

# Queer desire's orientations and learning in higher education fine art

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This paper explores the mechanisms of LGBTQI+ desire that intersect with fine art disciplinary learning. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* provides a theoretical scaffold for this work, particularly her reflection that orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. In so doing, sexual orientations might shape not just how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation (Ahmed, 2006, 3). I posit that the desires which determine self-placing within the LGBTQI+ rubric orient learning towards and/or away from disciplinary objects of engagement. They effect this through accentuated tensions between two colliding aspects of a student's *singularity* (Ruti, 2012): sexuality-centered *states of being* in which productive erotic desires reside (Grosz, 2010) and an individual student's creative will; sense-making of related desires; and dominant disciplinary cultural manifestations in creative visual arts higher education. To investigate this premise, the work of queer/queering visual artists is introduced to the higher educational student learning research canon as a valuable source of understanding what it means 'to be' in sexual orientation. In light of the work of queer artists, the discussion recognizes that tactics used by queer student artists and the cultural registers that they access and create can usefully be identified as a queer anatomy of agency that deserves fuller investigation. Specifically, it demonstrates how an analysis of queer artists' work offers a unique way of interrogating LGBTQI+ student learning experiences in fine art.

## Key words

Queer art, higher education, LGBTQI+ students

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## **Introduction**

Desires, unfolded and revealed or sublimated and contained in visual practices, are not uncommon phenomena in Art School learning. Sexual desire in particular appears both predictably and unexpectedly (Gray, 2018, 431). Erotic desire can be simultaneously a source of creative action and a location of potential non-belonging. *Being queer* through desire can be disruptive, agentic, pleasurable, fun, and accompanied by powerful love (momentary and lasting). It can also hurt. As students traverse the interweaving of embodiment, attraction, identity, and eroticism via the manifestation of their creativity, forms of difference are accentuated. In this accentuation, objects of learning can become sites of indiscriminate intimacy, locations of powerful affect and places of resistance (Probyn, 2004; Ahmed, 2006, 163-164). For some, the heightened awareness of difference and the associated affects in the experience both energize in one direction and enervate in another. Joy and pleasure of sexuality as well as its attendant shame and pain paradoxically share the capacity to foster creative activity through the production of art works during a student's fine art programme. For students who self-identify within the rubric of LGBTQI+ this is, perhaps, especially so as their experience of sexuality chafes against the limits of heteronormativity. Their *incorpo-realities* have, to borrow a phrase of Michel Foucault, distinct technologies of the self. How such technologies function in their development as student artists deserves more attention. Yet, the desires commonly associated with sexual orientation in student learning in undergraduate Art and Design programmes are under-researched (Ing, 2015: 737).

This paper attempts to address queer desire as an aspect of student fine art production to more fully conceptualise the role that erotically determined affects might play in student learning within a specific discipline. It explores the work of queer artists as a possible reservoir of insights into how queer students come to generate queer strategies in and through their art works and what this might suggest about LGBTQI+ learning.<sup>2</sup> In doing this, it turns its attention to two currently underdetermined areas of analysis: a possible conceptualisation of the inner 'genesis' point of queer creative action (referred to in this paper as *singularity, erotic desire and the creative will*) and an articulation of particular material and immaterial structures of the fine art discipline with which this inner-world interacts, visibility (being visible whilst visualising) and incorporating and reconstituting aesthetics with a particular focus on understanding queer aesthetic's abrasions.

## **A fractured landscape: the current context of 'LGBTQI+ learning in HE' research**

I have longstanding concern regarding fractures within educational research about LGBTQI+ learning in higher education disciplinary contexts (Gunn, 2003; Gunn,

2013). There are three of note here: Firstly, it is to be welcomed that queer learning research in higher educational research literature is no longer characterised by its absence. It remains the case, however, that it is still rarely specifically focussed on the relationships between erotic desire and learning within a specific discipline, be that fine art or other disciplines associated with higher education academic study (Gunn, 2013).<sup>3</sup> This is despite the consistent identification that an erotically-charged, intersectionally affected intimacy appears present in how students and scholars relate to their disciplines (hooks, 1994; Chapkis, 1994; DeSoto, 2005; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2006; Jones, 2009; Rowe, 2012). Indeed, disciplines as key cultural entities of learning which students inhabit and in which affects are generated whilst studying, deserve to be more comprehensively and holistically analysed for the potential role they play within the learning ecology. However internally divergent (or low consensus), disciplines manifest *seemingly approved* ways of thinking and knowing (epistemologies), practicing, and ways of being (ontologies) that in turn can interact with student's experience of their own erotic selves (Kreber, 2009; Carter and Gunn, 2017). The possible mechanisms at work offer a rich seam of research possibilities and challenges with respect to LGBTQI+ student experience (Gedro, 2009; Fraser & Lambie, 2013).

In light of this observation, the discussion below is especially focused on the question of how immaterial and material disciplinary structures might generate the conditions in which erotically centred aspects of *being* play out. In so doing, it apprehends how the relationship between disciplinary matter and erotic desire effects and affects the *how* as well as the *what* of learning in fine art contexts. It also takes as its starting place the following assumption: If we address the question of *who* students are, we are forced to see them in all their humanity. This means perceiving them as individually singular and collectively engaged through inter-subjectivities, responders to corporeal as well as intellectual desires. Sexuality is a critical aspect of this *being* as is its possible relationship with creative will. For LGBTQI+ minority groups, this may be especially pertinent. Erotic desire has a way of throwing the unacknowledged life of learning in general education and disciplinary contexts into stark relief. As it does so two key phenomena in student learning, agency and alienation, can be the response.

What is needed from research is a better determination of how disciplinary cultural manifestations in higher education engage *who-we-are* desire. Research needs to enunciate how this relationship might lead to dominant responses in students' learning in terms of the practices of prohibition, inhibition, permission or proactivism. We are yet to fully expose what it is about those practices which create, curate, consume, and/or challenge cultural manifestations in a way that intersects with the diverse selves of our students. The affect and effect of non-normative sexual desires can accentuate relationships with phenomena in a manner that disrupts taken-for-granted norms. This requires a way of accessing how socially accepted logics, aesthetics, moral positions, and other cultural processes embedded within the

disciplines interact with sexuality. Interrogating this intellectually might, therefore, enlighten our understanding of *all* student learning, not just a labelled and self-identified minority group in the fine arts.

Secondly, research about LGBTQI+ student learning sits within a context of institutional fissures that silo psychological, cultural, and socio-sexual approaches. Whether this is as a result of fulfilling the seductive intellectual temptations of the cognitive sciences, chasing research funding streams, or the at times seemingly remorseless specialization around what constitutes convincing education research, it nonetheless results in research outputs that exist apart from each other. This means that competitive (and at times exclusionary) tensions play out around different canons. The problem of this is one of impact. Ostensibly more practical or a-theoretical psychological and epistemological methodologies have come to dominate in the generic H.E. learning and teaching enhancement circles in the UK (though much less so in Adult and Community Education), despite a growing body of alternative methods and methodologies (Haggis, 2009; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Allen, Rasmussen & Quinlivan, 2014; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Aoki, 2002; Renn, 2010). Consequently, a limited range of approaches which overly emphasise apparently bodiless, affectless epistemic beliefs that relate to self-regulation of learning in disciplinary contexts have prevailed. The literature is useful for identifying how inductive and deductive patterns of reason work in our students and what characterizes deep or surface learning in these patterns in higher learning. It is, however, much less able to address issues of embodiment, creativity and being.

In student experience support circles a slightly different canon has emerged, one focused on the visibility of LGBTQI+ students, campus climate and attitudes to LGBT (rarely QI+) students, and LGBTQI+ student identities and experience (rather than learning in the disciplines) (Renn, 2010, 134; Formby, 2015; Epstein *et al*, 2003; Valentine & Wood, 2009; Marine, 2011; Holland *et al*, 2013; Gulley, 2009). Whilst this has played a pivotal role in foregrounding the structural and circumstantial discrimination that LGBTQI+ students face in academe and the potential roles they play in alienation, it fails to address the creative agency which emerges through both aspects of identity development and autonomy of action. Queer theory and cultural ontologies-based research has remained too much on the periphery, sometimes presumed to be the preserve of theoretical educational researchers or individual academics in the disciplines who specialise in the LGBTQI+ 'compartments' of a given disciplinary canon.

Additionally, as someone with a higher educational teaching policy role as well as an arts academic background, it is clear to me that certain narratives are preferred by higher education teaching excellence policy makers. Such privileging results in disproportionate influence over how LGBTQI+ students are considered in terms of categories of evidence used (and funded) for policy. I am thinking specifically here of two clusters. Firstly, simple student demographic metrics data-mining which has

tended to stabilise the LGBT rubric (omitting QI+) and neglect mining for intersectionality (though the interface between intersecting identities, eg race, age, class, religion and sexuality is clearly important, (Gunn, Morrison and Hanesworth, 2015; Keenan, 2014; Renn, 2010; Rankin, 2006;). Secondly, research that over emphasises the pathological, negative psycho-social and sexual orientation (possibly viewed as more 'fixable') and is arguably as much preoccupied with negative affect as some queer theory (Snediker, 2009; Ahmed, 2010). As a result, erotics, intersectionality, corporeality and creativity remain under-represented in this scholarship. The dedicated work of understanding how nuanced, affect-reflective, theoretically sophisticated, research outcomes could also be applied within curricular contexts to make new meaning around how disciplinary learning works is still principally overlooked.

Thirdly, culturally normative assumptions have dominated the underlying questions of much of the LGBTQI+ educational research (at least as its produced in the Anglophone regions of the globe) without having the humility to reiterate the manifold limits of applicability outside of that context (Rasmussen, 2016, 75). As an extension of this point, even within LGBTQI+ studies in anglophone educational research on student learning, such dominant cultural assumptions have reinscribed a hierarchy of analysis in which certain identity groups within the LGBTQI+ rubric have had more voice (Schlichter, 2007) This is especially the case when it comes to sex and sexuality, where the power of gendered-male, conceptualised as white, sexuality has continued to play a leading role in maintaining certain configurations of embodied intimacies as the starting place for the erotic (Morris *et al*, 2018, 2). (Though this is beginning to change, Morris *et al*, 2018).

I tentatively address the first two of these three concerns by adding my voice to those proposing a refocus in LGBTQI+ student learning discussion from the epistemological and pathological to a more positive ontological thread. For me, this is to be achieved via an exploration of the possible relationships between an aspect of the inner world of queer students and interaction with elements of the disciplinary culture that might be the location for the generation of creative agency in fine art learning. In terms of the third concern, I recognise the challenge of unstitching the tenacious binaries around heteronormativity and LGBTQI+ by posing the following question: could a notion of pluralistic queer orientations as expressed within queer art and by queer artists prove a more efficacious framework for analysis of LGBTQI+ student learning in fine art than achieved currently in the domain of learning in higher education research? I acknowledge, however, my cultural and intellectual limitations. I work in a UK anglophone culture. My social justice activity and research have emerged in terms of my own and the local lived experience of the LGBTQI+ students with whom I have interacted in this context since the late 1980s. As there is still, however, a clear need to unpick the social norms within this context, there is much

work to be done locally. We just should not naively universalize our approaches outwards.

## **Structure of the paper**

In the following sections, I attempt to explore the mechanisms of LGBTQI+ desire that intersect with the operationalizing of disciplinary learning. Sara Ahmed's powerful *Queer Phenomenology* provides a theoretical scaffold for this work. I refer especially here to her reflection that orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. In so doing, sexual orientations might shape not just how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance (Ahmed, 2006, 3). I posit that the desires which shape self-placing within the LGBTQI+ rubric orient learning towards and/or away from disciplinary objects of engagement. They effect this through accentuated tensions between the following: Two colliding aspects of a students' *singularity* (Ruti, 2012): sexuality-centered *states of being* in which productive erotic desires reside (Grosz, 2010) and an individual student's creative will (see below); sense-making of related desires; and dominant disciplinary cultural manifestations in creative visual arts higher education.

To explore this premise, the paper covers the following: It introduces the work of queer/queering visual artists as a valuable source of understanding what it means 'to be' in sexual orientation, centring on the notion of 'the multiple localities of queer', and the implications this might have for disciplinary learning. In light of the work of queer artists, the discussion recognizes that tactics used by queer student artists and the cultural registers that they access and create can usefully be identified as a queer anatomy of agency that deserves exploration. Specifically, it demonstrates how an analysis of queer artists' work offers a unique way of interrogating student experience from two key perspectives: firstly, sexuality as a charge for learning within the discipline and creative action that comes from it; secondly, the power of the narrative and experience of Western anglophone cultures heteronormative binaries and how these intersect with other binaries in a manner that over-simplifies the *what* of desire, but nonetheless is a space in which queer strategies emerge.

## **Introducing Queer Art to the Educational Debate**

Queer art visually and relationally unfolds desire's alterity. It reveals *other* sexual and asexual hidden nows in the fabric of *normal's* present. It ensures public space is not left neutral or abstract. As fierce pussy noted in a 2009 interview, their queer art takes *queerness out of the 'abstract' and enacts a queer conversation out in public* (reprint: Getsy, 2016, 223). It also generates spaces of reparation, recognition, and preferable futurism (O'Rourke, 2012). In this queer art makes both anti-utopian, post-futural queer (Edelman, 2004) and queer optimism co-exist (Snediker, 2009). Indeed, queer art is not quite the same as LGBTQI+ art and this tells us something about how queer

desire is experienced as an anarchy of disruption. When interviewed for the arts magazine, *Homoculture*, Chasen Igleheart, a queer performance artist, captured this thus: “*I am queer because imaginary rules can’t categorize or constrict me.*” (Igleheart & Perry, 2015, p. 11). Queer art cuts through conventions that exist as much in the LGBTQI+ communities (such as the continued privileging of certain voices, tropes, and bodies) as in broader normative ones. In so doing it generates visual practices that undermine any attempt to stabilize or sterilize sexuality’s intersectional fluidity.

### **The multiple localities of queer from the creativity of queer artists**

Arguably, queer and queering artists manifest visually the *what* of queer erotic orientations, signifying the *promissary* ‘multiple localities of queer’, which are dependent on no single referent or canon, though they are often associated with particular theorists. (O’Rourke, 2012, p.103; Muñoz, 2009). In so doing they manifest queer erotics as a dwelling or inhabiting of social space, rather than as a particular identity category. In this they revisit and disrupt expressions of meaning-making that have emerged around sexual orientation. I take as my starting place, three qualitatively identifiable ways of understanding the *what* of sexual orientation. These ways of understanding have all been the subject of queer artists and they capture the intersections of lived experience, theoretical approaches to LGBTQI+ bodies, and creative practice: *Performativity*: For Judith Butler, gender-based identities and the desires located within them are *non-inherent* to the body, in as much as that whilst having no prototype, certain characteristics and desires become naturalized through a cycle of reiteration of the norms ascribed to identity categories (Butler, 1990; Ruffalo, 2011). Reception of this philosophically-predicated idea has led to a dominant discourse of the fluid rather than stable orientation of one’s desire as being an emancipator from heterosexual/ homosexual sexual binaries (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

Yet, what queer art reminds us is that Butler’s adoption as a provider of a coherent position on gender and desire needs to be questioned in the light of the two following categories of experience: *Firstly, material literalism*: Commonly part of a lived experience intersecting with particular religious faiths where embodiment is tied up with concepts of sin or moral error, but also assumed to be the dominant experience of some from the Trans+ community. *Secondly, incorporeality*: This dimension expresses how the phenomenon of the perceiving the Self and its associated desires is in some way inherent. It does this without falling back on either biological determinism or the categories of gendered experience linked directly to Freudian sexology or post-Lacanian scholarship. Written works connected to this represent the notion of authentic subjectivities and it is particularly associated with discursive attribution (Munt, 1997; Halberstam, 1998; Ahmed, 2006; Ruffalo, 2011; Carter &

Gunn, 2017). Thus, for some in the Trans+ community, rather than the body determining gender identity, a complex interaction of an individual's internal sense of self and corporeality (not a form of over simplified inherency) transcends the material self, which in turn requires creative resignification of assumptions about body-dimorphism (Zimman, 2014).

Hypothetically, as multiple-localities these categories of experience can co-exist within the terrain of the individual body, with one being more dominant than others in the face of specific cultural norms. Additionally, these categories of meaning-making are the 'objects' from which accentuated affect emerges. As such they can be considered in terms of Ahmed's objects which circulate as social goods, intimately associated with affect, be that happiness or otherwise (Ahmed, 2011). As imaginary objects, they seem stable, yet are immaterial and over-loaded with assumptions and fantasies, which intimately interact with the ways culture is materialised. This approach challenges generalizing assumptions regarding sexuality and its relationship to gender dimorphism regarding LGBTQI+ groups, which tend to start from an oppositional binary of either the collocation of sex and gender *or* the dislocation of sex and gender, but either way get stuck on male/female dichotomies.

### **Queer art's anatomy of agency**

Queer art visually embodies, then, a possible model which demonstrates that sexuality is as much about the way affects are accentuated from within erotic orientations in relation to matter, as it is about the recognition to be gained from identity-belonging. In production of such a model, artists deploy a range of visual tactics which challenge and potentially undermine visual regimes that communicate through repeating the habits of power, particularly ones which reinforce oversimplifying yet tenacious sex and gender, nature and nurture binaries. At this juncture it is useful to note that the range of tactics deployed can be found to have parallels in the literature on LGBTQI+ student experience. I have referred to these strategies elsewhere as the queer anatomy of agency (Gunn, 2015). In short, these strategies include forms of transgression; making invisibility familiar without making particular visibilities stable; reclamation and reappropriation of shame and spectacle; social facilitation, strategic pragmatics around the Self; mischievousness; changing temporality (outlined in more depth in Table 1).



Table 1 Outlining Queer Art's Anatomy of Agency

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Tactics used</b>	<b>Indicative references</b>
<p>Transgression: Defiance and defiant presence that undoes normative forms and assumptions in fine art and is achieved through:</p>	<p><i>Punkiness</i> that unsettles gender assumptions and their association with sexuality, such as in the work of Juergen Teller and Kristen McMenamy.</p>	<p>Shinkle, 2013.</p>
	<p>Subversion &amp; radical questioning and the associated altering of dominant definitions of desire, for example, from the pleasure of consummation (and its hetero/homonormative assumptions) to the enjoyment of contradiction or through unfurling configurations of pleasure beyond phallogocentrism.</p>	<p>Sullivan, 2003; Bowen, 2016; MacCormack, 2013, 226</p>
	<p><i>Heresy</i> or creating and investing in new ways of understanding which are explicitly prohibited by those in power, seen in the animated works of the feminist postcolonialist animator, Chitra Ganesh's works, for example.</p>	<p>Ganesh, 2016</p>
	<p>Grappling with 'improper' objects.</p>	<p>Latimer, 2016</p>
	<p><i>Fugitive knowledge</i> and <i>fugitive citations</i></p>	<p>Grace &amp; Wells, 2004; Guy, 2016</p>
	<p>Discursive attribution (beyond essential/constructed binary) to overcome 'hegemonic material literalism'</p>	<p>Zimman, 2014</p>
<p>Making invisibility familiar without making particular visibilities stable</p>	<p>Making social absences visible through performing visibility (such as in Del LaGrace Volcanoe's collaborative photographic project, <i>Visibly Intersex</i> 2011-2017). Connected with this tactic is destabilizing normative archives through a conscious act of ownership, eg deliberately placing queer monuments in otherwise normative social spaces such as cemeteries. See particularly Patricia Cronin's 2003, <i>Monument to a Marriage</i> installed in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx NY.</p>	<p>Lord &amp; Maya, 2013</p>
	<p>Exposing territories and conventions of normativity (as in the works of the queer artists involved in the Shades of Noir (2016) <i>Decoding Masculinity</i> project, Ebun Sodipo, Sabeah Choudrey, Othello De'Souza Hartley).</p>	<p>Shades of Noir, 2016</p>
	<p>Demonstrating resistance through recognition which at the same time resists <i>identity-fiction</i>, as</p>	<p>Guy, 2016</p>

	in the film artwork, <i>Opaque</i> , by Pauline Boudry & Renate Lorenz.	
Reclamation and reappropriation	Sexuality shame (in a variety of cultural guises)	Munt, 2007; Halperin & Traub, 2009; Moore, 2004.
	Spectacle, carnivalising and hypertheatricality, especially trans-camp as spectacle, but recognizing the difficulties of intersectionality with this too.	Papenburg, 2013; Mayo, 2014; Ings, 2015:
Social facilitation	Peace-keeping and truce generation.	Keenan, 2014; Bettinger, 2007.
Strategic pragmatics around the Self	Dormancy not latency Self-enforced hibernation Compartmentalisation	McAllister, 2016.
	Passing	Rankin, 2006
Mischievousness	Humour, especially invention, playfulness, performance, parody.	Munt, 2007; Sullivan, 2003
	Irreverence, as demonstrated through the figurative painting of Dale Lewis	Lewis, 2017
Changing temporality	Making temporary and not so temporary queer geographies	Luzia, 2013

### Why might this be relevant to queer student learning in fine art?

By reflecting on multiple localities of queer as a model from which to consider the emergence of learning in a given cultural context (such as a discipline like fine art), it is possible to infer how the experience of self (at least in terms of sexuality) potentially can have a profound impact on the relationship of sexual orientation to disciplinary matter. If this model is theoretically sufficient for now, it emphasizes that states of being are not exclusive to one identity centric dimension but rather represent a delicate ecosystem of aspects of who we are that balance and rebalance over the life course, the balance being charged and reset by the inhabitation of desires erotic (and non-erotic). Though an 'imagined truth', multiple localities of queer are a useful heuristic for grasping how the mutualizing of desire and creative will might affect the way queer fine art's students reside or dwell in learning spaces. In acknowledging these different lived experiences, we may need to address states of being in which responses from erotic orientations play a considerable role and which *emanate from* the body through social, material, and immaterial relationships. This in turn will

hopefully provide a more sophisticated engagement with sexuality than has been enabled through the hitherto dominant oppositional binary underneath the discourse of heteronormativity.

Moreover, the strategies used by queer artists clarify the embodied nature of learning as creatively responding out of erotics' *affects* to the objects that compose culture and what might, therefore, be considered agentic sexuality in learning. Recognizing that the three elements of erotic orientation outlined above influence leaning towards/ away from learning responses in the face of particular metanarratives and other socio-cultural manifestations which lead to particular visually creative strategies, is a way to reconsider queer disciplinary learning in fine art. The three elements as multiple localities arguably determine what is accentuated in the experience of receiving a discipline's *matter* both positive and negative. How students who subjectively favour any one of the three outlined categories of understanding of their sexual selves in the face of abrasive assumptions emanating from the collision with the two others is an origination point of creativity. As such, queer agency is materialized from this genesis. A key insight from the work of queer artists is the option that students who produce queer art whilst learning the 'discipline' of fine art could be said to reflect the authentic, immediate insistency of their desiring selves in a manner that dislocates normative visual perceptions and almost ubiquitous forms of aesthetics in wider society. Queer art students *see* queerly. In so doing, they challenge constrained fields of vision, ie ones which harness established abstraction and conceptual meaning to what is perceived through sight, and create new ones (Shapiro, 2003, 201; Heyes et al, 2016, 142). Queer visual tactics from multiple localities of queer as a way of understanding the generation of learning in fine art is thus worthy of attention.

### **Conceptualizing Fine Art as a Discipline Materialized**

Fine Art as a discipline of higher education is an imagined social entity constituted through disciplinary cultural manifestations (Gunn, 2014). Key to these are formal and informal practices, cultural forms, and moral order themes and how they balance or contradict one another in student encounters with them (Gunn, 2014). As well as those disciplinary cultural manifestations associated more generally with learning, subjectivities, and inter-subjectivities in university, fine art education brings a specific mix of its own: firstly, the phenomena of singularity (erotic and creative will); secondly, the interaction of singularity with visuality; thirdly, the impact of incorporating and reconstituting the limits of aesthetics as fuzzily defined within visual arts educational contexts through subjective abrasions (particularly in relation to assessment and feedback mechanisms). Circulating throughout the discipline's pedagogical structures, these play a significant role in subjectivities and intersubjectivities of visual arts' students, their peers and staff, within and outwith the

studio, yet this mix tends to be overlooked in the literature on student learning. All three are experienced together as a whole but are separated here for ease of analysis.

## **Singularity and Creative Will**

The creative arts particularly, have appropriated and transformed Freudian and Lacanian psycho-sexual analysis into heuristic devices centred on both the role of the imagination and the *singularity of the Self*. These devices offer critical insights into how sexuality oriented subjectivities might operate to charge what we do and why we do it (Watson, 2008; Ruti, 2012; Williams, 2013). I adapt here Mari Ruti's useful reminder of the Lacanian description of human subjectivity as entailing a constant negotiation of three registers of being: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real (Ruti, 2012: 1). The Real can also be described as singularity. In this context, singularity is that which intrudes into our students lives as an unruly vortex of super-abundant vitality (referred to by Lacan as *jouissance*) and which breaches the registers of being associated with our integration into symbolic orders and our imaginary sense of self (Ruti, 2012). This singularity is where rebellious-to-social-norm energies reside (Ruti, 2012). Such energies should not be limited to sexuality and I posit here that these energies also include what I refer to as creative will. Nonetheless, sexual desires are often one of the most powerful manifestations of singularity (consider, for example, their co-existing capacities of incoherence and powerful specificity as noted by Jordy Jones in the discussion of Loren Cameron's *Transhomosex Texts* artwork, 2007, 9).

Creative will is an insistence that drives a student artist to return to certain forms, representations, media over and over again, each time trying a different angle and each time, converting their desires, obsessions, imagination into a productive material or immaterial artefact. This is perfectly summed up by Vince Aletti, reflecting on his time as a student artist: "I wasn't consciously queering the space, but as my rooms filled up with images of men, I realized I was queering the pictures. It didn't matter who made them or with what intentions. Now that they were mine, they became expressions of my desire, my obsession, my imagination. They may not be gay, but they'd become queer." (Aletti, 2015, p. 27). It is 'in love' with the creative process as much as the product and is, to use Pilcher's phrase when he discusses the work of Tomoko Kashiki, single-minded in its dedication (Pilcher, 2017, 144).

I construct here an initial hypothesis around the currently under-determined phenomena of erotic singularity and creative will singularity and recognize that as such, my observation warrants critique. Nonetheless, I think the notion of singularity as a locality for both queer desires and creative will in fine art students is a useful way of accessing something that is perhaps an 'inherence' of being (See Ahmed, 2006; Jagodzinski, 2002), lived out by some of our LGBTQI+ students as they progress with their studio work. I hypothesize that when two aspects of a students' singularity (Ruti, 2012) collide: sexuality-centered states of being in which productive erotic desires

reside (Grosz, 2010) and creative will, this amplifies how they experience meta-narratives and objects which circulate as norms within disciplinary cultural manifestations. This point of accentuation thus emerges as the location for engagement and alienation and this has a phenomenologically identifiable different flavour depending on the students experience of the multiple localities of queer. When students' sexuality and creative will as mutualized states of being, particularly their sense of them, comes into play with apparently negating, abrasive or contradictory mechanisms and meta-narratives within disciplinary cultural manifestations, this affects how and what they learn. This can occur in both a specific instant and/or be accumulative. It can evoke shame and/or excitement. It is visceral and disquietening. It may also drive how emerging queer artists deploy visually typical, normative, and/or queer cultural references of their present in a disruptive or apparently dissonant manner.

### **Visuality: being visible whilst visualizing**

One of the joys of working in an Art School, particularly one which provides on-campus, residential studios for its undergraduates, is being able to watch artworks emerge over a given year of study. This act of 'being able to watch', however, is itself evidence of how visuality operates in fine art students' learning. In effect, fine art studios in such a context are an *oligopticon*, peer-based and relational, where mutual oversight happens in a time-limited frame and where academics and practitioners visit to give feedback and make assessments (adapted from Armstrong, 2015; Otto, 2008). Privacy in such a setting is, thus, complicated. These complexities are made even more so by the sense that relational aesthetics at a peer level are a fluid constant in a context of circulating ambiguity and uncertainty (Bourriard, 1998; Orr and Shreeve, 2018). Visuality is heightened in terms of an expectation of *seeing*. It is also a haptic regime that tends to be rooted in the sensual rather than a necessarily intellectual gaze (Beugnet, 2013, 181). This cannot but invite intimacies and exclusions, especially where intrusion on the normatively private is experienced.

Into this already powerful experiential amalgam comes an additional dimension, materiality. I refer here to the ways in which simultaneous making, understanding of self, and autonomy of action originates and feeds both alienation and creativity (Ingold, 2013). Materiality thus plays a part in learning as affective dynamics emerge in the engagement with images, smells, textures, shapes and sounds (Papenburg & Zarzycka, 2013, 1). In terms of this understanding of materiality, the clearest phenomenon relevant to this paper relates to the queer-theory-haptic-making combination in studio. What happens when practice is enriched by theory in the studio depends on both the recognitions of Self experienced through it and the critical abrasions evoked by it. Embodiment debates in the critical studies elements of the curriculum (Rintoul, 2017) and haptic aspects of making come together with the debris

of historically based cultures as part of our meaning-making. Students responses to this are constitutive of fields of vision, imagination, and creative production. In this observation, I am not trying to over-claim the outcome of this as a pedagogic practice in terms of a consistently high quality of reflective practice on the part of our students. Other disciplinary mechanisms appear to influence these outcomes both positively and negatively (Belluigi, 2017). I am, however, suggesting that the making of the private (sexual desires) public within the studio impacts on the student's experience of learning visual practices through their body and accentuates the affect that runs alongside this. This in turn makes queer theory both something that emerges through their art practice and an existing intellectual canon of influence. To qualify this somewhat, it is noticeable for some LGBTQI+ students that, in this space, "declaration is integral to the authenticity of work" (Ing, 2015: 73). In this sense, the self is inescapable in their creative practice, which in turn increases the prospects of the multiple localities of queer's abrasions with forms of normativity.

This is important if we accept that higher education continues to operate structurally, sentimentally, and symbolically from implied sexual privacy and associated totalizing assumptions about heterosexuality (heteronormativity) (Harris & Gray, 2014; Rowe, 2012; Epstein *et al*, 2003). Put simply, such spaces amplify difference and reassert cultural hierarchies in which binaries regarding the orientations of desire are located (Epstein *et al*, 2003; Harris & Gray, 2014). The recipe of desires, self-engagement in art production, and exposure to theory can profoundly reveal this. Indeed, from erotically charged imagination queer creativity can result as a student makes the intimate out of inanimate and animate objects. This can produce erotic spaces of pleasure within fine art where a person could not otherwise initially belong. Social containments of sensuality, however, also become illuminated, with non-normative heterosexual desire often being placed in a category of 'questionable other', to be viewed publically with suspicion (if not derision) (Young, 2012; Loutzenheiser & McIntosh, 2004). This othering simultaneously perpetuates binaried thinking and effectively avoids legitimizing the positive role of diverse desire as presented through the multiple localities of queer and their resultant pleasures in how learning occurs (Allen, 2009; Allen, 2014). One of the challenges of heteronormativity for LGBTQI+ students is that their lives are subordinated to a model of consensus living that may seem ever more abstracted from their lived experience as understood through the multiple localities of queer outlined above. The impact of this on the Self's construction of a personal hermeneutic approach is one of affective intensity. These are pivotal points of orientations away from study, where the potential of the multiple localities of queer as *states-of-being* function to counter the dominant socio-cultural discourse.

In this way, heteronormativity translates possible connections within the educational space into repeated gestures of exclusion which produce alienation (Loutzenheiser & McIntosh, 2004; Mayo, 2014; Epstein, *et al*. 2003; Ellis, 2009;

Valentine & Wood, 2009; Ripley *et al*, 2012; Woodford, *et al*. 2013; Keenan, 2014; Bradbury, *et al.*, 2016). For example, the affect heightening processes of *becoming* and *being*, when frequently perceived as deviant from the norm, intensify certain types of shame and low self-worth, making persistence an intensified emotional labour (Scourfield, *et al*, 2008; Blumenfeld, *et al*, 2016). We must not ignore this. In some students, this will lead to disengagement, self-exclusion, and far worse. However, it is also the case that as LGBTQI+ art students become explicitly aware of their own *Othering* through its emergence in studio, they use the resultant sense of alienation to respond to their experience with creative action. It is, therefore, a mistake solely to conceptualize alienation and agency as exclusive of each other in higher education learning (Mackenzie, 2013). The paradox of alienation is that it can be expressed as agency both through personal rejection and as intellectual transformation. If there's one insight to be drawn from the learning of creative practitioners, it is that alienation charged with erotic desire can animate. Thus, the discordances that direct withdrawal and apathy can also facilitate the individual to act autonomously, even in a position of structural vulnerability. In fine art students, it can also be expressed through *ways of thinking, making and doing* reformation from a place of ontological disquiet.

For some students, then, these embodied encounters provide opportunities to make a new sense of what at first feels discordant – a construction of a personally meaningful appropriative yet disruptive reading of an object, situation, or meta-narrative otherwise assumed within heteronormativity to be universal or taken for granted. This is a genesis for originality through embodied learning, epistemological agency in alienation, where the question marks generated by apparent frictions in the discipline's curriculum or the dissonances amplified by meta-narratives that jar become owned by the individual student in a conscious act. This is in no way to justify othering, prejudice, or maintaining structural and individual discrimination, but it is attempting to raise the possibility that queer agency is a valuable characteristic of learning worthy of far more interrogation than it has had to date. Arguably, this agency potentially transforms social and epistemological norms articulated within fine art as well as institutional atmospheres. The desires and pleasures associated with LGBTQI+ orientation may illuminate aspects of *how* we learn and, in that learning, change subject-based interpretative stances.

### **Incorporating and reconstituting the limits of aesthetics in (visual) creativity**

In the context of this discussion, aesthetics is defined as a manifested process of judgement and appreciation intrinsically linked with affect. As such aesthetics as used here emphasises the cultural formation of the senses (Papenburg & Zarzycka, 2013, 3). In experience, aesthetic affects are “moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter” (O’Sullivan, 2001, p.126). In the context of students, therefore,

aesthetic responses are embodiments of emotions tempered through increasingly skilled pattern, schema, and sign recognition. This views the incorporation and reconstitution of aesthetics as happening on the level of daily experiences in which affective responses become increasingly filtered, but not necessarily less intense, specialisation is developed regarding certain patterns, schema, and signs. Those patterns, schema, and signs we then judge as something we do or do not prefer. This is expressed in relationship with objects and ideas and the way we see them and, ideally, they develop both subtly and profoundly over the period of an undergraduate fine art degree. This does not mean that there are only visual aesthetics – rather ‘the way we see’ as used here is shorthand for *to be aware of through the senses*. In the aesthetic moment, feeling and calculation seem in unity (See, Prinz, 2011, p.72), amplifying an orientation towards or away from the patterns, schema, signs we encounter. This point accepts that aesthetic valuation has an affective foundation.

### *Queer aesthetics abrasions: feedback and assessment processes*

Queer artists have shown how reclaiming abjection, disgust, shame, pleasure challenges normative fields of vision. Whatever is behind how we define, judge, evaluate concepts such as beauty, ugliness and their associations with aesthetics, certain definitions, judgements and evaluations become acknowledged more broadly and valued hierarchically within a given community over individual differences. The power given to hierarchically defined norms of aesthetics and who can see them within a group is at the heart of concerns about the ideologies embedded in aesthetics (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 126). It should also be at the heart of a visual arts education and the assessment processes on which it depends. After all, it is in this process where personal aesthetics constituted by students explicitly meet what they at times experience as seemingly restrictive fields of vision. Indeed, as queer student artists challenge what they perceive to be heteronormatively constituted fields of vision, especially if they intuit an underlying morality, creative risk is accentuated.

## **Conclusion**

Queer artists situate themselves in relation to history, objects, others, and ideas differently, producing and curating visual interruptions which challenge the dominating gaze be it gender stereotypical, overly simplifying sexual categories, or influential racialized morphologies that assume universalism (this reflection builds on Berger, *et al.*, 1972). In their work, queer artists manifest the queer desire lines that defy any dependence on over simplifications of LGBTQI+ erotic desire. Acknowledging this, it is possible to suggest that erotic desire’s orientations, then, may play a role in generating LGBTQI+ learning in fine art. This is especially observable in terms of the relationships between who the students *are* in the light of the fine art they create and co-create, who they *are becoming* and *have become* as they navigate



these processes through undergraduate progression, and how they opt to learn in the discipline from these places of *dwelling in themselves*. How we orient to the phenomenon we encounter in these processes from an embodied place requires more robust interrogation if we are to apprehend the ecology of student learning. The impressions LGBTQI+ fine art students form through their desires, how these impressions exert themselves to increase proximity or distance and resultant engagement and production, and the what of queer artistry that materializes out of them is worthy of our attention.

I have argued for the importance of queer and its relationship to student learning in fine art. The mutualizing of erotic and creative will as aspects of singularity could be used as an epistemological framework for comprehending the generation of queer defiance and deviation in higher education learning. In so doing, what our research and teaching practices could focus on is the anatomy of agency, in which we welcome the disruptive claims queer student artists make on our *pasts*, *nows*, and our *futures*. Queer desires challenge instrumental, disembodied norms about how fine art students acquire and creatively construct knowledge. Desires (erotic and/or creative), as a key component of Self, human relations, and identity development, may affect what our students opt to learn, how they opt to learn it, and what they are prepared to make conscious in their learning (Bracher, 2002; Carter and Gunn, 2017). Nonetheless, how sexuality mutualized with creative will *orients* fine art students' disciplinary learning in higher education contexts is still too invisible to be familiar.

## **Notes**

1. The nature of queer art is one of constant flux, however, four excellent starting places to become familiar with queer art are: Lord & Maya, 2013; Rogers, 2007; Pilcher, 2017; Lorenz, 2012.

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