

This is a quote from Marlon T. Riggs, from "Unleash the Queen," in Black Popular Culture :

In the last two years I have become a conference queen. Not with much deliberate intent, mind you. But my video *Tongues Untied*, in a way I frankly never envisioned while making it, has catapulted me into a society of theory divas and culture queens -- a society I must admit I barely knew existed three years ago.

At these conferences I am typically called upon to speak on matters of race and sexuality in queer media; race and sexuality in black culture; race and sexuality in Western cinema. I have become the Race and Sexuality Resident Expert. The assumption, it seems, is that girlfriend can talk about nothing else--that is, with authority.

But increasingly, of late, this Snap Queen harbors the sneaking suspicion that the measure of her acceptance into various critical in-crowds, which solicit her membership with the regularity of Visa and MasterCard companies ("membership has its privileges"), has less to do with any vital concern with black gay subjectivity and its intrinsic value in black social/cultural expression than with how well she has

mastered, and now mimics, the critical language of her new-found tribe of crit queens.¹

Marlon Riggs's words have a familiar ring. His relationship to academia, cultural theorists, and critics is basically the same one a lot of gay artists and female artists have to these same institutions. One of our roles has become illustrating theory, and making work about art critical ideas. Another role is to remain ghettoized. Our relationships to the traditions and history of whatever medium we work in, and our formal dialogues, seem secondary to considerations about whether or not we're using the language of theoretical discourse.

Marlon Riggs gave his address to a panel in Amsterdam in 1991, at the Stichting Festival, a lesbian and gay film festival. He was asked to speak about Race and Sexuality. The festival was in December, right before Christmas, and one of the dominant holiday themes in Amsterdam involved a cartoon-like character. This figure was everywhere you looked, meant to brighten up the public sphere. It was always the same caricature - a round solid black face, wide open eyes, weird smiling large pink lips, and a Ronald McDonald afro, only the afro was black, not orange. There was a local parade in which citizens of Amsterdam, dressed up like this figure, and marched and danced down the streets in black face, clown wigs, and

¹a project by Michele Wallace, edited by Gina Dent, Bay Press, 1992, pp. 99-105.

funny clothes. This was the climate of the city at the time. It was like being trapped in a clown nightmare. The festival and conference organizers wanted to know what was the last word on Race and Sexuality, and asked Marlon to speak.

During the Amsterdam festival, there was a dinner given by the city to honor the festival as a cultural event. A group of us got there at the same time, which included me, Sadie Benning, Pratibha Parmar, Patrick Wright, and Marusia Bociurkiw. There were no tables left, except in the balcony area, where waiters quickly set some up. They didn't have enough chairs, however. We wanted drinks, like the people in the good seats, but we couldn't find anything, and the waiters were not taking orders. We wanted food, but it wasn't clear how or if we would be able to get any. The mayor was giving a speech when we walked out in unison, in front of his podium, and that was that. It did cause a stir. Festival people thought we were rude and ungrateful. We had interrupted the diplomacy of the moment. People said we were immature, and began blaming the bad behavior on the Americans among us.

The people who walked out were film and videomakers, people who actually provide work, usually free of charge, to festivals, after putting up a great deal of their own time and money to make the work. Without the artists, the festivals would have little to show. Work like ours is what started the festivals, and this is what keeps them going.

Filmmakers and videomakers are neither saints nor martyrs, but we do a lot of free work. A person who writes an article about

one of my tapes is likely to make more money with the article than I am as the videomaker, throughout the life of the tape's distribution. The

time it takes me to make the work--anywhere from one to two years--and the expense--anywhere from \$1000 to \$15,000 (this is low-budget)--is my free and donated contribution to the creation of a language of lesbian representation, and to the dialogue of video as an art medium.

A lot of artists try to jump the gun and figure out what the next thing is going to be, so they can point their work in that direction. Artists make work to mimic the community's latest sexual trends, and the more academically-oriented among us also go for the more brainy types of themes. This satisfies a critical logic, but not a community response--a critical logic, by the way, which may still be in transit, i.e. just passing through.

I think the work queers do in examining sexuality has been invaluable, interesting and vital. But the same old, no-longer titillating themes of drag, S/M, and porn lose their transgressive potential, their ability to question, teach, or even just plain shock, when we are presented, again and again, with the same re-hashed, ideas and used-up visual codes.

It's important to take control of our own representation, document our own times, express sexualities that are under-represented, grossly misunderstood, and legislated against. Mainstream exposure is important for artists who want to keep being artists, but the exposure we get is lopsided. Our realities turn into myths as our work is dangled before mainstream

imaginations. We are still the Other, regardless of how many exhibits we have as the Other. There is little interest in any refinement past the

already worked-to-death themes, or in attempts to move into other areas for examination.

Issues of sexuality were associated with feminism. Feminism, as a term, became replaced with "gender issues" and "gender identity." Terms like "gender issues," indicate an expansive awareness of feminism in work by men and women alike. "Gender issues" takes away a reference to women, becomes more inclusive, more contemporary and easier to associate with all kinds of people, especially people who are not female, and definitely with people who are more interesting, sexier, and more open minded than traditional feminists. By the late 1980s, amnesiac gay artists re-invented artwork about the body, the gaze, and sexual subjectivity. The history of women's investigations was cheerfully forgotten.

I talked to a few of the artists in an exhibit curated by Nayland Blake and Larry Rinder at the University Art Museum two years ago, called "In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice." I asked them about their own work, and what it meant outside the context of the show. Their answers did not especially jive with what the catalog said. Who cares? Sometimes things are open to interpretation. I cared because this wasn't exactly a situation of curatorial creativity, or expanded readings of the work.

"In A Different Light" displayed a fabricated history of feminist art, of the development of decidedly queer art, and of the relationship between work by men and women. In its attempt at a

new history, the show's curatorial statements indicated that work on the body and sexuality done by gay men, in response to a combination of gay

liberation sexuality and the AIDS catastrophe, inspired women to take up the body as an issue for artmaking. But the direction of influences is the other way around. Why is it out of the question that women were doing this before men, before gay men? Homophobia and sexism produced similar responses in artists, because homophobia is sexism.

Gay men began to notice the work of women when it more closely resembled their own, which was in the 1980s. Work by a new generation of women, reaching large audiences through magazines like *On Our Backs*, began to deal with lesbian sexuality in different terms. It was, in part, about the way a new generation of lesbians wanted to be understood. It was, in part, a response to a misreading of 1970s lesbian styles as anti-sexual. This misreading looks at cultural--or community--expressions of lesbian desire in terms of the dominant culture, in male terms. The code-word, by the way, for angry, boring, and anti-sexual unattractive lesbians is "essentialism."

From "Curating In A Different Light," by Nayland Blake, in the exhibition catalog:

Much of this work looks back to the '70s. Many of the male artists are recreating working methods that originated in the women's art movement. They are employing centralized imagery, using "craft" materials, sewing and employing a pre-

modern rhetoric of sentiment. Many of the women are using '70s gay male culture as a template for expressions of sexual exploration and community. They are exploring drag, s/m technologies, and

flaunuerism as a way of moving lesbian identification beyond the feel-good homilies of essentialism.²

In fact, the newly emerging sexy lesbian looked like a mixture of the stereotype of the attractive slutty straight woman and that of an S/M gay man. Lesbians adopted sexual dress codes that were more easily readable to gay men, to all men in fact. We became more familiar-looking as sexual women.

We might prefer the honesty of Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins to the conveniently skewed history of "Curating in a Different Light." From their article in the same catalogue, they wrote about curating a show for Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions in 1988. We might prefer it if it weren't so ignorant, so stupidly adolescent and misogynist.

From "Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men:"

Feeling a need to interface with the AIDS crisis, Joy Silverman, then director of LACE, asked us to curate a show of lesbian and gay art. Actually, she asked Richard, he asked

Dennis, and she said okay. We mulled it over for a few months then decided to mount a huge multimedia show that was far too ambitious for LACE's teeny budget. But being young, we figured we could manage it. Our plan was to include art from every

²Nayland Blake, "Curating In A Different Light," in *In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, eds. Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder, (San Francisco: City Lights Books) p. 26.

medium in which homos were working out their shit. Writing, painting, photography, sculpture, video, performance, installation. This was the late '80s, and the only contemporary gay-related exhibitions had concentrated on social realist art which subsumed individual expression in favor of activist sloganeering. In short, we couldn't relate. Every artist we knew or liked was depressed, horny, and confused, not necessarily in that order. So we devised a showcase for personal albeit highly aestheticized expressions of homosexual identity, whether AIDS was referenced or not.

...Initially we thought to include work by lesbians, but gave up after realizing 1) that we hardly knew anything about lesbian desire and/or work, 2) that we'd be doing it out of an ill-placed sense of obligation, and 3) that our passions were attached to work by males, for whatever reason.³

What obligation? Why was it ill-placed? What happened to that youthful enthusiasm? Why didn't you know anything about the expressions of lesbian desire? Why didn't you know anything about lesbian work? Is it ok for male artists to participate in a show that is all-male because of the intended and concerted exclusion of women? Male privilege is the same in gay culture as it is anywhere else. And finally, why are lesbians so invisible?

³Richard Hawkins and Dennis Cooper, "Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men," *Ibid.*, p.

Last year there was a show of 68 films and tapes about lesbian sexuality in the Whitney Museum's New American Film and Video Series. The show was called "Lesbian Genders," and it covered about 6 weeks of programming. I had one videotape in "Lesbian Genders." When I heard about the show, it occurred to me that with one 6-week slot, the museum could probably take care of it's responsibility to show work by lesbians, however deep or shallow the feelings of responsibility may be, for a long time to come. The show of films and tapes by independent makers which followed the "Lesbian Genders" show, for example, did not have one single piece by a lesbian or gay man.

One of the themes of "Lesbian Genders," was to show work that presented more fluid definitions of gender, more than what was considered male or female. The panel discussion which opened the show focused on a specific theme, termed "female masculinity." What emerged from the panel was that some women's discomfort with their female bodies, and with culturally assigned feminine behaviors and status could find a solution in their relating more as male. What also emerged was the erasure of female as a term identified with power, and the restriction of ideas of womanhood to that which is traditionally feminine. This is misogyny.

Masculinity as a female trait was presented as a quality of the genuine transgressor, the queerer lesbian. If femininity denotes that which is powerless and unappealing in the self, who then is the lover? Where is the woman? She is the feminine one who is or is not homosexual, who glides with uncertainty between straight and queer,

defined by her partner and not by herself. She is the straight girlfriend of every dyke, the prize.

One program, entitled "Boy Realness," was about women who were not happy being women, who had identified with boys and men since childhood. They were envious of the freedom and support boys received compared to what they received as girls. Their dissatisfaction with persistent hateful sexism was interpreted as gender mis-identification. As women, they began a celebration of their own masculinity by placing themselves alongside boys and men, above and away from women, correcting what was missing from girlhood.

Brandon Teena was one subject, although not the main one, of a tape called *OUTLAW*, by Alisa Lebow with Leslie Feinberg, also in the "Boy Realness" program. In the tape, Brandon Teena was made an icon of female masculinity. She was referred to as "he" in the process of being made a hero. She was not to be considered a lesbian, but something closer to male, and by a twist of logic, therefore even more lesbian.

As she becomes an icon, her true story fades. How few options she had for living her own life, how much her class status contributed to her identity, her history of fraud and theft, false identities, stolen credit cards and ATM cards -- all indicated that being trapped in poverty was as much an obstacle as gender mis-

identification. I'm not convinced that Brandon Teena was a gender activist, so named posthumously.

Let's look at some legal trends regarding female biology. Forget any liberatory rhetoric. The challenge is beyond that.

Two news stories: (1) A doctor had a fetus confined to a hospital until it came to term because he feared that the mother's drug habits would endanger the child. He notified police of the woman's drug use, and of his recommendation of confinement after he had given the woman an examination. The woman was confined against her will, and her child taken away from her at birth. She is fighting for custody. The doctor was interviewed and said he knows people have a right to privacy, and doctor-patient confidentiality is sacred, but he decided that he had the duty to notify the police, and to have the woman, as carrier of the fetus, confined. (2) A legislator wants pregnant women to have to take drug tests, and hired a lawyer for a fetus to sue a pregnant woman. One part of her body is suing another part. Her whole self is violated. This is what we mean when we say we don't have control of our bodies.

When I saw these news stories, I had the feeling that my body was a legal liability. Perhaps other girls and women get the same feeling of entrapment, of being a slave. Some of us rebel, even with very limited resources. Brandon Teena was a woman, a lesbian, brutalized to death. What options do women have, what options do lesbians have?

This is how a talk about how work is looked at becomes a talk about women's rights. I think it makes sense. Along with the bombings of women's health clinics, and the terrorizing of women seeking health services, this is the context for women artists.

The tape of mine that was in "Lesbian Genders" was one I made two years ago, called *My Failure to Assimilate*. With this tape, I meant to say that even the informed woman, the artist in charge of her medium, is a woman under sexism, a lesbian under homophobia. Knowing your place,

analyzing it, and creating your own language for understanding it simply means that you know how to talk to yourself. The tape was the culmination of my investigation into video as an art medium. It included an image of a naked body, or in art terms, it was a nude. It was me, the nude. There were also lesbian confessions and admissions of deviance and confusion about the nature of identity. But it was not about gender identity, nor was it only about lesbian subjectivity. This tape has rarely been screened outside the context of lesbian and gay themes. *My Failure to Assimilate* did not belong in the "Lesbian Genders" show. My work was never about gender issues. This is how I became ghettoized by my own queer community.

After the panel discussion was over, the speakers went out for a post-reception celebration. The film and videomakers in the room were not invited, our presence no longer required. The fantasy of expertise about lesbian identity belonged to the art writers and theorists. Each artist's film or tape was one line of the bibliography of the fantasy thesis. It was not our show at all.

I want to answer the questions of this panel's originators: What guides current interpretations of contemporary art that suggests lesbian and gay readings? I think I dealt with some of that. Is work that is consciously gay or lesbian necessarily valuable for the people such work claims to represent? Not necessarily. Artists should do their own investigations, informed by what's going on in the world. But artists ruin it when they do work in reaction to the dialogue of writers and critics, when they act grateful for recognition, and when they try to locate, and illustrate the theories of sexual identity vanguardism. Sometimes art is

not valuable to people it claims to represent. I don't think queer art has to be easy to understand, or readily accessible, or even liked by a general gay and lesbian population. I think it has to be what it is.