Walking the Talk and Boating in Amsterdam

A Fabulous Meeting with Jack Halberstam

Charlotte Rooijackers

Interview – December 20, 2018

In advance of this year's edition [1] of Studium Generale Rietveld Academie, *Open!* reflects on the key positions taken at last year's gathering, which focused on touch in artistic, philosophical and political terms. Jack Halberstam, Professor of Gender Studies and English at Columbia University, curated the final day of the programme's conference-festival 2017–2018 under the title 'Reach out and touch / Somebody's hand / Make this world a better place / If you can'. Contributors included Karen Barad, boychild, Julia Bryon-Wilson, Mel Y. Chen, Paul B. Preciado and Jeanne Vaccaro. After the conference, Charlotte Rooijackers interviewed Halberstam.



Jack Halberstam talking to artist boychild at Studium Generale Rietveld Academie 2017–2018, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Photo: Malthe Stigaard

While walking through Amsterdam's Vondelpark and boating around the city's canals, Jack Halberstam and I spoke about the artists he writes about, the works that inspire him and how generative that exchange is – not everyone appreciates the large-scale publicity he enjoys in his work in queer theory. In relation to his supportive 'failure

book', *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), I began by asking whether success is what one truly desires.

Jack Halberstam: Well, I mean that's sort of the paradox. People have critiqued the model I offer for being secretly committed to another kind of success. So, on the one hand, I seem to be advocating for failure. On the other hand, there's a triumphalism in the children's films that I look at, or in some of the humour. I understand this paradox. But, in the end, it is not about success or failure – it's about the *logic* of success and failure that rules us, disciplines us. Like the student who really wants to study art but feels they should study science or business because that's more practical. That's a rubric of success that makes art into a site of failure, in an almost predetermined way. It is also about recognizing that this logic captures you by speaking to orientations that are really embedded in you ideologically. You know, it's not like somebody wakes up in the morning and says: I'm gonna be somebody who makes money and rule the world by being a capitalist! It just doesn't work that way. It's more that you feel yourself drawn to something and it feels organic to you, when in fact you're being prodded along by ideologies that are invisible.

In relation to the topic of your new book *Wildness* (2018), can you speak a bit on the notion of bewilderment, as a framework for your programme at Studium Generale Rietveld Academie?

The term 'bewilderment' is part of a theoretical vocabulary associated with wildness. I like 'wildness' as a critical category because it holds within it a sense of the environment, some probably expired understanding of nature, excess, intensity, anarchy, chaos, disorder and bewilderment. For me it's a capacious category that I wanted to try and think with. This has developed into a book project in which I'm writing about sexualities that exceed the systems we have to classify them: art making and music that is unclassifiable, political activity that isn't bound by capitalism versus socialism dichotomy and so on. There are entire histories of art making that are about undoing and unmaking and not at all about creativity and imagination and romantic notions of the artist as builder. There are lots of forms of art that are about unmaking. That's the stuff I'm interested in in this book. And that's where it follows on from the failure book.

Does *Wildness* follow your interest in animated video and children's films, something you explore at length in *The Queer Art of Failure*?

An emphasis on children comes up again in this project because children and animals occupy the space of the wild in the world that we live in as part of a colonial mapping of the so-called uncivilized savage. We can notice this association between animality, racialized otherness and immaturity as part of a decolonial critique. We think of children as always adults-to-be, but in fact this intense training suggests that without intervention the child stays wild.

How are films such as *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Up* (2009) instrumental in offering another way of growing up?

They always have that within them, because their narrative has to be that the child is opposed to the adult and then the child becomes the adult. There's always a moment in these films where the child seems like they're just gonna refuse to grow up and refuse to be the adult and then they do it. You know, Nemo stops being the little rebellious child and becomes the leader.

Hence your focus on Dory, a fish with continuous memory loss.

Right, there you actually have the queer character who doesn't grow up.

It's the twenty-year anniversary of the book *Female Masculinity* (1998), and the twenty-year edition is coming out, a book that helps the reader recognize there are so many ways in which one can identify in terms of gender, though gender deviance and female masculinity perhaps have become more accepted.

It's more accepted but there are limits to expressions of female masculinity and they continue to impose themselves on gender variant bodies. The binary holds despite everything. What's interesting about binaries is that they tend to operate as foundations. Therefore you cannot just sort of change the culture around the foundation. You have to destroy the culture within which they become meaningful. That's why my work so often turns to these kinds of anarchistic un-makings. I may have thought in the past that multiplying forms of classification would be enough, because it would recognize all these other modes of being. But recognition has proven to be a very fragile project for transformation. It's not a good root. Recognition of different categories is just recognition of different categories. It's not the same as transformation. So, we are beyond the binary, and that binary holds. Both of those things are true.

What do you think about the identification of gender variance in different localities? In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012) you, for instance, mention a vocabulary of gender identification in Albania in relation to agriculture.

Historically gender binaries operate differently outside of Euro-American cultures. Because they mean something different. In some rural contexts, for example, like some areas of Albania, the gender binary adjusts to the demands of labour or it might reference the household rather than identity, or style. In some contexts, the vocabularies attached to gender variance reference farming, not simply parenting or individual identity. Or in Afghanistan it might be in relation to education rather than in relation to reproduction. Those are really different structures that people are organized by. My point was to recognize that Euro-American understandings of gender identity do not at all exhaust the meanings of it globally. And so instead of going around the world looking for gays and lesbians, which is what researchers have sometimes done in the past, or activists still do, we need to recognise locally specific variations, or even regional specificity as Gayatri Gopinath's new book *Unruly Desires* (2018) shows. I'm trying to undo some of the colonial logics where we think that the there is only one model of gender / sexuality in the world and one way of applying it. Such logic leads to neo-colonial impositions of Euro-American classifications.

There indeed tends to exist little difference in these two legal entities. And you've always written about queer art: you have a whole chapter that was dedicated to transgender representation in *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), you write about cinematic representations in *Female Masculinity* and in *The Queer Art of Failure* there are several chapters organized around queer artists.

I think my intention always is to show that we can find other rubrics for being and embodiment in aesthetic expression than the ones that are given, and they're not going to be just obvious! Like on the cover of *Female Masculinity* is a picture of a woman who typifies and embodies female masculinity, a gorgeous painting, and that's one version of it. Another version might be an abstract rendering of the trans* female body using a paint stroke that exceeds the canvas, for example. I think this is quite an important argument to make: that queerness can be represented through abstraction in much more effective ways than through the figure. I wrote early on about the potential of abstraction as a method of representing the complexity of queerness and it's non-identitarian and non-foundational quality. I think that's why I tend to write about art, because it finds a different idiom for expressing some of the things we talk about either ideologically, theoretically or politically.

You had never curated a show before, or a programme like that at Studium Generale Rietveld Academie. What did you make of it?

It's a different kind of intellectual or academic work. I appreciate it when other people do it. The guests gave incredible presentations. I think one's role as a curator is to pull out the material that could require more conversation. It's haptic in the sense that it's pointing and gesturing towards things, not owning them and defining them and claiming them.

You moderated with wit, giving plenty of context, including the framework of bewilderment with which you started the day.

I tried to offer a frame within which we could hear each presentation, but also one that allowed the artists and scholars to be in conversation with one another. I thought it was a fabulous day all told, as was the day before curated so skillfully by Rizvana Bradley, and I would love to do it again! When we ended with a dance by boychild, the movement and excitement that had been generated all day long bubbled up into a spontaneous ripple across the audience. We all ended up dancing and that is not always the case at an academic or museum based event.

What artists do you write about at the moment?

For this event I think the inclusion of boychild was really important to me. I have a sort of ongoing conversation with boychild that has been sometimes private sometimes public. I've watched their work evolve over the last five or six years, and tried to take stock of this incredible kind of butoh-inspired performance that they do. Much of it is very original and self-crafted. boychild is also a really important intellectual. I think that they're more and more committed to writing about art, their own art practice and improvisation. You know they have created a pretty incredible body of work, sometimes in collaboration with other artists like Wu Tsang or the Thai artist Korakrit Arunandonchai.

I deeply admire the work and practice of Wu Tsang and boychild – they are itinerant artists creating incredible work and conversations wherever they go. It's been a real pleasure to work with boychild – rewarding and educational for me. I learned a lot being in conversation with them. I think that their work speaks in gestural ways too – not only to the haptic, but also to apocalypse, climate change, environmental breakdown. Some of the work they do with Korakrit is staged within these post-apocalyptic installations that Korakrit creates, that seem like post-apocalyptic swamps: tangled webs, not simply trees, but also wires and communication systems that have collapsed inwards. I've seen one performance where boychild sort of crawls from the wreckage that Korakrit has created in the gallery space. Phenomenal. The music is very important to what they do, sometimes made by a friend or another artist who has improvised some score for them. With music and dance in the installation they create this intense, otherworldy environment, where the human body becomes, I don't know, a part of apocalypse; the human body is not the cause or effect of it, it's just embedded in this world coming undone.

It's an amazing thing that the Rietveld organised this programme for their students. It's such an incredible event to have as a BA or MFA student.

Charlotte Rooijackers (1986) works as an artist. In a practice of performative and collaborative writing she examines vocabularies in different contexts and disciplines, with a focus on their common under / ground.

Jack Halberstam is a queer theorist and teaches in the English and Comparative Literature Department at New York University and the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Columbia University. His books include *Wildness* (2018) edited

together with Tavia Nyong'o, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (2012), *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and *Female Masculinity* (1998).

Footnotes

1. This year's focus lies in the notion of fabulation as a way to read the archive and its role in rewriting and reinventing the ways histories are told, potentially moving beyond the current time of post-truth by changing historical frames of reference. Not seeking a larger truth or to expose or remake lies, fabulation possibly allows histories and herstories to be better told. See www.takeawalk.rietveldacademie.nl

Tags

Critical Theory, Open! Academy

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