Making Messes for the Future

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"And therefore Poets with exalted rage Send down their Patron's praise to future Age."
Theocritus

This is an image of the Eclectic Object Room, the place in the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives for the things that don't seem to belong anywhere else. It is the archive's overflow, its unclassifiable, its mess. What is this document? Who did this object belong to? Why is it valuable? As we try to preserve and make sense of the past, our efforts encounter an edge—*I'm not sure what to do with this*. Our systems of classification only reach so far before we are foiled by the excesses of material life. Most of us have spaces like this in our homes and studios—a table by the door, a chair in the corner of bedroom. Is that item coming in or going out? Is that shirt dirty or clean? Where does it belong? Did it ever have a place, in the first place?

RJ Messineo's recent work navigates the feminist politics of messes. From an organizational point of view, the great thing about making a mess in the studio is that in the end, the work leaves the mess behind, gallery-bound—the white emptiness of the exhibition space a dream of pristine orderliness. As a painter, and co-curator of this exhibition, Messineo is feeling increasingly skeptical of leaving her mess behind. After all, messes are mixed up with gender, sexuality, and race. Everyone's mess is not equal. (Cue your mental image of a woman crying, hysterically, with her hair falling in her face.) Socially speaking, the more marginalized the identity of the actor, the more unacceptable their loss of self-control. Affect is a politics of credibility. For Messineo, it is just this anxiety about inhabiting the role of the marginalized and out-of-control queer artist that is fueling the creation of paintings that approach this domain: the articulation of an indecipherable logic, materials from the studio floor finding their way back into the work, or, the co-curation of a show on the subject of feminist rage not destined for a typical empty exhibition space. This is an exhibition that shares its space with the archive itself—a system of classification that, no matter how perfectly executed, will always encounter its own precious and unclassifiable items.

In the dream of a perfectly ordered world, our efforts are routinely frustrated by all that exceeds our systems, overflowing the plans we conceived of as all-encompassing. In trying to stuff everything in, something always comes popping out the other side. Materially, organizationally, but affectively as well. Our feelings put their feet down. The expression of rage tends to be just this sort of overflow. It happens suddenly—we spring a leak. Messy and disorganized, rage is an eruption of anger, violence, stubbornness, refusal. This is all wrong. I will not walk another step. We tend to define rage by the event—*that* moment when I lost my temper, when I realized how angry I was, when all the years of injustice finally became clear to me. Rage as the moment of understanding just how very wrong things are and it explodes out—all mouths and fists. Thinking about feminist rage, or political rage more broadly, conjures just these kinds of images—hands raised to the sky in solidarity, faces exploding with emotions marching in a rally. Or, in artistic expression, the subject of feminist rage immediately conjures the overtly political projects of artists such as Martha Rosler, Yoko Ono, or the Guerilla Girls. I had figured the relation between artistic production and feminist rage as one of self-expression and political statement. However, emerging from conversations about *Stand Close* and Messineo's painting practice, I have been thinking about rage from another angle. What are the possibilities for rage as a process and not a product? What could be its relation to abstraction? Without letting go of the importance of these moments of eruption and expression, I am wondering about thinking feminist rage as a method of making and a mode of desire.

While we tend to think of rage as synonymous with anger and expression, there is another less common usage—rage as desire, as in the expression "all the rage," or—as verb, now largely obsolete—"I rage for you".[1] I am drawn to thinking rage as passionate desire, because it poignantly reflects the interweaving of feminist rage with the social, political, and artistic task of building a future in which conditions are better for us, a future whose present nonexistence is the source of our rage in the current moment. Present conditions fill us with rage, and out of this grows a rage for the future, a future which we will not have to respond to with rage. Rage as a way of wanting, and a process of building that which we want, rather than an act of expression. Rage that makes the work, rather than that which is represented or expressed in the work.

In a moment of losing one's temper, it sometimes helps to slow down and count to ten. Instead of acting violently, we learn to control our instinct to outburst by simply forcing ourselves to wait, ten, twenty seconds, a few breaths. Where does our anger go in this time? What happens while we are waiting? Ideally, the purpose of this strategy is not to merely pacify ourselves, an exercise in acquiescing to current conditions. We hope that during this counting we are able to connect with the source of our anger, to pause and articulate for ourselves what the problem is, preparing us for the work of repairing our situation or building a new one. What if the making is the counting? Is it possible to think of the studio as this sort of holding chamber, the place where we have time and space and quiet, *while working*, to process our feelings, think through our grievances, imagine different future conditions? What if the rage is not in the work as expression, but in it as the conditions for its creation? The site of production becomes the space we so desperately need for reflection, our space for counting while our hands and eyes and bodies are occupied with the production of our work. Messineo's paintings speak—of formlessness, of imitation, of illogical decision making systems, of power sharing, of color and formal relationships, of confusion between their surfaces and edges—but, it seems to me, that they do not express feminist, trans, queer rage in any clearly decipherable way, at least not in their content. This rage, however, is present, as the work's origin story. In this sense, it is the scene of their making rather than the expressive content of the works themselves that provide the tools for survival.

When this point of origin appears in the finished work, it is in the ways the pieces tell us about their creation. *Sweet Teeth Queen*, for example, a large wall piece made of painted paper, aluminum, and window screen tells the story of it making: Messineo in her studio in a former industrial area of Holyoke, Massachusetts, finding and making the time it takes to produce and arrange these painted paper shapes, aluminum pieces, and careful folds of the screen back into itself. My encounter with the piece is contradictory—simultaneously invited in and closed out, I know there is an order to the final position of each component of the work, and yet I cannot access it. The work is highly specific while being almost entirely opaque about its rationale. I get the feeling the work is not talking to me in a language I know, and yet I feel drawn to it regardless as the result of a valuable process. The action is in the past, and the finished piece is a mysterious relic of the time, energy, and emotion that created it, animated by a logical structure that is fully present while remaining largely unreadable to me. I wasn't there for the rage, all I can see is the evidence of its processing.

However, if this is the case, it isn't the whole story. Messineo's work is abstract, and her decisions are determined by a process of formal intuition—*this just goes there*. Is there a feminist politics to be found in this practice of abstraction? Feminist and LGBT movements have been particularly wary about embracing abstraction as a political strategy, as it has been largely dominated by men and patriarchal politics and regularly used as a means of abdicating responsibility for occupying positions of power. When real change needs to be made, can we afford to be abstract? Isn't survival a question of being as articulate as we can? Don't we have to voice our demands as clearly as possible? In some instances, of course. And yet, there is a rich history of avant-garde movements that have responded to political and social injustice in just this way—turning to abstraction as a refusal to make sense according to prevailing modes of understanding, abstraction as a possible path around the structural logics responsible for unacceptable sociopolitical realities. From surrealism, to dadaism, to minimalism, abstraction has been offered up as a possible strategy for reframing our thinking, transforming our perception, and mobilizing us to imagine a different set of possibilities.

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[1] "rage, v.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. 9 March 2013 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157440?rskey=wiZqmb&result=3&isAdvanced=false>

Abstraction, in this figuration, can also be described as a mode of desiring a different future, what Jan Verwoert describes as an embodiment of "the potential reality of all that is presently not given in actuality…all the possibilities that lie beyond those already actualised within the dominant mode of thinking and acting."[2] Abstraction becomes, in this sense, not a political message, but a means of articulating our desire for political transformation through offering us a glimpse of another, as yet unintelligible, way of perceiving the world.

This is not to say that all abstraction is inherently capable of doing political work. But things that look the same can be very different from each other. Just as all messes are not created equal, not all abstraction is either—two things that look similar, or even identical, can have very different meanings and political effects, a phenomena made very clear by queer and feminist embodiments that reimagine the gendered significance and function of the physical body. Not all breasts are feminine, not all cocks are masculine, and abstraction alone is not necessarily an indicator of an investment in a political project. While there are no guaranteed outcomes to embracing abstraction as a political strategy, its unique offering is one that we cannot afford to refuse. Now more than ever, the primary enemy of feminist politics is not only the adverse conditions on the ground for people of all genders, but the limited and limiting models we have for thinking gender in the first place. We struggle to imagine different possibilities for gendered personhood that exceed the impoverished conceptions that dominate our cultural imaginary of women, men, and, increasingly, even transpeople. Feminism must be geared toward understanding, seeing, and experiencing gender differently, pushing against our own perceptual and conceptual boundaries in order to transform ourselves and, by extension, our broader political condition. As such, it is at just these points where our logical systems fail us—in our creative experiments, our messes, our eclectic object rooms—where we might find the tools for a future feminist project, the scope of which we are just beginning to be able to understand.

RJ Messineo *Sweet Teeth Queen*, oil, enamel and spray paint on paper, aluminum and window screen, 96" x 48", 2012

[2] Verwoert, Jan. "Exhaustion and Exuberance" Published in a pamphlet for the exhibition *Sheffield 08: Yes No and Other Options*, organized by Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum, 2008.