

Q2Q Paper

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**Queer Performance in the Post-Millennial Scramble:
Collaborating with Ghosts**

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I am writing to you from the middle of a PhD dissertation. The temporal and spatial territories of my “present” as an emerging scholar, a queer feminist, and a performance creator are never fully here and now but always also simultaneously then and elsewhere. My dissertation, entitled *Queer Performance in the Post-Millennial Scramble*, posits a theory about the ways that contemporary queer feminist performance challenges the stagnant periodization of our so-called post-feminist, post-queer, post-colonial now by scrambling ideas of gender, temporality, identity and form. The ongoing multiplicity of the present is a syncretic temporal mash-up that celebrates the very pleasure in scrambling. To take pleasure in the scramble is to embrace a present that holds no promise, and offers no neat narrative of progress, but rather, revels in the ongoing instability of now. Through their embrace of the scrambled reckoning offered by the post-millennial everything-ness of now, the artists represented in my research assemble queer archives within the very performances they scramble to present.

Doing feminist performance now is not anachronistic. Entirely present, the queer feminist stands ghosted by identifications; endless identifications accumulated over time. The challenge for feminist performance in the new millennium is not to “banish these ghosts to find some pure unghosted authenticity” but rather, as Rebecca Schneider has suggested, “to summon the ghosts, to bring them out of the shadows and into the scene where they already exist, to make them apparent *as players*” (*Explicit Body* 23). The performance discussed in this paper, *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House* created by Allyson Mitchell (and

Deirdre Logue¹), was presented in Toronto in October 2013 and remounted in Los Angeles in October 2015. *Killjoy's Kastle* is a large-scale performance piece filled with lesbian monsters that illustrate their histories of marginalization and abjection to trouble the popular stereotypes that engulf their representations. The *Kastle* forces us to think subjectivity (how we see ourselves from the position of the other), identity (the cultural process that constructs our sense of self), and impersonation (the conscious act of re-presentation) *all* together by drawing on traditions that render the queer feminist monstrous, “sublime, abject, and riveted,” as Hélène Cixous has said, “between the Medusa and the abyss.” Ghostly and chimerical, in sexual sequence the lesbian always comes last. In fact, she is more likely to suffer from disavowal than prohibition (Jagose xi). In the codes of sex she is second as female, in the codes of gender she is last as lesbian and when she does register in the field of the visible she is seen as monstrous—sterile, hideous, and filled with rage. With the lesbian at its definitional center, motivated by the question of “what would be scary” about a lesbian feminist haunted house and “who would be scared” (Mitchell, Personal interview), an artistic inquiry is launched using queer and feminist theory as its sculptural foundation.

Inspired by the film *Hell House*, a documentary about a Christian Evangelical event that uses the form of the carnival haunted house as a tool for the conversion of non-believers to Christianity. Mitchell and Logue had the idea to create a lesbian

¹ The original production in Toronto in 2013 listed Allyson Mitchell as the sole creator of the work but the remount in Los Angeles in 2015 listed both Mitchell and Deirdre Logue.

feminist version of the haunted house using the sensational horror tropes of the carnival haunted house and the passionate conviction of the Christian Hell House to create a hybrid experience that scrambles the very foundations upon which it is built. The performance installation was staged in the month of October, in both its Toronto and LA presentations, in order to exploit the witchy ethos of the month wherein Halloween is celebrated and when extremist evangelical Christian groups across the United States and Canada set out to build their Hell Houses. Situating itself within the temporal realm and stylistic conventions of haunted houses the *Kastle* emerged from a desire to re-imagine the Christian fright night as feminist performance art with lesbianism at its definitional centre. Traditional haunted houses are designed to stimulate a fear response, to thrill and excite with spooky imagery like skeletons, ghosts, and mangled or tortured bodies. Christian fright nights, or Hell Houses, showcase the horrific consequences of a sinful life (a tortured existence on earth and an eternity in hell) in order to convert the spectator to a better, i.e. Christian, life. In the words of John Fletcher, the Hell House impulse “stem[s] from that favourite eschatological ice-breaker: *if you died right now do you know for sure that you’d go to heaven?* The fear and uncertainty that this question inspires fuel their dramaturgy” (159). The tactical scramble of *Killjoy’s Kastle* repeats and terrorizes the future oriented forever that is the foundation of Christian conversion.

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* José Esteban Muñoz refers to “disidentification as a hermeneutic, a process of

production, and a mode of performance” (25), a model of interpretation, production and performance that shuttles back and forth between production and reception. My invocation of the post-millennial scramble takes up this charge as a hermeneutic, one that weaves together production analysis, queer and feminist theory, and an analysis of reception that, for the most part, stems directly from my own personal experiences inside the reception, performance and the creation of the work under investigation. The scramble suggests that the strategies of queer feminist artistic production engage with a wholly different system of perceiving, operating, creating, mating, fucking and world making within mainstream social reality. As the example of *Killjoy’s Kastle* demonstrates, the queer performance scramble is not, in its difference, separate from social reality, rather it is a direct correlative that relies on, refracts, and talks back to the perceptions, and disgust that are projected onto the mysterious and contestatory multiplicity of the lived realities of queer feminism and the agents of its cultural production.

In both productions of the *Kastle* I acted as one of the tour guides known as The Demented Women’s Studies Professors who lead the audience through the piece, contextualizing and animating the installation. The *Kastle* begins with multiple beginnings. Beginning with performances in the line-up outside gives way to the beginning of the *Kastle* with the hallways of signs [Image #2 below], which in turn leads to the beginning of the show performed by the Lesbian Zombie Folk Singers, from whence the spectators are chosen to begin their *Kastle* tours. The *Kastle* is a temporal scramble of beginnings—multiple, repeated, and inchoate.

Entering the inner sanctum of the *Kastle* spectators are first introduced to the Giant Bearded Clam, a large papier maché figure with tentacles protruding from it's maw and long strands of goeey hair straggling from its edges. Many of the exhibits were accompanied by substantial descriptions but this one needed only the introduction of its title. "The giant bearded clam," I would say, and spectators would laugh as we proceeded under it's tentacles as the thing opened and shut by a basic pulley system operated from nearby. After that, the *Kastle* performance begins...again.

Entering the inner sanctum the audience finds itself in a room filled with images, sounds and smells. Look one way and you will see a mirrored chamber filled with half naked women chanting and crying out in ecstasy [Image #3 below], look a few feet over and you will see a small carpeted nook where a trans man sits reading, his beard glistening with pussy juice, turn around again and you will find a stairway that, according to the sign at its base, leads to The Terrifying Tunnel Two Adult Women in Love, and then right in the middle of it all is a monstrous plush goddess with a horde of kittens emerging from her split-open belly, and a bucket between her legs where apples bob in menstrual blood [Image #4 below]. The trajectory of the *Kastle* does not build one layer upon the next. It is too much. It is too muchness. It is scrambled. And in its scrambled trajectory it seeks to offer a queerer set of possibilities while the guides, with their brazen performances of anti-normativity normalize the experience by directing the attention of the audience to one exhibit at a time.

We begin by directing attention to The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers [Image #3 below]. A shimmering reflective cave is occupied by four performers dressed only in hip-length ghost costumes (with a sheet over their heads--eyes and mouth cut out) facing each other in a circle with mirrors aimed at their naked and glistening vaginas. They rock and howl and exclaim in a state of sexual excitation. This hauntological presence (the metaphorical image of a ghost to invoke an ideology that is neither present nor absent) summons the politics of twentieth-century feminism that gleaned its tactics from the civil rights movement to mobilize the very potent concept that *the personal is political*. The consciousness raisers knew that telling it like it is can be a powerful tool for social change. By proclaiming the personal a political concern this movement sought to infiltrate the regimes of power by altering the very realm of political (redrawing the boundaries of public and private) and disrupting a system of values that stratified and segregated issues as worthy or unworthy of broader political debate or concern. The movements that perpetuated the proclamation that *the personal is political* understood that shanking off the fear and shame of so-called personal problems might change the very fabric of society. In contemporary society consciousness raising has been reduced to a stereotype, a pitiful image of bored housewives staring at their genitals; a stereotype that attempts to return the personal to its diminished status as merely personal. The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers turn that stereotype into a sex positive frenzy of self-awareness and desire. Within the *Kastle* they are staged into a version of their natural habitat on display, separated from the audience by a cord. *Killjoy's Kastle*, in many ways adheres more to the formal conventions of a freak

show than a haunted house. The subcultural others of queer feminism are exaggerated and put on display for the audience (who represents the normal member of mainstream culture) to gawk and laugh at. Staging queer feminism as a freak show displays it like a fun house mirror that projects normative belief systems back to the audience to confirm their normalcy in the face of these freakish characters who are simultaneously recognizable and inscrutable. The fun house mirror, like Annamarie Jagose's mirror ball, embraces a scrambled representation in its "fragmented and changing views" (14), which resists the imperative of a two-dimensional representation, an imperative implicit in normal mirror reflections. The scramble is sometimes a freak theory in that it acts as an intervention into the concept of performativity; one that suggests iterations *not* to produce norms, or to produce normative anti-normativity; non-normativity that is recognizable and inscrutable; non-normativity that is comforting in its reassertion of one's own normalness. A freak theory is an intervention into queer theory in so much as it returns queer to its historical association with deviance, and deviance studies. Heather Love reminds us that, "queer theory borrowed its account of difference from deviance studies" (75). The freak show draws connections to binary concepts of normativity and anti-normativity by differentiating them in the extreme. Returning queer to its pathological state, as defined by its categorization as deviant, scrambles systemic historical frames to suggest the very real way in which political positions do not progress; that there is always the potential for circling back – for better or for worse.

The exhibits in the *Kastle* deploy a number of tactics to destabilize the spectators' relationship to the subculture that is excessively, and sometimes parodically, displayed. Scrambling, flipping, too much, too muchness – these are just some of the layers of tactical re-mediation in this monstrous collaboration – tactics that seek to unshackle feminism from its systemic historical entrapment (as over and sealed in the past) and stage an intervention into the impossibility of being in time with feminism. The exhibits exploit the perception of queer feminism as shockingly wrong, ridiculous, and unnatural. The monstrous framing of feminism and lesbianism, past and present, are humourously deconstructed and brought to life in a series of tableaux and installations. The use of humour relieves the shock of, for example, a bucket of menstrual blood with apples bobbing in it, trans carpet munchers, butch ball busters, and a theory infused Gender Studies Professor and Riot Ghouls Dance Party where everything, especially the audience, is problematic. The politics of the *Kastle*, through their scrambled representation propose a loosening of the dualistic models of essentialism and performativity, wading into the muddy middle terrain between and beside the two. The *Kastle* is messy.

One of the things that makes this project so compelling is the stark contrast between the popularity of the show and the vehemence of the critiques that surrounded the work throughout both of its presentations—critiques that reveal the chronic anxiety about the border creatures (the queer feminists) that lurk on the shady fringes of ideal womanhood and homoliberalism, and demonstrate the hysteria that crops up when such work is performed, supported, and achieves some

level of success. This work shows—in both its content and reception—just how close to the abject the queer woman always already is, and always has been.

Killjoy's Kastle scrambles the temporal formulations and hierarchies established by the designation of feminist waves that crest and then retreat into an oceanic and irretrievable mass of history. Feminism, in the post-millennial scramble does not signify a single entity or designation in time—the waves that came before now continue to circulate just under the surface of whatever we define as contemporary. Through its ideological hauntings, its mirror ball/fun house mirror modes of reflecting and refracting, and its monstrous dimensions and sexualities, the *Kastle* becomes a multi-dimensional sculptural event whose materials consist of the animate, the thought, the considered, the judged, the real, and the performed to destabilize the spectators' relationship to a subculture that is excessively, and sometimes parodically, displayed.

The scramble is used to theorize new temporal formulations relative to understanding feminist ideology past and present. As manifested in *Killjoy's Kastle* it is an aesthetic strategy that embraces multiplicity—because one way to be in time with feminisms past and present is to dive straight into the mess of the not yet there, nor done, and never there. In the scramble linearity is, if anything, a random occurrence, because scrambled parts go everywhere in all directions, here and there, and new potentialities for multiple concurrent identity attachments and formulations are realized.

Works Cited

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The entrance to *Killjoy's Kastle*, Toronto 2013



The Hallway of Signs



The Paranormal Consciousness Raisers



Demented Women's Studies Professor, Dainty Smith, with Big Trubs, the
menstruating goddess

