The Wachowski article goes on to describe an image of transgender people that fits well within what Wilkerson describes as ‘normative sex’: married, white, thin, financially successful, monogamous. Wilkerson points to the ‘desperate need for alliance building’ between the disability rights movement and the transgender/intersex/genderqueer movements. She calls for a sexual-political interdependence: a politics, that is, that emphasises our interdependence as allies. Such an alliance allows for a transgender movement that does not only follow a normative model of medical transition but that openly questions the narrative of pathologisation placed on transgender and gender-nonconforming people and that questions the Western biomedical model of medicine, which only treats illness instead of focusing on healing and well-being. While transgender people can claim a disabled status based on our medical diagnoses and frequent interactions with the medical-industrial complex, such a claim risks appropriation and the diluting of claims for justice from other disabled people. Transgender people can work in solidarity, or interdependence, with disabled people by joining the disability movement’s strategy of critiquing the authority that defines illness, opening up a decolonisation of medicine that can imagine other models of health based on desire and liberation, not illness and correction to norms. At the same time, transgender people who identify as disabled should be supported by their communities when they publicly identify as disabled and speak out in solidarity with other kinds of disabilities. I am sick too. On top of having the diagnosis of ‘transsexualism’, I was diagnosed with ADHD as a child, and it persists in having a major influence on my life.

The transgender rights movement can learn from women of colour feminism, that not only are coalitions essential for success, but recognising and embracing difference within our movements is key to creating movements that perform the world we want now. The risk of not building solidarity between disability rights and transgender politics is demonstrated by movements such as Occupy Wall Street, whose focus on an economically reductive definition of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent created a movement in which sexual assault occurred and camps were divided into racial and class ghettos. Queer of colour critique builds on women of colour feminism to demonstrate how these issues are inseparable. Roderick A. Ferguson, in Aberrations in Black, states: ‘The decisive intervention of queer of colour analysis is that racist practice articulates itself generally as gender and sexual regulation, and that gender and sexual differences variate racial formations’. One could transpose this to state that ableist practice articulates itself as gender and sexual regulation, or transphobic practice articulates itself as the regulation of illness. Either way, such a conjunction helps one understand that the need for solidarity between disability activists and gender-nonconforming activists is not just strategic; it connects the roots of our struggles, deepening our claims for liberation and opening the way to a decolonial vision of healing justice.

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, unassimilable, 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 categorisable. ‘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 lead 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 slurs ‘ambiguous’ attempts to manage. I want to see that particularity as a challenge to systems of knowing.

I’ve recently been writing about abstraction and ways in which gender nominations are vexed by abstract, non-figurative, and non-objective forms. My aim has been to show the limitations of binary accounts of gender by using art’s rich history of debating what counts as an adequate figure (or a feasible departure) against compulsions to assign (binary) gender. When the body is invoked but not imaged, gender
nominations become open for debate and contestation, and it is in the dialogic situations of discord or successive nominations that gender’s openness, mutability, and multiplicity can be manifested. This is not due to the ambiguity of the abstract form. Rather, it is because of the ways in which the same intransigent form means differently for different viewers. To call this situation ‘ambiguous’ is to fall back into hopeless subjectivity 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 supposedly stable taxonomies unravel amidst contestations and divergences of reception. The difficulties of reading abstract art resulted from its withstanding attempts to categorise based on resemblance or the exterior. Instead, the limitations of a binary system of gender erupted repeatedly as viewers negotiated their divergent identifications with forms that resisted easy legibility. For me, such debates were deeply informed by the politics of transgender history and its demand that we look for suppressed evidence of non-binary genders and accounts of self-determination and successive personhood. This history again and again demands recognition that people are not ambiguous. People are themselves, for themselves. Mischaracterising any particularity for ‘ambiguity’ is a means of making their endurance of your scrutiny into a form of subservience to your desire for comfortable intelligibility.

‘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 recognising 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.

What does Trump’s presidency tell us about the state of queer America? Do you really think marriage rights and elections protect you?

Queer power is the power to change the world. Turn Anger, Fear, Grief into Action.


SILENCE = DEATH
A SELECTION OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY QUEER MANIFESTOS

Frieze Projects 2017
SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!)
Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero
The SPIT! Manifesto Reader, a reader of historical and contemporary queer manifestos is the second component of the Frieze Project by SPIT! (Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero) and was published on the occasion of Frieze Projects 2017 at Frieze London, 5–8 October 2017. The first component is a series of performative interventions by a group of performers (Daniel Brathwaite-Sharpe, Joshua Hubbard, Claudia Palazzz, Malik Na’had Sharpe, Carlos Mauricio Rosas, Despina Zacharopolous) that take five original manifestos written by SPIT! as a point of departure and that were performed daily at Frieze London.

Raphael Sygax
Curator, Frieze Projects

PART I INTRODUCTION

THE SPIT! MANIFESTO READER
INTRODUCTION

Author: SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!)
Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero

Year: 2017

The SPIT! Manifesto Reader brings together a selection of historical and contemporary queer manifestos to create a dialogue between radical queer histories, past and present. Arguably, queer histories can be narrated through these declarative statements of discontent with political systems that are inherently patriarchal, discriminatory, biased, racialised, class-based, or gendered. We consider these excerpted texts manifestos insofar as they are statements of intent, demands for visibility, or calls for autonomics in reaction to oppressive political environments. Ranging from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, these texts express a progression of interational concerns and practices in the sexual and gender rights movements: from the sexual and gender liberation of the 1970s, to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, to the activism around identity politics during the 1990s, and the rejection of the international (LGBTQ) movement’s assimilationist agenda and its capitalist incorporation in the 21st century. We hope that this reader can be used as a linear timeline upon which to reflect or understand the progressions that have taken place in the queer and human rights struggles that have lead us to the present. We also hope that this reader can serve as ideological evidence that underscores the urgency and importance of action, voice, and visibility in our social inheritance as queer people, asserting ourselves and the place of our desires in the world.

In addition to the historical manifestos published in this reader, the SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!) Collective has produced five original queer manifestos to be performed and distributed on the occasion of the 2017 Frieze Projects in London. SPIT! consists of three cultural producers hailing from different disciplines — Carlos Motta from the visual arts, John Arthur Peetz from art writing, and Carlos Maria Romero from dance and live art — who share a long-standing interest in histories of queer activism and sexual and gender politics. SPIT! wants to consider what has been deemed progress (social, legal, and cultural) and think about the shifts in strategy and urgency that have taken place over the last four decades in search of social equality for queer people. Our collective is interested in thinking about critical difference as a productive way of challenging entrenched systemic discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. While the framework of ‘equality’ has succeeded in finding ways to be included and assimilated in society (marriage equality, inclusion in the military, etc.), it has failed to transform an inherently oppressive and violent system.

In a time of unprecedented visibility and advancement of legal rights for LGBTQ people in the West, SPIT! is concerned with the ways in which the strategies of tolerance and inclusion have only carved inroads into existing societal norms and institutions, and have left many of our most vulnerable behind (namely those who are not rich, white, gay, and male). While these moderate social changes may represent ideas of political progress, we aren’t satisfied with the ways in which historical patterns of discrimination and exclusion have been cyclically reproduced. The radical raging ethos of sexual and gender liberation, and our demands for a truly just and emancipated society seem to have been mollified with crumbs from a table at which we don’t even want to sit. The acknowledgement of our struggles as a human rights battle, the recognition of our sexual practices, and the vindication from our social status as vectors of disease are milestones that have taken place only within the past decade in the Western world. We have been queer, societal, moral, political, and religious scapegoats for centuries and, make no mistake, we still are. Being able to marry or serve in the military doesn’t necessarily improve the living conditions of impoverished queer people of colour who don’t have access to basic health services, or of queer incarcerated people who are unjustly detained without due process, or of trans sex workers who are battered on the streets and elsewhere, or of undocumented queer immigrants who are prosecuted on the basis of their ethnicity — these individual’s lives are still regarded as disposable. We have compiled these manifestos to remind our communities that our social protections are precarious and not guaranteed. SPIT! urges our communities to WAKE UP! and to fight for and produce systemic changes that will benefit those beyond our immediate social circles.

Edited by: SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!)
Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero

Publication: Frieze Projects

Design: Amy Preston

Copy editor: Emma Capps

1 The SPIT! Manifesto Reader largely focuses on American and European struggles and histories and we acknowledge that there are a number of other voices and manifestos from around the world that deserve equal recognition but are unfortunately removed out of our purview.