Empty History:
Un-Working
Queer Progress
By Adam Barbu

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Imaging Progress

Following the recent 50th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion, the idea of a shared queer history has become a popular topic for consideration. In the artworld, more specifically, a number of projects have been presented to celebrate "our" hard-earned progress and teach the lessons of "our" fractured past. We have entered a time of reflection and affirmation marked by efforts to reconstruct queer history in the name of inclusion, representation, and recognition. Group exhibitions like *Art After Stonewall 1969–1989* (2019) work to render the invisible visible, thus framing "queer" as an identity category that is simultaneously recovered from obscurity and freed in an arc of progressive time[1]. While recognizing the important ways in which such exhibitions promote the visibility of LGBTQ+ artists in spaces where they are traditionally ignored, I find myself wary of the grand narratives of collective action and social transformation they inevitably promote. In thinking through the discontents of a shared queer history, I am not simply interested in remembering the past more accurately or robustly. Instead, I want to remember differently, outside the time of progress.

Historian Tim McCaskell demonstrates how, in the midst of this complex post-Stonewall, post-marriage, post-visibility historical moment, queer progress is not all that it claims to be. In *Queer Progress: From Homophobia to Homonationalism* (2016), McCaskell argues that, as a result of a charade-like acceptance and inclusion under neoliberalism, progress can be read as synonymous with an entry into normativity[2]. Favoring the political ideals of early liberation activists, he argues for strategies to counter the damaging effects of homonormativity, homonationalism, and gay conservatism. He thus develops a critique of progress and a conception of queer ethics rooted in an acting out against the dominant social order, where action is connected to a sense of optimism about queer futures that lie ahead. McCaskell's emphasis on productive resistance can be understood through queer theory's early critique of essentialist identity politics. In *Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight* (1995), theorist Deborah Britzman considers a shift in values from the study of queer actors to queer acts, a move that distinguishes between a speculative interest in LGBTQ+ identities and radical performances that make the world queer[3]. In this discursive space shared by McCaskell and Brtizman, as well as the curators of *Art After Stonewall*, queer acts are defined based on their ability to inspire real social change[4].

Without overlooking the significance of these contributions, I want to risk examining the subject of progress through a different theoretical lens. Located only blocks away from *Art After Stonewall*, the Public Art Fund presents a recreation of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' billboard work *"Untitled"*, originally displayed in 1989 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Stonewall. Whereas the curators of *Art After Stonewall* uphold an ethics of queer visibility, *"Untitled"* remains an expression of non-didacticism and illegibility, offering an image of queer history that is both everything at once and nothing in particular. The billboard consists of a black background and two lines of white text that reference significant events in LGBTQ+ history by name and date: "People With AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969." Notably, Gonzalez-Torres lists the events in a nonlinear fashion, un-working the notion of a sequential, chronological history. This intentional failure of documenting history further extends into his use of colour. The artist writes, "The letters running across the lower part of the billboard suggest a long caption, capable of sustaining the projection of many images. The size of the letters is rather small for such a large space."[5] The black field marks the impossibility of representation – namely, the impossibility of recovering the historical past and mastering queer history as a determinable object of knowledge.

Felix Gonzalez Torres – *Untitled* (1989)

While black appears as a void, the total absence of colour and the withdrawal of the image, it can also be regarded as a screen for the projection of countless irrecoverable images. Gonzalez-Torres images an ungraspable excess that challenges us to think at the limits of what is identifiable as a specifically "queer" history. As that which is visually other to the major events inscribed in bold white text, the black field embodies a sense of the ordinary, the unchanging, and the unmemorable. It bears the weight of the everyday that cannot be assimilated into the narrative of a singular, linear queer past. Looking into emptiness, we enter a space beyond progress.

The Work of Worklessness

The historical significance commonly attributed to Stonewall relates to the simple fact that queers fought back against police authority on that early morning of June 28, 1969. Yet *"Untitled"* reminds me that the depth and complexity of a queer life lived cannot be reduced to images of spectacular action and transformative change. It reminds me of the essential void/excess that lies outside the boundaries of normative historical time. Whereas McCaskell's critique of neoliberalism encourages us to adopt an authentically queer conception of progress, *Empty History* raises the question: What does it mean to curate "queer" beyond teleology? In doing so, it asks us to think through the work that

Deidre Logue – *Home Office* (2017)

representations of progress cannot do, as well as the ways in which such representations oftentimes erase and obscure the power of inaction, non-productivity, and worklessness. The artists included in this program use video to un-work the narrative conventions of queer history, tracing the contours of a uniquely de-instrumentalized resistance.[6] They do not seek to repair the unjust and the uncertain by constructing new queer utopias. Instead, they pursue pleasure in the broken, the unchanging, and the everyday. Their works open up a space of perpetually unfinished business in which action always already fails to result in change.

Deirdre Logue, Paul Wong, and Lucas Michael perform worklessness in a devotion to repetition and non-transcendence. In Logue's *Home Office* (2017), the artist repeatedly attempts to balance on top of a slide-out shelf in her wooden desk, an exercise in bodily control that suggests a coping with the burdensome pressures of the world. Paul Wong's *Perfect Day* (2007) documents the artist, in the altered state of a cocaine and heroin-induced high, as he sets out to enjoy the perfect day, without conflict or interruption, alone in his apartment. The viewer quickly realizes the impossibility of this task as the artist reels in frustration about a continuously skipping record, namely Lou Reed's *Perfect Day*. Lucas Michael presents two works, both of which cultivate a sense of arrested action. Michael's *Fixed Kilometer* (2018) questions the passage of time through the lens of the mundane. The video consists of one thousand different takes of the artist's right index finger tracing the span

of one meter across various surfaces in public and private. With each take, his finger wobbles, casting an imperfect horizontal line that implies neither progression nor regression but rather a focused resilience. As the only sculptural work in this program, Michael's *Audentes Fortuna Iuvat* (2011) consists of a crushed, warped silver trophy that lies on the gallery floor. Here, the trophy no longer symbolizes absolute victory and is thus rendered a useless object. In a refusal of the logic of wins and losses, Michael dismantles the popular belief that "fortune favors the bold." What remains is the materialization of an intimacy with form and a play of abstraction.

The works on display in *Empty History* refuse resolution and finality. And this is not for lack of care. Logue, Wong, and Michael negotiate an intensified lateral movement, occupying the difficult space in between meaning and disfunction, acting out and stepping back, seeking change and giving up. The artists do not aim to fix that which is broken. Rather, within the frame of the screen, life itself is presented in a fixed state. In this care for the irreparable as such, *Empty History* highlights a pursuit of pleasure for its own sake – a masturbatory un-working of time in which the artist-subject enters a queer relation with progress. This sense of worklessness is antithetical to the thought of a shared queer history carrying forward into a shared queer future. Without this carrying

forward, without meaningful progress, our sense of the past feels hollow. It is within this theoretical framework that Logue, Wong, and Michael trace the contours of a de-instrumentalized empty history.

In the conventional sense of the term, emptiness suggests a discernable absence. One's life is said to be empty when it lacks direction or purpose. As theorist Lauren Berlant argues, our understanding of emptiness is rooted in tropes of personal growth and success. For Berlant, this sense of movement is never simply neutral or apolitical. It is informed by an entire structuring of the social around neoliberal ideals of productivity and efficiency.[7] Alternatively, the works of Logue, Wong, and Michael frame modes of living without direction, neither backwards nor forwards. They do not attempt to fill emptiness with meaning but rather examine relations of open-endedness and indeterminacy that implicate a bending and stretching of heteronormative capitalist temporality. *Empty History* imagines an emptying out of emptiness in two ways. First, the artists demonstrate that emptiness is not a purely negative relation. In other words, emptiness is not merely impoverishment but rather an embrace of worklessness. Second, they reveal how emptiness is more than a taking-up of space without. It is also marked by a constant traversing and an endless failure of arrival. For Logue, Wong, and Michael, emptiness is expressed both in the pursuit of everyday intimacies and as an opening onto an ethics of non-productivity. Emptiness, here, is staged as the pleasure of deferral itself.

In this emptying of emptiness, *Empty History* proposes alternative ways of thinking about writing history and living historically. Considering the ways in which ideas of action, transformation, and progress are so deeply woven into the queer historical imagination, Logue, Wong, and Michael offer performances that seem minor and inconsequential. Their works are artifacts of workless, impossible histories without purpose or end, carried out at the limits of what is deemed recognizable queer political content. This relation initiates an exercise in what theorist William Haver calls the unbecoming of philosophical subjectivity.[8] As in Gonzalez-Torres' *"Untitled"*, what remains for the viewer is sheer indeterminacy. If the very meaning of queerness is rooted in a foundational rejection of normativity, perhaps it is this commitment to non-teleological thought that renders the practice of curating queer history queer. *Empty History* considers this un-working of progress as the work of curating queer history.

Empty Research

This program focuses on the ways in which artists use video to manipulate the time of progress. Over the course of a year of research, living with these four works at the forefront of my imagination, I have learned to embrace the worklessness of slow curating. I have learned to find comfort in emptiness as an intensified lateral movement. Nevertheless, old habits die hard. Returning to Vtape as a participant in *The Researcher is Present* program, almost four years after my involvement in the *Curatorial Incubator* series, I sought to make an exhibition that dispelled myths about canonical history. Beginning this research with an approach that seemed formulaic, mechanical, and mostly predictable, I was encouraged to let go of the conventions of my practice and to think without direction, restriction, or expectation, beyond the institutional demands traditionally placed on curating as a pedagogical, instrumentalized practice. A structureless structure afforded me the chance to let go of meaning. Over the course of this residency, I have spoken with peers and mentors about the uncomfortable thought of an empty history. Acting as early collaborators in this project's development, Deirdre Logue, Serena Lee, and John Paul Ricco helped me to think through my own anxious relation to productivity, success, and movement forward. I have learned to embrace the false starts and the unresolved thought experiments. And as Berlant suggests, it is this lack of direction, this decisive wandering, that might offer us a way out of the bind of cruel optimism. In *Empty History*, deferral is more than distraction. Deferral is resilience in the face of a heterosexist capitalist society marked by deception and hypocrisy. Today, still, the works of Logue, Wong, and Michael remind me that the decision to refuse progress carries its own ethical and political weight. ∎

Endnotes

[1] Organized by the Columbus Museum of Art, *Art After Stonewall 1969–1989* premiered at the Grey Art Gallery and the Leslie-Lohman Museum from April 24 - July 20, 2019.

[2] Tim McCaskell, Queer Progress: *From Homophobia to Homonationalism* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).

[3] Deborah P. Britzman, "Is There A Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight," *Educational Theory 45*, no. 2 (1995).

[4] This interest in queer acts has informed other notable curatorial projects such as *About Face: Stonewall, Revolt and New Queer Art*, a new exhibition at Wrightwood 659 that examines the ways in which artists "transgress, transfigure, transpose, transform, and finally, transcend a world of binary options." https://wrightwood659.org/exhibitions/about-face-stonewall-revolt-and-new-queer-art/

[5] An excerpt taken from the Public Art Fund's official project description. https://www.publicartfund.org/exhibitions/view/felix-gonzalez-torres-untitled-1989/

[6] Conversely, as artist Gregg Bordowitz suggests, queer artists have traditionally used video as a means of coalition building in resistance to social injustice. Gregg Bordowitz, "Picture a Coalition," in *Queer* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

[7] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[8] William Haver, "Queer Research; or, How to Practice Invention to the Brink of Intelligibility," in *The Eight Technologies of Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1997).

CONTRIBUTOR BIO

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