

The genealogical origin of the use of the term 'queer' in queer theory is deeply connected to gay and lesbian US rights; however, as performance and queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz and others have powerfully argued, there is nothing necessarily queer, for example, about the fight for the right to marry.<sup>1</sup> Muñoz does not mean to imply it is not an important struggle, but that such pursuits can become normative, ironically exclusive, and can marginalize those that do not fit into a certain agenda

## Queer Alchemy

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of gay pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the stakes involved in the slippage in the usage of gay/lesbian and queer as interchangeable has never been more pronounced in academic scholarship. Whereas gay and lesbian might refer to an identity in a fixed time and space, queer is a doing or a practice that never quite settles; it is constantly in a state of flux.

Brice Brown's works are queer. They are unstable signifiers that exist in between here and there as well as now and then; and operate on a meta-level through the production of a palpable destabilizing affect. In the process, these works make felt the impossibility of the closure of identity, broadly construed. To be clear, there are no overt visual references to sexuality, race, gender, class, nationality, or any other singular identity category; instead, Brown explores the affective properties of identity—those that are felt and not necessarily seen by a disembodied eye.<sup>3</sup> His works privilege the moment of transformation between identities or states—usually of objects, which importantly are activated by the viewer.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that alchemy—the science of transformation of one state to another—loosely features as a point of departure in various ways in the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the exhibition title, HOMUNCULUS, tangentially refers to a vision the mystic Zosimos of Panopolis—the founding figure of alchemy—is reputed to have had around 300 AD. In his vision, he sees a vat of boiling water with a figure inside who says to him: “the sight you see is the entrance, and the exit, and the transformation.” This cryptic statement is uttered as this figure—who psychoanalyst Carl Jung believes is the first homunculus, or little man, in alchemical literature—consumes himself to become another, a more transcendent version of himself; but this is an unending process. In this way, the homunculus personifies transmutation.<sup>5</sup>

“Brazen man,” one of the homunculi Zosimos encounters in his vision, is the title of each archival pigment print in the exhibition. Each one is an amalgam of various 19th cen-

tury etchings of alchemical processes. From afar, the prints appear to be authentic and seamless etchings. Yet, randomly drawn pastel markings—hot pink, yellow, lavender and indigo, for example—that are visible upon closer inspection challenge—but do not necessarily completely break—this illusion. The barely perceptible traces that belie Brown's use of Photoshop to produce the works also undermine the illusion. As one moves throughout the gallery where the works are installed, they seem to slip and slide between being etchings and prints—forever in flux much like the homunculi. Moreover, the sub-title of each print is a folio number, but there is no referent for them in the real world; this only seems to further question our initial assumptions of what the work is and to push us to consider what the work *does* through our engagement with it.

The prints are installed around a table on which are displayed 27 turkey feathers cast in bronze. More than any other work in the exhibition, they conjure the stereotypical trope associated with alchemy: the transubstantiation of a common object into gold or another precious metal. Here, the feathers of a relatively unglamorous turkey have become precious metals—or at least look like they have. The fact that the titles of these works—such as “Ardent Desire Baby;” “Letter Lover;” and “Jealousy Merriment”—are randomly derived from a deck of tarot cards by the artist only seems to reinforce the occult-like nature of the alchemical process.

The sense of not being able to pin the works down—that deconstructive quality embedded in the notion of queer—binds the work together throughout the exhibition. In the second gallery are 12 glass casts of an antique English table modified by Brown. Each table is cast in a different color of glass—maroon, amber, cerulean blue, green tea, ruby red, etc. Brown has often used decorative art objects, such as this antique table, as a type of readymade. The parodic repetition of the 'original' seems to reinforce the notion that the original is nothing “other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and original.” Interestingly, the latter is philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler's observation regarding sexual identity. She writes that “gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy.”<sup>6</sup>

The installation, though, is neither an illustration of a theory—queer or otherwise—nor is it one that awaits completion by a theory. Brown's artistic practice is somewhere in between theory and practice. It materializes concepts, makes ideas and multiplies variations of meaning as it enfolds 'theory' with/in 'practice' in a vital, corporeal exchange with bodies

in the world. Alchemy has also been described as being somewhere between theory and practice.<sup>7</sup> That is, alchemists bridged the gap between philosophers interested only in the workings of the mind, and artisans who produced objects with their hands. Jung makes explicit connections between the work of alchemists and his own work as a psychoanalyst.<sup>8</sup> The form of Brown's work, then, is the engagement of the viewer with the work rather than the works themselves as disembodied objects.

It is useful to invoke what is known as the "homunculus fallacy."<sup>9</sup> First coined by British philosopher Anthony Kenny, it refers to a theorem of sorts that explains vision, or what we see, as being the interpretation of a "little man," living in our brain, who processes the visual world through images that enter our pupils as if they are scenes projected onto a movie screen. Yet, how can the homunculus see the images on our pupils? Presumably, he must in turn have his own homunculus and so forth. Though it is easy to dismiss the notion that there is a homunculus in our brains, American philosopher Daniel Dennett notes that attributions of psychological characteristics to the brain (as if distinct from the body to which it is attached) linger in neuroscience.<sup>10</sup> Brown's work rejects this deeply ingrained dualism that cleaves mind from body and world by keeping in tension what we think we see and do not see as being tied to what we feel.

Wallpapering the entirety of three of the gallery walls surrounding the aforementioned glass table casts is an invented landscape in the style associated with the Hudson River School, often described as America's first coherent art school. Key to the artists associated with this school was the depiction of the sublimity, or awesomeness, of nature; the paintings were

thought to be an agent of spiritual and moral transformation. Indeed, when medieval alchemist Albert Magnus wrote that alchemy is the art that most closely imitates nature, he is referring to its potential to reproduce the divine act of creation through experimentation.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, painting is alchemy.

Brown's mural, though, operates to disrupt or challenge the promise of getting closer to any kind of truth. That is, the pastiche of the mural and casts function together as part of a tableau to shore up each other's inauthenticity. In contradistinction to alchemists who attempted to speed up the processes of nature to produce other "natural" materials—usually more valuable—here, the pastiche accelerates the speed with which *artifice* becomes palpable. It is worthwhile to note that Butler—invoking pastiche as a metaphor for gender and sexual identity—writes "there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted aeffects."<sup>12</sup> Brown's works operate in just such an aesthetic.

His work may point to a much more phenomenological understanding of the world in which the identity of objects is deeply intertwined with those who view them; in other words, what is an object and subject is blurry at best. This kind of thinking breaks free from identity-based rhetoric that implicitly posits a stable coherent subject, and points to a much more complex, queer organization of the world between and among subjects, where a subject is as much an artwork as it is a person.

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#### NOTES

1 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009).

2 Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan mobilize the term homonormative to refer to politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them. In accordance with this new homonormativity, prominent lesbian and gay rights organizations increasingly embrace agendas that vie for acceptance within contemporary economic and political systems, thereby abandoning their earlier commitments to economic redistribution and protecting sexual freedoms. See their chapter "The New Homonormativity: the Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materiizing Democracy: Toward a Recitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and D. Nelson Dana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 173–194. More recently postcolonial studies and gender studies scholar Jasbir K. Puar coins the term "homonationalism" to describe how certain homosexuals (usually white, male, and upper class) are enfolded into the productive logic of the nation in the US while other others (usually female, of color, or middle-to-lower class) are not. See her ground breaking book *Terrortime: Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

3 These references, however, would be welcomed by the artist, and not out of the ordinary or entirely unrelated, as parts to a whole reading of the work, considering past overt 'gay' references in previous work. One example is *Q03*, 2010, a cast from a nineteenth-century side table in sterling silver. It is carved with abstract depictions recalling beard hair—a reference, according to the artist, to the subculture of hirsute gay men known as bears—which morph into decorative foliage and filigree. At the same time, even in the latter work, the work refuses to fix meaning.

4 In early modern Europe, alchemical theory spanned the arts and sciences; recent studies suggest it played an important role in the broader intellectual and cultural landscape of that time period. See Getty Research Institute, "Art of Alchemy," [http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/research\\_projects/art\\_alchemy/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/scholars/research_projects/art_alchemy/index.html) (accessed September 28, 2012). Of course, by the time of the Enlightenment, alchemy was considered a pseudoscience; and it is gener-

ally derided for the most part in contemporary culture.

5 There are a variety of definitions of the homunculus, perhaps the most popular being that it refers to a fully formed diminutive human that can be found in a sperm or egg or even in our brains as I discuss later. For the C. G. Jung reference, see his *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Volume 13, Alchemical Studies*, edited by Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler, and translated by R.E.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 61.

6 Emphasis in original. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 41.

7 See Getty Research Institute, "Alchemy," [http://www.getty.edu/research/special\\_collections/highlights/alchemy/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/highlights/alchemy/index.html).

8 Jung, op. cit., 89.

9 Anthony Kenny, "The Homunculus Fallacy" in *The Legacy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 125–136. Both Descartes and Plato believed the soul to be distinct from the body; interestingly, Aristotle did not. Cartesian French philosopher René Descartes wrote that "the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is." See his *Discourse of Method and the Meditations*, translated by John Veitch (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989), 31.

10 Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1991). Dennett has coined the phrase "Cartesian theater" to refer to the fallacious mythical center at which all things supposedly come together and consciousness occurs. See also Antonio R. Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York: Quill/Putnam/Berkeley Group, 2000. Damasio argues the central role of the body in cognition and emotion in both bodily and intellectual processes.

11 Getty Research Institute, "Alchemy," op. cit.

12 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146.