

# Queer Space as installation

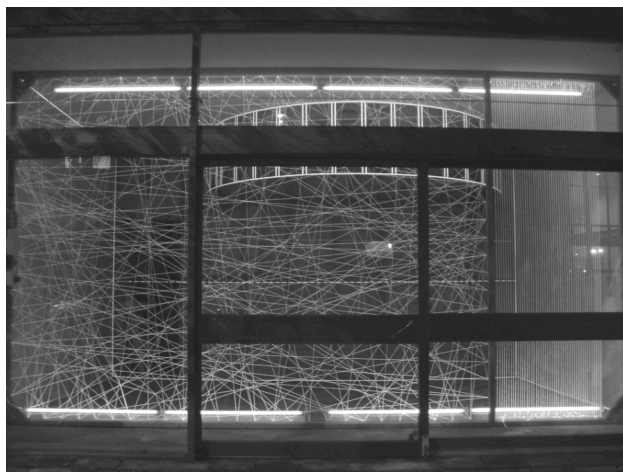
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## ABSTRACT

Queer space is a way of contextualizing my installation practice. In order to describe how my installations may be construed as ‘queer space’ I have associated some theoretical contexts of both ‘queer theory’ and ‘queer space’ that possess a degree of affiliation with characteristics that Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call rhizomatics and arborescence. Using these ideas to briefly frame the works of selected installation artists who I consider explore queer themes, I will conclude with a discussion regarding how these contexts are implicated in the design processes and the materiality of my installation.

For some time now I have been working on the possibility of *constructing* a queer space. One of the first attempts was the installation *Intersections* (below) in which I used various configurations of thread illuminated by ultraviolet lighting in an unused business premises in Newcastle’s central business district. I have produced several installations since, experimenting with various sites, configurations of thread, ultraviolet illumination, reflective surfaces, texts and grids.



**Figure 1** *Intersections* 2003. Textiles and ultraviolet lighting, 567 Hunter Street, Newcastle.

In order to explain how my series of installations are intended to denote queer space I have chosen one of the most prominent characteristics of my installation – the intersecting thread – to begin to discuss a pattern or quality which I have associated

with what Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have referred to as *rhizomatic*. I also use other qualities such as parallel vertical lines and paper tiles to denote what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as arborescence. As a “non-representational geophilosophical (sic)”<sup>i</sup> model of thought, the rhizome has been adapted to an array of disciplines including post-modern theory, architecture, and internet technologies. However, it appears that little has been written regarding *queer space* and *rhizomatics* and even less in relation to the visual arts despite the largely unexploited conceptual richness inherent in Deleuze and Guattari’s adaptive metaphors. In this paper characteristics of the rhizome and arborescence are associated with describing what may constitute queer space and how these contexts in turn relate to the materiality of my installation. I have structured my argument around two general questions – How can queer space be implicated in such qualities as rhizomatics and arborescence? And how do these rhizomatic/ arborescent conceptions of queer space manifest themselves in my installation?

Deleuze and Guattari characterize particular kinds of space that they have named smooth and striated space. Smooth space is characterized by the *rhizome*, while striated space is characterized by arborescence. The rhizome affords a certain amount of flexibility as an alternative “style of thought”<sup>ii</sup> to the constricting arborescent logic of “state philosophy”.<sup>iii</sup> *Queer Space* may be associated with rhizomatics and arborescence as these concepts offer an avenue for transcending the way that the body is inscribed as well as the geographical boundaries both inside and outside bodies and the surrounding places they occupy, perceive and interact with, that are often overwhelming structured by “heteronormative knowledge’s and institutions”.<sup>iv</sup>

In botany, a rhizome is a horizontal subterranean stem possessing nodes from which both root and shoot structures grow. Potatoes, bamboo and papyrus are common examples of plants that possess a rhizomatic anatomy. A unique property of the rhizome is the ability to propagate laterally via the growth of underground tubers. Viewed as a series of connective trajectories which intersect on a horizontal plane, the rhizome is an abstract metaphor useful in describing a anti-hierarchical model of thought.

Some of the earliest attempts to denote queer, intentionally or not, conjure images that are remarkably well suited to describing features of the rhizome. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for example explains in *Tendencies* that 'queer' can refer to the "the open mesh (sic) of possibilities"<sup>vi</sup> which describes the rhizome as a whole and that 'queer' means "across,"<sup>vii</sup> which may refer to the transverse trajectories or lines within the rhizome. In a group exhibition that Sedgwick was associated with called *Queer Space* in Soho in 1995, she discusses some of the thinking and planning process for the exhibition. Sedgwick states that the "label" queer was used "rather than offering a list of nominally distinct identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, transsexual...)" as a means of "implicating (sic) each other" to the "transverse space of their production and performance."<sup>vii</sup>

Conversely Deleuze and Guattari implicate the rhizome with qualities epitomised by arborescence. Arborescence is characterized by verticality and division; usually consisting of an underground root, a single vertical load bearing trunk which forms an axes for single pair of limbs which further subdivide into a series of finer and finer branch divisions. Arborescence is used to denote a bifurcating system that is structured through binary opposition. Deleuze and Guattari use the tree structure as metaphor for state philosophy stating that "We're tired of trees," which they use to describe a hierarchical system which we should no longer believe in, "They've made us suffer too much."<sup>viii</sup> According to Best and Kellner the,

'Arborescent' model of thought designates the epistemology that informs all of Western thought, from botany to information sciences to theology.<sup>ix</sup>

Arborescence is expressed through sexual classification and the binary configuration of sexual practices and identities as Michael Foucault asserts "sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden".<sup>x</sup> In Brittan as early as the sixteenth century sex between men was considered a criminal offence however there appears that there was no classificatory system as there is today only men that engaged in sexual behaviours that were consider illegal. However towards the end of the nineteenth century in Brittan and Europe medical practitioners began to meticulously classify every conceivable sexual practice and made judgments, based on their own bias and prejudices, as to whether such behaviours were normal or abnormal. As state sanctioned conjugal relations between men and women were licit, permitted and the norm much of the thinking about other forms of sexual relations were defined in opposing terms. During this period the coinage of the term 'homosexual' emerged, solidifying the binary opposition heterosexual/ homosexual. Ultimately these binary oppositions were inscribed onto the body and exercised spatially whereby the metaphorical 'closet' and the prison and became a way of

making invisible and physically separating 'homosexuals' from the rest of society.

Arborescence is also expressed through gender. Homosexual genders are often touted as imitations of the heterosexual original. However heterosexualized genders, as Judith Butler explains, can be understood through the "structure of impersonation".<sup>xi</sup> In other words heterosexual genders (indeed all genders be they gay or straight) are iterative performances that imitate some phantasmic idealization of the "proper" gender.<sup>xii</sup> However heterosexual genders are often (mis)represented as the original and correct embodiment of "'man' and 'woman.'"<sup>xiii</sup> Like sexuality gender is also understood as a social construct rather than an expression of an innate core identity, an iterative performance rather than a fixed biological essence.

While Deleuze and Guattari somewhat paradoxically use characteristics of rhizomatics and arborescence to describe what initially may appear to be two opposing models of thought, they insist that "...the root-tree and canal rhizome are not two opposed models..."<sup>xiv</sup> Rather rhizomatics and arborescence are always interconnected. Furthermore they argue that the rhizome is employed as a means to "challenge all models" including arborescent models that "we had no wish to *construct* (sic) but through which we pass".<sup>xv</sup> Queer space can be seen as being caught up in the process of deconstructing the bifurcating processes of heteronormative discourse, creating connections between heterogeneous identifications as well claiming space from which marginalized identities were once excluded.

Queer space is not a singular universal space rather it is means to refer to any number of different *places* that are framed by a diverse range of cultural, social and political interests, and communities. Queer space is sometimes used in context of sexual identities and the use of specific places which may include, but not limited by, the use open spaces such as parkland or beaches and the built environment such as streetscapes and buildings. Such sites may serve as profusion of connective interstices that serve as points of rupture to heteronormative knowledge and power relations that under-grid everyday space.

Another important context of queer space is the installation space. The installation space is a liminal space caught somewhere in between the artists internal dialogue that may resonate with others and the folds of public architecture. It also can be an in-between space that negotiates the dichotomy between the inside of the body and the outside of the body, between private and public realms, between the historical past and the now, between the periphery and center of the many contested intersecting terrains of identity. The artists that I have selected negotiate between these dichotomies and often mess up their convenient boundaries.

Dani Marti's *The Thin Wall PB/I-S* exhibited at *Artspace* in 2000<sup>xvi</sup> used reflector discs and red plastic cleaning pads to create an installation that explores viral infection. The reflector pads represent the dermis 'the thin wall' in-between the interior and exterior of the body. While the cleaning pads have been taken from their usual context – that of the domestic kitchen – to the gallery where their ready-made associations with cleaning become associated blood cells. Marti has chosen a subject that affects his everyday existence and uses the gallery during the

exhibition to perform his own healing by symbolically stitching hundreds red blood cells into rafts on the gallery floor.

Neil Emmerson's work aims to "confuse historically established dichotomies"<sup>xxvii</sup> and to explore through installation the "possibility of finding slippages around these orthodoxies".<sup>xxviii</sup> In *The dream* Emmerson brings together positive and negative silhouettes in the style of nineteenth century illustrator Aubrey Beardsley featuring portraits Aubrey Beardsley and the "Chinese revolutionary 'soldier saint' Lei Feng."<sup>xxix</sup> In this work Emmerson contrasts "European fin-de-siecle decadence with the Chinese socialist revolution" in order to implicate one another in the "common ground of revolution."<sup>xxx</sup>

Filmmaker Isaac Julien produces video installations that are often presented on multiple screens that explore themes around "race, class, sexuality, and desire in black British culture."<sup>xxxi</sup> The attendant for example is a film that explores the sexual fantasies of a black male attendant and white male visitor set in a nineteenth century museum. The film begins with Francois-August Biard's painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* (c.1833) depicting a white master and his black slaves – a painting that is part of a collection at Wilberforce House – "a museum devoted to the history of slavery."<sup>xxxii</sup> All of a sudden the painting is transformed in a tableau-vivant of master slave relations of a different kind – homoerotic S & M. The attendant passes the painting and exchanges glances. Later a black female conservator enters the gallery to clean the frame of the painting and overhears the sounds of the whip and groans of sexual arousal. At the end of the film the attendant sings an aria 'lamenting his unfulfilled fantasy with the white visitor', who's performance is applauded by the conservator.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Julian's "poetic style" as Katherine Chan notes presents the viewer with a series of,

"...questions without answers, stories without outcomes, places that shift seamlessly from the present into the past, splintering identities."<sup>xxxiv</sup>

As I have provided a background to my art practice and briefly looked at some installation artists that mess up dichotomies, I would like to discuss how these contexts may be adapted to the materiality and design processes associated with my installation. Once again I have utilized Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, only this time the rhizome is understood in terms of the "technological model"<sup>xxxv</sup> which describes both rhizomatic and arboreal qualities via a textiles metaphor. According to Deleuze and Guattari the rhizome is analogous to the structure of the 'anti-fabric' felt, while arborescence is analogous to the structure of tapestry weaving.

Deleuze and Guattari explain that Felt derives its strength and durability from filaments once 'fulled,' matted together through the felting process. Importantly there is no particular direction to which the fibres are aligned, only the arbitrary agglomeration of fibres. Furthermore Deleuze and Guattari note that felt is, "open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center".<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Tapestry or machined fabrics on the other hand are characterized by predictable vertical and horizontal striation. On a Tapestry loom for example the weaving yarn or horizontal weft is threaded through a series of parallel vertical lines called the warp. Furthermore the warp is "fixed" while the weft is "mobile", passing above and beneath the warp.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Deleuze and

Guattari argue that such textile processes create "closed" space that is "delimited" by the width and height of the loom frame and by the back and forth motion of the weaving process.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Additionally the horizontal and vertical weave creates a series of uniform squares that are rigidly aligned to form a grid.

As stated earlier rhizomatic/ arborescent, notions of space are always caught up in one another, always in mixture. In my own work I use particular configurations of thread to denote both rhizomatic and arborescent qualities in my installation. While felt is not used as a material my installation I have abstracted the rhizomatic structure of felt in a graphic way through the use of string which is configured as a series of arbitrary trajectories which intersect on a flat plane. While arborescence is implied by the vertical warps strings such as those found in the tapestry loom.



**Figure 2** *Watt Space is Queer?* 2004. Fibre/ textiles and ultraviolet lighting, *Watt Space Galleries*, Newcastle.

In the installation *Watt Space is Queer?* (Figure 2) rhizomatic configurations of thread have been used to surround the space of the gallery which have been juxtaposed against a series of twin fluorescent tubes – a kind of binary incandescence. In between I have placed text arranged at eye-level with several phrases cut from reactive vinyl which read; *Democratizing Multiple Desires, Collapsing Binaries* and *Subverting the Normal*. Visual elements within the space are reduced to stark contrast, highlighting the textiles and paper elements within the installation, while all other features are rendered in stark relief activating textiles and paper as if electrified from within. The viewers' body and clothing also reacts to the ultraviolet lighting annexing the body to the illuminated intersecting trajectories of the rhizome.

In this paper I have attempted to explain why I consider my installation a may be construed as queer space by adapting Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome/ arborescence in an effort to link some of my theoretical concerns to the materiality of my installation. I would like to have concluded by discussing my current project and more specifically some of more interesting social contexts such as those associated with other artists work. However it is still in the planning stage.

- <sup>i</sup> Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin and Gill Valentine, *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*, London: Sage Publications, 2004, p. 105.
- <sup>ii</sup> Philip Goodchild, *Gilles Deleuze and the Question of Philosophy*, London: Associated University Presses, 1996, p.85. Cited in Chuen-Ferng Koh, *Internet: Toward a Holistic Ontology*, Murdoch University, 1997 [cited 8th October 2005], Available from <http://www.mccmurdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/vid/jtk/thesis/nc hl.htm>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, p. x.
- <sup>iv</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Melbourne: Circa Books, 2003, p. vi.
- <sup>v</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 8.
- <sup>vi</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p. xii.
- <sup>vii</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Queer Sex Habits (Oh, No! I Mean) Six Queer Habits: Some Talking Points*, Queer-e, 1995 [cited 13th February 2007], Available from <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/media/journals/queer-e-v1.n1/article.3>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 15.
- <sup>ix</sup> Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, *Post-modern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991, p. 98. Cited in Chuen-Ferng Koh, *Internet: Toward a Holistic Ontology* Murdoch University, 1997 [cited 8th October 2005], Available from <http://www.mccmurdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/vid/jtk/thesis/nc hl.htm>.
- <sup>x</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, London: Random House, 1979, p. 83.
- <sup>xi</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/ Out, Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Dianna Fuss, 13-31, New York: Garland Publishers, 1992, p. 21.
- <sup>xii</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 238.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," p. 21.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 20.
- <sup>xv</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 20.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ann Finegan, "Dani Marti Thin Wall Pbl/S (Zero S of the Cure: The Thin Wall)," Sydney: Artspace Visual Arts Centre Ltd, 2000.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Neil Emmerson, *Neil Emmerson Selection*, William Mora galleries, 2006 [cited 18th February 2007], Available from <http://www.moragalleries.com.au/nemmerson/index.html>.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Neil Emmerson, *Neil Emmerson Selection*, William Mora galleries, 2006 [cited 18th February 2007], Available from <http://www.moragalleries.com.au/nemmerson/index.html>.
- <sup>xix</sup> Craig Judd, "(the Picnic) Neil Emmerson" Lake Macquarie: Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, 2004.
- <sup>xx</sup> Judd, "(the Picnic) Neil Emmerson" 2004.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Katherine Chan, 'The Film Art of Isaac Julian', Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001
- <sup>xxii</sup> Chan, 'The Film Art of Isaac Julian', 2001
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Chan, 'The Film Art of Isaac Julian', 2001
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Chan, 'The Film Art of Isaac Julian', 2001
- <sup>xxv</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 475- 477.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 475- 476.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 475.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 475.