

Reframed Positions - Terre Thaemlitz in conversation with Lawrence English

LE Thanks for agreeing to this conversation Terre, I appreciate the time. I thought, in the context of this survey of your work, Reframed Positions, it'd make sense to flesh out the themes and questions that comprise your artworks to date. I also felt it'd be useful for helping people visiting the exhibition to connect with the pieces and understand how it is your practice has travelled structurally, if in no other way, in parallel with these themes. I'm interested to trace how you arrived at producing the kinds of audio-visual pieces that have come to define your work over the past two decades.

I'm especially interested to understand how experiences you had early on, during your time studying at Cooper Union, and before too, shaped your interests. Moreover, how the experiences of creating the earliest works included in this exhibition were responsible for you moving away from fine arts in its most conventional sense. Back then, how is it exactly you arrived at painting? Is it fair to say that was the first significant, publicly visible investigation into creativity for you? And more importantly how it was you came to depart from painting?

TT It's all really cliché, actually. Fagbashed queer from the American Midwest who grew up being told he was good at drawing - while also being simultaneously told never to pursue it, and that she should be a doctor or lawyer or whatever conservative parents considered good husband material back in the day - finagles his way into a New York art college as a means of escape. This was back in 1986, after just turning 18. As a child I only had exposure to the most general and watered-down notions of "Fine Art," so at age 18 I started with painting as a goal. Cooper Union was a good place for that. It was intensely Modernist, with most of the studio work coming out of it still trapped in expressionism, with an occasional tinge of early minimalism. I think the most conceptual full-time faculty was Hans Haacke, but I wouldn't have access to one of his classes until my third year, by which time I had already outgrown the artist fantasy enough to just see him as another high-budget corporate artist, "critical" or not.

I began referring to all art as "critique affirming its object," because no matter how precise and harshly critical one's analysis may be, when it is funded by the same corporate or federal agencies one is criticizing, it all goes to show the benevolence and open-mindedness of the sponsors.

You know, one more way for rich assholes to feel good about themselves and convince others that they give a shit, because they paid some artist to say bad things about them. The artist is nothing but a court jester in this scenario. I couldn't see us as being anything else - and I still can't. Of course, this also shows my "American-ness" in that a more European model of federal art funding was utterly foreign to me. And as a result, I never grew up with the sense of entitlement that one's critique of a government or agency should be funded by them. I mean, I can understand the right to federal funding as a utopian democratic concept, but it also strikes me as a position of tremendous compromise.

I just never understood how anyone could actually be surprised when, say, the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts [NEA] refused to fund anything but the most vanilla projects or artists.

Back in '86, the NEA was in trouble for some federal funding having trickled down to Robert Mapplethorpe, and Andres Serrano's "Immersion (Piss Christ)." I don't think either of them were actually directly funded, but they got some funds from an exhibition that was partly supported by NEA funds, or something random like that. But I mean, despite all the uproar about injustice, I was like, why the fuck is anyone

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surprised that our right-wing government run by religious zealots doesn't want to fund this stuff?

I realize the hypocrisy of saying this while currently getting a chunk of my annual income from EU-funded events, but I still am not naïve enough to think any of this money business is on the level, nor to confuse my employment in "creative industries" as something other than just a job. To the contrary, when I look at the EU arts, I see how it mostly operates in a very insular sphere of pseudo-political rhetoric, and becomes a kind of reified arena of faux social organizing. You know, that great populist myth that art and music change the world, which is a huge means of distracting people from actually helpful and necessary forms of social organizing.

...But what was that you asked about painting being my first publicly visible investigation into creativity? I'm a bit thrown by your accusation that I am interested in "investigations into creativity," let alone significant ones. [Laughs]

LE Well, lets not call it an accusation as much as a provocation. [Laughs] This positioning of language might be something I return to as we speak, as I know how important language and its capacity to construct discourses (thanks, Foucault) and identities is, within your work.

TT You know I'm not interested in creativity, authorship, authenticity, originality, or any of that stuff, precisely because the ideological functions of those terms is so entrenched in patriarchal myth building about men giving birth to the world - which in its crudest form is literally the Judeo-Christian god myth that weirdly continues to frame our notions of secular society. In particular, I want to keep in mind how we have arrived at the traditional notion of men giving birth to the world - be it an old patriarchal deity in the sky, or the Humanist male artist as progenitor of his own work through which culture is birthed, etc. So let's put all of that kind of "creative" language to the side, if we can. Instead, let's look at my interest in painting as a youth in relation to the social conditions of a queer outcast with no real cultural education of any depth, whose rejection of conservatism in her upbringing was more educated by a kind of Midwestern Punk and New Wave mentality - simply because that was about as complicated as critical thinking was allowed to get in those regions. Like most young queers at the time, I blamed myself for my own ostracism. You know, like most abused people, I bought into the idea that I brought it upon myself.

And certainly by age 15 I was actively doing things that represented my body as a living middle-finger to the rednecks around me - gender fuck clothes, extreme hair, make-up, etc.

So if I think back to those days, and that mindset, if there was a first "serious investigation" for me at Cooper Union it wasn't about painting. It was about finally gaining access to texts and other media that provided me with language for thinking about the social functions of power, and the social construction of identities. Language for that gut feeling some of the social problems I had experienced came from without, and how that informed things within. I'm talking about really basic things like a concept of historical materialism from The Communist Manifesto, Juliet Mitchell's Psychoanalysis and Feminism, Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality, John Berger's Ways of Seeing, George Grosz' The Art Scab, Constructivist manifestos, etc. These were not the things students were supposed to focus on when studying at Cooper, but they were the things that caught my attention and helped deprogram a lot of deeply engrained bullshit. Most importantly, learning what "essentialism" is, and moving away from it as far as possible! [Laughs]

Clearly, that theme of anti-essentialism has continued over the decades. If you need to satisfy the curatorial itch to plot a course, I suppose that is the recurrent investigation in most of my work

LE Tatsächlich juckt es mich.

LE Consider me itching then. TT With regard to how I stopped painting, there actually was a specific moment that I can recount - it was either the final crit of my second year, or end of the first semester of my third year. To set the stage, I had been focussing on doing minimalist drawings and paintings for about a year, and getting a lot of flack about it from both my instructors and other students. This went as far as students "keying" my paintings with scratch marks and things like that. Their logic, as students duly instructed in the teleological western art canon - from realism to pointillism to abstraction to minimalism and so-forth - was that a young person such as myself at that time could never have accumulated the self-knowledge and understanding required to make minimalist work of any depth. Minimalism was something that had to be arrived at, and evolved into ever so gradually, like mastering classical piano before attempting improvisational jazz. So they felt I had to be put back in my place. Sometimes real life is cheesier than the worst teen movie, isn't it? So with that context in mind, it was during a final crit at the end of the semester. (For those unfamiliar with art-speak, a 'crit' is when you present your work to a professor and classmates for their 'critique.').

I was presenting two very minimalist paintings that were made with industrial lacquers on wood. They were monochromatic, with extremely precise and flat surfaces with no signs of gesture. The crit went awful. Everyone hated them, said they were "emotionless" or some other bullshit that showed our ideological disconnect, and just couldn't place them in their model of the art canon.

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TT To be honest, the paintings were completely referential to things like the early works of Frank Stella, whose first interviews often focussed on Marxism and notions of creating paintings that sought to minimize gesture or representational illusions as a kind of demonstration of materialist philosophies. You know, that whole minimalist movement to confront the viewer with objects that are so brutally deprived of illusion and representation that their sheer presence as nothing other than the object as-is would shatter the viewer's world view, banish the ghosts of spirituality and illusion from their minds, and snap them into a purely materialist way of seeing the world. [Laughs] Well, that was what I was going for, and nobody was having it. After the crit, the arguments with classmates continued in the halls, and at one point someone whose work I truly despised - just the worst pseudo-expressionist representational painting you can imagine an art student making - said point blank, "You're saying all this stuff, but in the end, you're still making paintings. I just don't get how what you're doing is any different from what I'm doing!" A weird wave of calm hit me, and I said, "You're right," and never painted again. I can't remember that classmate's name, but I owe her a big thanks. Fuck, I haven't thought about this shit in so long. It makes total sense that it all happened when I was a teenager. Real kid stuff.

LE I understand that at the same time as working on these paintings, you were also investigating more relational approaches, testing out expectations around and within various public spaces, and specifically how people assume they should behave in particular settings. I wondered if you could speak to these interventions.

I imagine the MOMA Beeper piece was in fact your first exploration into sound and space, at least in a nonclub environment, is that that correct? This work and the Newport subway interventions both seem to explore a sense of interruption, a breaking of the expected codification of public space and a subversion of expectation and in some respects control at various personal, social and institutional levels. How is it you consider these works now? How did they inform where your work moved to from there?

TT Yes, so while all that painting drama was happening, I was also involved in various direct action and social organizing groups like WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) and ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power). In fact, after I gave up

painting, in order to complete my studies at Cooper and get a diploma I used to seek out professors who supported non-studio work, and would allow me to present things like T-shirts or placards made for demonstrations as “studio work.”

It wasn't about qualifying those things as art - which I was totally not interested in - but simply about fulfilling school requirements for producing studio work. They were mostly guest professors, who were less conservative than the tenured faculty. Around that time I had gotten my hands on a book compiling manifestos of GAAG (Guerilla Art Action Group), which were a kind of post-Fluxus group that was more interested in politics than art, and they did a series of performances and attacks on the MOMA and other New York museums, around issues of financial corruption, political support of right-wing and corporate agendas, cronyism, etc.

I was inspired by this, and along with my collaborator in a lot of things at that time, John Consigli, we came up with the beeping devices as a way of adding to the already existing ambient sounds of the museum just enough to push them over the edge and make them a distraction for viewers. The idea wasn't to make the people hear beeping, but to clutter the already existing noise of air vents, doors, elevators, etc., to the point that it all became conscious and broke the presumed neutrality of the “white cube.”

TT We also did other projects within the Cooper Union's galleries that focussed on exposing how gallery spaces were constructed to create an illusion of neutrality in which viewers can focus on art objects as if they existed in a social vacuum. We were very interested in the cultural and political ramifications of that kind of ideological neutralization of highly funded and politically connected social spaces, how the majority of people fell for the illusion, what that meant socially speaking, and how art functioned in terms of propaganda for the agendas of those institutions.

John also helped with the silk screen printing of the subway adverts, and putting them into subway cars with me. I think we printed 100 of each. We'd take them into the subways at night, removing the actual Newport ads and replacing them with our prints. We almost got caught once or twice, but managed to run off before the police could get us. It's funny, years later I was describing them to someone at a party or something, and they said they had actually seen the “Ass Grabbing!” poster and thought it was a real advert. I mean, that raises another ongoing theme in my work, which is the need for producers to keep low expectations around audience comprehension - not in an “I'm smarter than you” way, but in terms of how difficult it is for people to see or hear things in terms other than how we are culturally programmed to see or hear them in a given context.

If little twists, ironies and sarcasm so easily fall flat, of course it will be even more difficult to try and unpack processes of reification, ideological production, the naturalization of gender and sexual binaries, racism, classism, etc. I think anticipating miscommunication makes way more sense than marching forward with a naïve belief that a majority of people will “get it.” That's just mainstream marketing bullshit, and will usually result in things that are more manipulative than informative.

LE What does this question of comprehension and, as you suggest, ambiguity of an audiences reading mean for how you approach what you do?

TT The conventions we carry about how media is supposed to function makes it incredibly difficult for most people to receive critical media or culture jamming in non-standard ways - whether it's a gallery, or a concert hall, or a night club, or a subway car. I call that small percentage of possible comprehension the audience's “queer ratio.” Even if I am performing for an explicitly LGBTQIRSTUVWTFMLFAO* audience - which is usually not the case - the majority still almost always identify with conventional, mainstream definitions of Gay, Lesbian and Trans cultures, so that the kinds of anti-

essentialist analyses I am producing will inherently fall flat simply because most people are filtering them through essentialist, or “born this way,” perspectives.

So the “queer ratio” is not about being a queer, it is the subset of people within any audience that is actually able to receive the messages in familiar terms. I must presume the majority of people in any audience will be encountering unfamiliar terms and concepts. At the same time, I don’t want to do the liberal bullshit thing of pandering to the mainstream. I insist on making it the audiences’ burden to do the labor of trying to understand the unfamiliar. At least, I try to insist on that. We all make concessions. But when I do, I try to make the concessions and ensuing hypocrisies also an active part of the works

Of course, I’m talking more about my recent projects like Soulnessless and Deproduction - not the posters or beeping devices. But I suppose all of the projects are linked by an attempt to foil expectations around the performance of media within a particular space. Those early works were pretty lame, and show that I was really lacking the kinds of language and strategies I needed. It’s understandable. I was a kid. Allowing for failure - even relying on it - is how I slowly built the kinds of language and strategies I use today... which are also still lacking, of course.

LE Before moving on, I wanted to pick up on this idea of the ‘queer ratio’ and also touch on essentialism. I realise this is my rampant optimism showing. [Laughs] But as much as I concede these perspectives dominate in the day to day - hell, social change is glacial at the best of times, and we seem to be dwelling in ‘fair times’ at most - do you feel this ratio has shifted in favour of audiences being more open, or at least available, to consider these reframed discourses that sit in excess of the a priori positions you’re eluding to? I’ve always thought of your pieces as a means for opening up spaces within which new questions can be forged. I know from my own experiences with your work over the years, I’ve been positively confronted on several occasions and would argue these moments has lingered with me in ways I did not expect, but have come to value deeply. I sense that often the way you interrogate these issues leaves a great deal of space for audiences to become personally engaged at a micro level with what might on first appearance seem a macro issue

I’m ceaselessly impressed by your capacity for situating your ontology within a very, and I use this word with respect, approachable series of modes. Whether it be the story of your father’s experience of the Christian Brothers and his resulting circumcision in Soulnessless, or the repeated image of Astroboy’s birth in Lovebomb, or the micro-narratives that form the first half of Deproduction - these are examples of how you create opportunities that can really open up a pathway for engaging with complex, painful and intense subject matter.

TT No, I don’t think today’s audiences are more open. To the contrary, I think the perceived liberal-humanist “openness” in contemporary audiences is a con, and we are actually in a highly sophisticated moment of reactionary conservatism. Of course, this deception is a traditional part of liberalism, which has always been rooted in maintaining a status quo that is friendly to petite bourgeoisie aspirations. The sensation of openness is a function of reification. It is a classic example of ideological production which inverts actual social relations. Relations that not only remain steeped in hierarchies, but are in fact reinvesting in family, clan and tribal relations as the defacto “logical” site for social support and services - which, as I describe in Deproduction, is precisely what is culturally required for today’s capitalist societies to destroy what minimal social services have been established through democratic methods.

The historically hard-fought agendas of deregulating/decriminalizing “perverse” sexualities and genders has fallen to the wayside, as contemporary LGBT movements focus almost entirely on demanding our re-regulation, demanding our

documentation and registration within the humanist bureaucratic canon of those who qualify as “human.” We hear nothing but “born this way” arguments.

I realize that in the fight for legislative protections, “it’s not a choice” is an easy sell to an essentialist, heteronormative mainstream that has internalized and naturalized patriarchal gender and sexual binaries beyond question. However, as I have written and spoken about countless times, this is an inherently antidemocratic stance. It is, in fact, a feudal and aristocratic stance in which we claim a birth-right determined by the blood in our veins. That is not a process I can ever support. Any “born this way” argument for receiving rights is fundamentally different from a democratic movement rooted in a collective choice to reduce violence against LGBT people.

And again, our current cultural investment in essentialist notions of LGBT gender and sexuality is utterly symptomatic of this moment in history when capitalism reigns supreme, detangled from Cold War notions that capitalism is inherently “good” and inseparable from democracy. No, in fact, capitalism functions better with slavery. It functions better without labor and social protections. Historically, this is how it has always functioned, and continues to function, with the West and wealthier nations relying on continually cheaper labor elsewhere - often in explicitly nondemocratic countries.

Isn’t it curious that with all of globalization’s cultural “advances” there have been almost no newly emergent democracies - and the few that have emerged are so fragile they could be lost without notice?

Meanwhile, at this stage in latephase capitalist globalization when the West likes to take pride in delusions of egalitarianism, for us to culturally conceal the slavery upon which we exist takes more than physical distance - more than the physical export of labor which became standard economic policy under Reagan and Thatcher in a supposed age of decolonization. Concealing it requires an incredibly deceptive and manipulative ideological indoctrination that breeds our cultural faith.

And I’m sorry to say mainstream LGBT agendas are also utterly symptomatic of that indoctrination. It used to be that the mainstream demanded heterosexuality and binary genders to the exclusion of all else. Well, the great liberal revelation of today’s era is that the mainstream only requires our heteronormativity! It simply needs us fags and trannies to behave as “decent” people with “the same dreams as everyone else” - legally sanctioned marriages, monogamy, two-parent nuclear families, enthusiasm for jobs, military service, home ownership, and so on.

TT In particular relation to trans visibility, it is unquestionable that for most people in this world “transgendered” is synonymous with “transsexual” - precisely because transsexuality is the form of transgenderism that is most invested in notions of genderreconciliation with the patriarchal binary. It is the form of transgenderism that “makes sense” to the heteronormative patriarchal mindset. It is also the form of transgenderism that is entwined with multi-billion dollar medical industries whose primary goal has always been heteronormative conformity.

Today we shudder at the outdated notion of medical institutions attempting to “cure homosexuals,” and yet today’s gender transitioning therapies are literally a financial redirection of those very research funds away from sexuality to gender. It is increasingly commonplace to give children experiencing gender crises damaging hormone blockers, rather than feminist tools for coping, organizing and living within an unsatisfactory and limiting gender binary. We are still being duped, still being experimented on, cut, physically and chemically deprived of sexual function, deprived of the ability to orgasm.

And despite how many of us may embrace these limitations, and attempt to reinscribe them with Pride™-ful notions of self-fulfillment, it is undeniable that on the culturally macro level these limitations are continuing a long tradition of dominant culture medically debilitating - not manifesting - our sexualities.

How many times have I heard MTF's on hormones explain away their loss of orgasm as a "natural part of becoming a woman," invoking all the essentialist patriarchal bullshit about the deprioritization and disbelief of women's sexual desires such statements carry with them? Today, even "anti-institutional" queer movements have standardized "self-medicating" with hormones. In particular, traditionally butch dyke scenes have been transformed into testo scenes, with intensely regimented peer pressure for testosterone intake and mastectomies.

I mean, people outside the trans world usually don't realize that the types of procedures undertaken by both FTM's and MTF's are not simply generic medical practices prescribed by physicians, that are then simply accepted by patients. There really are fashion trends around which hormone cocktails and surgeries to get. And they all cost a lot of money, and enslave the transitioned to ongoing debt, medical maintenance, etc. It is a hardcore 21st century subscription lifestyle, and those who eventually opt out - who are numerous, by the way - find little social space for sympathy or support. Socially, it is about equivalent to dropping out of a 12-step program, or a religion. Say goodbye to all of your friends and networks.

Mainstream transsexual support networks are ill equipped to help those who wish to opt out, because they represent the potential for doubt or regret or simply something else - and that complexity is currently irreconcilable with a culture of unquestioningly affectaffirmative Pride™. With all of today's queer- and trans- openness, look at how far we are from culturally facilitating nonmedically-mediated relationships to trans bodies. Farther and farther!

These are just part of the reactionary conservative undercurrents to that perceived openness you and most other people I meet seem to claim typifies today's audiences. Meaningful long-term change is not possible so long as we live in a world where "it's not a choice" can only infer biological predisposition - as opposed to the possibility "it's not a choice" because of brutally real material social processes which rob us of choices, and render our consciousness incapable of conceiving of ourselves outside of gender and sexual binaries, gender and sexual essentialisms.

In fact, I too would say when it comes to sexual orientation (the selection of sexual object choices) and gender identity, for the overwhelming majority of people "it's not a choice," but I can explain this observation with an endless litany of completely social reasons. In terms of social organizing, if it is the social practices of bias we wish to change in order to reduce violence, doesn't it make sense to focus first and foremost on the social reasons?

This is the very core of anti-essentialist analyses, because social strategies allow for self-agency, whereas socially organizing around essentialist notions of biological predispositions literally eliminate any potential for self-agency, right? "It's not a choice" has come to sound very comforting, but it is not a statement of agency.

And of course, this is precisely why mainstream globalization emphasizes liberal humanist models of diversity rooted in identity-driven essentialisms, because it ideologically robs us of the conceptual possibility for choices. It distracts us from identifying or even conceptualizing the social mechanisms which perpetuate our oppressions. And the result is a preservation of existing power relations.

LE Recognising and engaging with the complex mesh of social reasons around the development of opportunities for choice and the possibility for varying degrees of agency is something I can't agree with more strongly.

TT Yeah, sorry, all of this pissing on your parade is not to disavow the kinds of experiences you've had with my work or any other work. It is simply to say, on a subconscious level you seem to be associating the potential for your exposure to those experiences with a society's potential for openness or tolerance. I am positing the opposite, that those experiences you recognize or cherish as vital are not inherently birthed by liberal conditions. They are not inherently birthed by the gracious generosity

of sponsors who make a gallery exhibition possible, or whatever art world bullshit. Anyone who works in these industries knows those larger conditions that frame our productions are most often censoring, restrictive, disingenuous, and crassly rooted in speculative investing. So I'm asking you to set all that optimism aside, if you can, and then see if you can perceive those cherished experiences as something rooted in cultural discordance, rather than as cultural gifts? I mean, culturally it is so difficult to clearly place that value you extracted in relation to something other than having been exposed to some great moment of "openness" and "different ideas" brought to us by art world sponsors.

I suspect the majority of my "fans" also see things as you have described them. But within those fans, I also know there is that queer factor of a subset of people who recognize the hypocrisy and antagonism behind the presentation of my works within art, music, academic and other "creative" contexts. People who recognize that what they have seen or heard is already incredibly compromised, edited, and - despite the never ending text in many of my videos - more about what remains unspoken. And in that act of recognition, any use value extracted is not a gift of liberal art culture. I would argue any real value emerges despite liberal art culture. Not in a heroic way, but in an unavoidably limited, anti-populist and culturally minor way.

This means starting with the premise that my work will fail in conventional terms. Fail to entertain. Fail to be pleasurable. Fail to be popular. My task is to work with how it fails, and try and keep people thinking about it despite not particularly liking or enjoying it. That becomes the opening into a different kind of cultural use value. The idea of producing work that requires a time of "lingering" in the audiences' minds is part of my strategy. For example, I do not want people to leave my performances feeling refreshed or like they were just at a great music concert. I want them to feel out of sorts, unhappy, disappointed - in a way that is not maliciously traumatic, but like you said, lingers awkwardly in the mind for a few days.

This is my attempt to direct people towards an extraction of value from memories and perceptions that rest in something other than the instantaneous gratification of liberal celebrations. Something other than the communal bond of having shared a great show with other audience members, all leaving with the same glow.

As a nihilist, I am more interested in the always undermined values derived from ruins. There is no phoenix rising from the ashes. Only ashes. But it is precisely because, as a producer, I have so little control over audience perceptions - due to both cultural and subjective dynamics - that I spend the most time strategizing how my work may "fail" in the three economies from which I derive my income as a freelancer: music, art and academia. They each have their own concepts of failure, and for economic reasons I have to bridge them all.

LE The idea of this work being offered as culturally minor has been part of your methodology I imagine from the outset. I can't help but feel that even minor gestures and offerings that linger, as we are discussing, do accumulate a certain weight or presence beyond their moment of utterance. In saying that, I am curious to understand how it is you hope the work exists going forward. I'm often struck by revisiting a piece like "Silent Passability (Ride To The Countryside)," which I increasingly find interesting as it documents a very specific set of histories and a particular time period - of your life and also of that community and place - but the narrative that sits behind its title and around those people continues to expand and make new connections within contemporary settings.

Do you feel working from a minor position allows a greater flexibility for how work and perhaps even ideologies can permeate and hold currency, or perhaps even create currency, or moreover a current, in time? In answering this can you also talk about the experiences that are at the root of "Silent Passability (Ride To The Countryside)"?

TT Well, I don't mean to come across as if I'm knit-picking or playing word games with you, but "accumulate," "weight," "continues to expand," "currency," "going forward"... do you see an ideological thread emerging which subliminally frames your approach to my works in ways that make it difficult to discuss notions of strategic smallness, failure and nihilism?

I'm not pointing it out to criticize or say you've got it wrong, but simply to identify - clarify and share a perception - of some fundamental differences in approach and language that I think we have to address if we wish to talk about the culturally minor with meanings we can share. Because those words you are using are really pointing to something other than minor. Something growth-based. Which, of course, echoes business-positive rhetoric we are drowned in day and night. It's very hard to step away from it, isn't it?

It really takes conscious effort and self-correcting. And doing that involves public displays of confusion, shame, embarrassment - a lot of stuff one might also associate with "the closet." You see how tactics of the closet can still have some use value for us, culturally? Sorry to get derailed, but the construction and structure of questions in interviews is usually the most interesting bit for me as the person asked to answer them.

LE I know we've spoken about this at length before, but I think my use of these words fall more into my sense of, dare I say it, radical optimism and a hope to recontextualise or perhaps even gently emancipate these words that I agree are utterly tainted by capitalist desires and dialogues. I like to think of these words as more communal in some sense, weight and accumulation of community and value of social engagement. Likely a futile pursuit, but so much of what I do might seem futile and I've somehow drawn great drive from that tension.

TT Minor positions are not about "greater" anything. I do not see it as liberating, or something to be celebrated. It is about existing power relationships that restrict and limit, and while being conscious of that and strategizing through minor positions might involve cultural and social mobilities that are different from the culturally major, that awareness alone does not alter or invert the relations of mainstream domination. It simply allows one to engage that oppression with more precision and awareness.

The liberal art tendency is to romanticize the minor, start espousing Pride™, and plotting populist distribution models aimed at changing hearts and minds in the mainstream. In other words, plotting how to make the minor major. It is a notion of power-sharing with dominant culture, which in my experience always leads to co-option by the mainstream and a re-inscription of the very dominations people seek to transform.

I am interested in divestments of power, not power-sharing. And that means being cautious about "celebrating" the extremely limited mobilities found within culturally minor practices. Otherwise, it almost immediately becomes a celebratory politic of identities, and that twists into essentialist defences of the minor, naturalizing cultural differences as biological differences of character, declarations of Pride™, reaching for the brass ring instead of dismantling systems of oppression, etc. It's a fucking endless looping trap.

The culturally minor and major are entwined through injustice, and that must be taken into consideration at all times. Especially when we hear and see the signs of a culturally minor condition mimicking the signs of the mainstream. This can't be avoided, but it can be perceived, and serve as a red flag that keeps one suspect of the forms of cooperation they are engaged in, and the possibly damaging consequences. Like, Deleuze and Guattari had their whole theory about "becoming minor" as a key to "becoming revolution." I don't buy it.

I work through culturally minor means of production and distribution because they present a material level of non-cooperation with populistobsessed creative industries - be they “independent”, corporate or institutional. And that forces critical engagements between myself and my employers.

TT You asked how I hope the works exist in the future. I think at one point I answered that question in some interview by saying it would be nice if all that remained were the texts and critical analyses, with none of the audio or visuals, so they became like dead languages. That’s still my attitude.

I wish things could remain offline at least, and exchanged or shared through personal interactions between people with a bit of trust and understanding about how to protect culturally minor works. But I realize that is hard for many to grasp. I have to waste more and more time keeping my work offline. Maybe you’ve seen that pop-up message on my website asking people not to upload my projects (which, yes, I realize many people miss because they have pop-ups disabled, but there are also limits to how much effort I want to put into forceloading myself upon others). It says:

Terre wishes to keep ‘queer’ audio and media functioning queerly, contextually, and with smallness. Populist social media engines that blast media ‘globally’ to as many people as possible may be appropriate for corporate pop music, but they function contrary to everything Terre believes about cultivating and protecting the hyperspecificities of ‘underground’ and minor situations. Indiscriminate file sharing, YouTube and SoundCloud grant too much exposure with too little precision. Clearly, many of you disagree. However, please be sensitive to the fact that uploads into YouTube and SoundCloud enact an explicitly antisocial situation that prohibits open communication between you and non-registered users such as Terre - the very people you are likely trying to ‘support’ through your uploads! Such uploads display no specific concept of audience, and take no responsibility for who has access to the content. It is no different than dumping a box of 100,000 CD-R copies of your favourite track at the largest shopping mall in town, and just walking away. You are placing (at times rather delicate) materials into the hands of homophobes, transphobes, religious zealots, anti-pacifists, anti-Marxists, anti-feminists, corporate anti-sampling lawyers and their legions of content scanning spider-bots. The latter is also a major reason people should never list audio sample sources in website comment fields, or websites/apps like Discogs, WhoSampled, etc. Remember, many countries do not have the legal category of “fair use.” This includes Japan - where Terre lives. While the average end-user who lists things on such sites is preoccupied with a false sense of freedom of expression rooted in fun, it is on the production level that one is always aware of the risks and liabilities of cultural content development - particularly with collage-based media. As a result, Terre considers indiscriminate uploads and file sharing to be a risk to her cultural praxis on multiple levels. Although his views on uploading may be contrary to everything you have been taught to believe, please understand, in some instances NOT UPLOADING shows greater cultural support and understanding than uploading.

TT I guess this discussion of how certain levels of visibility or audibility or vocality can lead to unwanted risks ties into the story behind “Silent Passability (Ride to the Countryside),” in a very literal way. The title refers to the fact that back in my twenties, with a bit of effort, I used to be able to pass as female in the streets of New York - so long as I remained silent, since my voice was a giveaway. This was back in the early nineties. At that time, there were also a lot of problems with anti-trans discrimination from taxi drivers, who would sometimes drive trans-folk deep into the outer boroughs of New York, and dump us in remote locations with no way to get back home. We all

knew to avoid riding in taxis alone whenever possible. Meanwhile, public transportation options were also totally unsafe.

So the heavily filtered voice in “Silent Passability” was me talking about a time when I was taking a cab alone from my apartment in Spanish Harlem down to a club in Midtown. I was pretty dressed up, and the cab driver kept eyeing me in the rear view mirror, saying he thought I was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. I was terrified to say anything, for fear of being outed and taken on a ride to the countryside. You know, the more compliments this guy gave me, the more retribution I feared when he found out I had a dick between my legs. So these moments where my silence was a form of self-defence existed at the same time that, on another day, I might be shouting the ACT-UP slogan “Silence equals death!” That simultaneity and hypocrisy frames my understanding of queerness, not as something to be resolved, but as a condition of perpetual contradiction and simultaneity.

LE This seems like a good place for me to ask the idea of voice in your work. Voice, both your own and those of others, has always held a primary role in your sound works. I suppose Midtown 120 Blues is the clearest musical example of this. In that recording, I almost hear your voice as speaking a kind of ballad, something that exists as reflexive and distinctly provocative. In the other pieces too say, some of the pieces on Soil for example, introduced voices and scripts are present like subliminal threads, often counterpointing the textural qualities of the music.

In Soulnessless’ Canto I and IV, I perceive the use of voice existing both as concrète material and simultaneously holding a critical semantic function. I was interested to understand how you consider voice, in the broadest possible reading, functioning within the work?

TT When it comes to language, first and foremost, I am not interested in poetic vagary. That is not to say I am about strict clarity and singular meanings, but I am specifically disinterested in poetics that prioritize affect in such a way that they invoke universalisms. For example, themes that rely on a presumed shared human condition, “love” as universal, and other liberal humanist propaganda that deceives us into thinking diversity and difference must be more felt than interrogated, more respected as preconditions than analyzed as social constructions. I do often incorporate multiple types of language in a single piece. For example, Canto I of Soulnessless, “Rosary Novena for Gender Transitioning,” begins with a “cold” analytical voice, then moves into a kind of seductive personal narrative voice, followed by a “TMI” kind of hyper personal internal monologue about gender transitioning that is emotionally at the opposite end of the spectrum from the initial “cold” analytical voice, yet just as alienating. I also layer archival information with oral tradition, analysis with subjective recollection, dominant histories with minor and alternative histories, etc.

Compared to conventional poetry, I think these are more deliberate ways of allowing for the emergence of manifold texts, which are further layered with images and sounds, recorded voices, etc. And I want deliberateness in my work because, as we know, the audience will filter things into completely other meanings anyway. It is about limiting variables for how things can go wrong, in a sense - but not limiting quantity or depth of content. As I said earlier, I am not interested in simplification, or dumbing down specifically queer subject matter for easy absorption by predominantly straight audiences, or dumbing down specifically anti-essentialist queer subject matter for easy absorption by predominantly heteronormative LGBT audiences, etc. I prefer that at some point the majority of people feel alienated or excluded by some moment or passage that is directed at the queer ratio. In other words, I try to invert the traditional queer encoding of content so that it is recognizable to those “in the know” but not to straight folk - like lyrics in an Elton John or George Michael song. I am interested in the majority of an audience sharing in a sense of having been excluded, at the precise moment those “in the know” feel spoken to. Not in a bullshit Pride™-ful attempt to

reverse privilege, but in commiseration around closets and what we allow ourselves to publicly and privately acknowledge comprehending. Because in an audience you never know who is fucking whom or doing what where - it doesn't matter if they look like a super-hetero family man, house wife, drag queen, or picture perfect lesbian mom couple. Pretty much everyone is doing shit nobody else knows about, and via those experiences anyone can fall into that queer ratio. But it takes time for an audience in a public setting to understand that I am publicly speaking of that unspeakable part of our social behaviors, and it's "safe" for them to allow themselves to think about such things in that audience setting.

TT Meanwhile, I can only get away with making projects that are not meant to "please" people in a conventional art-entertainment sense because I get most of my money as flat fees from the people who book my events - not from ticket sales or that kind of monetarily quantifiable audience satisfaction. They are small, one-off financial agreements that do not rely upon events "going well." I may not get invited back by the same organizer or venue, but that is also anticipated in my financial planning that is more focussed on maintaining minor stability than growth-based "success." I understand it could all be over at any time.

LE Whilst the works in this exhibition sit outside of the environment of where a DJ Sprinkles set is situated, I still feel as though there are a lot of shared concerns and explorations happening with your musical works and the audio visual pieces presented in Reframed Positions. How do you approach creating music for environments like a club or a festival? Obviously opportunities for discourse exist, but within that type of performance space I imagine there's a friction at times around how to correlate these agendas.

Do you have an interest in them being aligned in any way? Or they are more in some type of loose orbit? I imagine the economic implications of presentation of work in these spaces can be differently fraught to those direct exchanges you talk about for the audio-visual pieces.

TT For me, DJ-ing is simply a job. I do it out of economic necessity because I can't live off of record sales or other types of independent income. I show up, do my work as freelance staff at a club, and leave. I understand that there is almost never going to be any similarity between the contexts in which I DJ today, and the queer/trans venues where I used to work in New York thirty years ago.

For me, house was over by 1992, so in terms of nostalgia it's like going to a rock'n'roll oldies show. Despite the presence of young people, and a marketplace selling music labelled "deep house" as fresh, this is not fresh in any way. At this point, after doing the same thing for decades, on a technical level I think I can do my job well. But it's a job, and we all hate our jobs. As I've written and talked about elsewhere, one of the biggest taboos of creative industries is hating your job. The minute any of us complain in the least, we are immediately confronted with, "Well, at least you're doing what you love." It really shuts down any critical discussions about poor labor conditions, which are particularly abundant in art and music industries that rely enormously upon volunteerism and underpaid labor.

This is also why I always refuse to do anything for free, and for the first few decades of my career spent my days explaining to organizers and labels why they had to pay me more money precisely because I was an unknown with fewer work opportunities, so the fees had to be higher to survive with so little work. That didn't usually go over very well. But that kind of inverted economics has also always been part of this ongoing experiment to see if it is even possible to live off this kind of work. [Laughs] So, yeah, despite all the underground vibes, for most people in this world we are the fucking poster children for capitalism, where personal desire and financial independence merges - "lucky people doing what we love". Fuck that. Seriously.

When I produce dance music in the studio, I do try to incorporate themes as in my electroacoustic work, either in the form of samples with particular meanings to a queer crowd, or spoken word samples, etc. But I know those messages become difficult to hear when played in a club - both because of technical issues with crappy sound systems that push too much bass and treble, and because most of the audience has their comprehension skills hampered by drugs and alcohol.

So I don't expect messages to really get across clearly on a dance floor. But it's there for the home listeners, usually along with texts and images. I know a few of them bring their experiences with that content as background into the clubs with them. But again, I produce from a realistically grounded perspective that anticipates failure.

Compromise is always the starting point for anything. Not compromise in the friendly sense of meeting others halfway. I mean starting from a state of being compromised. Starting from a state of failure, and success is not an option.

LE Coming back around to the earliest stages of your work, it wasn't long after this thread of works during the Cooper Union times were created that you started to become more active with sound. How did you come to find yourself in this space? And during that earlier period exploring sound were you primarily DJ-ing? Or also starting to explore ambient sound?

TT Okay, so while I was busy losing my faith in art (yay!), and being involved in activist work, I was also collecting records. I had grown up listening to electronic music - disco, new wave and techno-pop (which was not the same as techno music) - primarily as a reaction against the rock'n'roll and country music that formed the soundtrack for those who fagbashed me on a daily basis. Electronic music was extremely difficult to find in Springfield, Missouri. So when I moved to New York, I suddenly had access to all kinds of records I had never known before. By chance, I lived near Dance Tracks Records, which was one of the most important stores for Loisa and New Jersey deep house, and I started getting things from there, too. Around 1988 or '89 some friends asked me to mix a tape for them to use in their contingent of the Gay Pride™ Parade, and that was my DJ public debut of sorts.

Then I started DJ-ing at a few benefits, and then a few gigs at the clubs that had hosted the benefits. Finally, I got a residency at Sally's II, which was a primarily Latina and African American transsexual sex worker club. It was there that I got my "underground grammy" for best DJ of 1991, and then a month later was fired for refusing to play a Gloria Estefan record for a wealthy john.

So it was all shitty and crass, and I had lost my interest in the art bullshit that originally drew me to New York, and the activist groups I had been involved with were dissolving as a result of direct action groups increasingly transforming into CBO's (Community Based Organizations) that were city funded, etc. Attempts to find a "community" all failed. Personal relationships were also falling apart. After graduating college I was unemployed for almost a year, until I began working fulltime as a secretary at a medical college. After four years of art school, it was my high school typing class that gave me a means of employment. I was really miserable.

So I actually started producing music as a kind of totally private hobby. I had no plans for being a musician. If I was critical of the arts, I was even more critical of how notions of authenticity and artistry functioned in relation to music. Like, in the arts most people were aware of the critiques against authenticity - Warhol made sure of that - yet it was business as usual. So much so that you can get sued by the Warhol Foundation for replicating one of his prints without permission, yet his entire career was built on sampling newspaper photos, corporate logos, etc., without permission, right? It's nonsense.

Meanwhile, those same people who know all those critiques of authenticity are still more than likely to turn around and buy into the authenticity of musicians. And this also relates to class issues, with music being much more linked to pop- and low-culture

that is often in defiance of haughty high art culture (only to then be appropriated by it, of course). So when I put out my first record as a lark, my turning to audio production was not about finding a format that was better than the fine arts, but in a way finding a cultural site that was in even more dire conditions.

A cultural site where the century-old critiques of authenticity had yet to really begin. In the US they had briefly bubbled into public consciousness during the late '80s lawsuits against sample usage in hip-hop, but only to quickly have the courts reaffirm that sampling and all replicated tape media also qualify as creations subject to the rules of authorship, blah, blah, blah. And that has completely framed the evolution of electronic audio production since then until now. That includes far more emphasis on the development of software and other technologies aimed at the "electronic audio producer as conventional live performance-based musician" - Abelson Live, Max MSP and other things that are more about improvisation and performance than replication and plasticity. So it's all shit. Art is shit. Music is shit. I am simply re-performing the failure of those critiques of authenticity in the arts within the field of music. Not with any hope of making them work this time, but with the full knowledge that it is a futile gesture. I am performing their failure.

Again, there is nothing populist or idyllic about it. It's not about solutions. It's about solidarity with a culturally minor queer ratio, and the hopelessness of recognizing oneself in that ratio. I'm totally nihilistic in that sense.

LE This period was a massive transitional time, I guess like every few years, in New York. But specifically the social and cultural landscape was in a really significant shift following that late 80s economic bubble. This was a period where the New York that had birthed and supported so much possibility, made possible by the wholesale failure of the City Council to leverage the capacity of the city's real estate and the like, was starting to be flipped, especially after the arrival of Rudy Giuliani in 1994. I wondered if you could speak more to how this impacted on the way the communities you had become attached to since arriving functioned, and also how that then impacted your approaches to the work took shape in those years? When I go back to listen to the Raw Through A Straw 12", I can already hear so much of the sensibilities of the work that would come in the decade, and longer, that followed.

TT Giuliani advanced gentrification policies initiated by Mayor Ed Koch, and they were ruthless when it came to the bussing of homeless people out of the city. I was living just around the corner from Thompkins Square Park when the infamous police riot happened, and saw first hand the beatings they inflicted on the homeless as well as the public. It was horrifying. Homeless shelters were notoriously violent, and particularly dangerous for women, young men, and queers. Rape was a common thing. This is all typical of US social services and prison culture, where the emphasis is placed on scaring people into avoiding the need for social services, rather than constructing services that actually attempt to care and rebuild lives. HIV was also still a fearful plague, and housing services for homeless people living with HIV were even more atrocious than normal. Meanwhile, investment companies were buying up large areas of real estate. This included Disney's buyout of Times Square, which had been a sex district and was also the location of Sally's II and other venues that served as bases for many transgendered and queer folk.

Of course, Disney always enacts a cultural cleansing in everything it does, and the city was more than happy to have the sex district purged. As a result, the Midtown trans scene was totally dislocated and scattered to other boroughs, other cities, some went upstate, others were homeless by the piers, others simply disappeared never to be seen again. By the way, to give an example of how democracy favors capital, while activists from ACT UP were facing "weapons charges" for using cardboard tubes to hold up placards, Disney was able to convince the New York fire marshal to allow them to turn off all city lights on Times Square so they could do one of their electric parades

in pitch darkness. (To explain for the young people, this is why in most countries you no longer see placards attached to sticks at demonstrations, because authorities would claim the sticks were “weapons” in order to shut down protests for public safety.)

So that was the cultural climate. And this wave of gentrification also was at the same time that many people involved in direct action groups were taking jobs in city or federally funded CBO’s, which also came with a lot of self-censorship and concessions to mainstream policies and politics simply to preserve funding, etc.

It was all indicative of what was to come, and how we would arrive at the kinds of deeply compromised cultural situations we have now even though, like we talked about earlier, many would define today as more “open.” When I have gone to New York in recent years, I have heard so many people - liberal citizens, musicians and artists - say about the violence of that era, “Well, look how much better the city is now... I guess it was worth it.” Fuck you. Seriously. Fuck you with your blinders on, “the end justifies the means,” comfort driven bullshit. In this age of speculative real estate gentrification, we have all been ideologically relocated as well.

LE It begs the question what better actually means? You can’t help but wonder, what are the qualifiers or criteria upon which better is recognised?

TT Sadly, for most people, it is about self-serving comfort with a willing blindness to the suffering of those whose labor creates the basis for that comfort. It’s fucking heartless consumerism, with the qualifiers being determined by capitalist profits - profits that, ironically, go to an extremely small percentage of people, and is actually distinct from the mechanisms of comfort for the rest of us. I think the only reason notions of comfort appeal to so many people is that the overwhelming majority of us are horribly uncomfortable!

LE In conjunction with this question about the impacts of the changing circumstances in New York, I’m interested to pick up on some of the writing you did around the idea of Ambient. Specifically, your interest at that time, and probably still today, in decentralisation. I’d like to know what your interests were in exploring this concept via ambient music through that period of the mid 90s into the early 2000s. I note, and frankly couldn’t concur more strongly with Ultra Red’s rejection of the spiritual or the mystic qualities attached to Ambient music, which you reference. Their proposal of ‘finding pleasure in the mundane (soundscape)’ very much seems to resonate strongly within your work to this day. I know we’ve spoken about the role of tedium, boredom and, dare I say it, relishing the drudgery of lived life. [Laughs] Could you expand on how that operates in your works. Most recently I have felt that acutely whilst viewing *Deproduction*, the juxtaposition of the incessant bird call/field recording against the other sound materials and that heavy repeating string section is equal parts beautiful and relentlessly singular all at once.

TT Well let’s be sure to say it, in *Deproduction*, those other sound materials are the sounds of domestic arguments and domestic violence.

LE I had assumed that was the case, I knew they were sounds of abuse, but didn’t want to presume the exact sources. Thanks for the clarification.

TT Well, I’d be distressed if you actually heard the entire piece and still weren’t sure what was happening. It just proves that one can never be too heavy handed with content. Like, I can feel like I’m beating people over the head with some sample that seems way too direct for my ears, and yet 75% of an audience will still never realize or be able to discuss what they heard. That is so frustrating. But yes, there is a looping to the piece that, on the surface, appears stagnant, yet if you sit through the piece there is definitely a structural arch of tensions, but ultimately anti-climactic because it

simply goes on, and on, and on... like actual family violence, generation after generation, century after century, with no end in sight. The question then becomes, if we recognize that inescapable cycle, what does it mean for “democracy” and the global failure to cultivate means for people to survive as disowned? We are doubly disowned, by both our families and the “democratic” social services which prioritize families above all else.

But yes, what we used to call back in the old days “contemporary ambient” was about a decentralization of traditional musicology’s emphasis on melody to the exclusion of disharmony and noise. It was also a critique of conventional performance, including the pop stage, where audiences faced front and center to watch a staged spectacle. In terms of social outlook, it was running with Jacques Attali’s thesis in *Noise* that if music and melody expressed a society’s dominant power structures, noise and ambiance can be metaphors for cultural dissonances.

As a DJ in trans clubs who was used to having to play shitty show tunes and pop diva tracks for show queens to lip sync to, I was also interested in conceptualizing a more critical model of the transgendered stage. One that was not rooted in over-the-top spectacle, but in anti-spectacle that paralleled the kinds of silence, invisibility and closets required to survive outside of the “safe spaces” of our clubs. Well, to be honest, I didn’t want anything to do with performance at all - and I still don’t. But it is an economic necessity, since most of us in this business cannot survive off of record sales. We survive off of performance fees, which is ironic and disappointing when producing what I personally consider to be “nonperformative” works.

So I had to come up with strategies for performing the non-performative, and at first my solution was simply to sit on stage, in drag, with a DAT player, and play the audio almost like a conventional electroacoustic tape concert one would encounter in traditional academic circles. This was around 1995-2000.

TT At that time, many of the bigger named producers - overwhelmingly straight guys - were also playing from DAT, but they were doing all the macho gestures of knob twiddling on unused channels of the mixers, and basically faking a live show for the audiences. My show was just kind of more brutally honest and stagnant, in contrast to their staged gesticulations.

Then with the advent of Max MSP, the “laptop orchestra” trend hit. Over night, almost all of those guys were suddenly sitting still behind the glow of their laptops. Basically, those bitches stole my act. [Laughs] And I was also increasingly frustrated with the lack of thematic information audiences were getting out of my little anti-performances because, as I said, it is difficult to hear and understand the processed voices or other sonic clues to the thematic content of the albums. So I started doing 35mm slide shows, and then text heavy videos, as means of increasing content delivery.

I was also very deliberately keeping my production values in range of my economic reality. This was a deliberate rejection of Futurist aesthetics found in a lot of other videos used during electroacoustic performances, which were like high-tech screen savers. I fucking hated that shit, and felt it was deceptive as a means of visual representation within a field of audio production that was so financially limited and often done using cracked software, old junker laptops, and the opposite of high-tech. Of course, as a person schooled in Marxist-fueled Constructivism, I also fucking hated Futurism for its links to fascism, as well as the liberal mindset which is always so forgiving of that link and willing to dismiss it as simply “poetic.” No, Futurism was rooted in real militaristic fascism. Stop protecting your cultural and financial investments, and deal with it.

LE Was it with the introduction of the visuals that you moved away from the ‘stage’ altogether? Did the visual materials offer some kind of possibility for liberation from even that tenuous occupation of that space during performance? In terms of the visual

approaches, what I find interesting is that, given the technological shifts that have occurred that allow for fairly significant leverage of production values/techniques via software, you've somehow maintained the structural aspects of these audio visual pieces across the arc of the works to date; there is a strong sense of lineage between them, structurally as well as in relation to the content.

Is this a reflection of your interests in Constructivism, the works are a manifestation of how the application of this ideology take place? In some respects, I think this idea reflects how I think about you and your relation to the work, that it is constant but never solid, it is always becoming and through that process allows multiple entry ways to the ideas and enquires. An interested someone can commence a navigation of your work from so many entry points.

TT I've never had the financial luxury of moving away from stage performance. I mean, even when I am simply sitting still in front of an audience, to the side of a screen while a video plays for an hour, that is a "performance" - often times a drag show - even if it deliberately fails to fulfil the audience expectations around "performance." And sometimes the organizer's expectations, too. [Laughs] The use of video is simply the most practical means for getting thematic content in front of audiences who are not only unaccustomed to "listening for content," but actually culturally conditioned not to expect any content beyond affect. So, it is a very practical engagement with the limitations of a stage - particularly a music stage - and not a move away. I suppose you could link that kind of pragmatic and materialist approach to things as informed by Constructivism, with its emphasis on demystification.

LE I realise in this conversation we've tended to focus on the audio-visual works predominately. Today though, I had an experience that sparked me to think about some other aspects of your work. I was struck by how much house music was used in shops, cafes and other public, communal spaces. I started to think about how far this music had been removed from its birth place, how, to use a visiocentric term, invisible it has become even though it is more visible. It feels like some kind of inverse cultural colonialism. I wondered about your feelings on this and how it can be that the criticality of the music and it's meaningful evolution can be maintained and continuously vitalised? Perhaps also if that should be the case at all?

TT Oh, yeah, house music is literally fucking elevator and shopping mall music. It's totally co-opted. As I said before, for me house music ended in 1992 (when I say "house" I am more specifically referring to classic Deep House as it emerged from New York and New Jersey in the late '80s.) I've talked about it many times, but basically that was the year when "house" became genrefied in the music marketplace - an identifiable category for music distributors. As a result, the previously foggy differences between house and techno became more rigidly defined - including along race and gender lines, since house was more the sound to queer spaces for people of color, and techno became more rigidly aligned with hetero white-boy stuff.

It's important to remember that "house music" did not originally refer to a particular genre, but rather to the overall vibe of the record collections housed in certain clubs. We're talking back in the days before DJ's brought their own records to clubs. It used to be that when you were hired as a DJ, you played the club's records. Those collections of dance music - ranging from disco to soul to hip hop to Chicago Trax to whatever else - were literally the "house music", the music owned by the house, or venue. So Garage House is the vibe of the sound of the Paradise Garage, Loft House is the sound of the Loft, and so on. There were no stylistically consistent "house albums" as we think of them today.

It's like the old Donna Summer record with "I Feel Love." Have you ever heard that album? It's not an entire album of arpeggiated synth music. It's a typical soul/R&B/disco album with only a single synth track tacked on to the end. That was

how we used to consume music, by digging for nuggets that stood out because they were not typical, even for the producers who made them. Queer ratio. Another classic example would be “White Horse” by Laid Back. What a shit band, but what an amazing track. So things were not as rigidly codified.

It’s interesting to note, however, that the codification of these dance genres occurred at the precise time identity politics were crystalizing in US politics - late ‘80s and early ‘90s. This is not a coincidence. As the sexualities that found expression in underground clubs found visibility and became increasingly regimented and commodifiable, so did the sounds of those spaces take on more regimented categorization and marketability. The restricting of “house music” from a venue’s multigenerational selection of music to a singular contemporary sound paralleled the emergence of identifiable tropes in queer and trans identities within mainstream markets. Very visually stylized and immediately identifiable tropes - most notably the “white clone” look - which were a rejection of the closet, a means of immediate identification, with an emphasis on outing. So the emergence of house music as a genre is absolutely, historically interwoven with the emergence of the Pink Economy and queer marketability. And of course, the Pink Economy is interwoven with the allabsorbing liberal humanist marketplace, where context and specificity are ultimately replaced by mass market appeals to a universal human condition. Perhaps the pinnacle of that was “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” where the tropes of queer sensibility were no longer for the self-empowering identification of queers, but became a sixth sense possessed by queers that had use value to a heteronormative, straight lifestyle. Everything gets turned on its head with time, right? Classic Marxist ideological inversion. Fucking always on cue.

Of course, all of this co-opting was the theme to my album as DJ Sprinkles, *Midtown 120 Blues*. Most people took it as my critique on newer producers and scenes, but it was more about selfcritique while making a house album in 2008, as well as a critique of the label Mule Musiq that was releasing the album - which I considered part of that larger problem of the house revival. The album was really about the pointlessness of making house music in 2008. But I think most people don’t get that layer of metacritique, because standard humanist methods of argumentation tend to invoke things like “singular truths of experience,” and “respecting narratives.” So I think a lot of people take it as a testimonial, despite the fact that I am absolutely not about singularity nor interested in respect.

And by extension, as you anticipated, I am also not interested in continuous vitality. In the case of house music, it is already over. In the liner notes to the house album preceding *Midtown 120 Blues*, K-S.H.E’s *Routes not Roots*, I referred to house dancefloors as “wakes in remembrance of a mythological era of openness that never was.” And before that, the cover to DJ Sprinkles’ *Bassline.89* read, “These are reconstructed memories of the sounds embraced by late ‘80s underground House culture.... Particularly among Latinos and African Americans.... Queer.... Tranny.... Fierce.... Ova.... Ovaplayed...? Quickly subjected to cultural decontextualization and commercialization.... A decade passes.... Now this.... Possibly an attempt to de-commodify a musical era.... Probably yet another form of communal exploitation.” And so forth. Re-appropriation has clearly always been a recurrent theme in my house productions, because they were all produced after 1992, so I was always producing from this notion that it was already over. I was collecting records and DJ-ing before then, but the productions all came later.

LE I wanted to examine more specifically about some of the pieces presented in *Reframed Positions*, I wanted to touch on *Lovebomb*, as the themes you addressed there maintains both a universal and timenessless (see what I did there) presence. This was the first work of yours that I experienced in a performative setting, with the conversation following the work. To this day, I maintain a strong connection to that piece. It was indeed a gateway for me and I can still appreciate the lateral threads you

weave together to attempt to comprehend the complexity that is loaded into such an overworked word as 'love.'

TT Well, I know that you know the major theme of the work is that love is not universal or timeless, but actually the way we conceptualize and express love is related to cultural and historical contexts, moralities, taboos, etc. And also that love is not a "cure" to hate, but actually a mechanism through which much violence is justified and enacted, ranging from domestic violence on the micro (or "private") level to religious terrorism on the macro (or "public") level. Remember the line about "a love song's persuasive image of universality is its greatest act of mentally invasive violence?" So I don't know why you would choose to conjure clichés of the "universal" or "timeless," instead of simply saying that you feel the piece continues to have cultural relevance after the passage of 17 years (which, actually, is not long at all).

But let's think this through. Let's think about how those terms are misleading, so that we can more consciously catch ourselves wanting to espouse them, and be more conscious of whether or not we want them to come out of our mouths if they are in fact guaranteed to lead us away from the actual topics at issue. I realize that sounds awful, almost like censorship. I don't mean like censoring oneself. To the contrary, I mean that using words like "universal" and "timeless" are in fact already censoring our abilities to analyze and express our experiences with the culturally minor. So I am actually speaking about the dilemma of how to deprogram that internalized self-censorship which alienates us from our material conditions.

Regarding "universality," this is really about acknowledging the capacity for a work to broach multiple contexts or cultures. Of course, as a result of globalization, most cultures have been inundated with Western - and particularly American Hollywood - media explaining what forms love assumes in late-phase capitalism. Families are nuclear, not extended. Love is a personal choice, and the free selection of a mate is a right. At the core of love is sexual expression. Therefore, love is at the core of sexual identity, and self-expression. We can trace these particular views to the cultural emergence of the petite bourgeoisie, and they are deeply rooted in humanist ideology. Of course, at the core of humanism is the notion of a shared, or "universal" human experience, so a humanist notion of love becomes one more aspect of "the universal." Meanwhile, there are countless cultures where these particular values around love are not a part of daily life, and do not fully resonate with local cultures, despite the concepts of Western humanist nuclearfamily identity-driven love being visible in movies, TV and other media.

So, if Lovebomb has the multi-cultural breadth you imply, I would locate it as emerging from these processes of globalization. You can say it is, ultimately, a colonial breadth. This is a radically different analysis than a claim to universal appeal. And it is actually an analysis that is rendered inconceivable if one goes with saying Lovebomb is tapped into the universal. The "universal" becomes an ideological device that, culturally speaking, tends to eradicate our capacity for conceiving of the culturally specific. So I know it would be polite of me to just roll with your word choices, but I think it's necessary to unpack this stuff for the readers. And maybe for you, too. [Laughs]

This is not about me being a PC word nazi. Fuck censorship. Fuck PC word nazis. There are no magic words that will suddenly bring about world piece or global consciousness. I am not talking about that bullshit. I am a tranny faggot talking about the struggle to become conscious of how the language of mainstream culture keeps us analytically numb. And it really is a struggle, like deprogramming from a cult. We are talking that level of difficulty when it comes to recognizing and rewiring our brains around language that betrays our intentions. This is a constant struggle. I am also struggling every day with this shit, too.

Next, let's talk about that term "timeless" (you tried a pun on "Soullessness," but even with that logic "timenessless" would imply an absence of belief in the functions of time, which is another way of saying "outside of time" or "timeless").

HALLE

LE Not exactly the read I had in mind there, but certainly one I can concede. [Laughs] How would you frame it up?

TT The lurking theme would be thematic longevity, right? I would say there are typically three ways that a work culturally lingers... no, four: misinterpretation, re-appropriation, discovery, and - lastly and least likely - in relation to producers intentions within their time and place of production. The first three also tend to rely on a belief in universality, to some degree at least. Misinterpretation is when a critical work is presented as being ideologically in alignment with those presenting it (such as a museum, gallery space or music festival). For example, the hypocrisy behind "political art" or projects that revolve around institutional critiques, yet are funded through the institutions they critique.

This is a common and unavoidable hypocrisy in my own work, for sure, and I always attempt to address it openly as an unavoidability of the marketplace. And addressing it does not mean I excuse it or explain it away. It means we are producing works in a state of compromise, to a degree that renders most of what we do pointless for my own interests. That trap of "critique affirming its object" thing I was talking about earlier. All of our critiquing ultimately does more to hype the benevolence and cultural openness of the rich assholes behind the institutions we critique. It's not even a zero-sum game. They win.

Next is re-appropriation, when someone takes something from another context and uses it in their own context in an unconsidered or unplanned way. The most obvious example of this would be "African Art" in museums. But on the culturally minor level, this can also be about sampling, culture-jamming, flipping power relations in mainstream media, etc. Think early Warhol, printing news paper photos and corporate logos. But then think about the Warhol Foundation suing you for reproducing one of his works. Again, we are quickly back to the trap of "critique affirming its object."

Discovery is when people come across something that was unknown in their community, and then they build a narrative of timelessness around it. Think Van Gogh or the countless other people whose works were posthumously hyped into goldmines. It's sad that a lot of die-hard artists work this into their formulation of self-worth. For example, think about how Nick Drake romanticized this process in his song "Lemon Tree," only to commit suicide a few years later, and then have his music explode decades later thanks to a Volkswagen TV commercial. This is also unappealing to me.

Last, and absolutely least likely, is the work having longevity because the cultural contexts which contributed to its meaning at the time of production have not really changed, or perhaps even escalated in ways that exacerbate the dynamics of those contexts. I could see how this also might apply to Lovebomb. First of all, not that much time has passed. Second, globalization is marching on unfettered. And third, along with that, liberal humanist models of Pride™ based sexual identities are also increasingly familiar.

So the problems that are discussed in the work have not at all disappeared from the Western cultural mainstream - also including for an Australian audience. But again, this articulation of something contextually or historically specific is immediately rendered unthinkable if we allow ourselves to use terms like "timeless." Like, I would suggest to people, even if they have to think of it as a game, just try to avoid those words and see what other words come out in their place. The same goes for "love." It will get your mind working in new ways.

LE For me, this is one of the most revealing and personal works you have completed. Partly I guess because you appear 'within' the work in a very direct way, which is in some respects the first time this occurs one of these works. The "AIDS Bucket" sequence still haunts me, as I recognised a version of you there in the piece that is yet to be realised as the you who created the piece. It got me to thinking about how it is memory functions in your work. I choose Lovebomb because of this sequence of you and also

the section of cut up materials from interviews of Hibakusha survivors of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima set against the repeated, stuttering birth of Astroboy. These past/future, lived/imagined juxtapositions trigger strong memory scapes for me. How is it you perceive memory operating in the work?

TT You're talking about the album's Japanese title track, "Ai No Bakudan," which is precisely about functions of memory. In particular, how our contemporary collective memory of nuclear holocaust survivors is one of loving sympathy - basically to the point of wondering how we could think of them in any other terms, right? But in fact, the survivors were forced to live through decades of medical neglect, social ostracism, difficulty finding housing or jobs, being feared as contaminants, etc.

Meanwhile, as the number of survivors still alive today is dwindling towards zero due to old age, our contemporary collective (false-)memory of love and concern stretching backwards through time becomes increasingly uncontested, until eventually all we are left with is a cruelly distorted fantasy of how we wish to remember our relationship to them, as opposed to a materially grounded record of the endless social abuses they suffered. More often than not, this is how I see memory functioning. Violently. Particularly on the level of mass communications, which always prioritize propaganda about our collective liberal humanist greatness.

The AIDS Bucket stuff is actually the English title track, "Lovebomb," and yes, it includes some embarrassing photos of me as a teen. That occurs in other projects as well, like the clip of me next to my grandma in "Rosary Novena for Gender Transitioning" from Soullessness. I think incorporating the awkward and embarrassing is one way of making my thematically heavy projects a touch less didactic. Like, showing that I'm not a know-it-all, and just another idiot on this shit planet. [Laughs] It's also about the shame and awkwardness of being queer. My aversion to Pride™ and constant invocation of closets is also about the problems of memory.

Like, what does it mean for us culturally when our current collective memory of closets insists they are only sites of shame and trauma, and must be abandoned for total visibility at all times, despite the fact that tactics of silence and secrecy are also how sexual and gender deviants have socially survived for millennia? Why do people who come out have to disavow their lives up to that point - such as having been heteromarrried with kids - as having been nothing but years of self-betrayal? It is a complete erasure of non-binary sexual complexity. You know, the cliché of a man leaving his wife and kids to come out in his 40's, being left with no cultural tools for recollecting or reconciling his sense of Gay sexuality other than to mentally leap backwards into tales of his sense of his "true gay nature" at the age of four or whatever?

That's the joke behind the talk show segment of Interstices, where it said: "coming up... People who still contend one's 'true nature' emerges naturally over time, mysteriously evolving backward until they have the age and wisdom to see the core of the essence from whence, they came." You know, that confusing way in which the life-changing act of coming out is ultimately always turned into a tale of having always been "this way." No room for complexity. Again, there is this way that memory reaches backwards to sweep over material conditions and validate our singular humanist identities through affect. Reality is not singular. I think we are all schizophrenic on some level.

I don't value life-arching stories. I value histories and connections, but not teleological arches. I don't have any memories that can comfort me as being a constant and reliable whole. And I don't need them. I prefer allowing memories to be all over the place, contradicting each other, diserving any singular model of self, and refuting any ability to claim consistency of ethics or outlook. I'd rather have such desires for continuity dismantled by my own memories. Memory is not to be trusted. It is one of the most easily manipulated and self-serving aspects of human thought. The distortions of memory are how we arrive at "truths," be they personal or public truths.

And truths are very different from facts. Facts are much, much more difficult to culturally preserve or carry forward, because the interpretation of facts constantly changes with time and context. Truths are the falsehoods that emerge out of our inability to hold onto facts.

LE So true...

TT What a rant. Well, that should give a bit of context for pretty much everything in this exhibition. [Laughs]

HALLE