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Wipe, Montana Gold Banana and Ace Fluorescent Green (figure 1) is a small painted object hanging on a white gallery wall. The object is composed of two distinct wood panels, and its surface is built up with modeled joint compound and plaster, then sanded and covered with high gloss and matte spray paint. “Montana gold banana” refers to the painted color of a small yellow triangle that fits into a larger panel, painted Ace fluorescent green, while “wipe” refers to the physical break between panels, the line by which they are joined and separated. The soft edges of each panel have the promise of puzzle pieces, yet they never coalesce into a whole. Their taffy-colored monochrome surfaces undulate with shades of spray-painted color, their modeled facades bubbling out to exceed the sharp boundaries that would characterize a painted canvas. They are not entirely smooth and are slightly damaged, marked and scratched by the artist’s hand.

This little object is part of a larger series, *Transitional Effects* (2010–11), by Sadie Benning. These paintings were made by the same video artist who rose to fame through the gay and lesbian film festival circuit in 1990 and became the youngest artist to be included in the Whitney Biennial in 1993.¹ Using a Pixelvision toy camera and the materials available in the artist’s childhood bedroom, fifteen-year-old Sadie Benning recorded an experience of



Figure 1. Sadie Benning, *Wipe, Montana Gold Banana and Ace Fluorescent Green*, 2011. 21 × 18½ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.

queer youth in the early 1990s. Gritty and diaristic, Benning's multiple self-representations through the Riot Grrrl punk aesthetics of the Pixelvision are explicitly queer and feminist in form and content. The grainy, high-contrast black-and-white images and the compressed spatial format of these videos render the young Benning in intimate yet disorienting proximity to the viewer as the artist speaks directly into the camera. This specific aesthetic quality yielded by the technical limitations of the Pixelvision gave it an outsider status associated with alternative subcultures, a subversive medium that lent itself to the personal performances of a young queer artist.

Benning's paintings have developed in continuity with these videos. The paintings expand the artist's concerns with smallness of scale, the use of unlikely or low-quality materials, and an emphasis on medium-specific properties that also point to the constructed nature of these images. While Benning's paintings and videos share these concerns, the overall shift from video to abstract aesthetics sparks questions about the viability of painting in queer

creative practice and, perhaps more crucially, troubles normative accounts of abstraction. Indeed, how do we approach an artist whose work characteristically addresses queer and feminist concerns but who also works in an abstract painterly style that would seem to obscure the specificity of bodies and lives, where form and content seem to be in total conflict? In other words, how can we understand abstraction as a tactic of queering? I would like to take the artist's turn from direct reference to abstraction seriously as an opportunity to approach the larger question of whether the queer capacity of a work depends on our knowledge of the artist's identity or desires.

Benning's objects do queer work in multiple ways by taking on, occupying, and dramatizing some central aspects of abstraction's history in order to render them differently and by refusing the particular types of naming by which abstract forms might be settled or made definitively legible. This is not a kind of minoritarian difference that resolves, however, and instead is a differing that is both transitional and destabilizing. Benning's tactics of abstraction demand an understanding of the term "queer" as a verb rather than simply a noun or stable identity signifier; what I am calling "queer" performs as a disruption of the normative, the expected, and the intuitive. This conception of queering falls in line with that of David Eng, along with J. Jack Halberstam and José Muñoz, who insist on the catachrestic use of "queer" in excess of particular bodies or identities (I will return to catachresis later) and conceive of queer theory as a field without proper subjects or objects.² That is, rather than merely describing a lesbian or gay subject, *queering* is a critical *doing* beyond the singular subject. Within a regime of representation, where what is considered queer has been tied inextricably to the sign of figural content or biographical context, understanding "queer" as a verb allows it to operate in excess of what would seem to be established or legible. Even as I use the term to define a certain style or aesthetic practice, tactics of queering defy categorical boundaries along the lines of identity as well as material borders in the objects I analyze.

There is much at stake in how "queer" is defined, especially if it would seem to be a universalizing gesture that moves away from the concerns about identity that have been central to queer scholarship. But unfixing considerations of difference from the singular subject can allow for a more complex understanding of how identity operates. The difference between specificity and singularity is crucial here. As I will show, abstraction can be employed in ways that insist on specificity and difference that is so important for queer projects while, at the same time, rejecting the focus on singularity

of experience that continues to place the burden of representation on minority artists and limits the potential of their work. Rather than attempt to settle this productive tension with recourse to biography, as though it yields the most decisive evidence with which to make an argument about the artist's work, I am taking the formal aspects of Benning's artworks as their own queering operations. I take the theoretical deployment of "queer" as a verb to be the most useful for understanding how and why abstraction is taken up by contemporary queer and feminist artists, of which Benning is one example. And I am taking my departure from the work of current queer theorists in establishing what I will argue is a queer approach to history, to naming and specificity in Benning's work, and I view the artist's work as a contribution to theirs. This is not to overstate a single artist's contribution but instead to take the work of minority artists seriously as performative iterations rather than passive receptors for theoretical readings. Along these lines, the queer work of abstraction is not established by seeking coded signifiers of the artist's sexuality or gender, nor is "queer" used as a generalized term to describe all abstract aesthetics. Rather, the tension between specific identity markers and the potential for a more universalizing gesture is a productive point of departure for considering how abstraction can operate queerly.

The key formal and conceptual aspect of Benning's practice is the "Wipe," a term that begins the title of every painting in the *Transitional Effects* series. The wipe is both an aesthetic form and a transitional gesture that distills and dissolves. This classic cinematic editing technique of the hard-edged wipe is translated into the formal language of hard-edge abstract painting (even as Benning softens the edges). Traveling from one side of the monitor to another, a wipe allows one video shot to replace the next. This action is stilled in Benning's painting, where the traveling line becomes a gap that divides two panels of one painterly composition. As a division of film shots, the wipe is a form of punctuation that both marks a change and creates a continuity of action across time and space. At the same time, this transition is a cut or break that makes the construction of the film more visible and performative, even campy. Considering this signature visual device in the films of Akira Kurosawa, film studies scholar Catherine Russell writes that the wipe cut is an element that both unifies and flattens the image, foregrounding the formal composition of the film as a kind of montage.³ The wipe abstracts the image, activates form, and renders process visible. In my analysis, the wipe also defines a queering artistic practice where in-between spaces open out onto alternatives, where a transition performatively enacts the change it

signifies. That is, Benning's work prompts my reconsideration of a central tenet of avant-garde aesthetics: that form performs and does so historically and politically. Rather than a linear path to resolution, or a historical account organized as a narrative chain of events, the transitional wipe yields alternative approaches to abstraction.

While this gesture might also seem to wipe Benning's objects clean of specificity, this wiping does not wipe away; in Benning's work, the wipe specifies without certain aspects of naming that would insist on fixing. Specificity in this instance might recall Donald Judd's 1964 essay "Specific Objects." Judd's influential theorization of minimalism asserts that paint on a canvas is always attempting to create illusion, whereas "specific objects" engage space as a medium. Specificity, for Judd, defines artworks that fall outside of traditional understandings of painting and sculpture, artworks that do not merely take up space but engage it to create an environment. These objects are made of industrial materials and techniques employed directly, drawing upon a single material quality with emphatic presence and usually ordered serially, "one thing after another."⁴ And yet, there is already a contradiction rooted in the term "specific" that I would like to hold in tension. Etymologically, "specific" is derived from the term "species," linking specific and differing objects to a method of classification, producing the formal consistency of serial repetition that would seem to yield categorical sameness. But my later discussion of specificity will show how Benning's singular works might belong to a larger categorical set or series (and I will return to seriality), a "species," yet resist the categorical occupations of certain discourses of modernism. While Benning's works can certainly be described as paintings, I also call them painted objects to emphasize their three-dimensionality, the ways in which they might define a space that they both occupy and destabilize: the affective space of a viewing encounter in the gallery as well as the aesthetic spaces outlined by modernist discourses.

This essay takes its organizing method from the performative wipe in Benning's practice, a formal editing tool that does not yield a static thing but instead generates a revisionary overlay that brings seemingly disparate things into intimate proximity. The first "wipe" compares Benning's work to specific examples of modernist painting, showing how repetition can function as both a serial aesthetic strategy and a queering method of historiography. Operating in its capacity as a verb, a method or style of queering is a creative praxis that *does* history, a citational activation in which the past continues to perform. This understanding of critical recitation is derived from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where repetition

can create an opportunity to cite something in ways that render it differently, to appropriate or queer the oppressive structures by which our lives are contained and managed.⁵ Though it may seem that recitations of a problematic history or canon would reinforce its power, there are also regressions, perversions, and alternatives opening out from the gaps and spilling over from the excesses of repetitive gestures.

I am interested in how Benning's practice might work as a queering tactic of historiography: not a remaking of history that depends on direct representation but a painterly practice that reimagines modernist abstraction in ways that render it differently. Benning's use of particular abstract aesthetics not only signals a camping parody and postmodern appropriation but also shows how this revisionary practice can retroactively transform its own genealogy. This transformation is not merely the result of reading queerness back into certain historical forms but is also a revision that can, as Edward Said so eloquently describes the dynamics of history, "dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present."⁶ Rather than simply represent the aesthetics of modernist abstraction, works by Benning draw out the queer actions that are already there but become activated through this backward exchange. This is not a wiping over that attempts to replace a problematic object with radical queer alterity but instead is a wiping through that stalls between the gaps in order to draw out what was latent and perhaps not readily apparent but now emerges through this contemporary practice, insisting that these older forms can be useful for current queer and feminist production.

While I will argue, on one hand, that abstraction queers by operating in excess of particular bodies or identities, on the other hand I take the work of a queer self-identified artist as my case study, which would seem to tie queering to particular identificatory practices. This tension animates the question of how Benning's work might also be queering through the desiring of abstraction—a cross-gender, cross-sex, cross-generational dynamic of desire that might allow the artist to draw from earlier modernist artists while also poaching their work. This tension between a desirous backward attachment and a challenging critical stance or revising gesture remains an ambivalent relation that I take as a generative exchange and one aspect of the volatility of the work of abstraction in queer artistic practice. I understand Benning's paintings as challenges to the history of abstraction tied inextricably to the male genius, the big bad white boys of the avant-garde. Benning's work allows me to ask how this aesthetic approach might work for

a queer artist and to explore its potential as an alternative account of abstraction's legacy. To be clear, my argument is not that the artist's self-identification does not matter. Rather, I want to make a clear distinction between that identification and the tactics this work performs in terms of its aesthetic and political capacities that are not reducible to biographical interpretation.

This essay's second "wipe" will deal with politics around specificity to show how Benning's abstraction queerly resists legibility and the classifications that are essential to modernist discourses as well as understandings of how gender and sexuality might "show up" in a particular artist's work. I explore specificity and difference in relation to the painted objects themselves, their formal dimensions, and issues of identity. Benning's work approaches the specificities of identity and personal history through abstract forms that would seem to deflect subjectivity and feeling. Taking abstraction seriously as nonrepresentational, I will elaborate on the abstracting and queering effects of the wipe as a catachresis that disrupts aesthetic and historical processes of signification. As a tactic for queering abstraction, the wipe offers a deliberate tool for reckoning with a difficult past without wiping away the grit of this history and the residue of its contact in the present.

Wipe I. Desirous Revisions: Abstraction and the Death Drive

It would not be a surprising gesture to claim that the aesthetics, processes, and concerns of modernism are continued and revised in contemporary art.⁷ But the strangeness of a queer feminist artist desiring abstraction is a transhistorical affiliation worth exploring. Benning's painted objects are working in dialogue with modernist abstract painters of the 1950s and 1960s. The artist's work most directly appropriates the look of color field paintings by Ellsworth Kelly or Barnett Newman. Yet these objects also reference the expressive gestures and painterly style of artists such as Robert Ryman and Mark Rothko. Certainly, the artist is also quoting a generation of midcentury painters working in conversation with abstract expressionists; Benning's work can be understood in relation to the work of Agnes Martin, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. But my purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive genealogy that might account for Benning's aesthetic sensibility. Rather, I am most concerned with the artist's use of particular formal elements that signal a dialogue with a history of abstract forms in ways that render them differently.

Repetition and seriality, as conventions of modernist artistic production, are also the visible processual aspects of Benning's work that demonstrate the queering possibilities of abstraction. Benning produces a series with hardware store materials, referencing the industrial mass production that was favored over a look of originality.⁸ All similar in shape and size, composed of the same materials, and formed through the same process, they appear as a cohesive body of work under a single exhibition title.⁹ Similar to the goal of abstract expressionism to emphasize the performance of artists as they applied paint to the canvas, Benning's painterly aesthetics refer to the actions used to create them¹⁰—the textural quality created through an uneven application of spray paints and the gesture of marks on their thickly plastered surfaces. These dents and scratches recall the gestural repetition of a paintbrush. Rather than traces of brushstrokes used to build up the surface of a painting, however, Benning's aesthetics evidence a process of negativity or subtraction. This is not reducing an object to its most essential elements and materials—the process associated with minimalism—but rather destruction or negation that points to a queer backward desire.

Benning's recitation of minimalist seriality and the repetitive marking system associated with expressionist abstraction is a queer practice of historiography whereby repetition does not work through a progressive development but instead works through a melancholic attachment to the past. Understanding abstraction as already defined by the *drag* or *drawing away* from which its etymology is derived, the formal and aesthetic pull that abstraction exerts away from the real is also a queering "temporal drag" on its own history (to borrow a phrase from queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman).¹¹ At the same time, Benning is working through an ambivalent relation to this history, admittedly "inspired by things that bother me."¹² This tenuous backward attachment signals an unresolved relation to the things we might most wish to disavow and an approach to history that necessarily includes the things we might want to leave out of the picture.¹³ Through these queer theoretical approaches to difficult forms of history, we can begin to understand how the damaging aspects of Benning's process—marking, scratching, and wearing away at the surface—might also indicate a form of attachment.

Operating through material as well as psychic processes, repetition can be understood as a crucial aspect of modernist abstraction that enacts a traumatic relation to the past. Thinking with Sigmund Freud's theory of the drive (or the compulsion to repeat) and especially the instinctual self-destruction of the death drive



Figure 2. Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1959. Casein, gouache, charcoal pencil on newsprint paper. © 1959 Robert Ryman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

allows another understanding of repetition as traumatic, and a necessary operation of abstraction's history, that is significantly marked by a morbid concern with its own death.¹⁴ A desire for the end of art, or the death of painting, is a modernist discourse activated by Benning's paintings, queering through its impulse toward a destruction that challenges certain claims to mastery along with aims for historic preservation that would characterize some modernist projects. At the same time, this work shows up its melancholic attachments that illustrate a very different and queerly desirous relationship to the past.

In "Painting: The Task of Mourning," Yve-Alain Bois argues that the entire history of abstract painting can be interpreted as longing for its own death. Since modernism, and abstract painting as its emblem, could not have functioned without this apocalyptic myth, argues Bois, this "feeling of the end" is symptomatic of abstract painting's claim to tell the final truth and thus terminate its own

course. For Bois, the paintings of Robert Ryman work through this feeling in the most resolved way by deconstructing the historical position of painting as exceptional manual mastery, decomposing the gesture and the identification of the trace with its referent, its “subjective” origin.¹⁵ I would like to think with his argument about the turn with Ryman from a claim to essential purity toward an endless permutation without a narrative of the final painting, a process endlessly stretched.

Ryman's untitled painting of 1959 (figure 2) is characteristic of his use of a square format, his painterly gestures sometimes revealing the ground of colored paint, unprimed canvas, or paper beneath the dominating white paint. A small block of green paint, layered over black, layered over gray, is emphasized against the expanse of white. This painting, along with another untitled painting from the same year (figure 3), is comparable to Benning's: a larger rectangular field of color is repeated and completed by a



Figure 3. Robert Ryman, *Untitled*, 1959. Oil on manila wrapping paper. © 1959 Robert Ryman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

smaller one, or, we could say, a small patch of color intervenes in a larger field. But if Ryman's decomposing gesture, according to Bois, is that of paint on canvas, Benning's is the dents and scratches on the surface of layered paint. If the endless process that would identify the point of origin (the artist's hand) with these traces is posited but never finished, for Benning the process is one of damage, of surfaces modeled only to be sanded down and marked.

In Benning's work, the subjective reference of the artist's hand is not in the expressive brushstrokes but instead in the texture created by a process of scarring. This damage is both literal and affective: these external marks also speak to a wounding, a painful process that is both felt within and manifested on the surface. Exterior damage and compositional incompleteness might refer to an affective process of self-destruction, at once a regression and a hope for renewal. Benning's objects appear unfinished not only in their marked surfaces but also in the soft, unclean edges and corners and the lack of even paint coverage across the monochrome field. This incompleteness speaks to both the look of paintings such as Ryman's and the psychoanalytic death drive as a queer approach to the history of abstraction.

Benning's is a process without progression, a working toward something that never fully materializes and working through something that is never totally resolved. History can similarly be considered irresolvable, a process that is insufficient to describe that which it creates or contains, always working toward its own end in a process that is itself endless. Here, we can understand how serial repetition also implicates temporality. If a desire of modernism was to return to essential origins through purification and subtraction, then the temporal opposition of progression and regression become troubled as modernism's advancement is sought through a return or remembering. Holding on to the past might be a repetitive working through of trauma that never works through but might also suggest that the past can be a useful queer tool with which to form alternatives.

Repetition, as a performative remaking of the traumatic past, might also be a method for understanding contemporary recitations and appropriations of modernist art. In *The Infinite Line*, Briony Fer takes repetition as the structuring problem of what it means to make art after modernism and with the exhaustion of a modernist aesthetic. Rethinking seriality through Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, Fer understands serial strategies as the ground of all representation, as both ordering foundation and precarious downfall.¹⁶ Through this understanding of serial repetition, we can conceive of destruction and the potential to generate something

new that exists at once and at odds within Benning's artistic practice, where seriality performs a repetition in order to evoke difference.¹⁷ Focusing on Mark Rothko's work at the end of the 1950s, Fer points to the ways in which a new model of the picture developed by abstract expressionists was predicated on (even as it purported to resist) repetition. According to Fer, Rothko's recurring formats point to the differences that play out within repetition, as it emphasizes and dramatizes small variances; here, Fer refers to the rough edges of color panels, the unclear margins, as well as the differing color tones.¹⁸ I think about Benning's paintings as stressing not only formal variations within this repetitive serial process but also more crucially the deviations and specificities of bodies and identities.

Bringing Benning's *Wipe, Rust-oleum Gloss Regal Red and Ace Fluorescent Sun Glow Orange* (figure 4) in proximity to Mark Rothko's 1956 painting *Orange and Yellow* (figure 5) shows how difference and specificity operate in relation to this destructive impulse. Rothko's monochrome fields of orange and yellow are encapsulated by an intermediate shade so that the roughly delineated planes appear to both float on top and emerge from behind their orange-yellow ground. Benning's *Wipe* has no such framing or grounding element. The two monochrome panels are sharply contrasted and cohesive at once. Separated, the deep red panel on the left edge appears to have been cut away from the florescent orange. Yet this high-gloss wedge does not match up with the whole. Its dull top point does not create the corner at the upper left that it promises, and its base does not complete a straight line against the orange panel but instead falls down to a lower plane. Benning's panels are different, and while they do not quite form a whole, their togetherness emphasizes the specific qualities of each part. Rothko's paintings insist on the flatness of the canvas, the effects of color planes set against one another and on their surface to draw out subtle differences within the whole. Alternately, Benning's objects insist on the incompleteness of the composition itself, the sharp distinctions between planes of color, the odd queerness of particulars inherent in the practices associated with abstract painting.

If there is one central figure in the discourse around the "death of painting," it is the monochrome canvas: once considered the zero degree in painting, its legacy continues in Benning's work.¹⁹ As a paradigm of modernist painting, the monochrome was thought to function as a self-sufficient isolation of the pure essentials and a disregard for the inessential elements of painting as well as any index of the artist's touch.²⁰ The monochrome was used as an attempt to escape figuration and pictorialism altogether, but for Rothko, according to Fer, the monochrome is not



Figure 4. Sadie Benning, *Wipe, Rust-oleum Gloss Regal Red and Ace Fluorescent Sun Glow Orange*, 2010. 18⁵/₈ × 15¹/₈ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.

an antipictorial gesture. Instead, the monochrome redeems the “self-cancelling logic of repetition” as painting, where its expressive dimensions evoke an “endless transformation which ultimately preserves rather than destroys.”²¹ While Fer’s assertion reinforces my argument about the death drive of modernist abstraction, played out endlessly through repetition, it also assumes a positive process where history performs as we expect: to conserve. But if Rothko’s practice is one of redemption, Benning claims no such resolutions.

The monochrome’s freedom from figuration, its simultaneous specificity and resistance to coherent signification, is an issue I will

take up below in *Wipe II*. For now I will reiterate a question asked of Rothko's work by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit: is it possible to have an art no longer dependent on its subjects, an invisible art with nothing to see? For them, the threat to readability offered by the lack of clear boundaries and the confusion of inner and outer spaces in Rothko's work also render ambiguous, if not mocking, the framing of subjects in art. If there is a subject, for Bersani and Dutoit it is the very conditions in which a subject might be



Figure 5. Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956. Oil on canvas. $93\frac{1}{2} \times 73\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Art Resource NY. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

rendered visible.²² The ways in which abstract painting, and the monochrome in particular, promises a transcendence from signification, even as it ambiguously frames aesthetic form and color as a complete picture, also suggests an endless process through which this picture never coheres. Benning's work renders this process as a queering practice in which abstraction's ambiguous framing and promiscuous borders are dramatized in the transitional effect of the wipe, which I take as both a visual and textual object in the next section.

Wipe II. Specifying to Excess: The Catachrestic Actions of Abstraction

If we take abstraction seriously as nonrepresentational, as a rendering that is nevertheless devoid of signifying content or context, how does it also operate as a practice of queering without reducing or essentializing difference? Benning paradoxically approaches the specificities attributed to queerness and the particularities of a historical legacy through abstract aesthetics that would seem to render them invisible. Indeed, I take the destabilizing and obscuring effects of abstraction to be precisely generative for queer art practice. While direct representation would seem to assert and account for minoritarian bodies and lives left out of the picture, the politics of identification also functions to classify, categorize, and control through certain historical narratives and claims to objectivity. Abstraction, then, might productively refuse to render a subject legible. Operating as a catachresis, abstraction offers queer alternatives to representation and does so specifically through the wipe in Benning's practice.

Catachresis might describe both the abstracting and queering effects of the wipe as disruptions and exposures within processes of signification, simultaneously aesthetic, linguistic, and historical. Remobilized in queer and postcolonial theory, 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. Thus, catachresis offers alternative approaches to personal and historical narrative. Along these lines, David Eng has defined "historical catachresis" as a problematics of naming that works to dislodge a reified version of history by denying the possibility of any singular historical context.²³ This opens up a space for difference and multiplicity within the inherent slippages in language and history, where every naming is also exposed as a misnaming and history is shown to

be lacking and limited despite its ideals of presence and progress. The transitional space of the wipe, temporally stalled in Benning's paintings, serves as a sliding fault line along which these discontinuities are both revealed and shifted.

Catachresis, then, 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 ambiguous features. Its own catachrestic operation, abstraction constitutes matter without reference, suggesting a version of catachresis that is visible but cannot be fully grasped. Benning's abstraction operates as a queering catachrestic displacement, gesturing to specificities without direct identification. Yet reciting and altering the gestural strategies of white male modernist masters, Benning's work both signifies and dislocates identity. As a radical disruption within the process of naming, queering paradoxically insists on specificity while troubling the defining and definitive regimes of normativity. Even as forms of historical and political naming also function as shaming mechanisms—and it would seem intuitive to avoid those forms of naming now—Benning's work puts pressure on this difficult specificity through aesthetic and linguistic excess.

Even as Benning's particular abstract aesthetics would seem precisely to disavow identification, the queering operations of the artist's abstractions work through the instability of their forms and their strained relation to the past. While they are in the style of history—of modernist abstractions and color field paintings—these little objects performatively disavow notions of originality or essential identity to suggest that identity is not given; much like history, it never fully materializes and is often constituted by absences. Even as they press against history, the paintings are inadequate to describe it and point to the straining articulation of canonical classification—for instance, the frantic naming of new “species” to identify modernist art forms as distinct movements.²⁴ While they belong to a continuous series, categorized under a shared title, Benning's objects are excessively named to subvert legibility and stylistically formed to signify in multiple ambiguous ways. Their outrageous lengthy titles and formal play in the surface grit of their seductively marketed materials also sparks imaginative associations with the glimmer of camp.

Wipe, the first word of every title in Benning's series, references the video editing effect but is also humorously dirty. To wipe is to wash or clean, but it is also to smear, and it certainly carries an eroticism and reference to abject bodily practices. The cleaning function of a wipe in Benning's titles contrasts with the messy surfaces of the work, where the wipe becomes a transition from clean

to unclean, from a sanctioned public practice to an intimate and isolated act. The wipe, then, becomes unspeakable, almost vulgar, and most certainly queer in its slippery signification. Following the *Wipe*, Benning's titles refer to their paint medium, lending their lengthy names—*Montana Gold Banana*, for instance—a tongue-twisting rhythm and repetitive linguistic quality when reiterated aloud. This move imitates color field painters who habitually titled their works with the paint colors they used (Rothko's *Orange and Yellow*, for example). But instead of reciting this practice directly, Benning insists on the ready-made status of the paint by holding intact their brand names (Montana, Ace, etc.) and ironically calling attention to their inherent campiness. These household paints might just as easily refer to the mass-produced nail polish worn by a drag queen or high femme, perhaps *Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red*. The repetitive campy performance enacted through this utterance insists on the paradoxical queerness of their singular identification.

The work of abstraction constitutes a queer resistance to the clear picture that even in its specificity resists singular articulation and classification. Benning's titles name in order to specify: while wiping would refer to a general act, the texture of these objects, the marks and cracks on their surfaces, are specific to them. Their trademarked titles insist on *this* paint produced by *this* company and no other. The tension between specificity and singularity within Benning's series plays out when the object's specificity, the abstract forms that are not unique, become singular through their application. Each of these paintings is composed of the abstract, minimal fields of color that are specific to this object yet have also been repeated in multiple forms since the 1950s. These objects become singular, however, through Benning's application of spray paint and marks against their surfaces. The dents and smears are indeed unique to each individual painting; they cannot be replicated elsewhere. Their shared title, *Wipe*, defines a repetitive practice that nevertheless yields a series of different, singular forms.

As a formal property or technique that exceeds immediate reference or classification, the catachrestic wipe can also function through a promiscuous deployment of materials that cross categorical boundaries, allowing a specific medium to perform in ways that depart from its normal function. Medium specificity is essential to discourses of modernism and, in the case of painting, proceeds from its strict singularity: painting's purity and flatness should distinguish it from sculpture, according to Clement Greenberg.²⁵ This assertion would reach its apex in the monochrome, insisting on the purity of paint medium against an utterly flat picture plane. For Judd's definition of minimalism, the term "specific"

similarly conveys qualities of materials that maintain their individuality, insisting on the wholeness of compositional Gestalt and the aggressive deployment of an object in the here and now.²⁶ His continuation of modernist tradition emphasized specificity through the seeming objectivity of his medium, the unique properties of his industrial, ready-made, and fabricated materials. This strict separation of the specific and the generic is dramatized in Benning's work, where the wipe acts as mediation between categories of painting and sculpture, between singular and unique specificity, even as they undermine this modernist occupation with categorical precision.

The catachrestic operations of medium are pulled out in Benning's practice through monochrome compositions that toe a fraught line between the appearance of mass production and personal touch indexed on their surfaces. The artist deploys hardware store materials of spray paint and plaster; even the supporting panels of Benning's paintings are made of medium-density fiberboard, an engineered wood product. But rather than insist on the individuality or purity of each medium, Benning forms layers that lend softness to the hard edges of minimal sculpture or geometric abstraction, suggesting a process of covering that does not cohere over time. Even as layers of spray-painted plaster are carefully applied, rendered, and reduced through sanding and marking, the objects appear as if they were poured and pulled from a mold, left with all their surface inconsistencies intact. Combining the gestural application of painting with the thickness of sculpture, these objects simultaneously resist readings based on authorship and open the surface of painting to affective contact.

A tension between the generic materials used to construct these paintings and the specific indexes on their surfaces also produce playful monochromes that nevertheless remain open to multiple impressions and processes. The mono might indicate a singularity, but the doubleness of Benning's compositions gesture to possible proliferations. These adjoined compositions of two monochromes always diverge along the wipe, as one plane of color transitions to another through this stilled motion. The dislocating effect of the catachrestic wipe is also a physical separation, then, a departure or split between two monochrome panels. *Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red* (figure 6) can perhaps be considered a monochrome diptych—two separate panels acting as a pair—composed of the same media though differently colored and shaped. While their colors are singular, Benning's application of spray paint is uneven and inexact, revealing various depths of pigment on their surfaces. Especially in the

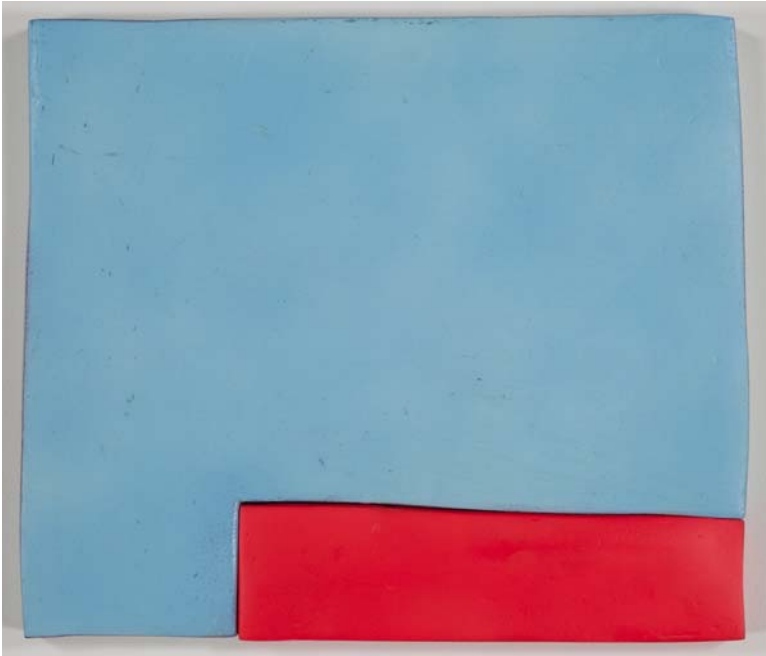


Figure 6. Sadie Benning, *Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red*, 2011. 13 × 15³/₈ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York.

larger field of light blue, varying tonalities create a subtle sense of movement, waves of pigment that resist the suggestion of stasis haunting the monochrome.

As a modernist strategy of abstraction, the monochrome was used to create both emptiness and openness, allowing a space for the viewer to occupy without aesthetic imposition and at the same time resisting both ideological and comfortable readings of paintings.²⁷ We might also consider how Benning's monochromes provide surfaces for projection, even as they do not record or store those projections. Instead, they insist on the ephemerality of memory and the unreliable act of remembering, which itself implies a historical form that performs in ways we would not expect. While it might privilege the viewer, the monochrome, much like the readymade, is ostensibly a modernist method of disavowing the index of the artist's touch. On Benning's paintings, however, indexes of touch are dramatized through the process of marking their surfaces. These scratches are performative, indexing the acts that scarred them over time. Yet they also suggest the object's impenetrability; though

they are slightly beaten, they are not entirely broken. These objects have rough, unfinished qualities; they are both incomplete, as each part refuses to cohere. Neither empty nor totally open, these paintings resist the conception of a monochrome as “blank.”²⁸ Instead, this queered version of the monochrome holds multiple affective, performative iterations on its surface, creating a space in which these repetitive projections might occur without containing or classifying them.

The indexes on the surfaces of Benning's objects point to their function as referents for the projections they do not hold. Rather than provide a singular flattened screen as a surface for projection, the thickness of matter built up on their surfaces also projects out into space, behaving as a sculpture that asserts itself in the viewer's environment. Not only does Benning's *Wipe* combine the specificities of painting and sculpture, but it also places both in proximity to video, suggesting movement through the plastic medium that translates time into space and transcends both. As these objects consistently point back to their own genealogy of forms, they suggest that something happens in the time and space of our viewing encounter: a departure, a transition, a projection but never rendering the total Gestalt through which the figure becomes arrested as a static image. Their ambiguous materiality, moving along alternative temporal trajectories, refuses the purity of medium specificity as well as singular categorization by which our personal practices and histories are also contained and neutralized. Confronted with an abstract medium and style that seems to deflect affective readings and connections, we nonetheless enter an in-between space that mediates queer experiences of the self that are at once intimate and alienating and always somehow inaccessible.

Considering these paintings, Benning's deployment of abstraction as a queering force becomes apparent in the artist's earliest Pixelvision video works. Even as they are autobiographical, Benning's performances of self in these videos consistently refuse singular articulation as well as formal definition. This self-conscious refusal of classification is most apparent in the artist's drag performances of various gendered caricatures in *It Wasn't Love* (1992, 20 minutes) where Benning parodies Hollywood gender conventions to playfully expose their artificiality. In both masculine and feminine drag, Benning plays various embellished roles such as the rebel, the platinum blonde, the gangster, and the heavy-lidded vamp. With this external gender play, Benning asserts a form of transgender queer subjectivity that is fluid and contingent. The Pixelvision itself could be considered a queer technology in its resistance to clarity: the boundaries between shots, the demarcations of edited scenes,

are literally blurred.²⁹ The tight framing, floating movements, and spontaneous style of filming are claustrophobic and disorienting.

Through the Pixelvision, Benning's performative self-images queerly resist a concrete picture. There are many scenes throughout these videos where images of the artist's body become disorganized due to the Pixelvision's fixed focus and close proximity. As Benning speaks, the monitor frame is filled with images of an eye, an ear, a pimple, a nose ring, or a hairy leg. The Pixelvision's low-resolution picture provides Benning with high-contrast imagery, creating a dramatic abstracting effect. In one scene from *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990, 6 minutes), only the artist's hand appears as a white silhouette against a black background. As Benning slowly shifts a hand before the camera, curling and uncurling fingers to form a fist, the artist talks about feeling anxious in a crowded restaurant, ending with the statement "I start to feel more different now, even in this room with eight hundred million other faces." Benning's isolated hand emerges as singular within the picture, yet the difference of this body becomes an abstraction rather than pointing to a stable identity. We take for granted that these are parts of the artist's body, but like the two parts in each of the paintings, they do not cohere.

Medium specificity is already troubled by its inherent instability: in Benning's practice, matter matters, as paint medium and video media become both activating materials and destabilizing intermediaries. My own linguistic performance of alliteration and repetition here signals both word and gender play. The ongoing, humming repetition of *modernism*, *monochrome*, *matter*, and *medium* as conceptual frameworks are also defined by the underlying *male*. Inverted, however, the "M" becomes "W." In an everyday context, these binary restroom door letters performatively police bodily functions by distinguishing between two opposing gendered spaces. Yet, while the "M" signifies both male and man, "W" stands in for the gender (woman) without so clearly defining the sex (female). Where a woman wipes, then, has less to do with the matter of the body than the mediation, the transition, between general (the masculine rendered neutral) and specific (gendered/feminine) spaces.

The "M" that structures the terms "modernism" or "monochrome" is subject to similar upheaval and inversion (to refer back to the term "sexual inversion," with its emphasis on gender role reversal). Inverted through Benning's queer practice, the transitional "W" (wipe) allows for slippage between the generalized male and specified female terrains that would also define an artistic practice. Through performative reiteration and campy repetition,

these definitive frameworks (both textual and visual) are activated differently and queerly. Mediating these transitional spaces, Benning's body of work renders medium differently through the seemingly incongruent artistic materials of paint and video. The wipe's inherent in-betweenness lends it to queer practice both formally and conceptually, as it functions in Benning's work to stress volatile instability. While a temporal and spatial slippage is embedded in the *wipe* media effect itself, the "trans" in *Transitional Effects* emphasizes the refusal to be either/or and to embody a transition between genders, sexes, or singular identity models.

Benning's recent paintings are gesturing to a specific history but one that perversely proliferates across multiple forms and movements. Rather than a claim to dispense with problematic modernist conventions, Benning is among many artists who are reclaiming and revising them for queer feminist art practice. Indeed, there is no escaping the past or the names by which we are subjugated, and this failure itself might be a modernist tradition; Judd himself attempted to deny the past but failed to completely disavow the painterly tradition from which "specific objects" emerged.³⁰ Even as Benning's practice is one of refusal in some instances, the artist gives us tradition with a twist, simultaneously turning back to and away from a legacy that would seem to exclude any concerns about subjectivity, aesthetics that would seem to resist certain kinds of memory or accounts of history. Benning's work activates, if not working through, some contentious forms of abstraction in ways that show up the forms and processes of queering that are already there while also troubling concepts of specificity and difference in relation to abstract aesthetics. The tensions that have emerged here—between inherent queerness and active queering, between desirous attachment and critical reworking—remain unsettled and continue to generate possibilities for the queer work of abstraction in contemporary art. While Benning's objects are wiping across the plane of modernist abstraction, offering a transitional movement through this history, they refuse to wipe it clean of the fabulously messy and gritty aspects of queer forms of embodiment and sexual practice.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. Christie Milliken, "The Pixelvisions of Sadie Benning," in *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood*, edited by Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 285–86.

2. David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now: Introduction," *Social Text* 85 (Fall–Winter 2005): 3, 7.

3. Catherine Russell, *Classical Japanese Cinema Revisited* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 85.

4. Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Work, 1955–1968* (New York: D.A.P., 2002), 4.

5. Locating agency in reiterative practice rather than an external opposition to power, Butler asks "What would it mean to 'cite' the law to produce it differently, to 'cite' the law in order to reiterate and co-opt its power?" Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xxiii.

6. Said's work has encouraged my insistence that the past is alive and useful for us in the present. The full 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's fable of *Pierre Menard and the Quixote* so wittily argues—dramatize the latencies in a prior figure or form that suddenly illuminate the present." Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), 25.

7. In taking a backward or transhistorical approach to abstraction, my project might be considered in relation to the work of Hal Foster, who locates a genealogy of contemporary art in the avant-garde, both historical and postwar, or neo. Foster's understanding of the avant-garde as traumatic, particularly through Freud's concept of "deferred action," is useful for my investigation of the continuing resonance of abstraction in contemporary art, as it shows how postmodern practice can exist in a relation to modern art that undermines standard historical notions of origin and repetition. See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

8. Art critic Leo Steinberg explains the essential American suspicion of art as snobbish, associated with aristocratic artificiality. Alternately, successful painting asserted itself as "Not art but industry. Not to be handicraft, but to produce a series, a line." See Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 62–63.

9. *Transitional Effects* was the title of Benning's exhibition at Participant, Inc., September 18–October 23, 2011.

10. Art critic Harold Rosenberg asserted that "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture, but an event," so the act of painting was meant to disavow art, or the ideas and values associated with art. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon, 1959), 25; originally published in *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22.

11. I borrow this term from Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). She uses "temporal drag"

to complicate notions of feminist generations, arguing that these "movements" can also feel a drag backward as a transformative part of movement itself.

12. Lia Gangitano, Participant, Inc., press release, *Transitional Effects*, September 2011.

13. Heather Love takes this queer approach to history that recons with negative affects and backward desires in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). José Muñoz also conceives of queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past remains a field of possibility and takes up repetition with a difference to show how queerness as an aesthetic practice can use and transform the very elements with which one has a charged and ambivalent relation. José Muñoz, "Just Like Heaven: Queer Utopian Art and the Aesthetic Dimension," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 131–46 (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

14. See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1961). Julia Kristeva also suggests that the dissociation of form (abstracted form) might be ultimate imprints of the death drive. See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, translated by Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 27.

15. Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 230–31.

16. Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art after Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 3.

17. Muñoz ("Just Like Heaven," 134–15) describes the power of aesthetics to function as a "great refusal," a queer utopic negation that also creates, insisting on refusal in order to reimagine.

18. Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 8.

19. In 1921, Russian constructivist artists Malevich and Rodchenko claimed that their monochrome canvases signified the death of painting. See Barbara Rose et al., *Monochromes: From Malevich to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). See also Jeanne Siegel, "End of Painting Phenomenon," in *Painting after Pollock: Structures of Influence* (Amsterdam: G&B Arts, 1999), 67–77.

20. See Benjamin Buchloh's discussion of the monochrome in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays On European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 263–64. See also Ann E. Gibson, "Color and Difference in Abstract Painting: The Ultimate Case of Monochrome," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, 192–204 (New York: Routledge, 2003).

21. Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 22.

22. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "Rothko: Blocked Vision," in *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 104–5. It should also be noted that Rothko denied that his art was completely abstract, insisting that it did have subject matter. See the transcript of a radio program by Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb Broadcast on WNYC, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist" (October 13, 1943).

23. David L. Eng, "The Structure of Kinship: The Art of Waiting in *The Book of Salt and Happy Together*," in *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 59.

24. Thierry de Duve discusses the naming of "species" as movements in relation

to Donald Judd's naming of minimalism in "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," in *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 233.

25. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Francis Francina and Charles Harrison (London: Harper and Row, 1982), 6.

26. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in *Complete Writings: 1959–1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 184.

27. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 488.

28. Warhol ironically called his monochromes "blanks." Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 487.

29. Julia Bryan-Wilson has suggested of Benning's work that "the alternative format of Pixelvision gave special embodiment to queerness," in "Flat Out: Sadie Benning," *Artforum* (January 2007): 59–60.

30. Judd, "Specific Objects," 183.