

1. Gavin Butt, "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism", in G. Butt (ed.), *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 5.



2. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 7.

The first time I met Gavin Butt was during an exceptionally boring lecture at the Performance Studies international (PSi) conference in Copenhagen in August 2008. Not knowing the guy next to me, I could tell by our exchange of glances that we were both getting restless, thinking of ways to leave the room unnoticed. But sitting in the middle of a row in the auditorium, we stayed put. When the lecture was over, I saw from his name tag that it was Gavin Butt. Quite a coincidence, as I had arranged to meet him the next day for an interview on his current project on queer seriousness in contemporary art and performance. And what could be a better starting point for our conversation on how to make theorizing more fun?

As an art historian, Gavin Butt is known for his paradoxical way of working. Not because he is foolish or self-contradictory, but because of his long-term engagement in working against or beside (para) the doxa of received wisdom.¹ In his 2005 book *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963*, he flirts with the danger of not being taken seriously by taking gossip about artists' homosexuality as his object of study. Through bold and original readings of artists such as Larry Rivers, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Johns, he demonstrates that trivial and fierce gossip on homosexuality shaped these artists' lives, as well as their work and its reception. Butt points out that there is a connection between interpretive desire and curiosity in gossip and art historical analyses, and argues for a more expansive understanding on art historical facts and evidence. Reminding us that gossip doesn't need to be true to have impact, Butt demonstrates the powerful function of uncertainty when approaching questions on art and sexuality.² *Between You and Me* not only shows that gossip is form of knowledge relevant to art history, it also pushes the boundaries of academic writing by giving the desiring body of the art historian a central position.

Gavin Butt's interest in rethinking the traditional criteria by which evaluations are made, is especially evident in the much-praised anthology he edited in 2004, *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*. Here, as in his more recent writings on cultural seriousness, he works to develop new concepts and modes for addressing the relationships between art, politics, and sexuality. In his new, ongoing project with the working title *Are You Serious? Flirtatious Acts in Contemporary Art and Performance* he plays out the cooperative and collaborative aspects of criticism, joining forces with performers and artists in disturbing and expanding our relationships with art and politics.

MD In your keynote lecture here at the PSi-conference, "Should we take Performance Seriously?", you made an argument for the value of non-serious forms of cultural consumption through a discussion of the London-based Jewish performance artist Oreet Ashery's witty and sharp work on religion and sexuality in contemporary politics. How does this new project relate to your previous work? I'm thinking of the afterword of *Between You and Me*, for instance, where you consider briefly the ways in which that project flirted with questions of seriousness.

GB My new project is very much a follow up on the previous work. One of the things that I became conscious of, towards the end of working on *Between You and Me*, was that the project had actually been more or less a sustained inquiry into modes of cultural seriousness, without me really realizing it at the time. That's why it only becomes explicitly thematized in the afterword to the project. So it did point towards future possible avenues of enquiry and research, which is precisely what I have taken up with the new emerging project with a queer take on cultural seriousness.

This new research has been progressing in a very ad hoc, perhaps even slightly arbitrary way, as I have begun to collect a set of responses to cultural artifacts: whether it be art works, for instance the paintings of the late American artist Joe Brainard or whether it be the indeterminate spectatorial responses to contemporary queer performance, by artists like the American cabaret duo Kiki and Herb (a.k.a. Justin Bond and Kenny Mellman), Oreet Ashery, and David Hoyle from the UK.



Joe Brainard, *Blossom*, 1977. Mixed media collage, 81 x 133 cm.
Photo: joebrainar.org.



Oreet Ashery's re-embodiment of the 17th century false messiah Shabtai Zvi in her performance *The Saint/s of Whitstable*, 2008. Photo: Oreet Ashery.

This work has begun to comprise a non-serious archive of queer visual arts and performance, through which something interesting is taking place about the ways in which we consume and come to value cultural artifacts. It is a queer project, which explores the ways we go about attributing value to things. I'm interested in how we habitually – almost ritualistically – contribute value to something in cultural terms by being serious about it. It might be that we do that in terms of writing a scholarly, analytical study of something; it might be that we spend time and effort in reading a work or engaging with it – but we do that almost without thinking. This is what I have called a Foucauldian technology of serious value, that not only produces the objects we take to be worthy of serious attention, but that also posits the appropriate attitudes we should adopt in addressing them.

I'm interested in how we might think or theorize value otherwise, finding other models of attributing value to something, and ways to appreciate things without taking them seriously as such. So the project is about paying heed to the ways in which we value things idly, lightly, outside serious contexts, addressing uneasy relationships to serious forms of attention and culture. It's quite a broad project in its scope, but at the same time I'm trying to locate moments where our implication in serious culture and our own seriousness is troubled by engagements with queer art and performance.

Flirtatious research

MD In your writings so far on cultural seriousness, you have introduced different forms of what we might term queer methodologies. In the article “Scholarly Flirtations” (2006) you argue for instance that undertaking a flirtatious approach to the objects of study might be a way of resisting the reiteration of the norms of “proper” art historical studies. How did this wonderful notion of flirting as an academic practice come about?

GB It came about through the art historian Carol Mavor. Reading my manuscript for *Between You and Me*, she suggested that what I was doing in approaching gossip, not only as subject of an art historical study, but also as a kind of method for an art historical analysis, was to be seen as adopting a flirtatious methodology. That interested me, also because of the ways that Adam Phillips has written about flirtation, not as an absolute Other to serious commitment, but as a way of relating to it.⁴ It is a way of entertaining seriousness, but without being committed to it: Entering into a relationship with it, but without being made subject to it. Thinking of the flirtatious as a curious, or you might say queer, relationship to the serious is something that I find very intriguing. Flirtation is often dismissed as being either a harmless or harmful activity, and it is interesting that it is often seen as being almost both of these things at the same time. It says a lot about the denigrated status that accrues to the behavior of the flirt. I am interested in how such discredited or even morally disapproved behaviors can be seen as models for how a queer scholar might act in writing and researching. Flirtation is only one such model for thinking perverse ways of doing queer research.

The founder of Theatre of the Ridiculous, Charles Ludlam, has an interesting quote in this regard. He says in an interview from 1978:

Now the whole idea of seriousness is awful to me – it sounds like something imposed from without. It doesn't really imply gravity or profundity; it implies decorum, behaving yourself, and that's what I don't like about it.⁵

The performer and writer Matthew Goulsh pointed out an important distinction for me in this quotation, because what is so interesting about it is that Ludlam splits apart seriousness from gravity and importance. I think that is great, because it allows me to think that one can lay claim to importance, to matters grave, without necessarily being serious. So one can recognize the value and importance of something without having to do it in the terms of serious culture. I think that was what Ludlam was getting at. That's actually what I'm trying to do, and that is part of the queerness of the project.

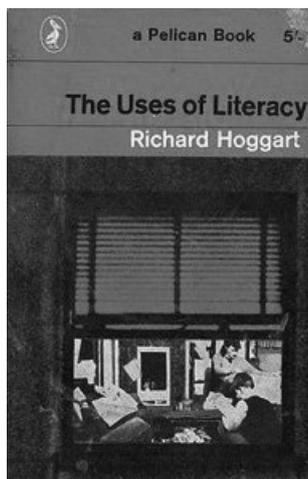
But interestingly, there is also a strong autobiographical dimension to the project as it is emerging. It has to do with modes of cultural consumption that relate to social class. I was brought up in Derbyshire, in the English East Midlands, in a working class family, without any high form of culture whatsoever. There was no context of cultural seriousness into which I was schooled. There was no familiar appreciation of high art or music. My formative culture was a televisual culture – mass culture. The terms upon which that mass culture became important

4. Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994).



From Charles Ludlam's play *Conquest of the Universe*, 1967. Photo: nyu.edu.

5. Gautam Dasgupta, “Interview: Charles Ludlam,” in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 3, No 1 (Spring – Summer 1978), p. 72.



6. Gavin Butt, "Joe Brainard's Queer Seriousness, or, How to Make Fun Out of the Avant-Garde" in David Hopkins (ed.), *Neo-Avant-Garde* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2006), pp. 277-297.

to me had nothing to do with serious, bourgeois forms of standards and evaluation. This is something that goes right back to the one of the founding texts of modern cultural studies, the work of Richard Hoggart and his book *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* from 1957. In many ways it was a paradigm-establishing text that explored the ways in which popular fiction, pulp novels etc., came to be important within working class cultures. It is a key study because he looks at how working class families didn't take these things seriously in ascribing them value and currency within working class communities. His book is very much styled, as he said in interviews, as a critique of studies like Queenie D. Leavis' *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). Leavis really takes the mass readership to task for its unserious pleasures and interest in popular, serialized fiction, and sensationalized forms, and she is very judgmental and moralizing about the poor reading pleasures of the masses. Hoggart quite rightly takes issue with that, and he is at pains to point out the different economies of value, that is, the different ways in which literature has a currency in working class culture. This takes us very far from serious being the only barometer by which we assess value and importance.

So the project has an autobiographical dimension, and it has started to move me toward not only the context of contemporary queer studies, visual culture, and performance studies, but also into the broader field of cultural studies as I think about popular pleasures and mass pleasures and the ways in which they are dismissed as being facile. I'm probably drawn to the facile, the low and the flighty, because I'm interested in dwelling in levity as a way of cultural engagement.

MD I'm interested in this exploration of different "perverse" forms of valuation. In your text "Joe Brainard's Queer Seriousness, or, How to Make Fun Out of the Avant-Garde" (2006) you touch upon the danger of recuperation in this process: when elevating the non-serious into the realm of the serious by giving it scholarly attention, the structure that created the divide between the serious and non-serious in the first place is left untouched.⁶ How are we to keep such other modes of valuation critical and "perverse"?

GB That is the \$64,000 question. It is a question to which I don't have any ready answers, because I'm in the process of trying to work that out as I progress with this project. I can begin by talking about the dangers that you elude to – the dangers of betraying a perverse mode of valorization. The project *could* be seen as a project of revalorization, looking at de-legitimated ways of accessing culture and entertaining an object, and looking at those ways *again*, saying that these idle, or flip, or trivial modes of engagement might actually be worthy of more attention and consideration. But the minute you begin to suggest that we need to re-look at our relationship to these things, there is the danger – especially within the context of a scholarly project – to say that these things are important and therefore worthy of serious attention. But then you end up re-subordinating queer pleasures to a normative kind of seriousness. In the Brainard text I discuss this in terms of the ways in which the campiness and gossipy nature of Frank O'Hara's poetry is revalorized by someone like Allen Ginsberg as important rather than superficial because it demonstrates O'Hara's ear for "deep gossip" on common humanity. That really seemed to crystallize the problem for me in terms of queer valorization, because Ginsberg returns O'Hara's poetry to a stereotypical construction of deep seriousness in order to positively valorize it. As if gossip can only be reclaimed if it is *deep* – deeply important. The perversity of my project is in trying to *resist* the deep, and deeply important, constructs of meaning and value. *How* we do that is difficult.

Lately, I deliberately – and to some degree repetitively – have attempted do undermine my own seriousness and the seriousness that accrues to scholarship by being flip or campy, and by offering propositions that are slightly dubious, or very playful, in terms of "queer seriousness" as a concept. That is one way which I'm trying to resist the serious, introducing into my work some level of playfulness which works to undercut the project, or – perhaps better still – to do the work of the project.

Queering up academic writing

MD This interest in dubious and playful propositions, reminded me of your last chapter of *Between You and Me*. In this text on Jasper Johns's painting *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), something happens in your style of writing. While your tone in the book is witty and sharp in general, this chapter includes fictional passages, as



Jasper Johns, *Target with Plastic Casts*, 1955. Encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 195 x 112 cm. Photo: Artchive.



The Divine David from *Divide David on Ice*, 2000. Photo: Duckie.



Poster from David Hoyle's *Magazine*
– a performance periodical, 2008.
Photo: Duckie.

well as a staging of your sexual desires and projections in interpreting this work. Your reading of the empty blue compartment in Johns' painting as an anus, while describing your own interest in male bodies and anuses, is a risky thing to do in the context of a scholarly text. This chapter is not only unexpected and fun, but it also is important in pointing out the ways in which projections of desire are central for art historical interpretations, even though this seldom is recognized or discussed. Will you continue to write experimentally in your new project?

GB I hope so. The project is not fully realized yet, and I'm currently at the stage where I'm not quite sure what form it will take. I'm heartened to hear your reception of the latter parts of *Between You and Me*, as it is precisely the way in which I was thinking it might work, as a kind of hyperbolization of how art history is habitually done: Taking it to the nth degree in order to really overplay it, to the point where it almost becomes impossible to take it seriously. But I hopefully didn't play it so far that one could just simply dismiss it. I left the reader with the projections that I had staged, whilst not letting him/her be quite sure how to take them. That is very difficult to do in terms of the performativity of writing a piece of scholarship. Particularly difficult because scholarly work is perhaps the most preeminent mode of writing seriously – it is a focused form of reflective activity: You spend a lot of time doing it, researching for it, thinking about it, writing it. Theorizing is such a serious business. To some large degree I am embedded in that serious machine. After going through my education, and the projects and writing that I have done, there is a level at which I become a subject of that serious scholarly machine. The question then is, what room is there for negotiation or movement? The answer to that may reside in thinking of genres of writing other than the scholarly monograph. This new project might be better served were it to exist in some kind of difficult or tangential relationship to the more strictly defined scholarly piece of work. For instance it might turn out to be a more "creative" project, or it might involve active dialogues with some of the artists, which might take on an explicit performative dimension, as in my forthcoming collaboration with David Hoyle.

David Hoyle may not be well known outside of the UK. But he is a really interesting contemporary queer performer based in Manchester who was formally known by his performance alter ego The Divine David. He was infamous on the queer performance circuits in London and even more broadly in the 1990s. He finally lay The Divine David persona to rest in 2000 and took a performance sabbatical for five or six years, and returned as David Hoyle performing under his own name. I have been looking at his recent shows at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in London called *Magazine*, which adopt the format of the magazine in so far as each weeks show is a different issue, focusing on a different subject, whether it be war, or spirituality, or keeping fit, or whatever it might be. It is a kind of performance periodical. There are various parts that comprise it. Part of it is stand up comedy, part of it is a weekly interview – usually of somebody who is an expert on that weeks subject – but it also includes live painting, performance of so-called "abstract shapes", which is a kind of piss-take on modern dance, and so on. There are many different components to his work.

In the development of my work on David Hoyle I engage in a dialogical project with him, though is in unclear what the outcome of that may be. So the form of my project is an interesting and open question for me at the moment, and maybe to some degree that is the best thing about it. It should remain a problem that the reader has to deal with: How to take this thing? Therein resides the power of ones methodology, that it should work with the whole apparatus of scholarly research both creatively and critically, and trouble it in some more productive kind of way.

Embracing a trashy ethic

MD Your new project raises not only issues of politics within academia and contemporary culture, but also questions of ethics. Can you elaborate on your thoughts on the political and ethical aspects of rethinking seriousness?

GB To take the political first, to some large degree I'm thinking about the project as having a kind of politics in itself. Not only on a local level – as a politics of queer research – but much more broadly as it is enquiring into notions of political agency: What might be the power in embracing purportedly non-serious forms of behavior? Might there be a kind of politics to that? Obviously all of this has a direct relevance to what we think of now as the typically queer activism of the 1990s: The direct actions with the In-Your-Face and

very theatrical Kiss-ins and Die-Ins, etc. Actions that were styled very much as a kind of politics that wasn't about soliciting respectability. It wasn't about being taken seriously as representatives of a conventional political power block or pressure group. The strategies that were utilized weren't the protocols of some forms of equal rights politics which were about pressure groups, etc. My project kind of tracks back to that moment, and hopefully begins to mine the possibilities of what might be deemed to be non-serious forms of action, and the agency that might accrue to them. But I'm thinking about this in relation to scenes of cultural engagement, in spectatorial responses to performance and visual art practice. So it is very much a cultural project, as I'm not at present looking at any activist performances, which is not to say that I wouldn't. At the moment it is very much on the level of cultural consumption. That is what I can say on the political.

As for the ethical, on how we might conduct ourselves in relation to others and to culture – that interests me a lot. Once we begin to adopt a tangential relationship to serious culture and the modes that are proper to serious appraisal and response, it begins to open up the question of the ethics of response: How should we then respond otherwise? It opens up the potentiality of those modes of responding that have often been characterized as inappropriate and ethically dubious. It might be about laughing in the face of something that is highly grave. Or embracing the inappropriate response in the name of a perverse ethics of cultural consumption, which is about paying heed to the object, respecting it on terms other than of the serious. I use the term trashy – I'm interested in a trashy ethics. When we think about trash music, or we go to a pub where they play trash music, it signals how we hold something dear that may be important to us, without taking it seriously. Nevertheless, it still has some sort of virtue to us.

There's going to be a historical dimension of this project, which is going to be about mining the relation between what I call queer seriousness and how it emerges or is embedded with trashy culture – thinking of it in relation to, for instance, underground film by the likes of the Kuchar brothers and John Waters, or trashy TV, which brings in the mass cultural dimension. And it might also be on the level of mining the history of camp. The trashy ethics is something I am very interested in, but whether or not it is a project specifically about trash or camp I am not sure at this moment. Going back to that Ludlam quote, if I am interested in how we might think of gravity and profundity outside of serious culture, then Susan Sontag's definition of camp is not what I am talking about. In "Notes on Camp" (1964) she defines it as a way of being trivial about the serious.⁷ I am talking about it as a way of being trivial in the production of importance, of trivially entertaining the important. It sounds like a pedantic argument about terminology – about the queer production of "importance" rather than "seriousness" – but it is actually quite crucial in beginning to fine-tune what my subject is.

A queer emotional moment

MD Picking up on the questions on terminology, in your talk on Oreet Ashery's performance at The Whitstable Biennial, you used a couple of terms that were new to me. In your descriptions of the spectatorial response to her reenactments of the surreal acts of the controversial 17th century false messiah Shabtai Zvi, you spoke not only about pathos, but *bathos* and *quathos*.⁸ Could you elaborate on the meaning of these terms?

GB This has actually come out in my work on the performances of Kiki and Herb, and I have written on it in the small-scale publication *The Art of Queering in Art* edited by Henry Rogers.⁹ What got me thinking about this was the particular ways in which some contemporary queer performances solicit pathetic responses from their audiences. On one level, we feel that we should take the emotion that is being staged seriously. But at the same time, as in the Kiki and Herb example, it moves you, while at the same time undercutting that feeling. It undercuts the emotion that you feel at the same time as you feel it. That is the bathos, the undermining of the pathos. You have the empathy and the feeling, almost at the same time as you have the rug being pulled from under you. That's where I introduce my queer theoretical take on that, to think about neither pathos nor *bathos*, but *quathos*. This is what I call a queer emotion, that is neither one nor the other, but a rather curious intermixing of the two, where you can't decide what it is, how to take it, or how to feel. That's a queer emotional moment. It is almost as if the one affect of pathos bleeds into the other. A point is also that *quathos* is a ridiculous term that clearly has a level of playfulness or glibness to it – a bit of a gag, really. I like that. I like the idea of doing conceptual theorizing as a stand-up comic. What does it mean to do theory as a practical joke? How would one think about joking as theorizing?

7. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001 [1966]).



Re-enactment of Shabtai Zvi's fasting ritual in Oreet Ashery's performance *The Saints of Whitstable*, 2008. Together with Andrew Mitchelson, Ashery bought ingredients for a meal one at a time (one tomato, one lemon, one fish, etc. It took 5 hours and about 50 kilometers). Then they fasted for 24 hours and cooked the meal by the sea for Gavin Butt and Dominic Johnson. Photo: Oreet Ashery.

8. See Gavin Butt, "Should We Take Performance Serious?" in Oreet Ashery, *Dancing with Men* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009).



9. Gavin Butt, "How I died for Kiki and Herb" in *The Art of Queering in Art*, Henry Rogers (ed.), (Birmingham: Article Press, 2007), pp. 85–94.



Herb and Kiki from *Kiki and Herb: The Year of Magical Drinking Tour*, 2007.

MD That would make theorizing much more fun!

GB It could be, but then it can also be so bloody difficult. That's the kind of paradoxical and almost impossible nature of the project that I have set myself.

MD This brings us back to the importance on the paradoxical in your work. In your introduction to *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, you write that criticism should aim at being paradoxical, not in the sense of being contradictory, but as being against doxa.

GB Yes, and the paradoxical is that which is so against received wisdom, as it is viewed with suspicion. It is so wide of the mark of how we conventionally think within consensus – the doxa of, let's say, scholarly work – that it is very difficult to take it seriously. An example from history might be Marx and Engels' famous use of the camera obscura-metaphor to describe ideology. They asserted that the world appears upside down in ideology, as in the image produced in a camera obscura. In a way this seems so crazy: that the world as we conventionally know it is a distortion, an upside down inverted representation of the real world. That is really weird, and so paradoxical as to be doubtful, that we can actually take it on board. I think that's where critical ideas come from. The power of critical ideas is that they are para-doxical. Against doxa, beside doxa, they depart from doxa. And that's why I still think and hope people see what I'm doing as that kind of a critical project.