

Interview: Liz Clayton Scofield

(Uses pronouns they/them/they)

Liz Clayton Scofield and I met in 2008 when we were both working at The Curb Center for Art Enterprise & Public Policy at Vanderbilt University. We bonded immediately over our passion for art. Over the years we've remained close, getting together whenever they could visit Nashville from Bloomington where they were studying for their MFA at Indiana University. Our conversations frequently focus on our ideas about art and its discontents. Their approach to art is both challenging and approachable. While Liz's work reveals their personal anxieties and the broader power structures they experience, the humor that colors it allows us to relate to the humanity of the sometimes-awkward situations they create in their video and performance art.

You've mentioned that your identity and understanding of yourself as a trans queer artist is in flux. Does your artistic practice assist with processing and recording this personal exploration?

I think words sometimes have trouble capturing these conversations about identity. It's one of the beautiful things about it, as well as making it so fertile for art-doing.

It's not my transness that is in flux, but rather that my way of being trans is a process of always becoming. Queerness allows for fluidity of identity. When you think about what defines us openly and honestly, what we find is that our experiences of being are rarely so clear cut. My trans queerness is freedom to be and become, to express and experience myself, and to discover new ways of living, loving, and engaging with others and the world.

My art practice is how I attempt to understand what it is to be human, what it is to be me, and every other grandiose platitude I could proclaim, but also how I engage with the mundane, how to recognize the significance of small moments, ideas, fleeting observations. It's how I think and live. While I may draw from relevant scholars and theory, this line of thinking is what I come to understand about myself through my practice. Then the scholarship can back up my own findings.

I dedicate myself to approaching art-doing from a radically queer perspective. I think about trans as transformation, rather than the mainstream narrative of transition. It is the ongoing process of *making a body*, exploring the ever fluid changing self. I approach my practice with this perspective of transformation that opens up the potential for a spiritual practice of art. It is a process of self-discovery. What do I learn about myself? What is revealed? What does this look like as a practice of art?

The body, specifically your body, is the focal point of much of your video and performance art. In 2015 you introduced LiZes, toy figurines made in your likeness, which allowed your body

to be a physical object, a commodity to be bought, sold, played with, collected, and displayed. What is the significance of representing yourself as a mass-produced toy?

First: there is a history of feminist artists using the body in performance-based art. In the 1950s and 1960s, performance and video emerge as genres that open up art-making and -doing to individuals that previously may not have had as much access. A camera or a body allow infinite possibilities.

The body is an apt site for discussions of marginalization and identity because these issues are experienced by bodies. I collaborate with my body in an effort to understand and change my relationship to it (which can be difficult and stressful, re: gender dysphoria). We don't only think with our minds. We think, process, create with our bodies. How do I cognitively understand the beauty of laying on my studio's cold concrete floor and breathing? There's so much more to that experience than what my brain can rationally understand. Collaborating with my body allows me to understand it in new positive ways.

I made myself into a toy because toys are both joyful objects and tools of socialization. As children, we learn through play, especially about gender. Play is also an essential creative act.

The video *Melodrama* stars LiZes. As you play with the toys, putting them in group situations, engaging in relationships with themselves, and writing their thoughts on a tiny chalkboard, anxieties arise around having emotions, fitting in, and connecting with others. What is the line between you and your art?

There is no line. I'm permeable.

Your art draws awareness to issues of space. In *Safe Space* (2013) you move around a white room filled only with a typical black and white male/female bathroom sign and a box on the floor labeled safe. During the performance you unsuccessfully try to fit comfortably in the box. You moved more toward activism with the LiZ stickers, in that people can place them throughout their community to broaden the incidence of encountering someone who looks like you.

I'm actually moving away from activism! I draw from activist strategies, i.e. using "protest" signs, stickers, and social media campaigns. The stickers are inspired by activist techniques, but aren't meant to be representative of the direct, vigorous campaigning characteristic of activism. In fact, they describe capitalist branding and marketing as much as they do activism. I'm interested in critiquing both, and these intersections in strategy are fertile ground for that.

I was uncomfortable in an activist practice because the outcome of my work depended on the reception of it. Making work for a particular audience in an effort to

change something — there is a power dynamic in activist work. Activism is essential! But I'm an artist, and I want to be free to do what I need to do regardless of outcome. The pants just don't fit me.

How is space significant in your work?

If bodies are important, space is important because we exist in bodies and bodies exist in space. Space is where our bodies interact with each other. It's also within space where we experience marginalization, alienation, discomfort, etc. Just as we've created strict categories to classify bodies, we've done the same with spaces: Bathrooms, galleries, roads, malls, classrooms, bars, junkyards, churches, nude beaches, the houses we grew up in — we learn how to act in these spaces. What happens when we break the rules?

Your performance art often includes endurance tests that are both painful and humorous. You've challenged yourself to eat 50 eggs (*NOBODY CAN EAT 50 EGGS*, 2014), repeatedly run into a closed door (*Nature of Codependency*, 2013), agonizingly pushed against a wall (*One Man Band Stand*, 2014), and forced yourself to stand and smile for 60 minutes straight (*How to Smile in 34 Steps*, 2013). Does the humor and absurdity of these situations mitigate your own physical and emotional pain?

Physical? No. Emotional? Probably. Humor is often cited as a coping mechanism. Like court jesters, you can get away with more with comedic delivery. But let's get real: it is a tough fight everyday just to be who you are. Humor is a survival technique. It is also a subversive political act; it can disrupt power dynamics. It's very queer in that way. You access a subversive power and freedom through comedy that makes it a fertile strategy for social and cultural critique.

How do viewers react in these uncomfortable situations?

I attempt to engage people in a performance so that they aren't passive spectators, but rather active participants. A performance can foster exchange and empathy. I pose a situation; together, we engage with the uncertainty of what will happen. We navigate the discomfort. We react individually but are united by this experience we shared.

Are there particular artists and writers you could point to as conceptual foundations to support art?

Jose Munoz, Jack Halberstam, Allan Kaprow, Kathi Weeks, Guerrilla Girls, Maggie Nelson: *The Argonauts*, David Robbins: *Concrete Comedy*, *Art Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor, and Economics*, "Debatable" an episode of Radiolab, *That's Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*, feminism, femininity, feminism, feminism, beautiful queers all over the world. Free Kesha. Cats. My bike, coffee, and cut-off shorts. Conversation, conversation, collaboration!!

Collaboration is key! Why do we think we know things?! We don't! Working with others challenges the things we think we know. I love my collaborators! Shout out to Cassie Harner and Patrick Stefaniak of HSSaLPaCaHSS, Katelyn Greenberg of artpee, and Emily Weihing of My Cup Overflows.

In your queer art manifesto, "Towards art in an imaginary future" you list 32 statements outlining what you believe a new queer art could be. At whom are you directing your manifesto?

I think a lot about queer ethics of art-making/doing. This manifesto is an attempt at concisely expressing what that ethic could look like. It is intended as a rejection of traditional heteronormative notions of what art is and artists are. It is a call to arms for queer artists to create our own models and approaches to art that are decidedly queer. We have a history of creating and imagining our own models for living, rejecting linear and conventional notions of time, space, family, economic practices, productivity. We can use our imagination now to build our own art world. Btw, hey, y'all are lookin' totally hot.

You open your manifesto with a quotation by Jose Munoz: "Queerness is not here yet. Queerness is an identity. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality." Do you believe we are currently on course for a queer future? What role does your art play in the trajectory?

There will always be work to do. We will not arrive. We create communities and collaborations and glimpses of the future we would like to see. Although we'll never

get there, anything is possible. It allows joyful optimism and hope in a world that is not for you.

How do you think your work fits with the larger conversation of queer art and trans identity?

We're on the dance floor, showin' off our moves, coming together for a chorus maybe. I'm jumpin' up and down, singing along, and sweating because we're bodies that can do this and we can do it together. I've got all the love for you, so won't you join me and dance dance dance?

You don't "believe in determining self-value through accomplishments" but we all know that academic and commercial art markets determine value through quantity and quality of professional achievements. How do you reconcile your personal motivations with public expectations?

Simply, I don't.

To be queer is to fail social expectations and standards. I embrace failure in the possibility, freedom, and potential it allows. The academic and commercial art worlds are hardly progressive. Representation or so-called diversity functions to use token individuals to score funding, create a veneer of progress, or, maybe most dangerously, convince us that we aren't doing that bad after all. If we're looking at those models, "success" would mean sacrificing my own politics and identity in order to assimilate, or play nice, within the institution. We need those people who are inside like covert agents pushing at those walls or slowly chipping them away with a toothbrush. I don't think that's me.

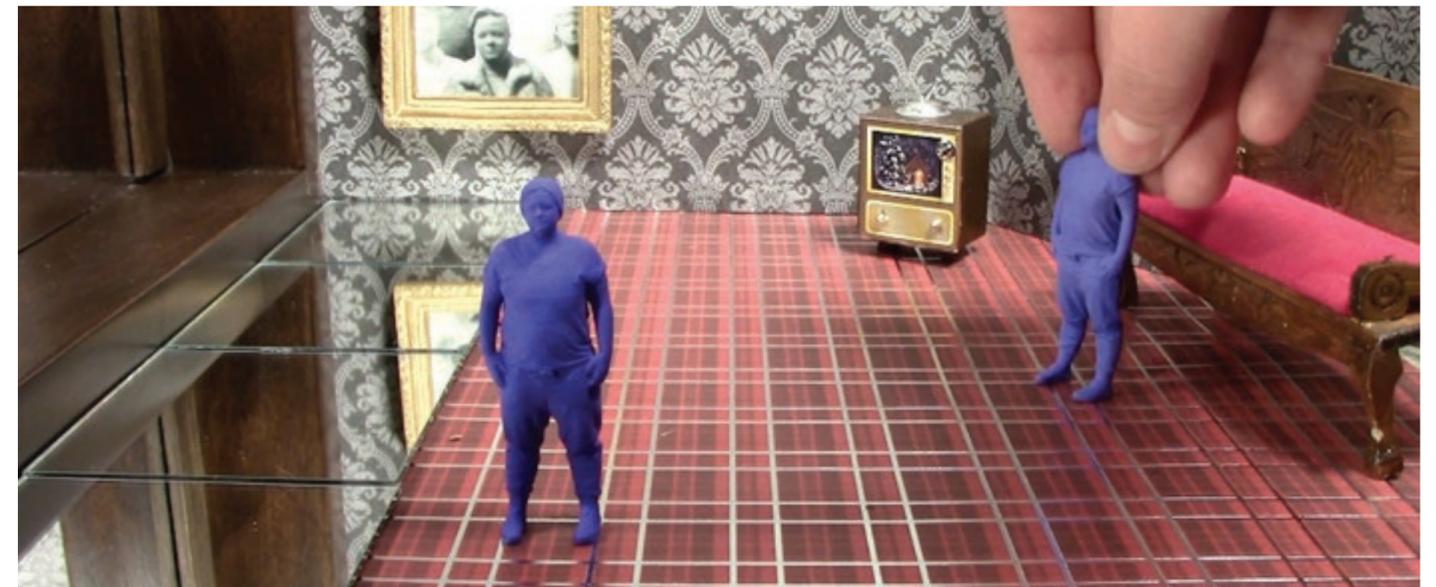
We're all valuable. If we, as queer artists, depend on external validation from those institutionalized art worlds, I fear our work would cease to be very queer. And why should we be trying to place ourselves in the

dominant heteronormative conversation?

Having recently completed your MFA at Indiana University, what recommendations do you have for artists considering entering an academic program?

When you finish, find a great therapist who can help you recover and learn how to manage creative anxiety. Try to maintain perspective. It will be difficult. Your faculty might not know what queer means, that being trans doesn't require surgeries, or that you aren't in fact a woman. You're still gonna learn a whole helluvalot, push yourself in ways you hadn't previously imagined, and meet beautiful people (collaborators!). It's an incredible opportunity, as long as you, one, don't go into (very much) debt to do it and, two, don't have expectations of any outcome on the other end other than growing and developing your studio practice and thinking. (Jobs?! Pfft.) Oh, and three, realize on the other end you've still got a ton of work to do in figuring out, okay, well, how do I keep doing this but in a healthier, more sustainable, long-term way?

ARTIST STATEMENT: I don't attempt to offer solutions, answers, or plans for progress, but I do document the continuing exploration of my own identity; an ever-shifting understanding of myself, my body, and my identity; and a genuine hope that if we just keep pushing, maybe some walls will fall down, some things will change, and we may just have a brighter future after all. If we maintain a vivid imagination, a refusal to accept what is handed to us, and an ability to see beyond our current situation, then anything is possible.



Clayton Scofield, *A True Love Story, However Brief, Simple, and Imaginary*, 2016, Video still 3:00.

Sara Lee Burd works as an independent writer, consultant, and curator.