drawing queer space

the kind of activism drawings do

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Abstract

For this article I turn a series of my own drawings into a case to study the ability of images to become socially productive and to serve as a tool for queer visual activism. I borrow the linguistic term “gapping” to describe the strategic use of space within drawings to activate the viewer’s own associations. And I suggest that drawings lend themselves particularly well to a particular kind of queer visual activism that does not primarily strive to create visibility in the context of identity politics, but operates on a more abstract and subtle level to rework the cultural image repertoire and lead to more freedom of self-expression beyond clear-cut identity categories.

This proposition is based on an understanding of queer not as an embodied identity but, following Gavin Brown (2007), as a “relational process” and on Antke Engel’s (2009) theory of the “social productivity of images.”

Keywords

drawing, queer, activism, images, identity, theory, gapping

This paper examines drawings as a tool for queer visual activism. Queer visual activism is part of cultural politics that intervene in the sphere of the social and aim to destabilize normalizing systems that put sex and gender in binary oppositions and sustain heterosexuality as a major structuring element in societies. I argue that spaces within the drawings contribute to their potential to become “socially productive” so that they do not just
reproduce existing representations of bodies, genders and sexualities but rework the cultural archive of available representations. I base my argument on a series of 24 pencil drawings that I made during the Copenhagen Queer Festival in 2007. The drawings are about the size of postcards and the heavy paper and its jagged edges are evocative of old-fashioned picture postcards, the ones you might very well want to send home to your family from your vacation in queer summer camp. For the purpose of this paper I will title the series “I really feel my gender” and analyze it using queer and critical theory.

This reflection has grown at the intersection of my drawing practice and my involvement with queer theory and activism. I spent quite some time trying to get theory to do something for drawing, other than just retrospectively analyzing the results. And on the other hand, I would like drawing to do something for critical theory, other than straightforwardly illustrating it. Since I both study and make images, in the back of my mind I always try to connect theoretical insights with my image-making practice. The theory does not necessarily have a linear impact on my visual work, but it informs the images I create and the way I think about my work as an artist. Or, as Ann Cvetkovich puts it, I “seek to pursue theoretical inquiry by visual means.”

Here, I do not focus on the process of making the drawings in the space of the queer festival, though this activity could almost more obviously be called “visual activism”. Neither do I propose ways to queer the process of drawing. Rather, I look at the drawings as material objects that circulate within societies and consider the effects they may have when they are distributed through printed media and the outlets of the internet.

I begin by delimiting some of the terms I use: “visual activism,” the “social productivity of images” and “queer.” Then, I give some information on the event during which I drew the series “I really feel my gender.” I borrow the linguistic term “gapping” to designate a strategic use of reduction and omission in drawing that makes space by leaving things out, and I examine the different spaces at play within my drawings. Finally, I suggest that these spaces render the drawings useful for a specific kind of queer visual activism that is not aiming to create visibility for those rarely or falsely represented in heteronormative societies, but rather allows us to look beyond the visual molds of gender representation and imagine something else.
I adopt the expression “visual activism” from the South African artist Zanele Muholi and the U.S. theorist Ann Cvetkovich. Zanele Muholi uses her photographic work to generate visibility for her community of black lesbians in contemporary South Africa. The women in this community are marginalized, they lack access to resources and are the target of hate-crimes, “curative rapes” and murder. One of Muholi’s goals is to offer positive images that allow the women she addresses to “see likeness” and to recognize themselves in those images.

Ann Cvetkovich writes about “visual activism” in her analysis of posters and graphic works that were wheatpasted in New York City during the early 1990s by lesbian activist groups. Fierce Pussy, the Lesbian Avengers and Dyke Action Machine initially claimed more visibility for lesbians by making lesbians literally more visible in the streets. Later they also commented on issues within the lgbt-community. The visual activism of these groups almost exclusively employed photographic images, graphic design and appropriations of commercial advertising aesthetics. Drawn images did not play an important role.

Both Zanele Muholi and Ann Cvetkovich write about a straightforward lesbian visual activism that mainly advocates for more visibility for lesbians within a heteronormative visual discourse. Following Johanna Schaffer, I understand that creating this kind of visibility has been an important concern for oppositional politics in the Global North, since visibility is generally equated with recognition and political power. Schaffer acknowledges the need for positive images for those who are continually being visually devalued or entirely kept out of the realm of the visible. She is, however, skeptical about the assumed causal relationship between visibility and political influence. Pointing out that stereotypical representations are very common but not affirmative at all, Schaffer alerts us that the form and quality of representations are more important than their quantity.

This is one of the reasons why the queer visual activism I have in mind does not primarily strive for visibility of a community based on an assumed identity. And it does not wheatpaste in the streets. Instead, it works on a more abstract and subtle level to rework the cultural image repertoire. Similarly to Zanele Muholi’s work, part of its mission is to invoke a sense of community and belonging. But its main endeavor is to create and bring into circulation images that act as queer interventions in Antke Engel’s terms – “anything that
confuses the rules, conventions and expectations of the image or the reading of it— with the intent of ultimately allowing for more freedom of self-expression.

To see what qualifies drawings for this kind of visual activism, Antke Engel’s theory of the “social productivity of images” proves valuable. Engel takes the phrase of the “power of images” by its word but shifts the notion of the power involved. She describes it as “a productive, creative power” that works within the realm of the social. This idea is rooted in the understanding that representation does not reproduce reality but rather constructs it and at the same time produces meaning and is fundamental for the constitution of subjectivities. These processes of signification, construction of reality and subjectivation take place in and are shaped by a field of power relations. Within this field, cultural politics use cultural modes of expression, such as images, to argue for acceptance of the societal order or resistance to it, and queer cultural politics aim to unsettle norms like sex/gender binaries and heterosexuality.

It is important to underscore that I use the word queer not as a convenient, depoliticized umbrella term for non-heterosexual identities. Rather, I follow Gavin Brown and think of queer as “more of a relational process than a simple identity category,” and I agree with Antke Engel when she points out that queer is not suitable to designate individuals or groups of people since it works against the construction of clearly defined identities. Instead, Engel suggests acts of “queering” as destabilizing interventions into heteronormative systems that structure societies and their institutions. My idea of a queer visual activism that does not rely on identity categories is also informed by Judith Halberstam’s call for an understanding of queer that is based on a different relationship to time and space and not on an embodied sexual identity.

Antke Engel locates the social productivity of images in the interstices between the production of an image, what it represents, and its reading. She points out that this in between is also the place where meaning is produced and reality is constructed. To explain how visual representations become socially productive, Engel details a method of reading images which acknowledges that images have a certain uncontrollable agency in the process of signification. They can resist attempts to impose any one reading onto them.
Because I assume that there is a correlation between the images available within a society and the chances of freely expressing one’s subjectivity, I do not want my drawings to just reproduce existing representations, but to rework and expand the cultural image repertoire. I consider the social productivity of images from the perspective of an artist and try to delineate methods that increase the images’ potential to become socially productive towards a greater fluidity in the expression of identities. One of these methods is a strategic use of space within the images that I call “gapping.” Analyzing a series of drawings I made at the Copenhagen Queer Festival I will explain further how notions of space are key when trying to impact the production side of the triad production-representation-reception in between which meaning, reality and ideas of the self originate.

The Copenhagen Queer Festival is a week-long, non-commercial, d.i.y. gathering of 200 to 300 people. Each summer since 2006, a changing group of activists finds a location in Copenhagen that can be temporarily turned into an autonomous, self-organized queer space. The group takes care of the basic organization of the event, while the festival itself, its program and its space are being created together during the week and come into existence through the contributions and skill-sharing of the participants. The crowd is international and diverse, though most of the participants come from Western Europe and the U.S. Without having access to any formal demographics, I would assume that many identify as queer and are more or less involved in activist and anarchist contexts. The festival is all about meeting people and being in contact, about discussions and workshops, performances and music and video and dressing up and partying and politics and activism and sex. Participation is free, shared sleeping spaces are available, and volunteer teams prepare food three times a day and serve it in return for monetary donations. Between 2007 and 2009, when I participated in the festival, it took place in the somewhat run-down buildings of a school for circus and performance arts. The school was located in Islands Brygge, formerly a working class neighborhood and industrial zone that has been gentrified since the 1980s and today is a popular residential area.

Each year at the festival, I spent some time drawing: randomly, whenever I could and felt like it, during workshops and organizational meetings or in spare time, while I was in conversation with people or sitting by myself amongst the crowds.
The series “I really feel my gender” does not have a particular sequence and therefore could be rearranged and looked at in any order. Rather than showing recognizable locations and people with explanatory captions, the drawings picture isolated body parts and nondescript architectural details, accompanied by fragmented lines of text written into the drawing. They do not give a comprehensive and colorful account of the goings-on but laconically capture moments with a few lines. The drawings are discrete. They document aspects of the festival by showing the margins, not the center. They look up or down into corners, as if to avoid eye contact with someone who might be there. The corners of rooms and buildings do not refer to any specific place and the drawings do not portray any one person in particular. The location of the festival would be impossible to find using just the guide of the drawings, and the drawn faces are so little individualized that they do not betray who was actually there. Most of the figures in the series either don’t have heads or facial features or they are looking to the side. But while it is hard to tell who exactly the people portrayed are, it is easy to identify with them: “is this me?”

The lines of text in the drawings are not so much written into the image as drawn into it, similarly controlled and stylized as are the drawings of the architecture and figures. The space represented could be anywhere, but words like “activism,” “social criticism” or “sex” appear in the drawings and point towards a specific subcultural setting. The identities of the “I” and “we” who are talking, or the “you” who is being addressed, remain unclear. Reading the lines, it becomes apparent that the drawn objects and the words do not go together in an easily consumable way. What do “people who don’t even want to define themselves” have to do with what might be the top part of the frames of two adjacent doors and some electrical wiring on a wall? Something is off in these drawings. There are gaps in between the objects, the people represented and the writing, and it is hard to tell what the images are about. The seemingly disconnected drawn objects, figures and words are actually collaged together from different situations. But unlike a collage in the more conventional sense, the picture elements are not visibly glued together or assembled but drawn together into an image that on first impression looks coherent.

My approach to drawing in this series makes space by leaving things out. I call this strategic use of reduction and omission “gapping.” The formerly linguistic term “gapping” here describes the activity of purposefully creating gaps within images. I do not suggest that gapping queers the process of drawing, since focusing on some aspects and leaving others out is an essential and
unavoidable part of drawing from life and creating representations of people and surroundings. And since I eye suspiciously anything that is supposed to be queer, I do not claim that things left out and gaps created result in images that are queer per se. But I like Antke Engel's suggestion that images have the agency to act as queering devices, tools for destabilizing interventions into heteronormative systems.

Gapping enhances the agency of images to act as queering devices because things left out and gaps created open up a mental space of projection, identification and memory that keeps a drawing available for various interpretations. The viewers are drawn in and invited to inhabit the gaps with their own ideas of what the drawing is about. What these ideas are will vary according to individual knowledge and “visual experience.”

It is, in fact, not the identical but the common in the images that draws the viewer into them, the well-known but undefined, unparticular. Those who are part of queer activist communities might feel a sense of commonality and familiarity when they look at the images. And those who are not might still connect through the drawings’ appeal of both intimacy and openness. As the drawings document and archive a queer event and its community, they trigger memories of the event for those who participated and evoke a sense of belonging for those who were not at this particular event but are familiar with its kind. Drawings lend themselves particularly well to spurring this kind of emotional engagement with the image since they are less mimetic of the physical world than photographs and appear to be more personal because they are obviously made representations.

Gapping increases the drawings’ potential to engage with the viewer in the production of multiple meanings and become socially productive. It enables them to work as a tool for a queer visual activism that is concerned with exposing, irritating and dismantling normalizing systems that regulate bodies, sexualities and genders. But gapping is just one method to this end. Other means will be developed in future explorations as part of more extensive research on what drawing can do.

Chris Campe has a background in Illustration and is currently a MA candidate in Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. In her work she invites theory to do something for drawing, other than just retrospectively analyzing the results.
and she asks drawing to do something for critical theory, other than straightforwardly illustrating it.

The whole series of drawings can be seen at:
http://www.queeristics.de/drawing2.2.html

Endnotes

4 Ibid., 15.
6 Ibid., 51.
7 Ibid., 23.
8 Engel, Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 204.
9 Ibid., 119.
10 Ibid., 17.
11 Ibid., 34 f.
14 Engel, Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 19f.
16 Engel, Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 200.
17 Ibid., 204.
18 Cf. ibid., 202.
19 "Gapping is a type of ellipsis which in English as well as in other head-initial languages elides the finite verb in the second conjunct," Sophie Repp. Negation In Gapping. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5. For example: "I love you and you her".
20 To randomly adapt a quote from Shakespeare’s Hamlet: "Nothing is queer but thinking makes it so."
21 A queering device might be the opposite of what Sara Ahmed calls a “straightening device”: "I show how compulsory heterosexuality operates as a straightening device, which rereads signs of queer desire as deviations from the straight line," Sara Ahmed. Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 23.

Works Cited


