

ISSUE NO. 129 / MARCH 2023 "TRANS PERSPECTIVES" (/EN/129/)

**30THE MOON IS TRANS: ON  
CULTIVATING AN AESTHETICS OF  
REACHING  
JEANNE VACCARO IN CONVERSATION WITH  
P. STAFF AND KIYAN WILLIAMS**



P. Staff, „À Travers Le Mal“, 2022

The art world, like any other marketplace for forms of capital, relies on give and take. Access to it comes only through admission. For artists from marginalized communities, this often means declaring your identity at the door: you may enter as a “woman artist,” a “Black artist,” or, increasingly, a “trans artist.” While many art institutions symbolically invest in diverse representation, they do next to nothing to address the material realities of those they ask to show up. It is thus with suspicion and ambivalence that curator Jeanne Vaccaro and artists P. Staff and Kiyan Williams share their conversation. Rejecting the current discourse of representation versus abstraction and (dis)embodiment in art writing about work by trans artists, they seek new language through reflections on their own practices.



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**Jeanne Vaccaro:** I am preoccupied with efforts at naming and with the institutional obsession with naming an aesthetic movement *trans*. I want to ask, What is lost when the social and political organization of ideas, bodies, and histories is conscripted to be called something? I see these impulses (in museums and scholarship) as a continuation of previous efforts at naming and, in that way, as conferring solidity on a disciplinary chain. What gets stuck by a supposedly shared description of an aesthetic movement – whose name announces itself as in flow? With description comes a reference world, a set of things determined to be inside or outside its scope. How then, do you as artists, and I as a critic, endeavor to recalibrate the norms of art history and its canonizing efforts? The terminology of abstraction is in vogue and, with it, an ongoing question about

representation and identity. I get wary whenever a concept is positioned as an ideal, and it always feels like an empty gesture to engage with art historical formulations that try to read identity into art or try not to read identity into art. Both seem to upload the binaries we are attempting to dispel. Both of your practices dispense with the proper object of the art historical by wrestling the body not entirely out of the frame but positioning it as one in a constellation of meaning-making objects. The body is an anchor – a loose one. I wonder if we can talk about the promiscuity of method not as a confrontation with form but as a defiance of genre.

**P. Staff:** I don't know if you experience this, Kiyon, but I find it so hard to put down my suspicion and to relinquish resistance when being asked to talk about trans aesthetics, to define it in the contemporary moment, to situate it in art history, or to even trust its framing here now via *Texte zur Kunst*. It's hard to be generous. It feels like a trap. Do you know what I mean? My instinctive response is to be cautious and defensive, but there are probably reasons for this defensiveness that are worth interrogating. And reasons that are very trans! I do want to start by saying that if we turned off the recording, if we pushed *Texte zur Kunst* out of the picture, it would be a completely different conversation – and that feels like an important place to start.

**Kiyon Williams:** I'm glad you named that. Today I feel elusive and ambivalent. That's my entry point to how I want to publicly talk and think about trans aesthetics, cultural production, and contemporary art. I am not feeling declarative or a need to define anything. Rather, my skepticism will orient my approach to our conversation.

**PS:** If we weren't recording, I would trust that between the three of us there would be some commonality around how we define what is trans, and we would be able to speak comfortably to its plasticity. We might not agree completely, but there is a kinship, which is vital. When I am asked the same question in a forum like this, by *Texte zur Kunst*, my immediate question is, Well, what do you mean by trans? You define your terms first. What baggage are you bringing to it? And implicitly there, What shit are you trying to pin on me? I trust the dialogue that is ours. I don't trust the institution, art history, or *Texte zur Kunst* to be able to engage with transness, trans aesthetics, trans lives without these implicit layers of eugenicist, ableist, white supremacist, medicalized formulation. When we're asked to define something trans, to discuss some aspect of it, it always feels like there's this liberal paradox undergirding it: a platform, a route, a forum is being offered where we are meant to give account for why we should be granted a livable life. And the conditions are always such that we also

have to capitulate to the forces that deny that very possibility. It's a rhetorical sleight of hand.



„Bring Your Own Body” (curated by / kuratiert von Jeanne Vaccaro and / und Stamatina Gregory), Cooper Union School of Art, New York, 2015, installation view / Ausstellungsansicht

**JV:** I love the way you are bringing in suspicion, but I am feeling a more active sense of rage about the way disciplines – and by extension, the capillary institutions, the publications, conference papers, art fairs – embrace the knowable. Even as the critique of the trap of visibility (see *Trap Door*) has been absorbed into discourse, the material conditions have not caught up. We are left with a door half ajar and the impending fear of it closing (or, the desire for it be slammed shut, depending on whom you ask). The politics of scarcity are real. There is also a violence of eavesdropping on transness as it is made available to a public, and I'd like to call out institutions that grant an audience permission to listen in while opting out of the collective work that liberation demands.

**KW:** In part, my ambivalence arises because disciplinarity or the canonization of art doesn't always emerge organically out of artists creating with each other, around each other, and in conversation with each other in a lateral way. Instead, it is often imposed. Artists might not even agree with or necessarily want to participate in the ways in which our practices are being canonized or framed within certain discourses. Articulating one's own positionality, to find one's own language and – if not define – position our own selves within what we're doing can be an act of agency when so much of creative cultural and knowledge production is usurped or misinterpreted or used for reasons that aren't self-driven. On the other hand, having to contextualize one's practice can be a burden particularly felt by Black trans artists.

**PS:** I do think it's interesting to contend with what a trans aesthetics would be if it arises, like you say, Kiyan, from the inside of a community. It would seem to suggest an aesthetic that is highly localized, highly contextualized, minor, vernacular, kind of intimate. Which doesn't necessarily mean twee – doesn't preclude bombast at all. But like you say, there's an unbalanced distribution of labor there too. I am reminded of a question that I think Terre Thaemlitz once asked: How do you talk about a community that is primarily operating in secret or remains hidden in some way? Could we argue that, statistically, the majority of trans people are not in fact out or able to

be out? Are closeted in some way? The closet being potentially many different spaces. I'm a little wary because it feels like summoning this idea that comes with an implicit accusation of a failure to self-actualize – I am against that. I hate the juvenile determinism of “egg” discourse. [1] I am thinking more of something that connects to an idea of an undercommons rather than an in or out binary. If we want to talk about transness, about trans aesthetics, is it misleading to point immediately toward what is most visible? It sounds like a facetious or dead-end question, but I want to push back against the idea that it's all there and up for grabs.



Kiyon Williams, „Between Starshine and Clay“, 2022

**KW:** I want to push against the binary discourse of representation versus abstraction as framing tools to attempt to locate and pin down the work. It feels reductive. That binary feels like it is the only available discourse as an entry point into the work.

**JV:** Yes, it is about identifying the available containers that disciplines cycle through. I mentioned the sequencing of identity movements earlier (from “feminist” to “queer” to “trans” art) because it seems like every identity movement and, in turn, every aesthetic movement must go through the same set of questions. When I curated the exhibition “Bring Your Own Body: transgender between archives and aesthetics” at the Cooper Union in 2014, a common criticism was how shiny and formal the exhibition felt in the pristine white walls of the gallery. Of course, the history of the politics of exclusion means most trans art has been made and displayed in less formal spaces – living rooms, community centers. Even as I am pushing back hard against the cultural elitism and hierarchy of the institution, what is left out of the record is a function of politics of prestige and means we lack a formal exhibition history of trans art. We need a method to contend with the violence of erasure, and I don’t think the answer is additive. Returning us to the question of abstraction and representation, I wonder about trends that seek to get rid of the body. It feels to me that there is a culture of devaluing the body as an aesthetic ideal.



**PS:** The way that I approach it – body versus no body, abstraction versus figuration – is to lean into known and felt strategies from experimental film and choreography, as well as transed and crippled assemblages. I use strategies in my work that co-opt and misuse the visual technologies of the clinic (MRIs, ultrasounds, X-rays), perverted architecture, hyper-sensual medias, volatile materials. I do subscribe to a particular trans mode that exists in the tension between dissociation and hypervigilance. Obviously, these states aren't exclusive to trans people, but I do see it as a distinctive and unique tendency. Likewise, there is this intense connection between the citational, theoretical, and discursive and an affective, poetic, corporeal way of navigating the world. I see myself as moving back and forth between these surface and subterranean worlds.

**JV:** When I experience both of your works in person, I feel how they ping at the sensorial. Both of your practices are research-driven in ways that are not immediately available to a view, which is all part of the unfolding of the work, a tension and release around holding back and making known. You are digesting and revising histories and then placing them at points of access that are not easily predictable or taken from.



„Bring Your Own Body“ (curated by / kuratiert von Jeanne Vaccaro and / und Stamatina Gregory), Cooper Union School of Art, New York, 2015, installation view / Ausstellungsansicht

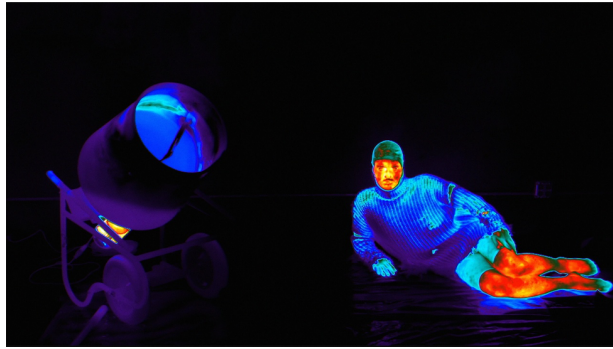
**KW:** I think a lot about the dilemma you named earlier: the weight of representing a body versus getting rid of the body as an aesthetic goal and the implications of that specifically for Black/trans/queer/femme artists. For me, the other side of the dilemma is that Black/trans/queer/femme people, our bodies, and our likenesses in visual art are always under intense scrutiny and investigation, and are routinely and systemically evaluated, dissected, and consumed by a hegemonic, dominant gaze. I'm cautious about and am often attempting to refuse making my body available to those dynamics. I sometimes have the desire to make a realistic figure, to represent a/my body – and then I actively resist and refuse that impulse by breaking the form up. For example, in *Between Starshine and Clay* (2022), I cast my full body in earth. I then broke up the entire sculpture and reassembled the fragments into a suspended constellation, with my head and hands as the only figurative

elements. Building, unbuilding, and rebuilding – that’s my making process. I’m working through questions of representing or articulating my sense of embodiment in real time, through the materials I’m working with, through the forms that I’m making. It is a building up of a form, but then also a breaking down of a form, and then I arrive at something that doesn’t necessarily feel resolved but that feels like I’ve worked through those anxieties.

**PS:** Do you feel you have a comfortable relationship with your materials? Is it intuitive? Is it a happy relationship?

**KW:** I have been consistently working with dirt and earth (I use them interchangeably). That’s the material I feel most comfortable with because I have such a deep tactile relationship to it. Working with earth came out of my early performances before I went to art school. It’s the one material that engages all aspects of my sentience. It engages me physically since it’s heavy and arduous to engage with. It engages me intellectually in thinking about earth as a metaphor for ideas of belonging, history, in geological time, diaspora, transformation, decay, human subjectivity, and the larger ecosystem I am a part of. It engages me spiritually by compelling me to think about myself as connecting to something larger. It’s a highly experimental material to work with. I’m always trying to get it to do things that it doesn’t do innately. It hits all the things that make me excited about being an artist: a sense of vitality

and curiosity and experimentation. I'm curious about your answer to that question.



P. Staff, „Weed Killer“, 2017, Filmstill

**PS:** The way you are talking about your engagement with material sounds like such a beautiful mirroring. Both in the way that it can meet you, physically and in the way that you can sculpt yourself into it and out of it. I'm fascinated to ask because I'm not a hands-on material person at all. I don't think I'm necessarily thought of as a really *digital* artist. But at the same time, almost every part of my work is digitally mediated in some way, and there's a pretty heavy degree of mechanical reproduction. But it's also often haptic, or accidental, or kind of tumbling. It can have this tumbling, accumulative sensation that I think is disarmingly organic. Not organic in the parlance of *wellness*, but entropic. That is a material space I find comfort in. In my video *Weed Killer* from 2017, the act of self-narrating one's sickness, which becomes uncomfortably merged with one's transness, becomes further transmuted through infrared image close-ups of flesh and body and hair, chains and machinery, and flashes of

postindustrial landscapes that are somewhat suggestive of climate catastrophe. There's an attempt in it to render bodies in their fundamental qualities – heat, liquid, skin, air. The faces of the performers are at once surveilled and irradiated, and through this thick layer of abstraction, they seem to bleed out into the gallery itself. The screen that the film is projected onto glows hotly, it is reflected in the flooring and walls, so surface and image collide, each abstracted and epidermal at the same time. I like to use deep sub-bass sounds that will literally shake in the chest cavities of the audience members. There's so much potential for bleeding into each other.

**KW:** We need new language to describe these aesthetic gestures. I love the image of your face bleeding into thermal color. Abstraction can be read many different ways, and in what you are describing, it sounds like a sense of porosity and fluidity, which is language that doesn't equate abstraction with erasure or a violent disembodiment. In my own practice I use a lot of cosmic and geological metaphors to consider my sense of self as a part of a larger constellation. I love that image of a face that bleeds into something larger as an aesthetic gesture toward capaciousness and not being limited by the boundaries of one's own flesh. That's where I feel language and ideas around trans embodiment are really potent and rich. It gets at so many ideas that I'm interested in both personally and creatively: transcending the tyranny of the individual, inhabiting a subjectivity

and way of being in the world that is dynamic, fluid, and ever changing, thinking about how I'm not just a discrete subject but that my sense of self is in relation to an ecosystem bigger than or beyond me.

**PS:** I totally follow. In my work and thinking, I am often trying to account for what it is to not live but not be fully dead either, to be un-living yet un-killable. There's a state of un-being that is unable to flourish into or actualize *the good life*. But there is a potency to drilling down into that state, a capaciousness. Without wanting to project onto your practice, I see that in your relationship to earth and dirt, to soil, land, and landscape. I think we are both wrestling with a similar question: what it means to confront subjecthood amongst structural abandonment, history, border, landscape. The way that transness can be understood not only as taxonomic, and not only as descriptive, but also as a way of describing the process through which thingness and beingness come into the world, no matter how strained.



Kiyon Williams, „Ruins of Empire“, 2022

**JV:** Although you have very different practices (one more mediated and digital, the other sculptural and earthy), you both engage in simultaneous excavation and building, gesturing to a cosmological interplay of earth and space, across our present moment and embattled histories and imagined futures. It brings to mind a quotation from the diary of trans activist and archivist Lou Sullivan from 1969 – the year of the moon landing – in which he wrote, “Don’t let it be on the moon as it is on earth.” [2] I see you both as having a desiring disposition, an active engagement that is building, assembling, and bridging, what I would think of as a method of retention and composition.

**PS:** What I return to a lot in my work is a sense of a displaced violence, a shadow of violence, or – picking up on the Lou Sullivan quote – a moon of violence that has to orbit, that has to be a confluent presence, a constant gravitational relation to the present. This is metaphorical, but I try in the work to establish a literal weight to it. I am trying to make available a sensitivity to the violence that constitutes the making of a person, or to conditions of “safety,” or the conditions of being that we’re all moving through together. I think a lot about the way Jasbir Puar articulates being “available to injury.” In a way, this is a desire to feel some otherwise serpentine concepts, of bio- and necropolitics, liberal and fascist regimes, debilitation. But I do believe that we all feel it, on some level. The Sullivan quote made me think about a show I had called “On Venus.” In that work, I’m continually describing an *elsewhere*, as a strategy to more accurately speak to the here and now. Venus is this *other* planet where the pressure is too great, and the winds blow too hard, and our bodies are pulled apart and reformulated, and there’s this churning violence. But it’s never as simple as an elsewhere; it is here with us all the time. Kiyari, I feel your work does something similar, but with the violence of the American context.

**KW:** I’m currently interested in how precarity and violence are quietly embedded in American iconography, nationalists’ symbols, and neoclassical architecture. *Ruins of Empire*, my public



sculpture that was in Brooklyn Bridge Park, reimagines the Statue of Freedom, a historical bronze monument that sits on top of and quietly looms over the US Capitol Building. Also known as Armed Freedom, the monument is a neoclassical female figure wearing a war helmet and holding a sword and shield. Fabricated using extracted labor of enslaved people at the height of the Civil War, the monument is the embodiment of the dissonance of the American project. I rendered the historic bronze as a deteriorating statue being swallowed by the earth, using the visual language of ruination and unbuilding as a strategy to tell a story about a symbol that glorifies the state, to unbuild a monument of a nation founded on subjugation, regulation, and policing.

**PS:** It goes without saying that trans rights, and trans lives, are being used as a focal point for a whole set of contemporary right-wing, proto-fascist, TERF, and white-supremacist arguments right now. In October 2018, the *New York Times* leaked a United States Department of Health and Human Services memo that sought to redefine “sex” as “a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth.” [3] The UK is tearing itself apart right now over something as simple as the right to self-ID, a set of legislation that is already in use without any real complication in a number of other European countries. [4] It seems to be that what this points to is a crisis of capitalism, which is a crisis of social reproduction, which is a crisis of sex and gender, and primarily race. I

wonder if perhaps, to continue your line of thought, Kiyan, what is remarkable about trans aesthetics now is its relationship to, and an inhabiting of, this flashpoint of crisis. The veil of the real, the privatized bourgeois family, the nation-state, tearing itself apart. The best art is, in my opinion, ruinous, whether emotionally or politically. Maybe what makes trans aesthetics pertinent now is an unrepentant capacity to make and invert the world as we know it, theoretically, politically, corporeally.

**JV:** I often think about the interface with the institution and how important it is to name the quieter violences, pointing to the eruptive capacities, and making little holes so things can seep out. Trans embodiment is a problem for art institutions, and we need to ask why.

Jeanne Vaccaro is a scholar, curator, and cofounder of the “New York City Trans Oral History Project,” a community archive in partnership with the New York Public Library. Her book in progress, *Handmade: Feelings and Textures of Transgender*, considers transgender self-making and was awarded the Arts Writers Grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation. Jeanne is an assistant professor of transgender and museum studies at the University of Kansas.

P. Staff is a filmmaker, installation artist, and poet based in London and Los Angeles. Their work cites the ways in which history, technology, capitalism, and the law have fundamentally transformed the constitution of our bodies today, and it has a particular focus on gender, debility, and necropolitics. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Kunsthalle Basel (2022); Serpentine Galleries, London (2019); and MOCA, Los Angeles (2017).

Kiyan Williams is a visual artist based in New York. They are attracted to quotidian materials and methods that unearth histories of extraction and settler colonial violence embedded in land. Their work has been exhibited, among other institutions, at

the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Public Art Fund; the Hirshhorn, Washington, DC; SculptureCenter, New York; the Brooklyn Museum, New York; and the Socrates Sculpture Park, New York. They have forthcoming exhibitions at Altman Siegel, Peres Projects, and Art Omi.

Image credit: 1. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, photo Paul Salveson; 2. Photo Marget Long; 3. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York; 4. Photo Marget Long; 5. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles; 6. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York

## NOTES

- [1] *Egg* or *egg mode* is internet slang to describe trans people who do not yet realize that they are trans or are in denial about being trans.
- [2] Lou Sullivan, “June 1969–August 1970,” in *Youngman: Selected Diaries of Lou Sullivan*, ed. Ellis Martin and Zach Osma (New York: Random House, 2021).
- [3] Erica L. Green, Katie Benner, and Robert Pear, “‘Transgender’ Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration,” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-trump-administration-sex-definition.html>) *New York Times*, October 21, 2018.
- [4] Pippa Crerar and Libby Brooks, “Rishi Sunak Blocks Scotland’s Gender Recognition Legislation,” (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/16/rishi-sunak-blocks-scotlands-gender-recognition-legislation>) *Guardian*, January 16, 2023.