

RECEIVING QUEERLY DISPLACED UTTERANCE: FAILURE AND/
AS RESPONSE IN WORKS BY GLENN LIGON AND LOW PROFILE
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Abstract

This paper looks at two works that complicate the condition of the utterance and the reception of performance, through an interplay of repetitions, reiterations, absences and occupations. The works are Low Profile *Impromptu* (Athenaeum, Plymouth 2016), and Glenn Ligon *Live* (Camden Arts Centre, London 2014). These works as events, tease apart voice – body / body – presence / document – absence pairings, and reiterate these as both/and. The paper takes up the question of queer as a research term, and queering as an active research strategy. In part it responds to an expansion or distribution of the term, and considers how it may be usefully employed to extend or complicate the discussion of art works. Reading Stephen Best, and aware of the work of Jack Halberstam on queer failure, and of queer voice in Freya Jarman-Ivens, the paper performs a reading of these events that redistributes the reception experience across body, voice, space and site.

Introduction

This paper considers two installations, a multi-screen video work *Live* (2014) by Glenn Ligon, and *Impromptu* (2015-16), a sound and light work by LOW PROFILE. Both reuse material from popular culture (material that has had a life in mass circulation, in concert, on disc, on VHS, sold in high street outlets, swapped and borrowed, and having a wide and enthusiastic fan base). Both projects resituate the performance material to a gallery or art setting; it is here that I encountered them, and it is as a member of that art audience that I began to consider a response to them.

In the decision to begin with the work on queer voice by Freya Jarman-Ivens I deliberately came at the term from a site not located in sexuality, not linked to choice of partner, sexual expression, or genital play. This strategy was intended to open up the potential for application, for play, but was not designed to denature the possibility of criticism, to defuse the potential for critique. If a queer position occupies an in-between, other, potential space, if it avoids decisiveness and direction, then how can it point to a 'better' 'improved' outcome? or is its usefulness in (not) failing, in (not) regressing, in (not) missing?

If queer / queering / queerness is to (mal)function as a theoretical frame or mode, then what must it (un)do, bring about? is it applicable in any and all circumstances, or must it be matched to specific types of work? This question might be asked of any tool or method, but if the queer tool is less likely to find its match among the cultural products, is there a chance that this 'wrong' tool can generate a strong mis-reading, a resistant analysis? Or, is this inversion model falling into a productivist trap, where the efficacy of critical work is assessed on a model of production: how many new ideas are generated, how much new knowledge is born, and a queer reading is judged by how much it makes? This reverses any claim that it might resist (re)production, that it can keep the focus on play, on present pleasure, on the dying now.

So where does this get me with my queer reading of the works I proposed to focus on? A classic lesbian and gay studies approach might begin with Glenn Ligon's sexuality, or Freddie Mercury's homosexuality (their gayness?) and consider this to be a key element of both works, though neither work foregrounds these aspects. This may be a case of passing for straight, or other questions may take precedence. Ligon's queer biography has entered his practice, but does so alongside race, nation and class; and the layers of displacement in *Impromptu* shift attention from Mercury's private life to the performance of his performance. Another queer studies reading might focus on the camp qualities at work in the tribute act, or in the television show *Stars in their Eyes*; or perhaps on the revelations in the recently published Quincey Jones interview where he discusses Richard Pryor's sexual exploits in the 1970s (Marchese, 2018).

Another tweaking of the queer nipple might look at the artist duo LOW PROFILE as a same-sex pairing, working perhaps in opposition to the solo male genius template of Modernist art production, though this queer reading might be occluded by a feminist and perhaps class reading. And while a reading of the treatment of Richard Pryor's body in *Live* – objectified, fragmented, focusing on the isolated parts – might repurpose a queer gaze, the work is as likely to demand a consideration of this as a black body, and contrast Ligon's dismemberment with Kenneth Goldsmith's appropriation of Michael Brown's autopsy (see Steinhauer, 2018), so that the persistence of racism overshadows a queer interpretation. These misfires in (mis)reading these works, may indicate that they do not mean solely as queer, but that they need to be read as intersectional, as cross- or hybrid-theoretical contexts.

And then, why decide to focus on these works through the concept of utterance? A simple answer is that I was working with voice and utterance in my practice (and in my teaching) and was finding the slipperiness of the term, the concept,

difficult to manage. There was a slipperiness of the thing itself, if I could manage to see it, find it, hold it long enough to consider it, and a slipperiness when I read others' treatment of it. The thing (such as I could name it) was queer in terms of its refusal to conform to a mode, to remain in a category, to belong. It was queer in its promiscuity, playing with and not playing with, other concepts and other activities. Does a consideration of utterance, utterance as queered in some respect, offer a self-pleasuring, looping, regressive, non-directive, targetless model for looking at these works? Does a queer reading of the works offer a way of briefly catching hold of utterance, without limiting this to matters of gender or sexuality?

Queer Voices

In *Queer Voices* (2011), Freya Jarman-Ivens uses the possibilities offered by the concept of queer to discuss a number of vocal performers and performances specifically in terms of their disruption or distortion of vocal norms. Jarman-Ivens writes that voice 'functions in a "third space" in between the voicer and the listener; and that it operates as a mediator between body and language, which are gendered spaces.' (Jarman-Ivens, 13) In addition to these qualities, Jarman-Ivens claims voice 'holds queer potential' in its 'lying at the intersection of two interlinked facets of the voice: it is genderless, and it is performative'. (Jarman-Ivens, 18)

The concept of voice thus offers a model for thinking queerly about utterance, about identity, about meaning; and vocal work offers potential for a queering of representation, of the norm, of authority. In being performative, the voice can be effective, can make things happen, but as queerly performative, this making happen 'dramatises incoherencies' and 'focuses on mismatches' in allegedly stable categories or positions. (Jarman-Ivens, 16-17)

Some voices may perform these dramatized incoherencies more obviously than others, but it is my contention that the voice always has the capacity for such dramatization because of the inherent separation of the speaker/singer from the listener. (Jarman-Ivens, 17)

Queerness operates in a diverse manner across the two works considered here, *Live* (2014) by Glenn Ligon, and *Impromptu* (2015) by LOW PROFILE. It operates across the persons of the artists involved, across the cultural works cited within them, and across site, audience, event, and utterances present in the works. Queerness or queering of the position of author/artist occurs through the disruption of the individual author position in distribution across a duo, or through the stripping away of the most notable aspect of an artist's utterance to leave an alternative, othered utterance, or through displacing the star with the impersonator. These actions in their operations in-between, in their refusal of

stability, in presenting the constructedness of 'natural' or 'normal' vocal labels, are actively queering.

Stephen Best further extends consideration of the effects of queering, or the acknowledgements with which it is working. He discusses a number of artists who are producing queer objects,

queer not because of the artist's assumed sexual identity (though there is that) but as a way of distinguishing the object's inadequacy to sustain the representational claims made on its behalf, queer in the sense of offering 'a disruption that thwarts efforts to determine political goals according to a model of representation,' queer to the extent that 'refusing to accept the adequacy of given forms, which is also to say, the sufficiency of any social positivization, grounds antinormative politics.' (Best 2015, 199)

For Best, queering in the work of the black artists whose work he considers, offers a method or mode that resists the resolution of opposition by recourse to binary models, that does not answer disappearance with a familiar representation, that does not accept a positive norm as reparative of negation.

Built into this queer making is 'the sense of producing their own failure', these works 'set themselves up to fail'. (Best, 199) This incorporation of failure as in and of the work recalls and reverses the anxiety J. L. Austin felt over the functioning of his performatives (Austin, 1962), or that H. P. Grice felt about the imputing of belief (Grice, 1975); the failure of the utterance is not an end, or a closing, or a conclusion, it remains in operation, going on failing, and continuing to call to the audience, to resonate in the space of action, to misalign and skew and disturb without a full stop.

Pryor's Body

In *Live*, Richard Pryor's body is presented for detailed looking, his black male body is presented in parts, in a parallel to the fetishising look of pornography and the pseudo-objective scientific looking of anthropology or the coloniser (Fig. 1). Ligon has addressed both these spectacular practices in works such as *Notes on the Margins of the Black Book* (1991-1993), where he re-presented Robert Mapplethorpe's images of nude black men accompanied by comments that resituated them within discourses around race, class, or privilege, they had been removed from or presented in ignorance of (Guggenheim, 2018).

In not quite matching anthropological or pornographic discourses Ligon has set up a queer looking, that acknowledges Pryor as 'something to see', but in its obsessive and disciplined looking goes too far. Ligon in other art works has

pushed text or images beyond their immediate function through patterning and reiteration, turning an utterance into noise or stuff as sounds blend and letters blur or smudge.

Ligon has challenged the apparent transparency of language by changing the intended conditions of its display and reproduction. These changes have resulted in language that is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to see. (Meyer 1998)

In seeing these works, the attention shifts from the semantic content of a text to semiotic associations allowing for multiple readings of the written, painted or printed word. In Ligon's paintings of Richard Pryor jokes, for example, *Mudbone (Liar #2)*, it appears only the words remain, and that sound, context, and movement have been stripped off, leaving a silent still utterance (see Regen Projects, 2018). However, in reading, the words are sounded in the viewer's mind, drawing on memory of having seen Pryor perform, or by association with the cultural stereotypes his act put on display. Similarly, in *Live* the viewer may recall the sound of the live event, may read on Pryor's lips or in his gestures details of the spoken text, but they are shifted into her voice, into her mouth.



Figure 1: Glenn Ligon, *Live* (2014) photo: Farzad Owrang.

And these utterances don't stay in place, don't belong to one position, that of the artist, or of the viewer, or of Pryor. In a silent statement where does the utterance reside, in the gesture, or in the act of decoding that signal? Is the work *Live* an utterance by Ligon (he has placed this material here in this way), or does it still belong to Pryor, or does it reside in the recognition or interpretation or activation of it by the audience? Perhaps Stephen Best's description of this as 'oscillation,

which is really a kind of stasis (a failure to either come or go), or the possibility of inhabiting no place in particular' (Best, 187), gives a sense of this multiplicity, and yet possible negation of utterance.

Silenced and dispersed in this installation, Pryor's body is at once present as event and is disappeared, dislocated. The fragmentation perhaps offers a possibility of reassembly, of recovery, of remembering, as parts might be brought together to rebuild Pryor's body. But as Stephen Best suggests in a discussion of work by Mark Bradford the fragment can resist this recovery by reminding the viewer that the 'whole' or the 'more' cannot be fully experienced.

Fragment is thus not limited to a dynamic of part and whole but corresponds to notions of disturbance, interruption, performance [...]. From the perspective of the fragment, the goal is deliberately to frustrate, derange, and disrupt the project of historical reconstruction. (Best, 201)

Ligon offers the viewer the body in parts, the body without the sound of the voice, a scattered display of gestures, of utterances, that defy reassembly and disrupt any project of reconstructing Richard Pryor. Pryor continues to resist closure, his utterances remain disruptive despite and because of the violence done to his image in this work. That violent utterance reiterates the continuing violence done to black bodies.

If the official state colonising utterance inscribes the black body, reading off of it the message it projects, that utterance that is thrown against and bounces off the described, located, taxonomised, read body, then Ligon's messy non-reflective scattering surfaces, skins, screens absorb that utterance, disrupt the simple throw and bounce; the call and response is not a simple 'I give, you return', but a stickier distorted reverberation. The fragments of body, of gesture, of action, of word, accumulate and recall or suggest but do not coalesce into a reassuring whole. There is a failure of the message, a collapse of the utterance that queers the structures of race, of gender, of power, and makes a gap where other meanings, readings, failings happen.



Figure 2: LOW PROFILE, *Impromptu* (2016) photo: Anna Barclay.

Mullen's Mercury

If Glenn Ligon presents Richard Pryor in pieces, to be observed, then LOW PROFILE in their installation *Impromptu* (Fig. 2), present a version of Freddie Mercury, not to be seen, but to be heard, heard again. In a show of sounds and lights, that pulse on then off, in synch, the audience is addressed with a series of vocal sounds. And many of them will know these sounds, these phrases are recognisable, they're not random sequences of phonemes. These are portions of the performance repertoire of Freddie Mercury.

What the audience hears in the space are excised phrases from Mercury's improvisations during Queen's live shows. 'Alright!' 'Everything's gonna be alright!' 'I think I'm gonna stay around.' These phrases would be sung to an expectant crowd, and in a 'you sing what I sing', call and response manner they would be repeated by the fans. These exchanges became a key part of the live shows, and audiences participated in them enthusiastically. Here in *Impromptu* the sounds uttered are stripped of their context, excised from the live show. They emerge in tandem with the burst of light, the volume reflected in the intensity of the light, then the phrase ends and the light fades.

In the gap following each outburst as the audience are again in near darkness, a response can be imagined, the many voices of the crowd calling back to the singer, acknowledging that they have recognised, that they are happy to be called into being as fans, as followers of Queen. In the gap, the shape of the absent utterance is held, is 'heard' by the present audience. The 'silence' between the utterances is occupied by remembered or recognised utterance, not (always) vocalised, but having the shape of vocal expression. In the installation some

members of the audience did respond, did sing back to the lights. They performed as they knew other audiences did, recognising their role, and filling in for other absent earlier audiences.

In some way another absence is at work in the installation, as the voice we hear is not the voice of Freddie Mercury. We recognise these utterances as belonging to Mercury, but what we hear here is the voice of professional Mercury impersonator Garry Mullen (see *LOW PROFILE*, 2018a). An impersonation already carries with it some sense of being beside itself, of being doubly oriented, to the original, and to the present performance. Mullen's singing of these excerpts enfolds in itself Mercury's performances of them, but also Mercury's performance as Freddie Mercury, signalled in the title of the BBC documentary *The Great Pretender* (*The Great Pretender*, 2012). Freya Jarman-Ivens points to vocal impersonation as drawing attention to or revealing the performative character of voice in itself, as well as the performative nature of 'self'. (Jarman-Ivens, 44-5) In striving for or seeking to emulate or mimic an imagined or ideal version of the voice, which Jarman-Ivens terms Voice-Zero (Jarman-Ivens, 50), impersonators will always miss, hit wide of the mark, overreach themselves.

She discusses the TV show *Stars In Their Eyes*, and the queer occurrence of multiple versions of certain stars, so that the tenth anniversary video includes three 'Celine Dions,' two 'Frank Sinatras,' three 'Chers,' and three 'Tom Joneses.' (53) She concludes that impersonation, as presented on shows like *Stars*, is 'queer on several counts' (57):

it involves a merging of selves in which is contained the potential for merging multiply gendered selves; the moments of failure, of vocal flawedness, reveal something of the tenuous existence of [Voice Zero]; and therefore they reveal the sign-ness of the voice and the tenuous relationship of voice to Self. (58)

Alongside the homage implicit in an impersonator's performance, is the competitive aspect of the TV show which brought Mullen to wider public notice. Here the business of getting the voice right is complicated by the need to win over the audience and get it more right than the other competitors, to get closer to Voice-Zero as remembered by the viewers. *LOW PROFILE* have used the format or content of television programmes or game shows in other works, including *DRY RUN Part 4: MacGyver'thon* (2008-2010) which was constructed around a box-set of the TV show *MacGyver* (*LOW PROFILE*, 2018b); or *LOW PROFILE presents: A Lesson in Love* (2003-2010) where the duo attempted to recite a list of 100 songs related to love (*LOW PROFILE*, 2018c). There were elements of contest and endurance in these works, as well as participation and contribution

from the audience. As with the participation of the audience in *Impromptu*, the audience for *Stars In Their Eyes* were called on to recognise, to judge, to recall; they were expected to know and play by these rules, to understand the conventions. All these activities will have a bearing on how the utterance is received, on how the text is read, how it means on this occasion, and in queering this utterance the responses are complicated, the roles muddled, the answers multiple.

In the event *Impromptu*, there is a series of utterances and in these there are a number of displacements, of absences, of occupations that cannot be simply structured as a set of binary oppositions. Nor can they be understood as a series of deferrals. The fact that LOW PROFILE are two artists, Hannah Jones and Rachel Dobbs, who operate as a single author further queers the status of their utterance, and their 'two-ness' disrupts expectations of a unified statement, of an unequivocal reading. The events of expression and reception are not sequential, there are multiple positions and places of utterance and reception, and movements from and to these positions. There are failures, gaps and sutures in the texture of the work, and it is among these that the experience, the event of the work occurs.

Conclusion

In these two projects, Glenn Ligon's *Live* and LOW PROFILE's *Impromptu*, I suggest that there is a situation of queer making producing its own failure, in particular the failure of the utterance. The collapse of the utterance makes a gap where other failings happen, where there is potential for other queer events. This gap has the shape of vocal expression, and is provisionally occupied by other voices. In the decision to begin with the work on queer voice by Freya Jarman-Ivens I deliberately came at the term from a site not located in sexuality, choice of partner, or genital play. This strategy intended to open up the potential for application, for play, but was not designed to denature the possibility of criticism, to defuse the potential for critique. If a queer reading occupies an in-between, other, potential space, if it avoids decisiveness and direction, then can it also generate new information or propose new ideas? or is its usefulness in a resistance to (re)production, that keeps the focus on play, on present pleasure, on failing now?

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