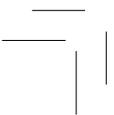
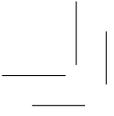


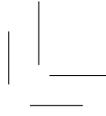
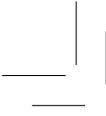
III

Queer Materialism (For Greer Lankton and Lena Dunham)

Artificial Nature
Total Indulgence
Dolls engrossed in glamour and self abuse
The vanity
The junkie
The anorexic
The chronic masturbator
“Its all about ME”
Not you
Trapped in my own world in my
H\head in my tiny tiny
apartment
Greer Lankton, 1996



The list of symptoms in Greer Lankton's poem that she wrote for the press release of what would be her final exhibition is about herself and exactly not about herself. It is about herself and the discourse surrounding herself. It enumerates her and what people think about her and what people think about her work, and they are all collapsed, as if, near the end, Lankton accepted that it would all be about "her," that all the objects and people and images that she made would become equated with "her"—an illustration of "her"—not unlike how, perhaps, she was forcibly gendered at the very beginning of her life so long ago, or how the work of queer, women, and other non-normative artists becomes unitarily reduced so often to autobiography. Yet exhibiting or illustrating or containing or receiving these discursive, externally applied qualities were bodies and materials. There was Greer's body, which was subject to a certain fascination, as remains the case for non-normatively gendered folks. In addition, there were the bodies of the sculptures and objects and images that she made, and those bodies too became the subjects of lurid fascination, indeed a clinical art-historical and queer art-historical gaze. The perceived sickness of her characters has been read as subversive, liminal, deconstructive, and melancholic—all monikers we use to describe queerness and transness, indeed queerness and transness as symptoms of postmodernism and not anything in and of themselves. To ask for or seek an essence



or authorial truth is not queer, we are told, but I think that Lankton's work has those essences, a resistance to being-in-between or being the subject of longing for the past. That essence, however, is not some sort of queer truth or truth-of-queerness, but rather, love. Some time ago, the curator Lia Gangitano mentioned to me quite offhandedly that Greer did not consider her dolls to be grotesque as we might, but rather quite commonplace and friendly. They were her best friends, and she did not see them as some statement about anorexia or body modification—two common themes that shape how she has been discussed. Rather, in light of Gangitano's comment, Lankton's medium was love, and for her love was not liminal. So, can we theorize love formally, compositionally, art historically? In truth, I do not know that we can, but we might try.

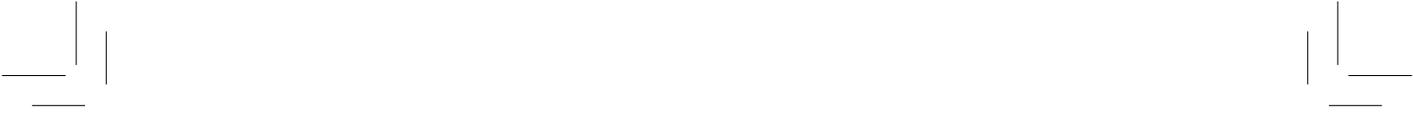
Given that I have begun with something heard second-hand, as is often the case with queer artists of the 1970s and 1980s, Lankton's story is filled with hearsay and muddied (productively, I think) by interpersonal drama, and it is important in this exploratory study to lay out Lankton's biographical landscape in order to support further research and oral histories. We do know that Lankton was born in 1958 to a conservative, religious family in Holly, Michigan. Playing with dolls and wearing women's clothing were disallowed by her preacher father, so she made her own outfits and friends. She grew up and studied

at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She then moved to New York in the late 1970s, entered the Pratt Institute, underwent gender confirmation surgery at the age of twenty-one (which was, according to Lankton, paid for by her father's congregation), and became a part of Nan Goldin's crowd in the East Village. She was a muse for Goldin and Peter Hujar, among others, and collaborated with David Wojnarowicz as well. In 1981, Lankton was included in the foundational exhibition *New York / New Wave* at MoMA PS1, curated by Diego Cortez, which introduced a host of important queer / punk figures like Jimmy DeSana, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Keith Haring. Lankton subsequently began showing at the gallery Civilian Warfare in 1981, which would also give Wojnarowicz two early and formative solo shows in 1983 and 1984. She married her partner Paul Monroe in 1987, and the two undertook many collaborations, which continued after her death, when Monroe began caring for her estate. Goldin took their wedding photos. Lankton filled the windows of Barney's and the East Village hotspot Einstein's (owned by Monroe) with her art. She then moved back to Chicago and was later included in the 1995 Whitney Biennial and Venice Biennale. The following year, Lankton staged her exhibition *It's all about ME, Not You* at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, and simultaneously in New York, she was on Goldin's poster for her retrospective at the Whitney Museum. Her body was



ravaged by drug use and anorexia, and she died soon after her opening at the age of thirty-eight. Her most visible appearances since her death have been Lia Gangitano's mini-retrospective and an inclusion in the 2019 exhibition *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* at the National Gallery and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The installation at the Mattress Factory is now permanently on view.

With these biographical details in mind, we can then consider what is not so certain—what might be relegated to the realm of gossip, which has been, after all, essential to queer histories, for example in the work of Henry Abelove and Gavin Butt.¹ Firstly, there has been a problematic focus on the nature of Lankton's transness, as evinced by a recent article in *Artsy*: “Monroe believes [Lankton's] mother forced her into the operation because she felt a trans daughter was preferable to a gay son.”² The article then cites a 1985 interview in *i-D* that indicates Lankton's own ambivalence about her transness, as if Lankton's opinion about her gender or sexuality in a single moment is reflective of the course of her entire life. Other details are queerly fuzzy. Monroe moreover maintains that the two never divorced, and that Lankton's mother forged the divorce papers. Some claim or imply that Lankton's death was a suicide, while others indicate that she had no suicidal intent, and died accidentally while taking high doses of drugs to deal with the ongoing



pain of her surgery (or just because she wanted to get as high as she could). And finally, Monroe recounts that Lankton's family attempted to throw out her work after her death. People had to dig it out of a dumpster, and the Mattress Factory acquired what was saved. The Mattress Factory, however, argues that Lankton's family voluntarily came forward with a donation. In any case, the Mattress Factory and Monroe's archive, called G.L.A.M. (the Greer Lankton Archives Museum), remain separate. Given all this competing information, we might wonder, what constitutes Lankton's archive of love, and who verifies it as such? What does it record? Can it only ever be a metric of opposition or erasure or suffering? As Monroe has written: "Greer didn't just make figures—she created creatures, with a past, present, and future."³ We might therefore allow Greer to have the same temporal freedom.

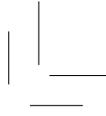
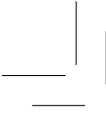
Indeed, Lankton's archival whereabouts may be somewhat liminal or in-between-categories, but her work is not. It is both and neither art history per se and performance per se. It is solid and weighty and unruly and bodily, not in the sense of, for example, Mignon Nixon's psychoanalytic reading of Louise Bourgeois in *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, or the universalizing pretentiousness of object-oriented ontology, but rather in a way that cannot be easily reclaimed for theory or anti-theory, for modernism or postmodernism. Lankton's work filled up a dumpster, so the story



goes, and now fills up museums and storage units and homes. Yet as much as it exists as hefty matter, Lankton's work exists likewise in the realm of theory, asking pertinent questions about autobiography, intentionality, sculpture, surrealism, scale, authenticity, criticality, craft, and so on.

Yves-Alain Bois, in his melancholic and unsurprisingly patriarchal 1990 book *Painting as Model*, argues from the position that he is the only one to have theorized what he calls a “materialist formalism,” meaning, according to Bois, a condition “for which the specificity of the object involves not just the general condition of its medium, but also its means of production in its slightest detail.”⁴ He opines about a formalism that is rooted not only in generalized medium-specific properties, but something that responds to an exhaustive, obsessive even, relationship to the material specificities of a given art object. Lankton had already theorized that, as have so many other queers and/or women and/or people of color, such as Betye Saar, Noah Purifoy, Jimmy DeSana, Laurie Simmons, and Lorna Simpson. It is easy to critique Bois and his *October* magazine comrades for their depoliticization of art and art history, but that has been done better elsewhere.⁵ So maybe the best thing to do would be to embrace it as a potential method, right?

In many ways, normative art histories can interpolate the dangerous presence of queerness only if it is reduced to



something immaterial. One way of “queering,” as it were, Bois would be to use his materialist formalism as a way of thinking through a queer materialism, that is, a chance to see queer art and artists as something other than infectious and liminal chimera and instead focus on process. Such a grafting of theory would not be incomprehensible. In *Painting as Model* at least, Bois is as wounded and fanatical and nostalgic as any queer might be.

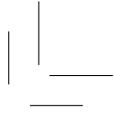
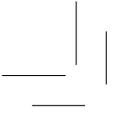
However, I was reminded while writing this that, about seven years ago, I was criticized by a fellow panelist at the National Women’s Studies Association annual conference for using Gayle Salamon’s writing on transgender theory in order to discuss Piero Manzoni, who was a quintessentially sexist artist. I thought it was novel, but it was probably just dripping with cis privilege. To be truthful, I still look back fondly on my naïve and problematic attempt at intellectual novelty, but, unlike Bois, I hope to meet criticism with self-modification, rather than re-entrenchment. So, to the point of queering Bois’s materialist formalism, I say let us leave dismantling the normative house with normative tools to straight people. Let us also leave “queering” to straight people and instead draw queerness out of objects without applying it as an exterior force.

Then I was brought back again to “Notes on Queer Formalism.” I realized that queer formalism might imply that queers and/or women and/or people of color have



not been theorizing a queer or materialist formalism this whole time—an erasure at the root of Bois’s formalist materialism. The possibility of remarginalizing someone or something is always possible with neologisms. Additionally, queer abstraction (a related term theorized by David Getsy⁶) and queer formalism can fall prey to an ongoing fetishization of liminality that reduces queer theory and queer art history to a never-ending hunt for the clichés of in-betweenness, interdisciplinarity, anti-narrativity, and being-beyond-all-categories. In any case, materialism or formalism are not enough, because inevitably they fetishize matter or arrangements of matter as somehow being prior to subjectivity, or they fetishize art history’s methodology of formal analysis as being the truest and having the most explanatory power. Returning to Lankton, there may indeed be a materialist formalism, one of love, of flesh, of fractured-yet-insistently-present archives, but it is also not limited by narratives of materials or process. Moreover, her work is assuredly, insistently not abstract, and it seems that, in the wake of queer abstraction, we reluctantly have to return to figuration in some way without reducing it, for example, to the depoliticized base materialism brought to us secondhand by Bois and Rosalind Krauss.

You could say though that I have indeed neglected formalism in Lankton’s work. In part that is because I wonder if it is possible at all to reconcile formalism with



queer bodies, especially trans ones, since the language of paranoia, exposure, and diagnosis that formal analysis carries with it seems inconsistent with the reparative aspects of queerness, especially in the case of Lankton, who seems vulnerable to a transphobic exposure, or a pathologizing art-historical postmortem. Still, even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was not postcritique, so a formal analysis we must have, but I will deflect it from Lankton's work onto a *representation* of her work instead, or perhaps her work that is not her work at all. Maybe queer formalism must always be a deflection or a reflection.

At the 1995 Whitney Biennial, Lankton was filmed in front of her work for community television. A guard asked her to step away from the art, and she had to inform him that she was, in fact, the artist. This act of misrecognition, now itself a misrecognition of sorts in its translation from film into video into YouTube, seems to me a performance of sorts. Its graininess, which, following Laura U. Marks, heightens the bodily nature, the tactility of the scene, seems to both confirm and conflict with not seeing Lankton, or not seeing her as an artist. She is so grainy, so hard to see, but for that exact reason she is there, scratching at the screen. Yet performance is not the right word, since this "is" Lankton. It is not a stage and it is not the performativity of language and it is not ironic or even earnest and it is not truth or fiction or para-fiction. It is naked and it is sad and it is funny, and it is an

interaction surely inflected by class and race and gender. It is both obscure and absolutely impossible to miss, and so it is queer and it is material and it is a forced distancing from something she loved and it is an incorruptible fairy tale that really “happened.”

- 1 See, for example, Henry Abelove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 2 Alina Cohen, “1980s Icon Greer Lankton Explored Glamour and Gender in Her Eerie Dolls,” *Artsy*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-1980s-icon-greer-lankton-explored-glamour-gender-eerie-dolls>.
- 3 Rita Gonzalez, “Q&A with Paul Monroe: Life and Work of Greer Lankton,” *Unframed*, April 28, 2019, <https://unframed.lacma.org/2019/02/07/qa-paul-monroe-life-and-work-greer-lankton>.
- 4 Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), xix.
- 5 See, for example, Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, “Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity,” *Art Journal* 65, no. 1 (2006): 22–39.
- 6 David Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” in *Queer Abstraction*, Jared Ledesma, ed., exh. cat. Des Moines Art Center (Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 2019).