

Open Spaces

by Erica Ciccarone

Liz Clayton Scofield is a queer trans artist born in West Tennessee who uses performance, video, and sound to explore and critique gender constructs. Scofield, whose pronouns are they/them/their, creates performances that subject their body — and social norms — to inquiry, often by enduring great discomfort.

Scofield and I talked about performance, community, and their manifesto for queer art. My profile of them is in the February 2016 print issue of NAM. Here is the full interview.



Nobody Can Eat 50 Eggs, 2014, Video stills from performance video, 42:22



Nobody Can Eat 50 Eggs, 2014, Video stills from performance video, 42:22

What language should I use to describe your gender?

Queer trans is what I've been using most currently. I've been trying to leave it open as much as possible as it is always shifting. The open-endedness and ever-shiftingness is at the core of my work, so feel free, even encouraged to include.

Geographical stuff: Where are you from originally? Where have you been since graduating from Vanderbilt in 2010? Any plans to come back to Nashville?

I am currently teaching at [Indiana University \(https://www.indiana.edu/\)](https://www.indiana.edu/), Bloomington. I earned my MFA from there in the spring and am now completing a year-long adjunct appointment. During school, returning to Nashville was always a cloud of hope I hung on to while trudging through. It still exists as a possibility when I need hope and want to feel connection to a home sort of base. Although for now, I think my next move will be going somewhere unfamiliar, to challenge, change, and grow my work and self. I will always keep Nashville close. Many, many, many trips to town. Originally, I'm from West Tennessee, the small town of Dyersburg.

Why do you feel drawn to the subject of performing gender, specifically masculinity?

Sometimes, people who only refer to me as female with female pronouns, who then I assume only see me as female, would refer to my performance characters in the masculine, viewing them as male.

In a large way, these performances came from me accepting and beginning to unpack my trans identity and the anxiety that came with that. The transnormative narrative is, wrong body, transition, move to the other side of the binary. Hours and hours spent thinking, is that what I want? To transition, to live and be recognized as male? If I am not this, must I be that? Where I arrive is a place where I can identify as trans somewhere in the wishy-washy in-between, refusing to identify beyond trans or queer but allowing myself to move and experiment along the spectrum of gender. These performances of masculinity express my struggle to be read as trans despite constantly being checked off the box as female by most people in my life. Of course, in my work, I'm drawing from my personal experiences to create narratives that may relate to larger audiences. On the subject of performing gender, my experience as a trans person really highlights those performances so that I'm almost constantly aware of how these performances play out in everyday life. This is not at all to say I experience them because I'm trans. We're all performing gender all the time. These performances become so embedded that we start to think they're natural. My mom says women are more likely to poison someone as a way to kill because women are less aggressive. Women aren't less aggressive, but many women are trained to be less aggressive: "be lady-like, be sweet, don't be a bitch, smile!" These are not bad things to be if you decide to be them, but you should have access to the full range of possibility and not be funneled into a socially acceptable role to perform.

I really admire your proposal for a queer art on your website. It reads like a manifesto. How did you arrive at this?

It is a manifesto!! I did write it as such. It is an artist statement written in the form of a manifesto. I am (as you see) generally not so concise a writer. One of the questions I'm working on in my practice is developing a queer method of production, so that the queerness of the work isn't in *content* but in *process*. Production raises a slew of issues for me in a sense of queer ethics. So much of artistic language and practice is wrapped up in capitalistic ritual, production, and values. How do you embody queer principles as a maker or artist? This manifesto is a document proposing a sort of queer ethics of art-making/doing. It is a very condensed document of principles I've developed over the years in my approach to my practice. The beautiful thing is that contradiction is embedded in the rules of it all, through its very queerness.

I do hope for a rise of a queer art that doesn't concern itself first with narrative. That is, telling the story of "the" queer experience tailored for a predominantly heteronormative audience. That doesn't at all disrupt the power dynamics already at play. What I hope for is an anti-assimilationist, dirty, never finished, violent and playful, loving and feeling, heart-on-its-sleeve, rebellious queer art, or you know, a quiet, reserved, covert queer art, but at the heart of it is a "screw you" and a hug.

Your M.F.A. thesis show included hundreds of action figures of yourself called LiZes. Any future plans for the LiZes?

The LiZes are currently in Detroit, so it's the longest we've been separated! But yes, the LiZes and I do have plans for future collaborations, including another short film (tentatively "A Tragicomedy") as well as a line of motivational? posters, crayons, and possibly sequels to the highly acclaimed "Playing with LiZ: The Activity Book!". It's also coming up on their first birthday, so I would like to have a birthday shindig celebration for them. Tiny cakes abound! And very excitingly, they will be coming to Nashville June 21-25 for Modular Art Pods as Oz Arts.

Have you found community of non-gender performing artists in Nashville? In Bloomington? Elsewhere? Feel free to tell me about specific exhibitions or collaborations here.

Well, there is my identity as an artist and my identity as trans and queer. I've heard it said that these communities all too often act like oil and water. There is the queer community, and there is the arts community. This is a problem. I reach out to artists elsewhere, and luckily have found artists who have been supportive of my practice and me, and willing to help me out along the way. I don't think we have the privilege of having a geographically based community. It takes digging, reaching out, speaking up, and being vulnerable across space and time to build this sort of community. I'm speaking as someone who has only been based in off-center cities (Nashville, yes, you, and Bloomington out there in the Midwest). This could be an entirely different experience for someone in a more center place. Although I don't buy into the myth of urban glory.

I think part of it, honestly, is this: http://www.temporaryservices.org/against_competition_mf.pdf (http://www.temporaryservices.org/against_competition_mf.pdf)

Instead of supporting other people working in this realm, we get competitive. This is totally counter to the aforementioned queer ethic. Our success doesn't depend on someone else's failure. Our success could very much be supporting others or working with others to arrive at ideas we wouldn't have had on our own. OR radically, our success may even be failure or something that we don't immediately recognize as success at all.

All that to say, community is so important and we should build this. I have recently started a new collaborative project with Katelyn Greenberg, an MFA student in sculpture at Indiana University. Our first experiment, art pee, involved fielding questions, compiling them into a tiny booklet, and then creating a space where people could ask and answer these questions. That space was broadcast live online. One aspect of this project is concerned with community, conversation, and vulnerability. We will see what happens as we move forward with more experiments!

Another thing happening is a show in Detroit called CROTCH: Contested Territory. The thing about being included in a show like this is your work may be in conversation with a very relevant group of artists, but you probably aren't! Meaning for the most part, I won't meet or discuss with these other artists included in the show. This was a fabulously curated show, bringing together a group of artists investigating shifting gender roles and understandings, from a wide range of perspectives.

That being said, if you're an artist interested in these ideas and work, call me up. Let's have coffee. Let's talk about what we can do or what's happening or just talk about something that's exciting you. This is where it starts.

Your performances wonderfully force us to acknowledge your visibility and your wholeness. My first experience with your work was at Ground Floor. As my partner and I built a structure for a performance we would do later, your video was playing on a loop, so I was constantly aware of the violence you were enacting upon yourself. Why do you enact pain and discomfort in your work?

It's a bit slapstick and a bit tragic. That particular performance, "The Nature of Codependency," is edited down to about a three-minute loop. I shot for over an hour, meaning I rammed myself into a door full force no hesitation for over an hour. Real bruises.

For me, so much of everyday life is violent. Gendered expectations are violent. Enacting violence on myself allowed me to physically manifest and represent that violence. It also takes away some of the power of that violence. I can own the violence. I can act it upon myself. I can make it funny. I can take away its power. It is mine. It is my experience.

How does it feel to put yourself on the line in your performances? Feel free to use a specific example.

I didn't want to eat fifty eggs. I didn't want to attempt it. I especially didn't want to attempt it twice. *But I had to.* I knew it would be awful. Once deciding to do it, though, there was no question. When it's for the work, it becomes easy. I'm referring to "NOBODY CAN EAT 50 EGGS," in which I reenact the famous scene from Cool Hand Luke. It's just about being 100 percent whole-heartedly dedicated to the work and what it needs. I'm typically pretty private about a lot of things, but when it comes to being vulnerable for the work, I am in the work.

In a completely different way, in terms of struggling against my body in terms of transness, I was able to work with it in these performances to understand it differently. Yes, I was expressing violence against it, but in many ways, I was testing it. How could I change my relationship to my body? I could use it as a tool, a collaborator, a medium, an object. In many ways, a readymade. A site. This is part of the line of thinking that led me to create myself into an object as the LiZes. To take that violence to the extreme self-objectification, to again redefine that and take ownership of my own object hood and tokenization as the trans queer in the conversation. How I had violently subjected myself to that tokenization.

What do you hope that viewers and participants walk away with after experiencing your work?

Cheating and pulling from a recent version of an artist's 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. And we must embody all that possibility now, in what's past, and toward the future, cuz IN IMAGINING UTOPIAS, WE EXERCISE A CREATIVE ABILITY TO RADICALLY REIMAGINE OUR LIVES AND WORLDS, SO THAT THE FUTURE IS OUR PRESENT AND OUR FUTURE AND NONEXISTENT JUST LIKE US.


What's next on your horizon?

I have been a step back from my practice, working on myself in order to dive back in with some renewed perspective and energy. I am feeling ready to take that dive, to push the work forward and feel okay on some unsteady ground with new experiments. As mentioned, I've recently begun a so-far fruitful, exciting, and energizing collaboration. I'm looking forward to being back in Nashville for [Modular Art Pods at Oz Arts \(http://www.ozartsnashville.org/tnt-modular-art-pods/\)](http://www.ozartsnashville.org/tnt-modular-art-pods/) this summer. I'm looking forward to adventures in community-building and beautiful conversations that last all night.


To learn more about Scofield and read their manifesto of a queer art, visit www.lizclaytonscotland.com (http://visit www.lizclaytonscotland.com). Read the complete version of this story at www.nashvillearts.com (http://www.nashvillearts.com)

Erica Ciccarone is an independent writer. She holds an M.F.A. from the New School in Creative Writing. She blogs about art at nycnash.com (http://nycnash.com).

 <http://www.facebook.com/share.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fnashvillearts.com%2Fsocially-engaged-art-liz-clayton-scofield-unpacks-trans-identity-performance%2F&t=Socially%20Engaged%20Art%20Liz%20Clayton%20Scofield%20Unpacks%20Trans%20Identity%20through%20Performance>

 <http://twitter.com/share?url=http%3A%2F%2Fnashvillearts.com%2Fsocially-engaged-art-liz-clayton-scofield-unpacks-trans-identity-performance%2F&t=Socially%20Engaged%20Art%20Liz%20Clayton%20Scofield%20Unpacks%20Trans%20Identity%20through%20Performance&url=http%3A%2F%2Fnashvillearts.com%2Fsocially-engaged-art-liz-clayton-scofield-unpacks-trans-identity-performance%2F&t=Socially%20Engaged%20Art%20Liz%20Clayton%20Scofield%20Unpacks%20Trans%20Identity%20through%20Performance>

 <https://plus.google.com/share?url=http%3A%2F%2Fnashvillearts.com%2Fsocially-engaged-art-liz-clayton-scofield-unpacks-trans-identity-performance%2F&t=Socially%20Engaged%20Art%20Liz%20Clayton%20Scofield%20Unpacks%20Trans%20Identity%20through%20Performance>



Comments
0 comments