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"A queer aesthetic sensibility enlarges one's sense of being in a body."

Toward a Queer Aesthetic Sensibility: Orientation, Disposition, and Desire

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This article explores the idea of a queer aesthetic sensibility and how it might provide ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling that help one better recognize the imminent potentialities that hide beneath the routine and expected rhythms of the everyday. Thinking alongside the work of Maxine Greene and Jose Esteban Muñoz, the article considers how aesthetic objects affirm one's existence through the embodiment of gay desire, promoting imaginative action in the pursuit of new possibility. Such an orientation toward the aesthetic reveals an approach to educational practice that promises to promote the values of imagination, attentiveness, and possibility, rather than conformity, routine, and homogeneity, which are values essential to the survival of queer folks who must learn to find new possibilities for themselves and the world.

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According to Berleant (2015), aesthetic sensibility can be understood as a form of "educated sensation" (p. 4) that allows one to find meaning in sensory experience, an approach he shares with Dewey (1934) and Greene (1995, 2001). Specifically, they share the idea that one must *learn* to "break with the taken for granted" to "impose different orders upon experience" (Greene, 2001, p. 5). For this reason, understanding the pedagogical force of aesthetic sensibility is important to the empowerment of minority groups, especially if one's sensibility and perception can also be "impeded, repressed, or hidden behind conventions of acceptability" (Berleant, 2015, p. 4). Therefore, it seems important to consider how aesthetic sensibility is "regulated, applied or extended into various situations in order to think those situations beyond mere appearance" (O'Donoghue, 2019, p. 58). Exploring aesthetic sensibility from this angle opens possibilities for the field of art education, potentially allowing educators to better "facilitate access for students to the diverse ways of being and becoming in the world" (Greteman, 2017, p. 198).

In considering aesthetics as a theory of sensibility, one cannot escape the fact that "everything we encounter and undergo is coloured by our interests, responses, and attention" (Berleant, 2015, p. 7). This opens consideration of how one's sensibility is influenced by experiences of oppression and prejudice. Looking at the work of artists and theorists who identify as queer, for example, one may detect an emergent sensibility that promotes an anti-assimilationist stance capable of speaking to power with power (Getsy, 2016). Moreover, their work often demonstrates certain strategies for surviving and flourishing that mark modern queer cultural production. Perhaps, as suggested here, this sensibility can be described as queer.

Articulating what constitutes queer aesthetic sensibility remains tricky and must allow for the many attitudes that make up "queer" in its contemporary usage. According to Getsy (2016), these include "self-made kinship, chosen lineages, utopic futurity, exilic commitment, and rage at institutions that police the borders of the normal" (p. 12). However, as curator Lawrence Rinder (2005) suggested, although one can question what count as identifiable gay or lesbian aesthetic sensibilities, or if they exist at all, one cannot begin to clarify these issues as long as discussion of the matter "remains closeted" (p. 58). Thus, the task of this article is not to define queer aesthetic sensibility *per se* but to begin an exploration into what queer aesthetic sensibility might mean in relation to those who feel themselves "growing astray inside the delay that defines who they 'are'" (Bond Stockton, 2009, p. 6). In so doing, I consider several things: how the potentiality and difference of queerness is often actualized as *not* being straight; how aesthetic objects[1] become animated by bodily desires that sit outside heteronormality; and why the exploration of queer aesthetic sensibility is important in a culture that leaves a mark on who and how one becomes in the world. I consider many things, but I do not seek to *define* queerness or queer aesthetic sensibly outright. Rather, I use the considerations outlined above as

a way to explore how a queer aesthetic sensibility allows queer folk[2] to imagine lives beyond the routine and expected.

Of particular interest is how queer aesthetic sensibility may interrupt indurated conventions long enough for strange or queer ways of being, acting, and knowing to be imagined. As suggested, if one wishes to understand queer aesthetic sensibility, it may be productive to turn toward the work of queer artists and theorists. This article will largely focus on the art of Felix González-Torres as well as the theories and concepts of Muñoz (2009) and Sedgwick (1990, 1993, 1997). The work of renowned aesthetic educator Greene (1995, 2001) is also of value. Each scholar uses a similar practice that allows selected aesthetic objects to take on a particular weight in relation to queer hopes and desires. This is important because, according to Sedgwick (1993), the enforced silence of one's queerness is often only broken when examined and developed through fictional forms. She stated:

> For many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. (p. 3)

Thus, even if reluctant to define queerness or queer aesthetic sensibility, one may find specificity by focusing on the idea of queer desire[3] and where it can be safely developed in a hostile world. For this reason, I will use personal accounts to bring this practice to the foreground. These ruminations hold space to reflect on the "irreducible multilayeredness and multiphasedness" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 2) of queer survival in a society that often wants to hide that complexity from those who need it most. Therefore, the idea of queer aesthetic sensibility and its development through queer desire is a way of exploring "how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that… are available within the bodily horizon" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 2). I ask how queer desire, directed toward aesthetic objects, continuously compels queer folk to escape the established order of things toward a life that has not yet made itself known.

In what follows, I use personal reflections to demonstrate how I explored my growing queerness through aesthetic objects. These *asides* focus on gay desire[4] because my life is the only experience I can write from in this way, and much of my own queer difference stems from my desire toward men. Yet I do not want to collapse the idea of queer desire down to just *gay* desire or suggest that gay desires are always only sexual. As Greteman (2017) suggested, "Queer is a slippery term. Some find it strange and difficult to grasp while others find it too tied to its historic traumas" (p. 197). Thus, while ontologically handy, to define queerness on the grounds of gay desire makes it more understandable at the risk of its unique value. To be clear, I want to emphasize that queerness can be "stretched and pulled in various ways to do different work in different contexts. It resists standardization and refutes normal ideas of scholarship" (Greteman, 2017, p. 197). In this regard, I follow Muñoz (2009) in holding "queerness in a sort of ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim always already to know queerness in the world" (p. 22). In other words, the value of queerness is its fluidity.

And yet there is promise in exploring queer aesthetic sensibility through gay desire—first, because it makes the unfolding exploration possible; and second, because it challenges the separation of mind and body by intertwining desire with one's thoughts and embodied emotion, returning bodily sensation and lived experience to aesthetic appreciation. Thus, queer aesthetic sensibility is, to a degree, a "structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). This also raises timely questions about the place and purpose of queer aesthetics regarding

emancipatory and transformative education practices (Greteman, 2017; Luhmann, 2009; Walcott, 2009).

Take, for instance, Duncum's (2005) concern that the body has remained "outside the discourse of art education… due to limitations imposed by modernist aesthetics" (p. 10). Citing cultural critic Eagleton (1990) and postmodern aesthetic theorist Shusterman (2002), Duncum (2005) wrote in support of an aesthetic shift capable of addressing the "unpleasant as well as pleasant sensations aroused in the service of any number of [cultural] issues" (p. 18). To fully account for the desires created by consumer culture, this aesthetics, Paul Duncum (2005) suggested, must embrace "all bodily sensations because we are bodies whatever else we may be" (p. 18). This seems important, as the body has been the site of much queer cultural production.[5]

Turning to González-Torres, I explore these ideas further. Flowing between the physical and mental, his work is an invitation for viewers to share in the desires, pain, and pleasures of his world. Take, for example, *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*. The piece consists of 175 pounds of individually wrapped candy, representing the ideal weight of González-Torres's partner, Ross Laycock. Heaped on the gallery floor, visitors are encouraged to take and ingest the candy. The receding pile reminds viewers of their complicity in the gradual loss of Ross to HIV/AIDS. Yet González-Torres instructed galleries to replenish the candy as a symbolic gesture of eternal life. Thus, like much of his work, the piece embodies the complexity of González-Torres's queer experience and gay desire. Moreover, it encourages viewers to physically bring the work inside their bodies, "mentally savouring, turning over on [their] mind's tongue, the flavour of González-Torres's sensibility" (Schjeldahl, 2019, p. 297). Furthermore, because the weight of the candies implicates González-Torres's partner, they invite the viewer to share in the body of his lover, physically and mentally connecting them to the artist's gay desire and personal loss. This sensibility is an orientation taken up by González-Torres in his practice. For example, his gay desire often is inserted as a kind of eros in the aesthetic objects that become his work. In doing so, González-Torres offers space to reflect on the acceptable and unacceptable desires generated between and toward bodies, allowing different configurations and expressions of togetherness to emerge. Furthermore, González-Torres's work considers bodily sensation as part of aesthetic experience. Such formative experiences keep the viewer in proximity to their desires, even if the desires operate as a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011).

How, then, does the work of González-Torres help explore the developing idea of a queer aesthetic sensibility? The answer is in his use of aesthetic objects. In refusing to offer a figurative visualization of his lover, gay men, or people with HIV/AIDS, González-Torres imagines a space of potentiality where he and Ross might live and love together. Considered this way, the candies are neither candies, nor the body of Ross. Emptied of prior symbolic meaning, González-Torres invests his desire and loss in the aesthetic object, a practice described as "abstract drag" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 138). In doing so, *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* becomes a site in which the everyday comes undone. This suggests a complicated process "of visualization that, precisely in the act of producing visibility, allows for a collapse in the signifying conventions" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 138). Furthermore, because the candies can be removed and ingested, becoming part of the viewer, the work allows the opportunity for the artist's desires to enter the real world through those who encounter them. This form of artistic expression hints at queer aesthetic sensibility and how it could be productive in thinking about how individuals are moved and reoriented through their encounters with specific aesthetic objects.

Aesthetics, the Queer Body, and Gay Desire

Aside 1

Tucked away in the corner of my high school's playground was a magic bush

> that occasionally gifted us with used pornographic magazines. Mostly of naked women, the finds were accompanied by an impression of interest. I would say how much I would like to do things with this girl or that, how amazing her breasts were. Then, this one time, we found images of women with men, and it was harder to pretend. I folded away the female bodies so I can picture my desire in their place.

I want to continue exploring the connection between gay desire and queer aesthetic sensibility further through the work of Greene (1995, 2001) and Muñoz (2009). Given that Greene is not explicitly queer, her inclusion may seem an odd choice. Yet queer (or allegedly queer) artists and writers, such as Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Elliot, Rupert Brooke, and Virginia Woolf, are used to progress Greene's (1995, 2001) idea of imagining an elsewhere through aesthetic education. Furthermore, familiar touchstones in Greene's (2001) work, such as the poems of Wallace Stevens, are recognized as providing inspiration to queer writers and artists (Jarraway, 1996, 2015). Perhaps what Greene detected in this material was a distinctive mode of perception and meaning-making, one largely cultivated by queer folks to imagine an elsewhere for themselves and others. If so, could this be understood as something like queer aesthetic sensibility?

This collocation between Greene's aesthetic approach and queer aesthetic sensibility may be quickly dismissed by some as something of a stretch. Yet, as much as I admire Greene's ideas, there is space to remember what they owe to the creative efforts of queer artists, poets, and writers. This alone is important because the queerness of gay and lesbian artists has been "especially susceptible to forgetfulness" (Rinder, 2005, p. 58). Thus, although it is not my intention to suggest Greene ever identified as queer, I am proposing that her approach owes much to the imaginative perception of queer-aesthetes whose work continues to challenge the fixed and taken for granted. At the very least, this consideration of her work indicates that something approaching queer aesthetic sensibility can be cultivated by folks who do not self-identify as queer.

In addition, Greene's (1995, 2001) connection to queer perspectives could explain why her writing resonates with Muñoz's (2009). Specifically, it supports how queer desire might be found as potentiality in aesthetic objects, fostering a kind of perception that allows one to "open windows in the actual and disclose visions of what might be" (Greene, 2001, p. 110). Similarly, for Muñoz (2009), queerness must register "as the illumination of a horizon of existence" (p. 25) to free itself from the "hollow nature" (p. 21) of the present. He goes on to suggest that turning toward this "queerness as horizon" (p. 32) is a chance to think beyond the present and against the performative forces of the past. Given this, one might see why Greene (2001) used poems like Brooke's (1977) "The Great Lover" to imagine ways of "reaching beyond" (Greene, 2001, p. 68) from the ordinary rhythms of daily life. In this regard, queerness could be considered an aesthetic orientation that strains toward movement and transformation. It is this unsteady yet determined quality that might describe a queer orientation toward the aesthetic.

In this sense, there is promise in bringing the work of Greene (1995, 2001) and Muñoz (2009) together to explore the idea of queer aesthetic sensibility. For example, Greene's (1995) approach is about attending to the aesthetic moment, using imagination to "search for openings without which our lives narrow and our pathways become cul-de-sacs" (p. 17). To this end, Greene (1995, 2001) and Muñoz (2009) are accessing the aesthetic domain as a way of striving toward an expanding horizon of possibility and potentiality. Both are invested in cultivating an aesthetic sensibility that can "create clearings, spaces in the midst of things where decisions can be made" (Greene, 1988, p. 58). One might suggest that

this is the queer promise of the aesthetic object: the ability to embody desire, allowing one to reject repressive social orders that orient them in different ways and for particular reasons.

Aside 2

> White socks and the smell of fabric softener were symbols of my teenage desires. To see his feet dressed in white socks, free of the black leather shoes, to be close enough to smell the fabric softener of his clothes was to chase my desire to the point of euphoria. It was to locate that desire in those moments of an aesthetic encounter and to know what that desire meant. It was formative and informative in powerful and emotional ways. I would actively wear white socks and savor the smell of Sunday evening, freshly washed clothes drying over radiators and on the backs of chairs, following forbidden desire through proximity to objects. It was to look on these objects queerly and imagine someday all this could be free and all this could be mine.

For myself, the appropriation of aesthetic objects provided a safe space to practice gay relationships that ran counter to heteronormative culture. This attachment is often a necessary way to imagine oneself crossing that line beyond the private sphere (Duggan, 2004; Muñoz, 2009). I was, for example, able to recognize my queer desire through aesthetic objects. White socks, magazines, He-Man figurines, a poster of Leonardo DiCaprio. Furthermore, it was my gay desire, examined through these objects, that caused me to question those moments of erasure when, as Sedgwick (1993) indicated, "religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourses of power and legitimacy" (p. 3) unite to continue heteronormative accounts of "family" and "nation" (p. 3). This suggests queer aesthetic sensibility is often attached to particular objects around which one's emerging queer identity can be explored.[6] Eventually, for me at least, this practice allowed some of those fantasies to be actualized or dismissed.

Given this evidence, it seems as though one way of identifying queer aesthetic sensibility is through the defiant perceptual and interpretive practices of queer folk. For myself, such acts of perception were important, as they promised a "sense of something still to be seen, of thus far undisclosed possibility" (Greene, 2001, p. 13). It was to take a stance against a future I had been conditioned to expect, to imagine my sexuality as not straight. Leading from Bloch's (1986) work on aesthetics and utopianism, Muñoz (2009) described this perceptual event as the "forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations" (p. 28) of an aesthetic encounter. Aesthetic objects can have an ability to jolt the viewer into seeking new possibilities for themselves by embodying their desires and hopes—two words that orbit a similar sentiment. The promise and potential for such an approach is how it recognizes different ways of performing in the world. Such ways of attending to aesthetic objects are "an orientation toward the future, insofar as the action is also the expression of a wish or intention" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 109).

Taken this way, it could be argued that the cultivation of a queer aesthetic sensibility allows for one to focus on the alternative promise of aesthetic encounters, disclosing the tacit possibilities therein. This willful act, sparked by desire, but also informed by interest and curiosity, draws one toward the object of an encounter in ways that allow them to imagine "what might be, what ought to be" (Greene, 2001, p. 65). Thus, a queer aesthetic sensibility seems familiar to the practice of gay cruising and its reliance on one's capacity to detect ephemeral traces of queer possibility (Muñoz, 2009). Furthermore, like cruising, practicing queer aesthetic sensibility does not mean one can entirely predict or prepare for when or where they may find themselves

undergoing the experience of an encounter. Indeed, meaningful encounters must be actively sought out and recognized in particular ways. In these cases, a queer aesthetic sensibility prepares one to better notice and willingly engage with the force of an encounter should it arise.

Aside 3

> Strange fingers touch my hand. Disguised as accidental, teeming with purpose, signaling the promise of pleasure to come. So much can be implied by the faintest of gestures when received at the right moment and in the right way. Over time, and with practice, I learned how to see desire in the upturned corner of a smile. I also learned what was at stake if those same gestures were to be given at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

Furthermore, like cruising, the evidence of queer desire is often embodied in ephemeral gestures, necessary because lasting evidence of queerness is used "to penalize and discipline queer desires" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 65). Thus, queer aesthetic sensibility must detect queer desire in objects and situations that might not be obvious to others. In this way, queer aesthetic sensibility helps one experience their desires within aesthetic objects that draw their attention. Through these objects, queer folk can imagine other ways to live and love away from the harsh criticism of a normative culture that would end them before they begin. Muñoz (2009) supported this idea when he suggested that ephemera are important, as the evidence they leave "is rarely obvious because it is needed to stand against the harsh lights of mainstream visibility" (p. 65). In this way, the aesthetic object becomes a space for queer desire to develop without showing "its material conditions of (im)possibility and historical positionality" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 67). It is this attunement to ephemera that allows queer aesthetic sensibility to detect the potentiality of queer ways of being, making them palpable.

A Queer Aesthetic Sensibility and Art Education

I return to the work of González-Torres again, specifically *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)*. The piece is made of two identical clocks that hang side by side, initially set to the exact same time. Imagined shortly after his partner's diagnosis, the piece acknowledges that the clocks will eventually fall out of step, one stopping before the other, in a process that mirrors the lives of the artist and his lover. However, much like *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, there also is hope and optimism in the work. The clocks can always be resynchronized, dead batteries replaced. Thus, it reaches out beyond the affective force of the present, suggesting the power of relationships built on stranger ties than those of matrimony, reproduction, and social acceptability. It describes a queer time and place where the clocks might tick to the beat of different temporal rhythms. Thus, *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* also proposes "a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 91).

As with all of González-Torres's work, *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* uses materials that could be considered everyday or mundane to extend and explore queer personal desire. Importantly, by "connoting" his queer identity, rather than "evoking it" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 165), González-Torres allows *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* to become both intimately personal and widely social. This double bind activates not only a moment that recognizes how bodies are shaped by present circumstances, but also what they might become under different conditions. A queer aesthetic sensibility, then, seems to begin in the body, yet also reach beyond it. To explain, I mean it allows one to enter a moment of connection with aesthetic objects, creating a space where seemingly impossible desires can be imagined. This process should not be understood as simply projecting one's desire onto objects. Rather, it is about recognizing a certain

disconnect between what is and what could be that allows other ways of seeing the aesthetic object to emerge. Such objects, now freed from exact signification, encourage a kind of aesthetic attentiveness that allows one to begin the "work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 28). In developing this orientation, a queer aesthetic sensibility frees one to make their desires real through a radical reimagining of what is possible in the present moment.

This sensibility is queer inasmuch as it orbits desires that emanate from those who do not identify with the status quo. For myself, gay sexual desire, explored via available aesthetic objects, was a chance to step away from the conformity of straight expectations long enough to acknowledge a growing difference and where it might lead. For González-Torres, candies and clocks became spaces to imagine what could have been and may still become. Thus, if any identifiable queer aesthetic sensibility exists, it is described in moments that disconnect one from the expected and reconnect them with other ways of being, even if only through potentiality. Such a sensibility is neither part of the aesthetic object, nor entirely located in the perceptual and interpretive practices of the individual experiencing it. It could be described, to use the words of Probyn (1996), as a kind of perceptual movement that "revels in between, that picks up things along the way, that is rerouted by small ethno-autobiographical shards" (p. 40). Similarly, Greteman (2017) also described queerness as a force of "movement" that "operates in excess" (p. 199) of itself.

Such an orientation is also a move toward "an aesthetic that is entirely embodied and willing to deal with all bodily sensations" (Duncum, 2005, p. 17). It accounts for some of the ways "the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world" (Eagleton, 1990, p. 15). Thus, a queer aesthetic sensibility enlarges one's sense of being in a body and orientates them in space through the exploration of personal desire that goes against the routine and expected (Csordas, 1994). Or, to use the words of Greene (1980), it is also a way of cultivating one's creativity and imagination in the face of "domesticating forces" and to be "resistant to socialization and control" (p. 319). By thinking with aesthetic objects through bodily desire, art education becomes a place to imagine the shape a life might take and find creative ways to make that shape reality. More specifically, it provides opportunity and space for one to begin naming possibilities and potentialities for themselves, of transcending and moving beyond what is simply given to them by striving forward toward "a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 25). In short, it shows promise as a way to help queer folk of all kinds succeed in finding ways to sustain their desires within a culture whose primary drive has often been to obscure or inhibit them.

Conclusion

What is the promise of this approach to aesthetic sensibility? Perhaps it is the way it helps one transform distressing situations into more desirable ones through an "emotionally and intellectually generous matrix of nurturance and pedagogy" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 179). Maybe it is the way in which it makes queer lives possible by creating space to imagine the imminent potentialities smothered beneath the routine and expected, allowing them to develop safely in a surreptitious manner. This is important, as "it is imagination that first images the bare possibility, that catches a glimpse of things, meanings and values that are not, but could be" (Garrison, 1994, p. 3). Such imaginative acts describe a desire to understand the world, to become different,

to move beyond the limits of the present. It is this desire for difference I find so vividly expressed in the work of both Greene (2001) and Muñoz (2009). Because queer aesthetic sensibility is connected to desire, it provides one with an approach to educational practice that promises to promote the values of imagination, attentiveness, and possibility, rather than conformity, routine, and homogeneity. It promotes a style of education that is more than the passive reception of skills and knowledge. It reminds one that to "be active in the world as a listener and a beholder" (Greene, 1980, p. 319) is to challenge the limits of one's perceived reality and imagine new possibilities for themselves and the world. To practice queer aesthetic sensibility, then, is to be in a constant state of becoming, and to understand that there is always more to be seen and heard.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Aesthetic objects, in this article, are considered broadly. They are objects of sensory experience in that they are heard, seen, or imagined in sensory form. These include objects such as movies, books, advertisements, artworks, and fashion.

[2] By using the term *queer folk*, I seek to elevate the complicated gender and sexual politics that unfold in speaking on behalf of or about such a diverse population of peoples.

[3] Queer desire is considered broadly as wants and needs existing outside the norms of sociocultural control. It involves one's sexuality and gender, but also exceeds them to include any rejection of what might be considered "normal."

[4] Gay desire is considered here as explicitly located in same-sex desire.

[5] See artists, such as Thomas Eakins, Zoe Leonard, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Catherine Opie, as well as scholars, such as Butler (1990, 1993), Doyle (2006), and Halberstam (1998).

[6] For example, as in Frank O'Hara's poem, "Having a Coke With You," where the poet imagines his queer desires via the everyday object of the Coke bottle (Muñoz, 2009).