

Queer spritz

Kate Britton, Sydney



Top:
Spence Messih, *Physical bottom / mental top*, 2014,
installation view as part of 'A matter of time', Firstdraft, Sydney, 2014;
steel, 81 x 58cm; image courtesy the artist; photo: Fiona Susanto

Bottom:
Spence Messih, *Moving | Beauty*, 2014, installation view, from 'severance & suture
[the tabula rasa project]', Sydney Guild, 2014; 48-page artist book, series of 2,
edition of 2; image courtesy the artist; photo: Fiona Susanto

Right:
Claudia Nicholson, *Cry me a river*, 2015,
white earthenware, underglaze, ceramic glaze, gold lustre, diamantes,
dimensions variable; image courtesy the artist; photo: Document Photography

Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.¹

On 10 October 2015, I emailed a group of artists:

Dear Friends,

I've been asked to contribute an article on queer practice to *Art Monthly*. It struck me that to write an article on queer practices by taking up an authorial tone & firing off some lofty thoughts would be very un-queer given these practices are about disrupting such approaches.

Instead, I'd like to invite you all to participate in a conversation about queerness and how that does or does not relate to your practice.

Yours, etc.

The conversation took place three days later at the residential studio of Frances Barrett in Sydney, and included Frances, Kelly Doley, Elliott Bryce Foulkes, Astrid Lorange, Anna McMahon, Spence Messih, Claudia Nicholson, Emily O'Connor, Okapi Neon and Salote Tawale.

Frances begins.

Frances Barrett (FB): I think it could be interesting to think about how people define queer. I feel like it's this thing that's counter to hegemonic structures, so it's this way to maneuver or sit outside capitalism, racism, homophobia, sexism – all of those kinds of prejudices and oppression. Queerness is about opposing that, creating antagonism. For me it's not just sexuality-based; it comes from this opposition.

Kelly Doley (KD): Yeah for me there are two strands of queer: there's queerness and queer theory. One is sexuality-driven and lifestyle-driven, and the other one is a mode of being or critiquing the way we exist in the world. And they're not necessarily separate, but they don't necessarily have to be together. I think people really struggle with that – if they don't identify as sexually queer they don't feel like they can access all this amazing field of thought and way of experiencing the world.

Elliott Bryce Foulkes (EBF): I have an art practice and I am queer and I don't necessarily identify as a queer artist, but I think some of my methodologies are tactically queer. My practice relates to the everydayness of materials and graphic marks, so undercutting those – valuing the devalued or devaluing the valued – those kind of approaches, to me, are queer. I hate how base it might be, but recently I've been sewing, and while I don't do it mindfully, I feel queer when I'm on a sewing machine.

Spence Messih (SM): I think for me queerness is a radical questioning of binaries and structures; that's what it is, whether it's sexual, embodied, lived or through other ways.

KD: I was at a lecture where the speaker said that single mums are queer and I was like, yeah, that's cool; why can't anything be queer that is different from heteronormativity? I was quite excited by that, but I can also see how the flipside of it is this watering down. If anything is queer, then where's the political radicality in that act?

Okapi Neon (ON): And who gets to define that?

Emily O'Connor (EO): So there's an agency in queerness ... For me, queerness is about imagination and imagining other than what is.

FB: I also feel that it's about providing radical platforms for people with different voices that have traditionally or historically been oppressed or silenced.

Astrid Lorange (AL): And maybe also there's a difference between [queer] as an adjectival identity phrase and as a verb. I think that for art and writing practices, queering as verb is the territory that is often at stake.

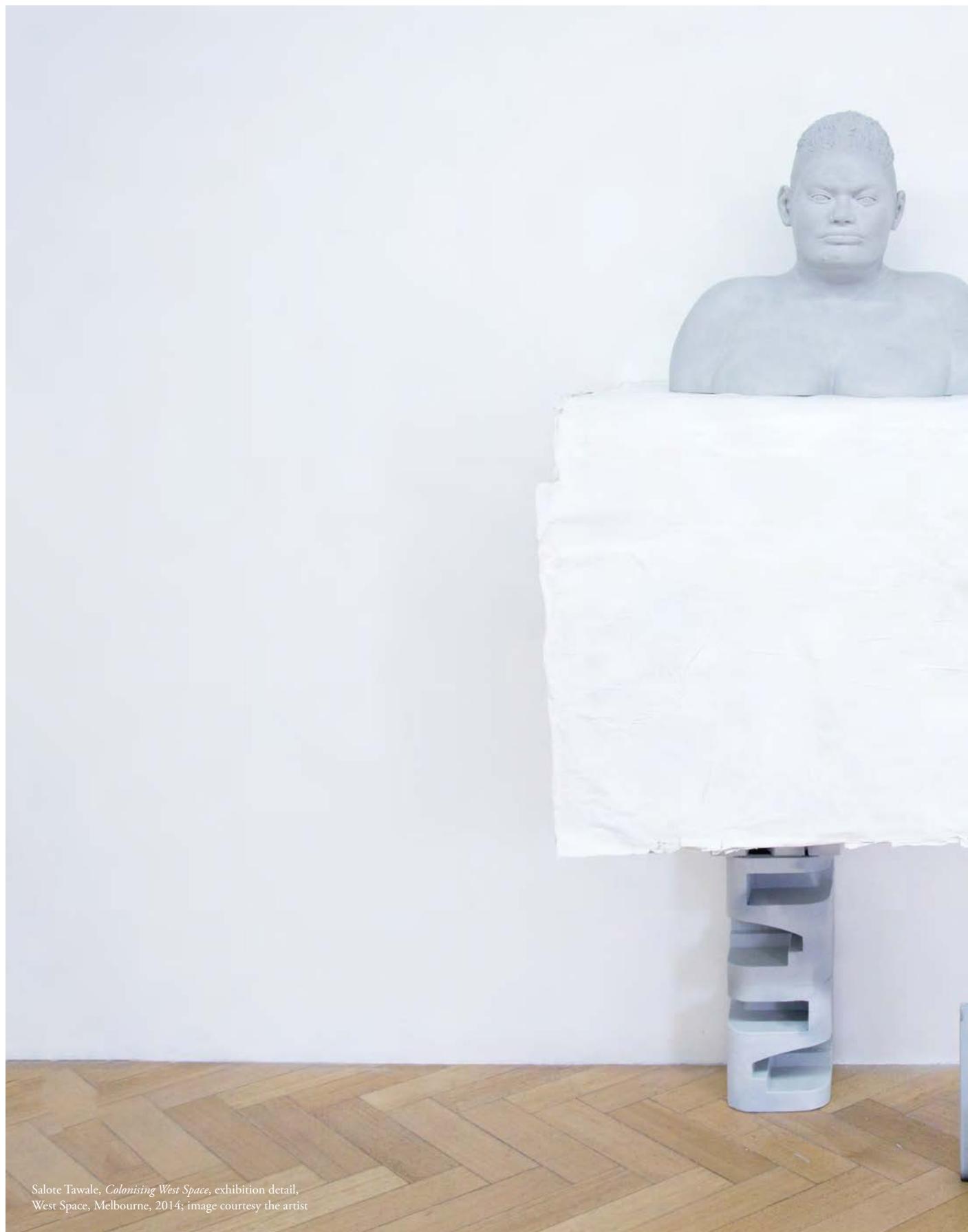
SM: I think it's also interesting that most of the people around the table today have multiple entry points to their work and that our practices are not often read as being *particularly* queer. That's my work – I aim to provide multiple ways of getting in. And queerness is a real language out in the world, and certain people understand that and some people don't.

KD: Yeah, there's code underneath queer culture and gay culture; there's always been code.

FB: I read this interesting quote yesterday about how every generation should develop a new language around sex, and I feel like every generation should develop new languages around queerness as well, because with each generation there's different political situations that people are reacting to and experiencing. I feel that these codes, whatever they are, are developing and shifting with the ways that we are strategising to fight against capitalism or how we exist under postcolonialism in this country. What we're dealing with right now and the terror that we're living right now needs a whole other strategy.

EO: Can I also talk about what it means to claim and name a queer practice, because I'm not a self-proclaimed queer artist as a solo artist, although my work is inherently queer. But with Hissy Fit, my collective, we've been drawing on histories of queer and feminist culture so we describe the work we make as queer. It's self-proclaimed and people that write about our work always give us this tag. The feedback that you get is actually incredibly difficult – to be named something – because then you are just constantly defending why: who you're excluding, why you identify that way, even though it's your lived experience and it's inherent in your practice, it's something you really have to fight for and defend. I feel particularly with social media and call-out culture; there's a risk of things getting watered down and people not claiming things and doing the things they want to do in art, not taking as many risks as they want.

AL: I think that speaks to the fact that these things are both lived experiences and social realities and as strategies in work – the labour is constant; it's constant and that's what is



Salote Tawale, *Colonising West Space*, exhibition detail,
West Space, Melbourne, 2014; image courtesy the artist





Frances Barrett, *The 12-Hour Revolution*, 2013, documentation of performance at Sydney Guild, 2013; live performance, 12 hours duration; image courtesy the artist; photo: Alex Wissler

so fucked about it, but also what is so critical about living it and reliving it and doing it collectively.

EBF: There needs to be safe access, to be able to just explore that. I hate that idea that as soon as someone might become visible or self-proclaimed that suddenly they're up for grabs and there's zero room for error or experimentation ...

FB: Or ambiguity ...

EBF: Or ambiguity! You have to come out fully armoured, which is in nature the very opposite of what I think queer practice embodies, which is risk-taking, opposing these power structures in experimental ways, in unthought-out ways.

KD: I think Astrid just put it so beautifully, that the labour of making a stand is most of the work. Any affront to the power structures is going to piss someone off. So if you're ever going to have an opinion – queer or just any opinion – you're going to have to make a stand and you're going to have to put it in a box, which goes against queer practice because it should be multiple, and it should be experimental, and it should be anything goes.

SM: That's what it comes down to again, queer being self-reflexive and always questioning binaries. Being queer is work and it *should* be work because the world's getting worse or whatever.

AL: And when it comes to art, too, we can all frame or discuss art in these terms, but the mainstream interpretive models for reading art are totally non-queer, so that's what queer art faces – that you can be as complex and as radical as

ever, but the interpretive models demand singular meaning or a coherent narrative or total representation. That problem is not symptomatic of the work; it's symptomatic of the reason the work is made in the first place.

KD: But can I just say that the whole reason that I love queerness and queer theory and queer practice is because it's about thinking outside the now. It's about saying the present isn't enough and there could be something else. The positivity of queerness I find so exciting because it's this affront. Everything is heteronormative and binary-driven, but queer theory proposes this other thing, that maybe we could all live and think differently in this other world, and that kind of utopian stance I find really exciting – it proposes another space.

Salote Tawale (ST): I agree, it opens up an alternative. It opens up this possibility to represent yourself the way you live now within those structures, and that's what's great about it.

ON: The complexity of multiple realities as well – like you're not just an artist, you can be a disabled artist and an artist of colour and a crazy artist, and that is also why I like queer because there's all those layers.

FB: Well it takes into account intersectionality, and it takes into account all the factors of oppression or all the factors that determine who you are, how you express yourself, your situation ...

Claudia Nicholson (CN): My practice is entirely about identity. So I think my queerness comes through quite naturally. It's not something I've intentionally done, but it's



Hissy Fit, *I might blow up someday*, 2015, performance view, presented by Performance Space at Carriageworks, Sydney, as part of 'Liveworks Festival of Experimental Art 2015'; image courtesy the artists; photo: Alex Davies

inherent because my work is about identity and it's about *my* identity and not belonging; I don't belong here and I don't belong there. I'm in this weird middle ground. Maybe it's really naive, but my thinking is: 'I've made this thing and it represents who I am.' And then people say: 'that fits into this broader framework and people have written about that.' But I'm not aware of that necessarily.

ST: But you live it.

FB: I do read queer theory because I think that it makes me develop a language and it makes me think of what else is happening around the world. There's lots of languages, there's lots of voices, there's lots going on. I feel like in Australia we have such a complex situation, but at this point in time we are just not part of the international dialogues around queer practice.

ST: We just have to come to terms with our past and then we'll be okay.

FB: If Australia acknowledged our position, like we are in the Asia Pacific area, right? If we looked to Indonesia, to South Korea, to China, to the Philippines, to New Zealand, to all of these places ...

ST: To and not down on ...

FB: Of course, if we build a cohesive and diverse language across this region about a specific queer experience, I think that would be so strong and so incredible. I think that would equal what is happening across Europe and America.

EBF: We're leapfrogging our direct experience ...

ST: Which means that we're always behind.

FB: If we look to our region ...

ST: You're getting that information when it's happening. Our history is so fraught, there's so much to work from in that. It would be great if that wasn't ignored.

FB: And Anna, what about your practice; do you perceive it as a queer practice?

Anna McMahon (AM): I think a lot of things changed for me at the start of 2014. I'd stopped making work for a period of time. I started reading queer theory and it was really great. My work in its essence is about failure, and I read Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* [2011] and I was like, this is sick. So I started making work that was about that and within that, with materials that are inevitably doomed. They don't have a long timeline and they're quite performative because of that. So I feel like my practice is a queer practice; that's where I found it again.

EBF: I think it's even more beautiful when you stumble upon your own queerness and acknowledge that it's actually a big part of yourself and you have some agency around it. I remember reaching the point when I realised, 'Oh, I'm allowed to be here'; 'I'm allowed to exist' ...

CN: I think art has given that to me.

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, New York, 2009, p. 1.

The conversation continued into the night; queer time winning out over work time. A full transcript of the conversation is available at <http://queerspritz.com/>.