blackness be represented and he asserts the critical need for abstractionism to displace realism as a primary stake in Black cultural engagement.
  - 34 See Simpson, *Blues for Smoke*; and Sheets, “Black Abstraction.” Thelma Golden has done much work in this regard at the Studio Museum in Harlem, including *Freestyle* (2001) and *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* (2006). The Contemporary Art Museum Houston’s two-part *Black in the Abstract* exhibition explored the contributions of Black artists to abstract movements since the 1960s (2013–14).
  - 35 Edwards, *Blackness in Abstraction*, 10.
  - 36 Harper champions abstractionist artwork (though privileging narrative over visual art) because its emphatic distance from an easy referent in reality “invites us to question the ‘naturalness’ not only of the aesthetic representation but also of the social facts to which it alludes, thereby opening them to active and potentially salutary revision.” Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, 3.
  - 37 See McRuer, “Crip”; and Sandahl, “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?”
  - 38 See McRuer, *Crip Theory*.

- 39 Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 5–7.
- 40 Cooley, “Crip Materiality.”
- 41 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34; and Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xxiii.
- 42 For Sedgwick, *queer* points to excesses of meaning. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.
- 43 Lorenz, *Queer Art*, 21.
- 44 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.
- 45 Said’s work has encouraged my insistence that the past is alive and useful for us in the present. The longer quote is: “Thus later history reopens and challenges what seems to have been the finality of an earlier figure of thought, bringing it into contact with cultural, political and epistemological formations undreamed of by . . . its author. Every writer is, of course, a reader of her or his predecessors as well, but what I want to underline is that the often surprising dynamics of human history can—as Borges’ fable of *Pierre Menard and the Quixote* so wittily argues—dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present.” Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, 25.
- 46 Barthes, “Style and Its Image,” 92–93.
- 47 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation*, 277–81.
- 48 Doyle and Getsy also discuss queer formalism in terms of camp in “Queer Formalisms,” 62–63.
- 49 Cleto, *Camp*, 4.
- 50 For a campy account of abstract expressionism’s queer potential through its various revisions, see Sillman, “AbEx and Disco Balls.”
- 51 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8–9.
- 52 Amin, Musser, and Pérez, “Queer Form,” 230.
- 53 For examples of these readings, see Gibson, “Color and Difference”; Latimer, *Harmony Hammond*; and Betterton, *Intimate Distance*.
- 54 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.
- 55 While Halberstam argues that forms of abstraction offer representations of unstable embodiment that produce transgender aesthetics, I am exploring the postmodern pastiche practice of these recitations in order to show that their instability and mutational capacities actually exceed bodily signification. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 122.
- 56 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 138.
- 57 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 12.
- 58 I am not alone in this endeavor. A similar claim is made for the political potential of “queer form” by Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez in “Queer Form.”
- 59 Doyle and Getsy, “Queer Formalisms.” In “Notes on Queer Formalism,” William J. Simmons understands queer formalism (he credits painter Amy Sill-

- man with the phrase) as a paradox: “It advocates for a ‘queer subject’ while attacking the notion of ‘subjecthood.’” See Simmons’s book expanding on this essay: *Queer Formalism: The Return*. See also Getsy’s expansion on queer formalism: “Queer Relations.”
- 60 See, for example, Nizan Shaked’s outline of this debate within the art history journal *October*, “Is Identity a Method?” in Jones and Silver, *Otherwise*, 204–24.
- 61 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner popularized the term for queer theory in their influential essay “Sex in Public,” where they write of queer culture as “a world-making project”: “The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.” This is a utopian concept, “by definition *unrealizable* as community or identity” (558). It is worth repeating from “Queer Form” by Amin, Musser, and Pérez: “The world-making ethos of contemporary queer studies is vulnerable to critique, because when it is perceived as unmoored from history it appears idealistic and facile. The essays in this volume demonstrate our view that scholarly and artistic world-making need not be a historically unmoored interpretive act, however, but can be a creative orchestration of historical objects to create assemblages that expose archival ties, making critical perspectives on the past intelligible, and summon possibilities that unseat political stagnation” (229). They go on to discuss the particular queer analytical strategies that are also in alignment with mine, drawing from Sedgwick, where “established categories often take a back seat to affect, feel, style, or disruption” (230).
- 62 See Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*: “For materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9).
- 63 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17. The connection between texture and affect, Sedgwick asserts, is due to the fact that “both are irreducibly phenomenological” (21).
- 64 Karen Barad, interview in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism*, 59.

## 1. Edging Geometry

- 1 “Temporal drag” is Elizabeth Freeman’s term; see Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.
- 2 For a discussion of postexpressionist geometric abstraction, see Falconer, *Painting beyond Pollock*. Iwona Blazwick traces a history of early utopian ambitions to postmodern critiques of geometric abstraction in *Adventures of the Black Square*, 15–19.
- 3 Brandon Taylor’s *After Constructivism* traces the long-reaching effects of constructivism, even after the collapse of its ideals, *through* modern and contemporary art.