

**A
FAULT
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IN ME
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A FAULT LINE IN ME IS A FAULT LINE IN YOU

A journal by Max Lester

May 2019

PREFACE

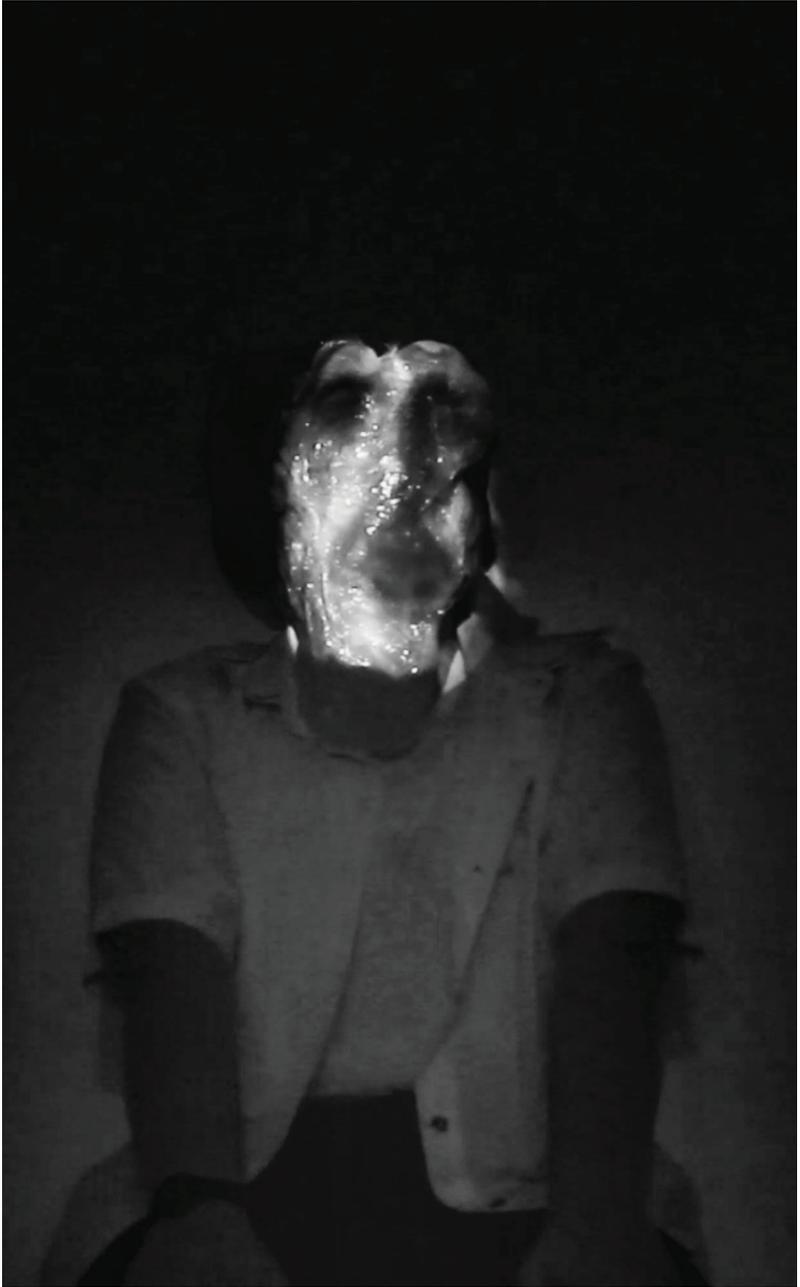
In May 2019, I was the IN STUDIO artist-in-residence at Bunker 2 Contemporary Art Container, developing a work titled A Fault Line in Me is a Fault Line in You. Using the shipping container space for research and material exploration, I wanted to investigate forms of queer embodiment that defy hegemonic conceptions of naturalness in a way that left room for the contradiction and tension I was feeling in my own body. The uncanny, a central theme in the work, became a site in which to immerse myself and access the ambiguous and challenging aspects of queerness. I began by trying to find the messy moments that expose shoddy fabrications of identity—discreet fault lines in everyday performativity.

I began the residency with a performance piece. Wearing a latex mask over my head, a version of my own face—heavily manipulated through digital distortion—projected onto me. This face spoke for me. Told the audience of my intentions for the month. Explained, rather coyly, my theoretical framework. I followed along with gestures and body language to imply that this mask and I could either be separate or unified entities. The transcript of this performance is included in the pages ahead.

What follows is the process work from my residency: notes from my journal, quotations from texts that have influenced the work, and images of the work in progress.

—Max Lester





TRANSCRIPT

Is this lining up okay?

No? Ok.

I want to thank you for coming tonight to see me. I appreciate your being here. This work begins at a fault line. Mmmm, the fault line. In geographical terms, it's a fracture on the ground caused by shifts in tectonic plates. This location is where an earthquake is likely to occur. But no—this is not what I am really speaking to—not really. I am interested in the fault line as a location for the potential for disruptive or contentious identities. A place of contradiction and conflict.

I see potential in the use of the uncanny here. Its affect, that is. In the uncanny there is a place to discuss certain queer embodiments that defy the hegemonic conceptions around the naturalness of gender and sexuality. For the uncanny is a space for both unclarity but also insight. A space in which everything that was meant to be hidden comes to light. The uncanny is a return to a repressed projection of the self. Freud of course links the uncanny to back to a fear of castration —although I have reason enough to believe that he was more so talking about a body like mine.

I am interested in building upon this aesthetic. I will be using latex like such to create a simulacrum of skin. Because really what I am interested in is the artifice that surrounds the body—the false assumptions around science and politics. I am drawn to the gooey/plasticky/glassy textures like so because they remind me of this kind of artifice,

but also because I see there is something very intriguing about looking at the body as a viscous entity. Something that oozes and flows into space, sticking to ideas, beliefs, and structures that dictate its movements and desires.

Skin acts as an interface between our internal and external worlds. The body I wish to create is like my own in that it exists fragmented. It extends itself into the spaces around it, thus beclouding the boundaries that enclose it. The container that divides the internal and external world is not so definitive but rather is entangled with the objects, infrastructure, and social institutions that the body moves through and that affect it.

The body of work I will be creating mirrors the relationship I have with my own body. Grasping at theory when I can but also exemplifying the ways in which it fails me. In this work I will address the ways in which nothing about gender or sexuality is natural. Instead I will be recreating a body in the most unnatural ways thus exposing the fault lines that are at play in everyday performance. This body is always out of tune. Its process is exposed. It's always coming undone.

In this work I am creating, gender is exaggerated but also erroneous. These moments are defining as they unveil a certain vulnerability in the ways we assume gender. The work relies on digital tools, and untraditional ways of video editing, and atrocious fabrication practices. I hope that you come to see more. I look forward to seeing you here.



NO OBJECTS, SPACES, OR BODIES
ARE SACRED IN THEMSELVES; ANY
COMPONENT CAN BE INTERFACED
WITH ANY OTHER IF THE PROPER
STANDARD, THE PROPER CODE,
CAN BE CONSTRUCTED FOR
PROCESSING SIGNALS IN A
COMMON LANGUAGE.

DONNA HARAWAY, *A CYBORG MANIFESTO*, 1984





While the latex sets it finds its way to adhere to the debris of its surroundings. Asphalt, pebbles from the parking lot, spilt coffee, seeds and flowers, and scraps from the drop sheet that covered the floor cling tightly to the latex. These materials become inseparable, enmeshed in this artificial web, revealing the history and location of this object. This fleshly object has found a way to mimic a human habit of entangling itself with the world around it.

THE MODERN BIOPOLITICAL BODY, AS FOUCAULT SUGGESTED, IS NO LONGER A ONE-DIMENSIONAL SURFACE WHERE POWER, LAW, AND PUNISHMENT COME TO BE INSCRIBED, BUT RATHER A THICK INTERIORITY WHERE LIFE, BUT ALSO POLITICAL CONTROL, TAKE PLACE IN THE FORM OF EXCHANGE, TRAFFIC, AND COMMUNICATION. IF BIOPOWER HAS TO GO INTO AND THROUGH THE BODY, THE SPACE OF THE BODY MUST BE EXTENDED, INFLATED, OPENED UP, AND MAGNIFIED TO BECOME A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM.

PAUL B. PRECIADO, *TESTO JUNKIE*, 2008



Cement, a material that encapsulates modernity, is the architectural structure of our day to day monotony. In its fabrication, cement begins as a powder, mixed with water it becomes a thick goo, until it dries into a solid, rigid state. In this final state its fluid process is concealed, and from this the cement is revealing of the structural hierarchies that present themselves as natural and also as immovable. This material is useful in gesturing the uncovering of something's making.

It seems almost obvious that I would be out here performing masculinity and working with a material such as concrete. Then again it took me a few months to see the evident humor of using construction materials to signify the making of social constructions.





... WE MIGHT ... INSIST ON ENLARGING THE INHUMAN INSTEAD—OR ENLARGING WHAT, IN ITS EXCESS, IN ITS UNINTELLIGIBILITY, EXPOSES THE HUMAN ITSELF AS ALWAYS MISRECOGNIZED CATACHRESIS, A POSITING BLIND TO THE WILLFUL VIOLENCE THAT MARKS ITS IMPOSITION.

LEE EDELMAN, *NO FUTURE: QUEER THEORY AND THE DEATH DRIVE*, 2004

THE TERMS OF IDENTITY
HAVE IN RECENT YEARS
APPEARED TO PROMISE, AND
TO PROMISE IN DIFFERENT
WAYS, A FULL RECOGNITION.
WITHIN PSYCHOANALYTIC TERMS,
THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF AN IDENTITY
CATEGORY TO FULFILL THAT
PROMISE IS A CONSEQUENCE OF A
SET OF EXCLUSIONS WHICH FOUND
THE VERY SUBJECTS WHOSE
IDENTITIES SUCH CATEGORIES ARE
SUPPOSED TO PHENOMENALIZE
AND REPRESENT.

JUDITH BUTLER, *BODIES THAT MATTER*, 1993

Just because I know that something doesn't exist doesn't mean that I can't desire it. I am willing for this tension to be unresolved.



A Response

Chelsea Rozansky

I need to tell a story to get to the point. It's about the Barnett Newman series *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*. It's title, a reference to the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—which is really just to say “Whose Afraid of Modernism”—makes a provocation or a tease of the signified works. They're these four famous abstract paintings Newman made in the late '60s, two of which were vandalized. My friend listened to a podcast episode about it last week and recounted the story to me over drinks, so it's been on my mind. I'm going to relay it as she told it to me.

The other day, when I did a studio visit with Max, we talked about Rosalind Krauss's essay, *Grids*. Krauss pokes fun at the bogus appeals to grand ideals like Spirit and Being that an abstract painter like Piet Mondrian might evoke. The grid's fiction is that its straight lines symbolize science, or mathematics or some kind of otherwise overlaying logical structure, which I—since I'm bad at science and math and stuff—might take for granted as an authority. “From this point of view, the grid is a staircase to the Universal, and they [abstract painters] are not interested in what happens below in the Concrete,” Krauss writes.

Max works in concrete, in a way that I'd suggest is transgressive and coy only because the material is so bro-y. His practice invokes a dandy-ish masculinity: a performance of gender that is extravagant and melodramatic, so is often read, or misread, as feminine. Max uses construction materials to deconstruct gender. It feels like a prank. This mesh that's draped across the Bunker's ceiling seems industrial and cool, but it's an illusion. The mesh looks like steel but it's spray-painted plastic. This grid is a myth, on planes that are theoretical and concrete. It's a clever joke to use these materials when the themes addressed in your work are about artifice versus the appearance of naturalness, gender as a projection or a performance, a fear of surfaces.

So anyway, everyone was really terrified of *Whose Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* because they were all worked up and threatened by abstract expressionism. The reactionary impulses of artists trained to mimic nature are the art history version of gay panic. Newman, who was a critic and teacher before a successful artist, was really funny when he talked about making the painting series because he says he didn't have a plan when he started the project. He just wanted to paint something asymmetrical and realized that the colours that went best with his red canvas were blue and yellow, which was annoying to him because he thought the reduction to primary colours had been made didactic and idyllic by his predecessors. Like it or not, he had found himself in conversation with abstract artists like Mondrian, and you can later plot them like grid-points when you discuss art history.

Whose Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III was hanging in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. In 1986, this failed realist painter named Gerard Jan van Bladeren went to the museum and slashed the painting with an exacto knife, which was, apparently, a crime of passion. He was sentenced to jail for five months, and the attack fueled this chatter from a bunch of abstract expressionism haters whose sentiment was like good riddance, this guy is a hero. Later, in '91, a conservatist in New York named Daniel Goldreyer restored the painting. This sparked a whole secondary drama because after Goldreyer sent the painting back to the museum, everyone thought the restoration lacked the luster of the pre-slashed original, so the City of Amsterdam had this forensic report done and determined that instead of using oil paint, Goldreyer had gone over the entire canvas with house paint and a paint roller, which critics obviously thought was iconoclastic. The museum thought the painting was ruined and Goldreyer thought his reputation was ruined. He denied the report's findings and sued the Stedelijk and the City of Amsterdam for defamation in this \$125 million lawsuit. Meanwhile, van Bladeren gets out of jail and hears word of all this. He's horrified that the painting, which he initially thought was total trash, emblematic of a cruel joke of an art movement, was treated so disrespectfully in its restoration. So about ten years later, the slasher calls up the museum, is put through to the director, and, over the phone, he warns the director that he is coming back and he is going to slash the painting again. van Bladeren goes to the Stedelijk with his exacto knife and his intention to attack. But unbeknownst to him, *Whose Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, which was contentious and humiliating to the museum, was not on display. It was put in storage somewhere. The slasher looks around, can't find the painting and slashes another Newman work instead, which was blue.

The reason I'm compelled to tell this story is because I think the second attack reveals something Max is getting at with his exploration of fault lines. His usage of the term is borrowed from the essay *The Queer Uncanny*, written by Olu Jensen, an academic from the University of Brighton, who uses Judith Butler's thinking to rework Freud's essay on *The “Uncanny”* to represent an encounter with queer bodies. She uses fault lines to refer to the breaks and fractures in our heteronormative construction of gender. Like a crack on the wall, or in these sculptures. These fault lines mean that something is coming undone. The double, in Freud's work, and in Jensen's reconsideration of Freud, is the site of the uncanny—an other that puts the self into question. The dialogue between the twin latex masks in Max's first performance represents an uncanny doubling, each performing a different type of gender. “Any gender ambivalence in a person may produce uncanny effects in others,” Jensen explains. She continues, “Anything that reminds of these fault lines must, for the heteronormative matrix to remain intact, stay hidden and secret.” Queer bodies make evil twins of the self-assured. The latex Max uses in this instillation, specifically in the masks whose faces were projected onto them in the last performance, look like skin. It's kind of creepy, only because you know it's an illusion. Max's projection work, animations which are not on display today, but were in his first performance and will be in the next, is significant because it does a pretty literal job of shining a light on Freud's definition of the uncanny as, “the name for everything that ought to have... remained hidden and secret and has become visible.” As I understand it, the projection rolls over the sculptures and they come to life at the same time that they come to light.

There is, I think, a fault line in that Newman painting. It was originally frustrating because it challenged a more conservative understanding of what art is, but the shabbily restored doppelgänger that took its place, is more telling of what, I'd argue, is an uncanny experience of the work of art. The slasher, apparently, was angered that the copy didn't maintain the aura of the original. How upsetting must it be for the thing that threatens your understand of what's right/good/true to then fail as your boogie man? In Jensen's framing of Freud's uncanny with Butler's gender performance, she summons drag to simultaneously reveal the production of gender, exposing a fault line in heteronormative conceptions of gender as natural, and to showcase the performance of doubling, of repetition. "By making the fault lines visible, the drag act also draws attention to the act of repetition itself and repetition is something that Freud clearly situates within in the realm of the uncanny," she writes. Freud locates an uncanny doubling in the compulsion to repeat: "whatever reminds us of this inner *repetition-compulsion* is perceived as uncanny," he writes. Obviously, the slasher's sequel moment harkens back to this repetition-compulsion.

My hope was to tell the Newman story like it's kind of funny, or like it possesses the melodrama of a hokey horror movie or something, but there is a more sinister history that this vandalism seems to recall. Freud identified repetition-compulsion in his psychiatric patients and van Bladeren was sentenced to a psychiatric clinic after his second vandalism. But the attacks seem consistent with this weird racist hatred of abstract art. Because Newman was Jewish, a few other paintings of his were attacked as antisemitic hate crimes: swastikas, white paint etc. but much before Newman showcased his work, the propaganda machine in Nazi Germany banished modern art, because works that were at all impressionistic, distorted, or represented vulgar subject matter were deemed tainted by a Jewish sensibility. Hitler was famously a failed neoclassical painter before van Bladeren was. During his reign, he implemented a cultural chamber that put on these two art exhibitions: one was called *The Great German Art Exhibition* and the other, *The Degenerate Art Exhibition*. The first was meant to showcase the glory of Nazi Germany's racial ideal. Hitler commissioned all these works done in a neoclassical style, with a German twist: sculptures of heroic blondes, and family portraits in front of farmhouses and rolling hills. Meanwhile, the *Degenerate Art Exhibition* featured all the modernist painting purged from German galleries: works by Picasso, Matisse, van Gogh etc. It toured Europe for free admission and was billed as a travelling freak show. People were meant to go and gawk at these modernist masterpieces, which presumably looked the way they did because the artists' eyes were messed-up. Picasso, for instance, really thought that women looked like that. Despite cluttered curation, bad lighting, and other attempts to make the work look bad, it was probably a really sick show.

The reason I bring this up is because of the false dichotomy both the Nazis, and van Bladeren created between what looks natural, and is therefore good, versus what looks artificial, and is therefore bad. Max reminds us that this hierarchy is illusory. By exposing the fault lines in gender's production, he reveals that the body is a site that already politically determined. His representation of queer embodiment as uncanny, as uncomfortable, as a crisis, calls into question what we might naively think of as natural or as neutral. These are constructions, and in order for social constructions to justify themselves as natural, they must repress contradictions. To quote Jensen again, "anything that reminds of these fault lines must, for the heteronormative matrix to remain intact, stay hidden and secret." Note the bits of debris in the mesh grids that come to surface in Max's work: the grid's fault lines. In her essay, Krauss also uses the language of a matrix to explain the grid's power: "They function as the multilevel representation through which the work of art can allude, and even reconstitute, the forms of Being," she writes. Put more simply, the grid is a structure, which reinforces in the artwork a metaphysical ideal. She gets psychoanalytical. The grid, Krauss writes, "*is*, a structure, and one, moreover that allows a contradiction between the values of science and those of spiritualism to maintain themselves within the consciousness of modernism, or rather its unconscious, as something repressed." The two values enmeshed in the grid here, science and spiritualism, are the self-justification of modernist normalcy. This, perhaps, is why there is reason to be afraid of red, yellow and blue, and reason for Newman to attempt to deconstruct this didactic ideal. "Because of its bivalent structure (and history)," Krauss writes, here again playing psychiatrist, "the grid is fully, even cheerfully, schizofrenic." I'm thinking now about that one dissonant bit of dialogue between the doppelgänger masks in Max's previous performance. "When did my body become a weapon? How long have I been fighting?" asks the first of these split personalities. It's double responds, "Yes, you are at war with the world, but don't forget you have been at war with yourself. You are a contradiction."

References:

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Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. "Grids." *October*, Vol. 9



THE GRID'S MYTHIC POWER
MAKES US ABLE TO THINK WE
ARE DEALING WITH MATERIALISM
(OR SOMETIMES SCIENCE OR
LOGIC) WHILE AT THE SAME TIME IT
PROVIDES US WITH A RELEASE IN
BELIEF (OR ILLUSION, OR FICTION).

ROSALIND KRAUSS, *GRIDS*, 1979

The fault line can be the unveiling of something's making. It can thence unfold the beginning of a thing's undoing. Fault lines stick out when we see a slip, a glitch, a tilted wig.



A mesh grid can act like a screen or an interface. It reveals as it obscures the space it covers—a sense of space that it deceptively depicts.



The fault lines I am trying to describe are not necessarily hard to find but it is rather difficult to define precisely what is being exposed when found. It's a slippage of meanings usually found in the exaggeration of a copy. A sweeping gesture that causes one to question the realness of the original. This is what makes these encounters so uncanny.



PRACTICES OF PARODY CAN
SERVE TO REENGAGE AND
RECONSOLIDATE THE VERY
DISTINCTION BETWEEN A
PRIVILEGED AND NATURALIZED
GENDER CONFIGURATION AND
ONE THAT APPEARS AS DERIVED,
PHANTASMATIC, AND MIMETIC—A
FAILED COPY, AS IT WERE ...

... THIS FAILURE TO BECOME
“REAL” AND TO EMBODY “THE
NATURAL” IS, I WOULD ARGUE,
A CONSTITUTIVE FAILURE OF
ALL GENDER ENACTMENTS FOR
THE VERY REASON THAT THESE
ONTOLOGICAL LOCALES ARE
FUNDAMENTALLY UNINHABITABLE.

JUDITH BUTLER, *GENDER TROUBLE*, 1990



THINK OF TRACING PAPER: WHEN THE LINES ON THE TRACING PAPER ARE ALIGNED WITH THE LINES OF THE PAPER THAT HAS BEEN TRACED, THEN THE LINES OF THE TRACING PAPER DISAPPEAR: YOU CAN SIMPLY SEE ONE SET OF LINES ... LINES DISAPPEAR THROUGH SUCH PROCESSES OF ALIGNMENT, SO THAT WHEN ONE THING COMES “OUT OF LINE” WITH ANOTHER THING, THE “GENERAL EFFECT” IS “WONKY” OR EVEN “QUEER”.

SARAH AHMED, *QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY*, 2006

Navigating this world, my body is regulated and affected by the structures that surround me. My body, thick and viscous, sticks to everything in its path. I move in spaces that are made up of rigid lines and hard surfaces. My body feels as though it is held together by illusive forces. Every fracture I find on these planes make me feel as though I could ooze out.





cake-oh wears ten disposable make-up masks as a part of their performance, inviting audience members to introduce themselves and remove the masks one at a time.

Photo by Mike Gontmakher.

On Monday, May 27, 2019 art writer Chelsea Rozansky and artist cake-oh presented their responses to my installation. cake-oh's was an interactive performance experimenting with masks and personal introductions. Rozansky read a text that she had written in response to my work. The text is made available in this publication as an insert. Performances were followed by an informal Q&A discussion.

BIOGRAPHIES

Max Lester is an artist born and based in Toronto. Max's practice incorporates experimental video and sound-making, material exploration, and use of found objects and images. This eclectic/additive approach often results in immersive installations that utilize ambiguity and the uncanny as a means to understand queer embodiment and the viscous entanglements between internal and external worlds. Max is currently completing his BFA at OCAD University.

cake-oh is curious about the location of identity and exercises pronunciations of self to explore in-between spaces that defy definition through technologically mediated performances.

Chelsea Rozansky is a writer from Toronto. She is currently the writer in residence at C Magazine.

ABOUT BUNKER 2 CAC

Bunker 2 is a contemporary art gallery based out of a repurposed shipping container in Toronto.

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IN STUDIO transforms Bunker 2 CAC into an artist's workspace and opens it up to the public. Treating the artist's process as the primary subject, this residency invites visitors to engage with and influence in-progress works developed by the artist inside of the Bunker.



*From left to right: Max Lester, Chelsea Rozansky, and cake-oh during the informal Q & A discussion.
Photo by Mike Gontmakher.*