

(RE-)NEGOTIATING AMBIGUITY'S (ADDED) VALUE(LESSNESS)

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## (Re-)Negotiating Ambiguity's (Added) Value(lessness)

### Abstract

What would an issue on ambiguity be without countering the affirmative calls for a concept that established itself as an aesthetic paradigm and thus as a norm in art discourse as early as around 1800? To answer this, this multi-voiced *Perspective* is dedicated not only to the potentials (added value) but also to the limits (valuelessness) of ambiguity as an analytical tool. David J. Getsy, who works at the intersection of art history, queer studies, and transgender studies, initially delivered his\* reservations about ambiguity at the Symposium *Ambiguity Forum*, held at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, on 14 January 2017. In the sense of a deconstructive (re-)reading practice, 12 contributors from various disciplinary backgrounds accepted the invitation to respond to Getsy's critique of the concept of ambiguity with a short comment. In the current *Perspective*, Getsy has the last word by responding to the forum with a closing comment at the end. What emerges through this experimental-discursive format is, on the one hand, a structurally ambiguous discussion room in which the reader is invited to search for possible contradictions and ambiguous relations of tension between the individual comments and to evaluate them as a contribution to the issues topic. On the other hand, this contribution is above all an invitation to add more views to this open discussion, for example by writing a *Perspective* in reaction to one of the comments.

### **1 Capacity and Openness are not the Same as Ambiguity. Refuse Ambiguity.<sup>1</sup>** (David J. Getsy)

Abstract art is often considered 'ambiguous' due to its openness and capaciousness. Even though this sometimes sounds like a compliment, it is not. More often, it is used to avoid confronting the particularities and complexities proposed by an abstract form and others' investments in it. The same intransigent form can and does mean differently for different viewers. To call this situation 'ambiguous' is to fall back into hopeless subjectivism and avoidance. Instead, let's call this situation 'competing' to show how much it is in the viewer's incomplete attempt to classify that differences emerge and that supposedly stable taxonomies unravel amidst contestations and divergences of reception.

Nominations of ambiguity are nothing more than declarations of resignation. We call something ambiguous when we give up on it and when we avoid committing to learning about all that does not fit into our categories. Objects, people, texts, events, and acts are not themselves ambiguous. They are particular, inassimilable, unorthodox, unprecedented, or recalcitrant. To invoke 'ambiguity' is to flee from the confrontation with something that does not easily fall into one's patterns of knowing. This act of exhausted reading disrespects the particularity of that which is before us

and instead writes it off as being at fault — as being unknowable, indiscernible, and incompletely categorizable. ‘Ambiguity’ is safe to invoke, because it places blame for our own limitations elsewhere. It is a method of deflection and scapegoating. It enables us to throw up our hands and beat a hasty retreat from confronting how limited our categories and systems are. After all, what do we really mean when we say something or someone is ambiguous? We mean that *we* cannot read, cannot identify, and cannot classify. Instead, I want to uphold the particularity and inscrutability that the backhanded slur ‘ambiguous’ attempts to manage. I want to see that particularity as a challenge to systems of knowing.

‘Ambiguous’ as an invocation or description merely signals the limitations of the one who would deploy that term. This does not mean I want everything clear and in its place. Quite the opposite: I want to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies. This is a queer stance, for it denies the applicability or the neutrality of those taxonomies as adequate representations of the world’s complexity. Rather, they are artificial impositions of normativity more concerned with policing boundaries than with engagement. To take this term to task is to demand that we see the greater structural limitations that its invocations hope to mask. ‘Ambiguity’ as a description is not just lazy. It’s chauvinistic. More to the point, its deployment keeps us from recognizing and embracing the chance to see beyond the categories that are nothing more than blinders forcing us to stay on a narrow path.

Especially today, we cannot afford ambiguity. We must attempt to embrace inscrutability and particularity, and we can defiantly exceed or jam the taxonomic protocols that seek to delimit and define us. The undertow of ambiguity is complacency and surrender, and it is misapplied to acts of refusal and self-definition.

## **2\_Vibrational** (Sampada Aranke)

In November 2019, the same year that Getsy published “Ten Theses on Queer Abstraction,” I went to see Camille Norment’s *untitled (Red Flame)* at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago. I’ve been reflecting on Norment’s artwork in light of Getsy’s insistence in Thesis 9 to “refuse ambiguity.”<sup>2</sup> For Getsy, calling a piece of abstract art ambiguous often means “to avoid confronting the particularities and complexities proposed by an abstract form and others’ investments in it,” thus resulting in “hopeless subjectivism and avoidance.”<sup>3</sup> Without

a doubt, I agree with Getsy's assertion. I find that ambiguity is yet another cynical form of a lazy maker and lazier viewer. My stomach churns at the thought of living in an ambiguous aesthetic world. Instead, I want us to work for it. This might be why Norment's installation won't leave me, and indeed why the work attracts a non-ambiguous, highly relational modality of abstraction.

Norment's multi-channel sound installation takes as its centerpiece the megaphone — a technological apparatus commonly used as a means of communication in the streets during acts of collective resistance. Taking *fire* as a mode of destruction and creation, Norment's attention to how social uprising spreads like wildfire — uncontrollable, indiscriminately impacting everything it touches — gives us a different sense of the word 'movement' and how collectivity *feels*.

The installation attracts. Viewers enter a disorientingly pitch black room. By obscuring modes of sight, we are partially blacked out, except for coming into fleeting moments of visibility depending on how close we are to a red light ("flame") that glows from the center of the room, radiating light onto three megaphones with their backs to each other, each affixed to its own microphone stand.

In Norment's hands, the megaphones are emptied of their complete function as objects that transmit sound while on the move, roving technologies that serve in the function of mobilizing the masses. Instead, these megaphones are rendered still, placed on microphone stands like a trio taking the stage. Surrounding us throughout this visual encounter with the microphone is a series of resonant sonic intonations. Sounds drone and pop and squeal and settle. It's an atmosphere of sound; a blanket that quickly becomes white noise — or better yet, black noise — and is something we begin to feel in our bones, in our breath, on our skin.

Norment is known for using vibration as material in her work. The artist has called her uptake of the material "sympathetic vibration," signposting the way that energies move as "dissonant attraction and repulsion of magnetism" that ultimately relate to "scarring of the individual mind and body," thus enfolding active corporeal relations into what is seemingly accepted as an individual's singular relationship to sensorial feelings.<sup>4</sup> This approach to both the conceptual apparatus and materiality of vibration presents an acute attention to how the sonic bends beyond representation and into the performative. Vibrations are catalyzed through a pulsing speaker, compressing air in its release of frequency, which travels into our own pulsing eardrums

until we feel it shaking inside our chests. In this instance, the frequencies that produce those pulsing waves use the body as a resonator, traveling with and through us in such a way that the sonic apparatus lives vibrantly because we carry it. We become the tuning forks that calibrate these vibes and the politics they carry.

While it moves through us, vibration also appears, though it might be difficult for our naked eyes to see it. As an amateur, I attempted to photograph the work (Fig. 1). The photograph is embarrassingly blurry. It dawned on me that these blurs were evidence of how these vibrations made their way into my own shaky hand and shakier photographs. The blur, a notion theorized by Fred Moten, is itself a mechanism of sociality, a way that we move away from a false, stable notion of self into a more collective understanding of who *we* are or might be.



Fig. 1: Camille Norment: *Untitled (red flame)*, 2019. Installation view in the Logan Center Gallery. © Sampada Aranke.

“Can you hold one another tonight in the blur, so that one and another are no more?”<sup>5</sup> The blur provides an occasion for holding, an occasion for a dissolution of self into the others that help make us. This is a collective fantasy that I’d like to imagine is at play in these terrible photographs: some other thing acting upon my hand, as prompted by the pulsing vibratory power of Norment’s social and political sound.

Norment's work might be precisely that "infectuous transmutation," that "in-eluctably contingent" mode of abstraction that Getsy so incredibly provides language for in his theses.<sup>6</sup> Without a doubt, Getsy queers how I've thought about abstraction and indeed how I think about Norment's work. Ever deploying a "critical suspicion of normativity,"<sup>7</sup> Getsy urges a slowed pace of attention, calling upon an intensity of study that does not forsake the pleasures of visceral engagement, the ways our bodies might elicit thinking, how whatever vibrations work through me are also activations of a non-normative peak of sensation otherwise relegated impermissible in public. The red flame is also flamingly read, a turn of phrase only made possible after Getsy for me, enabling me to mobilize a practice that counters the political as merely an activation of the visibly coherent. Instead, I think of the "sometimes"<sup>8</sup> that Getsy offers at the end of his essay, as a poetic refrain that mobilizes realms of possibility within and against the 'always' demands of the manifestly political. Sometimes the resonance of an art object is what stays long after the act of seeing, like a lingering feeling that takes hold. Sometimes these sensations are what move me to act publicly or invite me to stay in to vibe out. That might be the queer capacity that lasts.

### **3\_In Favor of Giving Up (Marie Sophie Beckmann)**

"We call something ambiguous when we give up on it," writes Getsy, suggesting that the designation in question obscures the particularity of an uncategorizable something and points instead to our own inability, or rather unwillingness, to engage with it properly.<sup>9</sup> Getsy plays ambiguity off against abstraction. While for him the latter is about the possibilities and limits of queer visualizations or a tactical refusal of specific forms of representation, he does not seem to ascribe any productive potential to ambiguity; on the contrary, it does little more than describe the inadequacy of those who invoke it. But what if this 'giving up' does not signify a lazy escape route, as Getsy seems to suggest, but the starting point for engagement? What if the irritation, frustration, even anxiety resulting from confronting something we simply cannot grasp, place, or make sense of were not a failure to recognize its particularities, but the very precondition for doing so?

I want to propose that what strikes us as ambiguous not only causes "minor and generally unprestigious feelings,"<sup>10</sup> but often does so because of its *messiness*. What is potentially multiple and mutable, perhaps slippery and irregular is, well, irritating.

A messy phenomenon, in the words of John Law, “necessarily exceed[s] our capacity to know”<sup>11</sup> it, meaning we cannot *know* it through normative methodology, pre-conceived terminology, and established (binary) systems of categorization. Another approach is needed.

From the perspective of someone working in the fields of film and media studies, I am thinking here of images and objects that *look* or *feel* messy because of their material quality or subject matter; or that *act* messy because they defy the traditional (often heteronormative) logic of genre, narrative, form, or canon, or because they circulate in ways that are messy and elusive. I am thinking of objects whose form and meaning rarely make for reliable reference points, as they are (re)shaped by the context and framing at hand. Such objects evoke a sense of ambiguity precisely because they cause us to dwell in uncertainty, to vacillate between poles until, hopefully, we open ourselves up to the idea of multiplicity — that is, ambiguity. Because most of the time, it’s not a matter of either/or, but rather of and/also. To give up on something, ultimately, might mean coming to terms with our situated perspective and the unstable, changing nature of what we encounter.

#### **4\_A Comment — If it is One (Jakob Claus)**

In the ninth thesis on queer abstraction, Getsy harshly criticizes the notion of ambiguity for its manifold connotation with passivity. After guiding the reader through eight theses on modes and techniques of queer abstraction and its empowering, political, strategic, provoking and context-sensitive nuances, to Getsy, ambiguity appears problematic in various ways. Ambiguity, he argues, is a way of avoiding confrontations, a niche for “hopeless subjectivism,”<sup>12</sup> relinquishing the phenomenon or experience one might attribute it to. For Getsy, ambiguity appears as a symptom of indecision and facile safety in the light of seemingly omnipotent categories that one’s im- or expression do not conform to. As abstraction can act as a specific form of desire and experience, ambiguity manifests as lack of all these potentials.

From a media studies perspective I would most certainly have chosen one of the other theses to comment on. Getsy there elaborates queer abstraction in respect of power relations and configurations of visibility, representation, exposure and each of their antipodes. While reading the theses, I contextualized them in relation to questions of mediality and the basic insight that each medium is said to render some-

thing/-one visible while at the same time producing areas of invisibility and non-perceptibility. Consequently, media bears the power to visibility and opacity, thereby leaving itself out and in the background as much as possible. Nevertheless, media tends to have a primal lust for exposure and mediation. As Getsy writes in reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the fifth thesis: “Faith in exposure [...] is characteristic of a paranoia that defensively seeks to make the world conform to its imperialist ways of seeing.”<sup>13</sup> But let me not slide towards the other theses → refuse meandering.

As Getsy rightly criticizes, ambiguity as gesture and judgment can have the defensive tendency to attribute nothing in order to avoid the risk of decision. Instead of doing the exhausting work of figuring out the categories that obstruct and normalize an experience or phenomenon, ambiguity suggests — as aesthetic or political ascription — an uninvolved detachment. Contrary to the imperial longing for total transparency, Getsy states: “I want to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies.”<sup>14</sup> But what if this “want” doesn’t work, even in cultural, artistic, or literal critique or theory? What if I cannot differentiate but am coerced to communicate?

As I understand Getsy’s theses, queer abstraction is not only a *medium for* but also a *form of* communication. Thus, queer abstraction allows for specific relations, references, and meanings to be built and circulated, written and read into.<sup>15</sup> Instead of an analytical understanding of communication as a semi-static relation, I here want to shortly reference Alexander R. Galloway’s, McKenzie Wark’s, and Eugene Thacker’s notion of ‘excommunication.’ In short, they suggest that all communication and all media bear not so much their negative but their non-communication, in the sense of previous communication that has taken place. They claim: “Prior to the cybernetic dichotomy of information and noise, prior to the metaphysical dichotomy of presence and absence, excommunication is the communication of ‘no longer communicating,’ the silence of ‘nothing more to say.’”<sup>16</sup> What they argue for — briefly summarized — is the idea that even within ubiquitous communication and connection, there is a moment where no communication can or might happen. Even though this is not necessarily desirable, it nevertheless hints at a form of rupture and a moment of indecision in omnipresent networks of references, coding and de-coding. If ex- implies a past, a ‘nothing-more’ — in my associative thoughts — I’d like to also think of a ‘not-obvious,’ a ‘maybe-not-realized’ relation: in-communication, so to say. Or: ambiguity.

Thus, while reading Getsy's theses, I thought of the notions of complexity, retention, or pause, which are implied somewhere in the idea and moments of ambiguity, accompanied by its possibly passive, paralyzing, or even reactionary tendencies. But as Getsy warns us at the beginning, every category "will fail us in the end even though it has served to make things possible and imaginable."<sup>17</sup>

### **5\_ Queer Ekphrasis (Ashton Cooper)**

In his call for those of us who write about queer abstract art to "refuse ambiguity," Getsy makes an important warning against a kind of lazy criticism that only understands the artwork in relation to established structures of meaning. He argues that queer abstraction has a "radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies"<sup>18</sup> and that it is precisely by attending to these particularities that we can move away from stale, standard classificatory systems for understanding abstract form. It seems to me that in asking us to interrogate our uses of descriptive codes and categories, Getsy also necessarily brings up questions around *methods* of describing. I wonder if refusing ambiguity might be put into action through a kind of queered formalism or practice of material description that is highly attuned to what Getsy describes as the artwork's "particularity and inscrutability."

Historically, formalism and taxonomic art historical meaning-making have gone hand in hand (the classic example being über-taxonomist Clement Greenberg's teleological schema centered on abstract flatness). I'm interested, however, in what it would mean to pry apart the two terms, to recuperate formal or material analysis as a productive practice of queered close looking. In the first years of the 1960s, Greenberg's great critic, Leo Steinberg, offered a theory of non-taxonomic criticism that — to be anachronistic — is a kind of queering of the analytic repeatability of the Greenberg model. In his essay "Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public," 1962, Steinberg performs his role as an art critic, narrating his uncomfortable confrontation with the early work of inscrutable queer abstractionist Jasper Johns. Describing his experience of encountering the work, he writes: "I am left in a state of anxious uncertainty by the painting, about painting, about myself." Steinberg accepts and encourages this state of being unmoored from established explanatory formations, concluding that "modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where *no values are fixed*" (emphasis added). Steinberg's method for approaching artworks that exceed existing

structures of meaning is to write his way through it, to chronicle his process of observation, all the while underscoring the subjective nature of his descriptions.

One way to answer Getsy's challenge to attend to the particularity and inscrutability of abstract artworks could be an extreme attention to the formal, to the physical, to the material —what I would playfully term a 'queer ekphrasis.' Meaning 'description' in Greek, ekphrasis is, classically, a literary or poetic approach to describing works of art. If formalism in its Greenbergian iteration was about creating a replicable system of analysis, ekphrasis is a practice of close looking that hangs on the subjectivity of the interlocutor (and whatever desires and identifications they bring to the table). Doing queer ekphrasis means performatively moving through the act of description, finding the productiveness of critical anxiety and uncertainty, misusing art historical methods, taking wild guesses and imaginative leaps, lingering over an object's physicality, neglecting the usual categories of explanation, and letting ideas wander along without finality or enduring conclusions. If ambiguity acts as a critical short cut, queer ekphrasis meanders toward meaning.

### **6\_Is it Ambiguous, Competing, or Fragile? (Fatma Kargin)**

I take this thought-provoking statement from Getsy as an invitation to join in and play around with it. So, this playing-around-with is exactly what I will be doing within this short comment.

In terms of reception, Getsy writes that "the same intransigent form can and does mean differently for different viewers,"<sup>19</sup> and that to "call this situation 'ambiguous' is to fall back into hopeless subjectivism and avoidance."<sup>20</sup> The process of reception is neither 'ambiguous' in this sense, nor should it be necessarily redefined as 'competing' to point out the dependent structures and elements in it. Alternatively, we could define the process as fragile. This fragility in reception stems from its temporal structure and the availability in and of the spectators.

At an installation by Richard Serra, Noë notes that "to encounter one of these works is not so much to see something you don't understand as it is to find yourself someplace and not know your way around. But this isn't psychological manipulation; it's not just getting under your skin. It's an invitation to find out where you are by exploring the work. The pieces are worlds, and worlds afford opportunities for exploration, investigation, and learning."<sup>21</sup> A beautiful upshot of this consideration is that

the ambiguity in this sense affords opportunities to engage with. In other words, ambiguity has something destabilizing, provoking, exceeding, exciting, and inviting; ambiguity is indeed an open invitation to grapple with it. And finally, ambiguity is not a neutral category, but it is fragile as a quality of presence we achieve.<sup>22</sup>

Let us say that ambiguity is understood as an arrival point or a demonized giving-up, then it should/can be, as beautifully formulated by Getsy, refused. Since it does not refer to or even consider the particular qualities that make the work of art and the process of reception such a specific process of debate, and it solely hints at one's limitations. From this point of view, the proposed and upheld embracement of inscrutability and radical particularity offers a promising dimension to the discussion. The assumption is that through this embracement there will be a chance to see beyond the categories that are at best blinders and nothing else. Therefore, the specific affordance of "inscrutability and radical particularity" would indeed provide a continuation and a desirable excess in and of analysis concerning reception.

This brief discussion brings me back to fragility. On another note, on the presence and its fragile condition, Noë argues that "there is not one reference or aboutness relation. Presence is something we achieve, or, perhaps, fail to achieve."<sup>23</sup> Now, with this presence, what I have in mind is the "inscrutability" and the "radical particularity." Both of them, as a mode of presence to achieve, refer to the capacity and its manifest "power as potentiality [...] and imminence."<sup>24</sup> With this promising potential in mind, specifically, with 'particularity' Getsy assumes that it can be considered as a challenge to systems of knowing,<sup>25</sup> whereas 'ambiguity' is accused of being a scapegoat for limitations and an act of exhausted reading.<sup>26</sup>

If ambiguity is framed in such an inhibited way, then the need of exceeding its incapability with 'inscrutability' and 'radical particularity' could be plausible. But, again, is ambiguity something which limits and defines us? And, if ambiguity puts the blame of one's limitations elsewhere, where do the upheld inscrutability and radical particularity put the blame exactly?

## **7\_ Why Ambiguity Matters AND/OR: Aesthetic Ambiguity & Queer(ing)-Political Engagement (Oliver Klaassen)**

On the occasion of the exhibition *Wolfgang Tillmans* (07/18/13–10/20/13) at the Museo de Artes Visuales (MAVI), the artist created a poster and hung it in the public urban space of Santiago. The upper half was filled by an image depicting a portrait of

two closely embraced — and readable as male\* — people kissing against a black background. It is a detail of Tillmans' analog photograph *The Cock (Kiss)* (2002) (Fig. 2). The image in the lower half captivated the viewer with a rather abstract formal language: The filigree, thread-like black formations of varying density, moving streamlined and wavelike with sharp and blurred portions in a blue image space, are the results of photochemical processes shot without a camera or negative. Although this detail of Tillmans' camera-less photograph *Ostgut Freischwimmer (right)* (2004) (Fig. 3) is governed by aesthetic ambiguity, it nevertheless allows for diverse associations. Far from a possible microscopic image, I inevitably associate what I see with the element of water due to the blue coloration. Thus, the dark accumulations of filigree thread structures remind me, among other things, of tentacles of jellyfish, of (human) hair moving under water, and of stains and streaks of ink dissolving in water. With the concept of aesthetic ambiguity, I refer to Verena Krieger who, distinguishing it from pictorial ambiguity, states: "Beyond the purely visual, artistic ambiguity also has a conceptual dimension — it is aesthetically shaped, intensified, complexified, cultivated ambiguity."<sup>27</sup> I find the encounter with aesthetic ambiguity in the *Freischwimmer* photograph particularly appealing because it confronts me with the loss of clear orientation and unambiguous identification, which is why I must navigate outside familiar systems. What for many people is probably rather challenging and burdensome — connected with the desire to dissolve ambiguity — is a familiar terrain for me precisely because ambiguity, the renunciation of a hard either-or and the acceptance of shades of gray are central components of my non-binary gender identity. The clash of different objects in this mini collage, in which two details of photographs are combined to create a comprehensive view, creates a tension that fascinates and irritates me at the same time. Left with a sense of vagueness in the realm of experience, the poster challenges me to leave my comfort zone, where stable and unambiguous views dominate. As a viewer of the two photographs, I no longer must make a binary decision, but am invited to settle comfortably without decision in ambiguity.



Fig. 2: Wolfgang Tillmans, *The Cock (Kiss)*, 2002. © Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

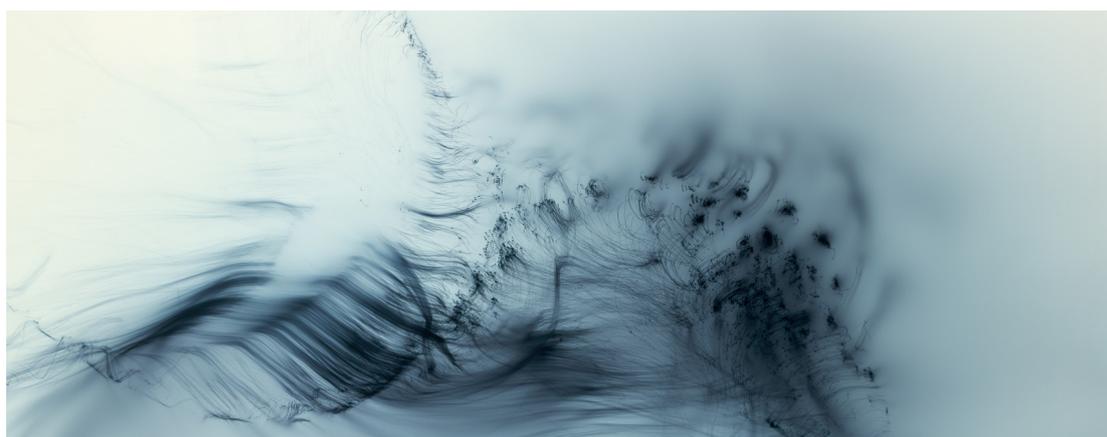


Fig 3: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Ostgut Freischwimmer (right)*, 2004. © Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne

In my PhD project, it is those examples from the field of contemporary photographic art that lead me to reflect on the interplay of aesthetic ambiguity and queer(ing)<sup>28</sup>-political engagement<sup>29</sup> that is critical of normativity and tends to subvert binary oppositions. Fully aware not only of the normativity of ambiguity in art,<sup>30</sup> but also of the contradictions that permeate a possible connection between aesthetic ambiguity and sociopolitical engagement,<sup>31</sup> I follow Krieger's plea for a more nuanced exploration of ambiguous phenomena in art and visual culture with this interdisciplinary project that is situated at the intersection of queer(ing) art studies<sup>32</sup> and ambiguity art studies.<sup>33</sup> The fact that ambiguity is a "movement of opening, differentiation, and contin-

gency”<sup>34</sup> that “can only be traversed in search and tactile movements, and opened up in trial treatments”<sup>35</sup> requires in my view an experimental analytical approach. This search-movement project probably corresponds most closely to a deconstructive gesture that Jacques Derrida describes as a “movement producing itself entirely in the structure of ambiguity.”<sup>36</sup> It is about the scientific production of knowledge, which functions less according to controllability (mastery) and according to a binary either-or principle, but rather according to an open approach of thinking, which is characterized by an as-well-as and/or a neither-nor principle.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, it is a matter of adopting a research approach that is characterized by a “pleasure in and a desire for contradictoriness, discordances, ambiguities”<sup>38</sup> and that is concerned with “intellectual mobility in interpreting and reading.”<sup>39</sup> Since plural, polylogical readings of a deconstructive reading are most likely to do justice to the diverse “faultlines of [aesthetic; O.K.] experience,”<sup>40</sup> it is necessary to let poststructuralist and phenomenological approaches, which tend to relate to each other in a conflictual relationship against the background of the history of science, meet in a productive act of reconciliation. Last but not least, the receptive level of ambiguity<sup>41</sup> or the performative effect of ambiguity, which leads to the production of ambivalence on the value level,<sup>42</sup> entails in my view the necessity for (self-)reflection on one’s own shares as a logical conclusion. This means making one’s own modes of reception together with one’s own experiences of reception transparent in one’s engagement with the research object,<sup>43</sup> thereby following Dario Gamboni’s motto “that ambiguity demands subjective engagement and that there is no interpretation without risk.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, for a search-moving approach to images the goal should be to explore the question of how a researcher can move from WRITING ABOUT to WRITING WITH<sup>45</sup> and SITUATED<sup>46</sup> WRITING AS.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of Tillmans’ MAVI exhibition poster, with which I opened my short commentary, I have elaborated that “radical particularity”<sup>48</sup> and ambiguity do not necessarily have to contradict each other. With the disparity of the individual elements on the poster, Tillmans employs an artistic strategy that I understand, following Susan Sontag (1962), as “radical juxtaposition,” that is, “the idea of destroying conventional meanings, and creating new meanings or counter-meanings.”<sup>49</sup> The specific effect of this strategy is comparable to that of an equivocation (*VerUneindeutigung*<sup>50</sup>), which produces — in the sense of a consistent undecidability — a dynamic ambivalence on

the value level, and establishes an ambiguized form of paradox<sup>51</sup>. In a poststructuralist manner, this (work and reception) mode of aesthetic ambiguity, which can best be grasped with the oxymoron *decidedly undecidable*,<sup>52</sup> is characterized by the recognition of decided undecidability and thus calls for an open, non-binary understanding of difference. As a result, not only aesthetic guiding differences in the hegemonic art field (such as abstract and figurative), but also political questions related to sexuality, gender, and desire are opened for (re-)negotiation processes.<sup>53</sup>

### **8\_Ambiguity Accountability Capaciousness Capacity (Erica Rand)**

Here's what I love about Getsy's take on ambiguity: his insistence that we check ourselves when we are affronted by someone or something we don't understand. He talks of *ambiguous* used as a "backhanded slur" that misattributes problems we should often locate in ourselves. When we say "something or someone" is ambiguous, he writes, we "really mean [...] that we cannot read, cannot identify, and cannot classify," that it does not "easily fall into [our] patterns of knowing."<sup>54</sup>

Getsy emphasizes, particularly in work he labels trans studies,<sup>55</sup> that our approach to the *someones* affects our approach to the *somethings*, and his text brought me immediately to Leslie Feinberg's 1993 novel *Stone Butch Blues*, and the scene where Jess introduces the "constant refrain" of their gender-nonconforming childhood: "Is that a boy or a girl?" I was one more bad card life had dealt my parents."<sup>56</sup> Is *that*? Whose harm? These are matters, as micha cárdenas writes, that "resonate with necropolitical gravity." Shifts between passing and not passing — as stably ensconced in a binary gender category, especially when Black or Brown — may mark to the appraiser shifts between human and beneath human.<sup>57</sup>

I followed Getsy, then, on the harms of inadequate taxonomies, both gender-linked and in entrenchments of thought more broadly. As a teacher trained and first employed in art history, I followed him, too, back to crabby students disinclined to engage abstract art or other objects of study that they considered unreasonably opaque, rather than unfamiliar to them for reasons that they might take some responsibility for. One long-ago incident I still think about concerned a wonderful interview by Maurice Berger, lost to COVID in 2020, with the artist and philosopher Adrian Piper, who discussed working to "blast the simplistic categories that we impose on people,"<sup>58</sup> especially as they uphold gendered racism. One of her central strategies,

relevant here, has involved confronting viewers with discomfiting or unexpected ambiguities that expose our stakes in those categories. For example, *Cornered* (1988) presented U.S. viewers who understand themselves to be white with the historical likelihood that, given centuries of intermixing and the one-drop rule, they are actually black.<sup>59</sup> During class, an indignant white student charged that despite critiquing arcane academic language, Piper herself used gratuitously obscure words. Her example: *miscegenation*. Who had ever heard of that? It was an occasion to talk together about how white supremacy, the genesis of widespread laws and violence involving racial intermixing, enabled even anti-racist avid learners like her not to learn about its harms. So I know where Getsy's coming from about evasions of accountability for what we don't know, why charges of ambiguity bespeak for him refusal to engage.

Yet I also want to take him somewhere else. "Resignation," "exhausted reading," too much to take on: I know that I'm extracting his words from one context to another but I can't help reading Getsy's characterization of refusers through pandemic conditions of inadequate supply, of wherewithal drained from plenty to sparse, or meager to missing, depending on where inequity started you. After a year plus of teaching in the pandemic, I pay better attention to how not merely willingness but also desire to engage can run up against shortages of time, energy, sustenance, wellbeing, materials, tools, connection — and, at the same time, to how we limit capacity building by conceptualizing it primarily in regard to shortage.

I want to share with you an experience of capacity boost that recently galvanized my thinking about this. It involves *Inclinations* (2019), a "dance film short" by Danielle Peers and Alice Sheppard with Lisa Niedermeyer and Lindsay Eales in which, as its webpage announces, "disability aesthetics, disability community and a gorgeous ramp meet the institutional histories and discordant inclinations that can lurk just below the surface."<sup>60</sup> To "support the accessibility of the work," the filmmakers offer two versions: one with visual description, one without.

I first played the version without the description. To bare some layered ableism, I presumed it was the version for people like me who can access the film without extra help. (Setting aside the strong multi-correcting eyeglasses that, as Peers and Eales showed me elsewhere, are among the tools people use to *perform* the category of able-bodiedness — half of another inadequate binary — that we believe ourselves sta-

bly to inhabit.<sup>61</sup>) I clicked on the second version out of distanced curiosity: how did the filmmakers deliver support to those who need it?

Yet I soon realized that the visual description, besides being an artistic component itself, greatly supported my own access to the film, partly by advancing my starting points. Just to begin: It presented the performers as “four dancers using manual wheelchairs” — useful information about equipment and the politics of labeling. It offered their names and pronouns (never accessible visually). It confirmed my sense of the setting’s intended “deep institutional feel.” It alerted me (to one way) that race mattered in the choreography, that the three “white” performers often traveled “in a pack,” sometimes in “robotic fits and starts,” with the “mixed-race” dancer often on her own.

I would need at least twice the allotted word count to share even my preliminary embarkations with *Inclinations* as enhanced by the Audio Describers. One I am super-keen to pursue begins in a hot flirtation. Two dancers approach each other, touch, gaze, a bold move, startled retreat, still willing, arms open, vulnerable. Then “both smile seductively and swing hips” by swiveling wheelchairs side to side, chests facing forward (3:42). Ah. Swiveling conveys swinging. Hips swing sitting. The words+movement shift my awareness about how generally unstated ability requirements may limit how we convey and take in desire. That’s not totally new information to me. I’ve just published a whole damn book working with hips — inspection of, flirtation through, metaphorical potential of — that explicitly critiqued those very limits.<sup>62</sup> Yet I stopped short of engaging otherwise. Now my body/mind/heart/curiosity/creativity is/are sparking, sparkling, on the move.

Getsy wants to “exceed” and “jam” the “taxonomic protocols” that work to “delimit and define us,”<sup>63</sup> that can be deadening and deadly. Yes! The more of us on that project the better. So where can we get by factoring in that if as Getsy writes, capacious is not the same as ambiguous, it is also not the same as accessible? I’m excited to find out.

## **9\_What is Love? — Ambiguity’s Potential for Intimate Relationships (Tillmann Schorstein)**

After reading Getsy’s text “Capacity and openness are not the same as ambiguity. Refuse ambiguity,”<sup>64</sup> I am left with a feeling of ambiguousness. Instead of refusing this feeling, I would like to take it as a starting point for an attempt to expand his remarks

in the field of intimacy. To do so, I additionally draw on a passage of Şeyda Kurt's book *Radikale Zärtlichkeit — Warum Liebe politisch ist*<sup>65</sup> (*Radical Tenderness — Why Love is Political*) and discuss ambiguity's potential for creating 'zärtliche' (tender) intimate relationships.

In his text, Getsy calls for the refusal of ambiguity as a descriptive category and instead pleads with us to confront particularities in order to challenge existing systems of knowledge. He appeals to the reader, as a recipient of abstract art, to take a clear stance in the engagement with an abstract form and to face its particularities without negating its complexities. To call something 'ambiguous' is what Getsy sees as a "declaration of resignation,"<sup>66</sup> a speech act that writes something off as being unknowable and that keeps its speaker from clear positioning. In that way, ambiguity degenerates into an empty word.

In fact, to call something ambiguous can also be an expression of speechlessness. A speechlessness that, following Şeyda Kurt, is closely linked to power structures. Examining the concept of romantic love in regard to its cultural meaning(s) and contradictions, she comes to the conclusion that romantic love is told along the lines of standardization and putative opposites that do not allow for ambiguity. The language of romantic love often condenses in phrases like 'I love you' or 'All you need is love,' which seem to implicate a very clear meaning, but which are in fact imprecise and equivocal. In Western culture, romantic love is enormously charged with meaning, and at the same time individually different and thus extremely ambiguous; for what exactly do we mean when we speak of 'love' or when we say "I love you?" We face an ambiguity that pretends to be unambiguous, that in fact requires this un\_ambiguousness in order to be considered 'true' or 'genuine' at all. In this regard, those speech acts might refer to a promise of happiness<sup>67</sup> that frees us from the obligation to deal with what constitute their meaning. Instead, what language is needed to describe intimate relationships? Following Kurt, the paradoxical relationship between ambiguity and unambiguity prevents us from having sincere, tender ('zärtliche') relationships. In order to move beyond, particularities are required: It is required to be specific about what really constitutes, shapes the relationship to another person for us and what does not. It requires facing our own ambiguities, appreciating, negotiating, and working with them.

Instead of giving up ambiguity, I would argue for its potential for spotlighting speechlessness in the way how we relate to things and for challenging common ways of thinking in the field of intimacy (and art). Acknowledging ambiguity can help us to connect to other subjects, objects, abstract forms, but also to ourselves. It may help us to think in relations. Hence, ambiguity must not be the objective but the starting point of an engagement. Acknowledging ambiguity and working with it can also mean to open the way for new narratives, in art and the field of intimacy.

## 10 Refusing Ambiguity in Queer Art Historical Studies (Sophie Sexon)



Fig. 4: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, “Christ’s Side Wound,” Psalter and Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, The Cloisters MS. 69.86, fol. 331r <<https://www.met-museum.org/>>.

In “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” Getsy notes how “abstract art is often considered “ambiguous” due to its openness and capaciousness.”<sup>68</sup> Much abstract imagery

has evaded art historical study as it did not fit into received and unambiguous categories. Yet the polysemous nature of abstract medieval images requires a highly articulated level of understanding in order to analyze, and training often involves the study of literature, art, Latin, manuscript studies, history, and theology. Religious imagery which had heretofore been deemed too ‘ambiguous,’ such as the late medieval abstract image of Christ’s side wound pictured above (Fig. 4), was consigned to the realms outwith understanding and therefore deemed unworthy of research. Ambiguous images that did not signify within reified categories were previously termed ‘pagan,’ ‘obscene,’ ‘grotesque,’ or in a more historical sense, ‘queer.’ Feminist studies embraced abstract wound imagery first, as often the abject and feminine were also banished from the categories of the holy, the good, the heterosexual, the Christian, and therefore, the recognizable and understood. Yet contemporary studies of the medieval understandings of ambiguity in both the body and in sexuality do recognize that there was a higher level of ambiguity tolerance in pre-modern societies; something which appeals to queer image makers in the present.

Queer contemporary artists such as Ron Athey and Franko B find appeal in abstracted wound imagery in a manner recognized by queer medieval art historians, with authors often drawing parallels between contemporary queer art and medieval religious imagery.<sup>69</sup> Some appeal to cross-period study as that which embraces non-chronological ‘queer time,’<sup>70</sup> and repeatedly, in this abstracted wound image, many modern queer medievalists see something of themselves and their lived reality.<sup>71</sup>

Getsy notes that “the same intransigent form can and does mean differently for different viewers.”<sup>72</sup> Yet it is only recently that those working in queer and trans studies have argued the possibility that medieval image-makers might have understood the polysemous nature, and therefore reception, of the images they created. Historically, medieval art historians have stultified the open potential of abstract imagery by resigning it merely to an understanding of the image as being purely theological, and by side-lining the queer potential that scholars such as Karma Lochrie, Amy Hollywood, and Michelle Sauer have argued for. My own recent publications on this abstract wound imagery see queer potential in the image’s abstraction to convey the lived reality of the trans and genderqueer body as that which can be abstract and resist ontology, classification, and morphological fixity. The trans body is ever teetering on the brink of that which renders it too ambiguous to be studied, represented, or talked

about. Queer studies acknowledges that the body can be unstable and can defy taxonomies, and therefore attempts must be made to disassociate wound imagery from its canonic attribution as being ‘vaginal’ and therefore ‘feminine’ by queer studies. This circumvents what Getsy terms “competing” in art history; classification and reification of stable taxonomies that seek one incontestable reception of the image. The idea of art historical reception as “competing” to find stable and fixed meanings means that there have been missed opportunities to see how abstract medieval imagery can appeal to the modern viewer, and in turn how modern scholarship can embrace the medieval.

Getsy reminds us that “objects, people, texts, events, and acts are not themselves ambiguous. They are particular, inassimilable, unorthodox, unprecedented, or recalcitrant.”<sup>73</sup> For those who are queer, trans, or genderqueer, this sense of being rendered ambiguous is all too familiar as they are often ignored by institutions of health and social care, erased from culture, underrepresented in popular media, and cast out of the structures that uphold social order. We see, too, a homonormalization at play in popular media that reinscribes unambiguous taxonomies; the dominance of versions of drag where one is only permitted screen time if they are able to fit within a certain trope; ‘I am the wounded queer outcast willing to show my wounds, and through drag I become a brilliant and beautiful woman, loveable and beloved’. Yet the many, many people making genderqueer drag, disabled drag, angry and political drag, and drag kings are as yet considered too ambiguous, too yet culturally ill-defined to be permitted into the media’s conceived order of where queer people and their art belong. Queer only ever as entertainment, not yet as lived possibility.

As drag king, genderqueer, and medieval art historian, I am called upon to give account of myself and my work without ambiguity. But as living subject, I cannot give a fixed account; the intersection of my identities and interests are abstract. If we are “to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies,”<sup>74</sup> this presents and poses both possibilities and challenges for art historians and content creators. It is hard to market one’s self if one accurately reflects what Getsy gracefully deems “the world’s complexity.”<sup>75</sup> But as Getsy reminds us, “we cannot afford ambiguity. We must attempt to embrace inscrutability and particularity, and we can defiantly exceed or jam the taxonomic protocols that seek to delimit and define us.”<sup>76</sup> In the debates around taxonomy and onomastics, around self-identification, pronouns

and identity labels, we must be galvanized into acts of refusal to be assimilated when tasked with being too difficult, too unruly, too ambiguous. There is strength in the abstract and the polysemous, in resistance to assimilation. To give an adequate art historical account of the abstract in medieval imagery we must refuse the idea that the queer had no place in medieval imagery. We must, instead, note the repeated resonance such abstract images have for queer people in the present, those who revel in the abstract as that which provides limitless potential for emerging identities, and yet acknowledge that the abstract medieval image provides us with a reflection of ahistorical queer identities in turn.

### **11\_ There is Only Love/Queerness is Dead (William J. Simmons)**

In the same way that I no longer believe in the language of the manifesto or the coy “Note,” I no longer believe in the political efficacy of debating the ambiguity or certitude of queerness, nor do I believe that abstraction has any privileged affinity with art that is critical or important, nor does it matter to me that ‘queer art’ be made by ‘queer artists.’ Ambiguity represents, exactly like *liminality* or any number of postmodern buzzwords like *capacity* and *openness*, a quasi-religious escape from the equally quasi-religious obsession with formal analysis or critique — just a series of hermetic lion’s dens from which God might save us, despite queerness purporting to save us from God.

Yet the non-consensual language of formal analysis touches everything, even and especially commendable attempts to escape it. There is no escape. The issue is certainly not that ambiguity is subjective and therefore avoidant and hopeless. Subjectivity is all there is. Why we keep emulating the distance we imagine that the critic maintains baffles me. The critic has no distance, and the critic is certainly not nobler than the romance novelist. The issue is that ambiguity as we practice it is not at all subjective. Ambiguity has become the new objectivity, and finding a new word for it will do nothing to resolve the double binds posed by the perennial search for definitions. These debates about how queerness *should* manifest itself are just Lynchian, cyclical rehearsals of the dead avant-garde and the masculinist regrets of modernism.

What is more important is that there is really no possibility of a truly ‘queer’ reading at all, at least as defined by hegemonic academia. I no longer wish to “confront” or “read into.” I no longer wish to subject objects of culture to a ‘queer’ version of the

unrelenting and paranoid stare of the policeman or the landlord or the doctor or the dissertation adviser. I no longer wish to be in constant and futile pursuit of a normatively defined “radicality” or a discourse that will finally unearth and expose some heretofore unconsidered truth about queerness. I no longer wish to entertain the nomenclature of capitalism, i.e., what we can or cannot afford to do, and I no longer wish to debate what is or is not complacent (a form of laziness — a word so tied to the toxic productivity of capitalism). If one wants to write a grandiose polemic, one could say: There is only love, and there is only autobiography; only *pleasure*, *trauma*, and *indifference*, and discourse as such has yet to find a way to deal empathetically with those phenomena in any of their configurations. Until such a connection can be made, queerness is just another ghost of the avant-garde, which, *pace* so many men who dream otherwise, is dead.

**12\_Ambiguity can be a “Very Queer Thing Indeed,”<sup>77</sup> or: Refuse Closure, Instead!** (Siim Sorokin)

The renowned historian of queer art and prolific author David Getsy’s provocative and stimulating essay offers as its 9th thesis — echoing one of Gricean Maxims — a passionate refusal of our uncritical embrace of the descriptor of “ambiguity.”<sup>78</sup> The author’s central argument, as I read it, refers to the employment of ambiguity as a ‘lazy’ shorthand enabling one to sidestep (or obfuscate) epistemic limitations in comprehending a given artistic representation by perhaps mistakenly or hastily attributing it the label of ‘ambiguity.’ While I sympathize with his argument, I would argue his interpretation of ambiguity to be restrictive and, to some degree, needlessly resolute. Getsy’s complete refusal (i) threatens to eclipse some of the more productive (and progressive) usages and understandings of ambiguity, thus misdirecting attention necessary for capturing the nuance of its broad yet measured conceptualization and application; (ii) may risk overlooking some empirical findings in language and brain research suggesting ambiguity either is a “functional property of language,” augmenting — instead of wholly obstructing — “communicative efficiency,” or a “general property of the brain;”<sup>79</sup> (iii) and last but certainly not least, omits the artistic drive, argued to be evident since the era of modernity<sup>80</sup> and modernist art, — toward increased ambiguity as a creative response to the emergent complexity on a global scale.<sup>81</sup> In fact, some of the recent hermeneutically inclined art theoretical discussions on ambiguity foreground the concept as the “central category” in aesthetic epistemol-

ogy. For, ambiguity “dissolv[es],” “unsettle[s],” and upsets strict boundaries, meanings, and orders by considering questions and, more importantly, *questioning*, as more aesthetically advantageous, challenging, and pleasing.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, instead of inhibiting creativity for artists and in reception, ambiguity indeed enlivens it. The remainder of this rejoinder briefly advances this latter understanding in mobilizing and combining some of the etymological elements of ambiguity that foreground a *goal-oriented activity* embedded in its conceptual field.

Subsequently, Getsy, at his most provocative, charges ambiguity with being “chauvinistic,” indicating one’s reluctance and inability “to see beyond the categories.”<sup>83</sup> If my reading of his thesis is accurate, however, I’d posit that the impulse of perceiving something as ambiguous need not always be *passive* (uncritical, non-confrontational, complacent). Indeed, engagement with and immersion in ambiguous fictional content or in the informational flow of high-profile real-life events can evoke *active*, forward-looking tendencies; or what ethnologist Matthew Carey terms “imaginaries of mistrust.”<sup>84</sup> For, such pervasive doubt necessitates a suspicious ‘wandering’ or ‘walk-about,’ an imaginative exploration, if you will (recalling here the literal meaning of the Latin *ambigere*). A particular kind of interpretative quest is undertaken to draw out (the) (un)intended meaning(s). In attempting to obtain the ‘phenomenological feeling’ of closure,<sup>85</sup> authorial endings and orderings (or official event explanations) may become rejected and undergo constant challenge and modification.

When cast in these terms, wouldn’t it be appropriate to contend that the very idea of “closure” is “chauvinistic” instead? At least when insisted upon or enforced from without, from the institutions or figures of authority? When not always readily legitimized by the subject? For imposition and determination of order; laying bare the chains of causality; of imparting a specific “case closure” to some aggrieved party<sup>86</sup> — are not all these in pursuit of authorization of that one “univocal, definitive meaning”?<sup>87</sup> And if this indeed is the case, would not a productive acceptance of and immersion in ambiguity necessarily operate as a “subversive” force?<sup>88</sup> As an inherently mistrusting attitude that presupposes some formation of “bureaucratic imaginary” yet sets out to creatively disprove or dismantle it?<sup>89</sup> Getsy himself appears to allow that much, albeit in the context of his preceding thesis. He writes: “Queer readings are sometimes forensic [and creative], tracking the traces buried or exposed [...] ‘Reading into’ is often declared to be a bad thing, but for queer readers, it can be a lifeline.

Subverting the “common” sense interpretation of a text is, after all, a very queer thing indeed.”<sup>90</sup> I agree.

### **13\_Beyond B. A Response to David J. Getsy (Lukas Mathis Töpfer)**

A slight shift, from A to B and back again (hi there, Andy!<sup>91</sup>): Could it be that Getsy’s rejection of ambiguity is itself ambiguous? ...that it’s not sufficiently clear what ‘ambiguous’ stands for in his text? ...that ‘ambiguity’ is a scarecrow, seemingly scary but not quite real? First, let’s not forget we’re reading a short and polemic text, or rather: a *fragment* of a text, one of ten theses on abstraction (a remix of Getsy’s text “Refusing Ambiguity,” published in *The SPIT! Manifesto Reader*, 2017). So let’s not expect too much. A manifesto doesn’t have to be clear. More than anything, it must be convincing, and many of Getsy’s thoughts *are* convincing. Second, let’s remind ourselves that the term ambiguous is — you’ve guessed it — ambiguous and, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means something that’s “doubtful or uncertain” or even “inexplicable,” but also “capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways.”<sup>92</sup> In other words, ‘ambiguity’ can both mean that there is *more* than one meaning and *less* than one (coherent, certain, clear-cut, distinct) meaning. Since Getsy does not refer to any specific theory of ambiguity (something like that should always raise some suspicion: what exactly is criticized?) I am tempted to ask TEN QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CRITIQUE OF “AMBIGUITY” AND NOT, FOR EXAMPLE, “INSCRUTABILITY.” All right then, David J. Getsy, I will address you directly now.

Q1: You seem to assume that different viewers have different experiences with the same work. “The same intransigent form can and does mean differently for different viewers.”<sup>93</sup> Does that mean that each viewer must be committed to one and *only* one interpretation of the work (an interpretation that can then “compete” with other interpretations)? Probably not. Does it mean that each viewer understands the work *in more than one way* (because we change our minds, have several voices in our heads, see the work in different contexts and from different perspectives, etc.)?

Q2: What do you mean when you say that the “form can *mean* differently for different viewers”<sup>94</sup> (my emphasis)? Do you refer to interpretations, i.e., networks of possible meanings that are created by interconnecting different perceptions and thoughts? If you do (and it seems that you do), there are at least three possible as-

sumptions: a) There is one and only one entirely coherent meaning (whether it is found or not). b) There is no coherent meaning at all (what we need is “an erotics of art,”<sup>95</sup> for example). And c) there are several meanings that are *sufficiently* coherent but also incoherent enough to keep the process of interpretation going. (I tend and you seem to tend toward option c].)

Q3: Would it be possible to describe the set of sufficiently but not entirely coherent interpretations as ambiguous in the sense that it results in *more* than one sufficiently and *less* than one entirely coherent meaning?

Q4: Would you agree that it might be possible to *see* the material or structural basis for several (incomplete) meanings of the work at the same time or almost at the same time? And wouldn't each viewer then have to pay (and keep paying) attention to the work in all its “particularity” because every detail could potentially be relevant (i.e., stabilize or destabilize at least one of many possible interpretations)?

Q5: Would you agree that this type of viewer would have to assume that the work is “inscrutable” (maybe even inexplicable), not because it defies any interpretation whatsoever but because it cannot be transformed into one and only one coherent and stable meaning?

Q6: Why do you criticize ambiguity and praise inscrutability? Where do you see the difference?

Q7: What do you mean when you say that you want us to “to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies”<sup>96</sup>? Does “embrace” imply the third type of interpretation? If not, what type does it imply?

Q8: You assume that the word ambiguity is often used (or misused) precisely when a thorough examination of the work is *not* supposed to take place. “To invoke ‘ambiguity’ is to flee from the confrontation with something that does not easily fall into one’s patterns of knowing.”<sup>97</sup> Why do you think that? Which texts do you have in mind? And would you agree that this use (or misuse) of the word ambiguity is at odds with the interpretation of ambiguity described above that establishes more than one sufficiently coherent but no entirely coherent meaning?

Q9: You write: “After all, what do we really mean when we say something or someone is ambiguous? We mean that *we* cannot read, cannot identify, and cannot classify.”<sup>98</sup> Really? Why do you think that? (Again, you don't mention any authors or texts.) And why does it suddenly sound like you *want* us to classify the “particular”

and the “inscrutable”? Is it not possible to say, first, that the work is ambiguous in the sense that it exceeds or undermines every attempt to find a single (exclusive) coherent interpretation and, second, to *see* how the work does that, *exactly* how it does that, how different meanings destabilize each other but are nevertheless *all there*, coexisting, competing?

Q10: You are right, in my opinion, to demand that interpretations compete with each other. Would this also include different interpretations of the term ambiguous? And I agree that works of art must be perceived and interpreted (though maybe not “embraced”) in all their particularity and inscrutability. But in my opinion, as I’ve tried to show by asking ten questions (more than ten, actually), ambiguity can include both particularity and inscrutability. I’m not a fan of the term ‘ambiguity’ myself (there are several better alternatives), but I don’t see why it should be either deeply flawed or highly problematic (or even “chauvinistic”). If it’s used as a shortcut, an easy way out, I’d say it’s *misused*. What it can do is broaden our thinking — well beyond A and B.

#### **14\_Ceaseless** (David J. Getsy)

The bulk of this text on refusing the descriptor ‘ambiguity’ was written in one sitting, and both its boldness and its sometimes infelicitous language were the result. I intended it to be provocative (reductively so) and to shake the comfort with which I saw the term ‘ambiguous’ being effortlessly and repeatedly applied. This text was later revised slightly and keyed to the question of abstraction, but it was initially written in response to another forum — this one organized at the Renaissance Society in Chicago on the occasion of an exhibition by Sadie Benning. The forum included artists, poets, and scholars; we were asked to engage with the topic of ambiguity in art — and implicitly, queerness.

I have to admit that the invitation irritated me, because I had been hearing the term ‘ambiguous’ all too often in studio critiques, exhibition reviews, artists’ studios, and gallery openings. At that point, I was teaching in an art school, and the confrontation with fresh work and newly-visualized ideas was a daily experience. In those conversations, a regular occurrence was for someone seeing a new work of art (often, but not exclusively, abstract) to fall back on the term ‘ambiguous.’ This always stopped the conversation, leaving everyone with little else to say other than compulsory nod-

ding assent. It was these engagements with new art — that is, art without an established explanatory context or predetermined narrative role — that is one of the imagined scenes for “refusing ambiguity.” I should have made it clearer in the text that this is what I meant by “exhausted reading.”

But I do still find value in the claim that works of art, texts, their forms, or people are not, themselves, ambiguous. I believe that the adjective ‘ambiguous’ describes a viewer or reader’s *response* rather than the state of the form, the text, the person, or the object itself. By contrast, when I claim something is ‘inscrutable,’ I am being honest about how *I* cannot discern it. When others say something is ‘ambiguous’ they mean the same thing, but attribute their inability to the object, person, or text they regard. Erica Rand says it here better than I have been able, reminding us that something appears ambiguous to viewers because it is “unfamiliar to them for reasons that they might take some responsibility for.”<sup>99</sup> It is this lack of responsibility that I see as the problem with calling something unfamiliar ‘ambiguous.’ Remember, this isn’t just about abstraction or about art. It is also an ethical claim about how we might treat and regard each other. To celebrate that which does not fit into a simple schema is a means to allow queer and trans possibility to flourish. I want to uphold (and, yes, embrace) the complexity and uniqueness of the one who others lazily or hostilely describe as ‘ambiguous.’

‘Ambiguous’ has negative implications, we must not forget. It is not just that the form called ‘ambiguous’ is open to more than one interpretation; it is also that it is vague, dubious, imprecise, or suspect. The Latin origins of the word carry connotations of the untrustworthy, the unreliable, and the doubtful. It was these pejorative undertones that always seemed to me to accompany the use of the term, and it is for this reason that I refuse not undecidability but the viewer or reader’s suspicious projection of it onto a person or an object.

I am grateful for this forum and the work of its authors. What I found most useful in the group were the very different and helpful defenses of particularity, multiplicity, inscrutability, and polyvalence. Each author, in their own divergent ways, wants to open up rather than close down the relationship between the viewer/reader and the text or object (and, as is always my ultimate implication, person). For instance, Marie Sophie Beckmann’s extended praise of messiness is productive,<sup>100</sup> and it is another way to describe the potential I see in attending to the particularity of that which ex-

ceeds categorization. Tillmann Schorstein's redescription of the viewer's claim of ambiguity as "speechlessness" beautifully gives that viewer an egress to further self-reflection and self-revision.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Ashton Cooper's "queer ekphrasis meanders toward meaning"<sup>102</sup> captures the slowed down and ethically engaged process of becoming acquainted with such messiness and particularity. Sophie Sexon's extended historical view of polysemy,<sup>103</sup> Sampada Aranke's account of the richness of the visible incoherent,<sup>104</sup> and Oliver Klaassen's praise of vagueness<sup>105</sup> each capture some of the potential that particularity and undecidability *initiate*. (As opposed to — as I provocatively posited — how the descriptor 'ambiguous' halts or arrests.) Even the authors who misunderstand or humorlessly misconstrue my (admittedly immoderate) claims spend considerable time talking about how we must attend to in-betweenness and the ways that a form, object, text, or person can exceed a preconceived pattern of knowing and recognizing. I thoroughly agree, and all I wanted was to *not stop* at ambiguity as a final assessment. A refusal is, after all, an act in which one rejects something given. It is not a claim that what has been given does not exist.

My headlong and partial text was first written in January 2017, just days before the inauguration of the United States' 45th president. Like many, I had found myself unable to write or think in the two months since the election, and this was the first piece I had managed to complete. Its impatience and truculence came from fear of what was to come, and my anxiety about claims of ambiguity derived from the persistent 'spin,' the uncertain readings, and the overly-generous assessments of the future president's plans. (These would turn out to be decidedly unambiguous in their divisive and self-serving promotion of bias, dualism, and hate.) When I wrote, "Especially today, we cannot afford ambiguity," it was acquiescence to the triumph of populism that I also had in mind. Maybe this was too much weight to put on the word "ambiguity" as it was tossed around artworks, and some of the contributors rightly raise this question of me and my zeal. Nevertheless, it felt urgent (and still does) to reject being satisfied or comfortable with 'ambiguity' rather than to take on the responsibility to grapple with the messy, conflicted particularities it purports to describe.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The text to which this forum's authors respond was previously published as one of ten short essays in David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in *Queer Abstraction*, ed. Jared

- Ledesma (Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 69–75. That version is an expanded version of an earlier text first presented at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, on January 14, 2017, and subsequently included in Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, and Carlos Maria Romero’s *The SPIT! Manifesto Reader*, a chapbook accompanying their performance at London’s Frieze Projects in 2017.
- 2 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 3 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 4 Camille Norment, “Deviations and Resonance (Related Series): 2016 to Present,” Camille Norment Studio, accessed December 8, 2021, <<https://www.norment.net/work/drawings-ind/notes-on-sympathetic-vibration/>>.
- 5 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 218.
- 6 Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses.”
- 7 Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses,” 65.
- 8 Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses,” 72.
- 9 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 10 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.
- 11 John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London: Routledge, 2004), 6. For a productive use of the term in the field of queer studies, see Heather Love, “Queer Messes,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3–4 (2016): 345–49.
- 12 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 13 Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses,” 69.
- 14 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 15 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 16 Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, “Introduction: Execrable Media,” in *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, eds. Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1–24, here: 16.
- 17 Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses,” 65.
- 18 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 19 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 20 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 21 Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 110–15.
- 22 Alva Noë, “Concept Pluralism, Direct Perception and the Fragility of Presence,” in *Open Mind*, eds. Thomas Metzinger and Jennifer M. Wind (Frankfurt a. M.: Mind Group, 2015) 1–15, here: 14.
- 23 Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 41.
- 24 David J. Getsy, “Capacity,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 47–49, here: 47.
- 25 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 26 David J. Getsy, “Refusing Ambiguity,” in *The SPIT! Manifesto Reader*, eds. Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, and Carlos Maria Romero (Frieze Projects: 2017), 61–62, here: 61.
- 27 Verena Krieger, “Modes of Aesthetic Ambiguity in Contemporary Art: Conceptualizing Ambiguity in Art History,” in *Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory*, eds. Frauke Berndt and Lutz

- Koepnick (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2018), 59–103, here: 73.
- <sup>28</sup> Contrary to its use as an adjective or noun and the associated danger of fixity, by spelling it as a present participle, I mark ‘queer(ing)’ as doing, as an unsettling practice that is concerned with criticizing normativity and subverting binary oppositions or “putting something or someone out of balance, out of a self-evident order.” See Nina Degele, “Heteronormativität entselbstverständlich: Zum verunsichernden Potenzial von Queer Studies,” *Freiburger FrauenStudien: Zeitschrift für Interdisziplinäre Frauenforschung (Queering Gender — Queering Society)* 11, no. 17 (2005): 15–39, here: 16; translated by O.K.
- <sup>29</sup> Based on the semiotic assumption that a sign does not contain an absolute and stable meaning, but always obtains its meaning only in difference from other signs in each specific symbolic and material context, I start from an understanding of the political “as a field of permanent contestation” (Antke Engel, “Entschiedene Intervention in der Unentscheidbarkeit: Von queerer Identitätskritik zur VerUneindeutigung als Methode,” in *Forschungsfeld Politik: Geschlechtskategoriale Einführung in die Sozialwissenschaften*, eds. Cilja Harders, Heike Kahlert, and Delia Schindler (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), 259–82, here: 277; translated by O.K.) and thus as “potentiality” (Antke Engel, “Desiring Tension: Towards a Queer Politics of Paradox,” in *Tension / Spannung*, ed. Christoph F. E. Holzhey [Wien: Turia + Kant, 2010], 227–50, here: 227), which is characterized by inconclusiveness, thereby following poststructuralist-informed critique of hegemony. This principled undecidability constitutes the condition of the possibility of politics, see Urs Stäheli, “Politik der Entparadoxierung,” in *Das Undarstellbare der Politik: Zur Hege-monietheorie Ernesto Laclaus*, ed. Oliver Marchart (Wien: Turia + Kant, 1998), 295–11. The political is thus determined by the respective handling of the impossibility of closure, see Susanne Lummerding, *Agency@? Cyber-Diskurse, Subjektkonstituierung und Handlungsfähigkeit im Feld des Politischen* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2005), 154–155, which is why I deliberately write of queer(ing)-political engagement and not, for example, queer(ing) politics. In distinction to the political, politics as the making of — necessarily contingent — decisions, undecidability namely aims at provisional closures, a process that, however, cannot undermine the unclosability of the political, see Engel, “Desiring Tension,” 230.
- <sup>30</sup> As Krieger elaborates, ambiguity established itself as an aesthetic paradigm and thus as a norm in art discourse as early as around 1800. See Verena Krieger, “‘At war with the obvious’ — Kulturen der Ambiguität: Historische, psychologische und ästhetische Dimensionen des Mehrdeutigen,” in *Ambiguität in der Kunst: Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, eds. Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader (Köln: Böhlau, 2010), 13–49, here: 27–28.
- <sup>31</sup> On the interplay between aesthetic ambiguity and sociopolitical engagement, see especially Nina Bandi, “Zur Un/Eindeutigkeit politisch engagierter Kunst,” in *What Can Art Do?*, eds. Siri Peyer et al. (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2020), 85–93; Verena Krieger, “Strategische Uneindeutigkeit: Ambiguierungstendenzen ‘engagierter’ Kunst im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert,” in *Radikal ambivalent: Engagement und Verantwortung in den Künsten heute*, ed. Rachel Mader (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2014a), 29–56; Verena Krieger, “Ambiguität und Engagement: Zum Problem politischer Kunst in der Moderne,” in *Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit: Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*, ed. Cornelia Klinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014b), 159–88.
- <sup>32</sup> For an introduction to the research field of queer(ing) art studies, see especially Josch Hoenes and Barbara Paul, eds., *Un/verblümt: Queere Politiken in Ästhetik und Theorie* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2014); David J. Getsy, ed., *Queer (Documents of Contemporary Art)* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016); Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, eds., *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer, eds., *Art & Queer Culture* (London: Phaidon, 2013); Barbara Paul and Johanna

Schaffer, eds., *Mehr(wert) queer — Queer Added (Value): Visuelle Kultur, Kunst und Gender-Politiken — Visual Culture, Art, and Gender Politics* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009).

- <sup>33</sup> For an introduction to the research field of ambiguity art studies, see especially Frauke Berndt and Lutz Koepnick, eds., *Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2018); Verena Krieger, “Modi ästhetischer Ambiguität in der zeitgenössischen Kunst: Zur Konzeptualisierung des Ambiguitätsbegriffs für die Kunstwissenschaft,” in *Ambige Verhältnisse: Uneindeutigkeit in Kunst, Politik und Alltag*, eds. Bernhard Groß et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021b), 15–71; Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader, eds., *Ambiguität in der Kunst: Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas* (Köln: Böhlau, 2010); Rachel Mader, ed., *Radikal ambivalent: Engagement und Verantwortung in den Künsten heute* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2014).

The aim is to examine, in relation to case studies, the means by which aesthetic ambiguity is produced, the functions it fulfills (e.g., in sociopolitical contexts), and the different levels and forms that exist in its production and reception. See Verena Krieger, “Steigert Kunst die Ambiguitätskompetenz? Potenziale ästhetischer Ambiguität von Picasso bis zum Zentrum für Politische Schönheit,” in *Mehrdeutigkeit gestalten: Ambiguität und die Bildung demokratischer Haltungen in Kunst und Pädagogik*, eds. Ansgar Schnurr et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021a), 103–127; and Krieger, “Modi ästhetischer Ambiguität;” “Modes of Aesthetic Ambiguity;” “Strategische Uneindeutigkeit;” “Ambiguität und Engagement;” “Kulturen der Ambiguität.” Michael Lüthy also states, “[T]he noticing of the ambiguity of the artwork [does] not represent the end, but merely the starting point of the interpretive engagement with the artwork.” See Michael Lüthy, “Ambiguität in der bildenden Kunst: Eine differenzierende Bestimmung,” in *Ambige Verhältnisse: Uneindeutigkeit in Kunst, Politik und Alltag*, eds. Bernhard Groß et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 73–109, here: 86; translated by O.K.

- <sup>34</sup> Sabine Dengel et al., “Einleitung: Zur Ambiguität in Kunst, Gesellschaft und Pädagogik sowie die Suche nach dem Transfer,” in *Mehrdeutigkeit gestalten: Ambiguität und die Bildung demokratischer Haltungen in Kunst und Pädagogik*, eds. Ansgar Schnurr et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 9–22, here: 10; translated by O.K.

- <sup>35</sup> Ansgar Schnurr, “Die bildende Seite der Ambiguität: Zum ästhetischen und demokratischen Bildungspotenzial mehrdeutiger Kunsterfahrung,” in *Mehrdeutigkeit gestalten: Ambiguität und die Bildung demokratischer Haltungen in Kunst und Pädagogik*, eds. Ansgar Schnurr et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 27–53, here: 48; translated by O.K.

- <sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Platons Pharmazie,” in *Dissemination*, ed. Jacques Derrida (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 1995), 69–190, here: 125; translated by O.K. Jonathan Culler sums up the movement of deconstruction as follows: “An opposition that is deconstructed is not destroyed or abandoned, but re-inscribed.” See Jonathan Culler, *Dekonstruktion: Derrida und die poststrukturalistische Literaturtheorie* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 148; translated by O.K.

- <sup>37</sup> I hereby follow Katja Hoffmann’s plea for “[d]ouble, ambiguous image readings” (see Katja Hoffmann, “Doppelte Bildlektüren (mindestens): Zur komplexen Vermittlung der Moderne im Kunstunterricht am Beispiel der Ausstellung ‘museum global.’ Mikrogeschichten einer exzentrischen Moderne (2018/19),” in *Mehrdeutigkeit gestalten: Ambiguität und die Bildung demokratischer Haltungen in Kunst und Pädagogik*, eds. Ansgar Schnurr et al. [Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021], 175–92, here: 188; translated by O.K.) in dealing with aesthetic ambiguity and Antke Engel’s plea for excessive readings as a possible form of a critical-queer(ing) intervention in neoliberalism along with its paradigm of scarcity. See Antke Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie: Queere kulturelle Politiken im Neoliberalismus* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag,

- 2009).
- <sup>38</sup> Barbara Paul and Johanna Schaffer, "Introduction: Queer as a Visual Political Practice," in *Mehr(wert) queer — Queer Added (Value). Visuelle Kultur, Kunst und Gender-Politiken — Visual Culture, Art, and Gender Politics*, eds. Barbara Paul and Johanna Schaffer (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), 20–33, here: 20. This approach with an affinity for ambiguity is — as Roger Lüdeke notes for deconstructive reading practices — at the same time an "approach of radical uncertainty." Roger Lüdeke, "Methode der Dekonstruktion," in *Methoden der literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Textanalyse: Ansätze — Grundlagen — Modellanalysen*, eds. Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (Stuttgart Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2010) 155–175, here: 160; translated by O.K.
- <sup>39</sup> Ludwig Duncker, *Wege zur ästhetischen Bildung: Anthropologische Grundlegung und schulpädagogische Orientierungen* (München: kopaed, 2018), 144; translated by O.K.
- <sup>40</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung: Phänomenologie — Psychoanalyse — Phänomenotechnik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002); translated by O.K.
- <sup>41</sup> See Dengel et al., "Einleitung," 15; Bernhard Groß et al., "Für eine Pragmatik der Ambiguität — Zur Einleitung," in *Ambige Verhältnisse: Uneindeutigkeit in Kunst, Politik und Alltag*, eds. Bernhard Groß et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 9–12, here: 11; Krieger, "Modi ästhetischer Ambiguität," 41; Krieger, "Modes of Aesthetic Ambiguity," 68–69; Lüthy, "Ambiguität," 84.
- <sup>42</sup> See Miriam Haller, "Dekonstruktion der 'Ambivalenz': Poststrukturalistische Neueinschreibungen des Konzepts der Ambivalenz aus bildungstheoretischer Perspektive," *Forum der Psychoanalyse: Zeitschrift für psychodynamische Theorie und Praxis* 27, no. 4 (2011): 359–71, here: 363–364.
- <sup>43</sup> Although there is agreement within ambiguity art studies about the high significance of the reception level, it is surprising that critical (self-)reflection on reception experiences, e.g. by scientists, does not usually find its way into art studies research on aesthetic ambiguity. Gamboni elaborates on the reason for the uneasiness of art (studies) scholars to deal with their own subjective perception in the relatively young disciplinary history of art studies and the associated fear of defamation, see Dario Gamboni, "Ambiguität in der Kunst: Bildtheorie und Interpretationsverfahren," in *Ambiguität in der Kunst: Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, eds. Verena Krieger and Rachel Mader (Köln: Böhlau, 2010), 209–24, here: 220.
- <sup>44</sup> Gamboni, "Ambiguität in der Kunst," 222; translated by O.K.
- <sup>45</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Experimental Futures* (Durham: Academic Press, 2016); Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*, 215.
- <sup>46</sup> The thesis of situated knowledges was introduced into the feminist discourse by Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding and criticizes traditional theories of knowledge and science, which assume a supposedly objective and abstracted research standpoint, as well as the androcentric and heteronormative production of knowledge. See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99; Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991). Because all researchers speak and write from a particular position that is temporally, locally, and thus culturally and socially, but above all bodily anchored, I thus assume the subjective and affective situatedness of every scientific reading practice. In doing so, I take up the plea for "articulating one's situatedness in academic writing and speaking" (See Naomie Gramlich and Annika Haas, "Situierendes Schreiben mit Haraway, Cixous und Grauen Quellen," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 1 [2019]: 38–52, here: 52; translated by

- O.K.) by Naomie Gramlich and Annika Haas, who search for “forms of situated writing” (39) and pose the “new old question” (39): “How to write (oneself)?” (39). Susanne von Falkenhausen argues for the increased reflection and application of Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges within art history and visual culture studies because it would invite one to think about a model of dialogue between research object and interpreter. Therefore, Falkenhausen advocates for a dialogic approach to seeing in the process of interpretation — for an ethical dimension which maintains the tensions between objectivity and subjectivity but also acknowledges the ‘otherness’ of the opposite entity. Unfortunately, Falkenhausen does not answer the question of how this dialogic approach of seeing can be implemented in the analysis of visual material. See Susanne von Falkenhausen, *Jenseits des Spiegels: Das Sehen in Kunstgeschichte und Visual Culture Studies* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2015).
- <sup>47</sup> For a more detailed explanation of my suggestion for a search-moving approach to images, see Oliver Klaassen, “Wolfgang Tillmans ENTSCHIEDEN UNENTSCHEIDBARE Fotokunst UND/ODER: Ein provisorischer Werkzeugkasten für suchBEWEGENDE Bildzugänge,” in *Politische Bilder lesen: Ein Werkzeugkasten zur Bilddekodierung*, eds. Melanie Dietz and Nicole Kreckel (2022, in preparation).
- <sup>48</sup> Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- <sup>49</sup> Susan Sontag, “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition,” Robert Spahr, 1962, <[https://www.robertspahr.com/teaching/hnm/susan\\_sontag\\_an\\_art\\_of\\_radical\\_juxtaposition.pdf](https://www.robertspahr.com/teaching/hnm/susan_sontag_an_art_of_radical_juxtaposition.pdf)>; Mark Godfrey speaks of “jarring juxtapositions” in reference to Tillmans’ artistic practice. Mark Godfrey, “Wordview,” in *Wolfgang Tillmans 2017*, eds. Chris Dercon und Helen Sainsbury (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 14–76, here: 30.
- <sup>50</sup> As a term intended to highlight the “denormalizing, destabilizing, and deconstructive potentials of representational processes” (Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*, 225; translated by O.K.), Engel conceptualizes equivocation (*VerUneindeutigung*) as a strategy in the field of queer(ing)-political engagement that aims to intervene in processes of disambiguation: “It [...] intervenes where unambiguity is asserted, a boundary is drawn, a unity is concluded” (Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*, 224; translated by O.K.). Engel therefore understands equivocation (*VerUneindeutigung*) as a “politicization of paradox and ambiguity” (Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*, 14; translated by O.K.) In addition, see Antke Engel, *Wider die Eindeutigkeit: Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation* (Frankfurt, Main: Campus Verlag, 2002).
- <sup>51</sup> According to Engel, the figure of paradox can be characterized by a “tension of ‘reconciled irreconcilability’” (Engel, “Desiring Tension,” 43), that is, an “irreconcilability between elements that contest each other, yet in this tension remain ineluctably connected.” Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*, 188.
- <sup>52</sup> On the poststructuralist-inspired perspective of queer(ing)/feminist-political engagement in decided undecidability, see especially Engel, “Entschiedene Intervention,” and Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie*, 122–27.
- <sup>53</sup> For a detailed analysis of Tillmans’ MAVI exhibition poster focusing on the relationship between aesthetic ambiguity and queer(ing)-political engagement, see Klaassen, “Wolfgang Tillmans.”
- <sup>54</sup> Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- <sup>55</sup> See, for example, “How to Teach Manet’s *Olympia* after Transgender Studies,” Keynote, Association of Art Historians Conference (Birmingham, United Kingdom), April 6, 2021, *YouTube*, accessed April 26, 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bq1qVnNUYU>>.

- 56 Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (New York: Alyson Books, 2003), 8, available at <<https://lesliefeinberg.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Stone-Butch-Blues-by-Leslie-Feinberg.pdf>>.
- 57 Micha Cárdenas, “Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* no. 6 (2015): section “Passing.”
- 58 Maurice Berger, “The Critique of Pure Racism: An Interview with Adrian Piper,” in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant H. Kester (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998 [1990]), 230.
- 59 The script for “Cornered” appears in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
- 60 *Inclinations*, directed by Danielle Peers, Alice Sheppard, Lisa Niedermeyer, and Lindsay Eales (2019; Alberta, Canada: Canada Council for the Arts), online, accessed October 4, 2021, <<http://www.daniellepeers.com/inclinations.html>>.
- 61 Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales, “Moving Materiality: People, Tools, and this Thing Called Disability,” *Art/Research International* 2, no. 2 (2017): 101–25, here: 109.
- 62 Erica Rand, *The Small Book of Hip Checks: On Queer Gender, Race, and Writing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 9 and 64.
- 63 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 64 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 65 Şeyda Kurt, *Radikale Zärtlichkeit — Warum Liebe politisch ist* (Hamburg: Harper Collins Deutschland, 2021), 120–28.
- 66 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 67 Sara Ahmed, *Das Glücksversprechen — Eine feministische Kulturkritik* (Münster: UNRAST Verlag, 2018), 138.
- 68 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 69 See William E. Burgwinkle and Cary Howie, *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture: On the Verge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) and Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics and Artists* (London: Palgrave, 2010).
- 70 See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 71 See Karma Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, eds. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James S. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180–200; Amy Hollywood, “‘That Glorious Slit:’ Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ’s Side Wound,” in *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture*, eds. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Theresa Krier (London: Routledge, 2004), 117–37; and Michelle M. Sauer, “Queer Time and Lesbian Temporality in Medieval Women’s Encounters with the Side Wound,” in *Medieval Futurity: Queering Time and Space*, eds. Will Rogers and Christopher Michael Roman (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), 199–220.
- 72 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
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- 77 David Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” in *Queer Abstraction*, ed. Jared Ledesma (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–75, here: 71.
- 78 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 79 Steven T. Piantadosi, Harry Tily, and Edward Gibson, “The Communicative Function of Ambiguity in Language,” *Cognition* 122, no. 3 (2012): 280–291; Semir Zeki, “The Neurology of Ambiguity,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 13 (2003): 173–196, here: 173–174. For more on ambiguity in the study of language, see, e.g., Thomas Wasow, “Ambiguity Avoidance is Overrated,” in *Ambiguity: Language and Communication*, ed. Susanne Winkler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 29–50. Similarly, brain researchers have observed that human-animal perception is itself ‘multistable.’ Various stimulus patterns invoke multiple and “continuous change of perceptual interpretations” (Michael Stadler and Peter Kruse, “The Function of Meaning in Cognitive Order Formation,” in *Ambiguity in Nature and Mind*, eds. Peter Kruse and Michael Stadler [Berlin: Springer, 1995], 5–21, here: 7); for most well-known visual examples, see Stadler and Kruse, “The Function of Meaning,” 7–9. Hence, interestingly enough, ambiguity — in its strict neurological conception — runs counter to the common dictionary definition. Here, ambiguity indicates “not uncertainty, but certainty” and “the obverse of constancy” (Zeki, “Neurology,” 175, 189). For all available interpretations are equally valid and plausible, the ‘correctness’ of any single one is eschewed, and “each one [is] sovereign when it occupies the conscious stage.” In sum, therefore, our brain physiology appears to indicate that whilst we strive to obtain closure (our brain “instill[ing] meaning amounts to finding a solution,” [Zeki, “Neurology,” 188]). Ambiguity is the very requisite for how our knowledge acquisition and meaning-making develop neurologically (Zeki, “Neurology,” 175; see also, e.g., Igor Yevin, “Ambiguity in Art,” *Complexus* 3 [2006]: 74–82). Curiously, in our engagements with forms of art, like literature, some narratologists have observed the reverse. “Mutually exclusive readings” might “co-exist, render[ing] choice impossible and frustrat[ing] reader’s expectations of univocal, definitive meaning” (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, “Deconstructive Reflections on Deconstruction: In Reply to Hillis Miller,” *Poetics Today* 2.1b [1980–1981]: 185–88, here: 185–86).
- 80 Cf., as Anthony Ossa-Richardson observes, modernity “has reveled in hesitation as it has unfastened all certainties — in physics, in warfare, in art, in philosophy — at first conceiving new certainties from its own hesitation, and finally disowning even these” (Anthony Ossa-Richardson, *A History of Ambiguity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019], 5).
- 81 Frauke Berndt and Lutz Koepnick, “Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory: Introduction,” in *Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory*, eds. Frauke Berndt and Lutz Koepnick (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2018), 5–13, here: 7–8; Cf., Adam Sennet, “Ambiguity,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2021 Edition), accessed November 15, 2021, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/ambiguity/>>.
- 82 Berndt and Koepnick, “Introduction,” 9, 13; In the same volume, see also: Frauke Berndt, “Zonen – Zur Konzeptualisierung von Ambiguität in der ästhetischen Theorie,” in *Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory*, eds. Frauke Berndt and Lutz Koepnick (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2018), 17–36; Gabriel Trop, “Ambiguity of Attraction – Revisiting the Culture of the Concept,” in *Ambiguity in Contemporary Art and Theory*, eds. Frauke Berndt and Lutz Koepnick (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2018), 39–58.
- 83 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 84 Matthew Carey, *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2017), 85–90.
- 85 Noël Carroll, “Narrative Closure,” in *Philosophical Studies* 135, no. 1 (2007): 1–15.

- 86 Patricia Patterson approaches the topic of closure from organizational theory, in the context of human loss and administrative responsibility attribution. Hence, in practical terms, she argues, closure is a “social fiction.” For even if some ‘tangible’ result is achieved (i.e., some institution taking partial responsibility, thus “clos[ing] [the] case”), closure “may remain a bureaucratic abstraction,” often providing no emotional relief (Patricia Patterson, “The Public Pursuit of Closure: Losses, Fictions, and Endings,” in *International Journal of Organizational Theory & Behavior* 21, no. 3 [2018]: 171–91, here: 177–78). Indeed, the same can ring true on a personal level of those requesting it: “Rarely is it clear what closure *is* to the seeker. [...] Somewhat clearer is what the pursuit of closure entails, such as acquiring information and explanations, recovering remains, considering retribution, and seeking memorialization” (Patterson, “The Public Pursuit,” 177–178; emphasis in original).
- 87 Rimmon-Kenan, “Deconstructive Reflections,” 185–186.
- 88 Paul Wake, “Plotting as Subversion: Narrative and the Gunpowder Plot,” in *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 3 (2008); 295–316.
- 89 Carey, *Mistrust*, 91–96; Carey conceives of “bureaucratic imaginary” as grounding the internal self-structuring and aesthetics of conspiracy theorizing, “i.e., narratives of mistrust [that] draw on [the former] to ensure their plausibility,” (Carey, *Mistrust*, 98).
- 90 Getsy, “Ten Theses,” 71.
- 91 This, of course, hints at Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).
- 92 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “ambiguous,” accessed September 17, 2021, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambiguous>>.
- 93 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 94 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 95 Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, ed. David Rieff (New York: The Library of America, 2013), 10–20, here: 20.
- 96 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 97 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 98 Getsy in section \_1 of this *Perspective*.
- 99 Rand in section \_8 of this *Perspective*.
- 100 See Beckmann in section \_3 of this *Perspective*.
- 101 See Schorstein in section \_9 of this *Perspective*.
- 102 Cooper in section \_5 of this *Perspective*.
- 103 See Sexon in section \_10 of this *Perspective*.
- 104 See Aranke in section \_2 of this *Perspective*.
- 105 See Klaassen in section \_7 of this *Perspective*.