

HYPERALLERGIC

A Queer Homage to a 1970s Lesbian Separatist

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Seven years after her death, Jill Johnston has finally come into vogue. She was a dynamo writer whose Village Voice column was the absolute record of the 1970s East Village avant-garde, particularly its emerging performance art and experimental theatre scenes. But Johnston was more than an influential critic; she was an influenced one. Her writing came to be defined by Fluxus, a hybrid poetry-criticism that made Kafkaesque diversions into absurdities, absolutions, and non-sequiturs. Upon shifting her writing into this idiosyncratic form, Johnston became a prophet of sorts for queer futurity. And as a leader of New York's lesbian separatist movement, she used her platform to expound upon the implausible possibilities of queer utopia: cosmic villages of homo-ness; artists (all people, she would say) who make sand castles and other inanities both inside and outside their heads.

Today's tastemakers have come around to Johnston's vision. The fabled experimental theater troupe called the Wooster Group is touring *Town Hall Affair*, a restaging of one of Johnston's most infamous public debate appearances. Theater critic Helen Shaw recently named Johnston the "true gonzo art critic." And more recently, curator Nick Morgan has taken Johnston's queer ramblings as inspiration for his latest exhibition at Kate Werble Gallery, *in the hopes of not being considered*.

Morgan's Johnston experiment opens with Chris Bogia's "Sun Standers" (2017), a massive sculpture that plays host to a delightfully strange mix of juxtapositions. Lacquer, wallpaper, wood, steel, and yarn populate the work's geometric design with the faded neon colors of a 1980s palette swatch. Bogia's sculpture succeeds in inaugurating the exhibition space with a strong thematic take on the question of queer aesthetics. The artist has perched a small flower vase on a ledge jutting out of his sculpture, and noticing this small detail quickly contextualizes

the sculpture, revealing the abstraction as an inverted, fragmented vision of the vase. This interplay between the coded and the decoder gestures toward the idea of queerness as a shared secret, a thing that gains power the longer you look at it.

Approaching queerness from a drastically different angle (although, curiously, with the same color palette) is Ken Tisa's sequin textile, "So Shy" (1982). This work is pure comedy, satirizing the ho-hum, clichéd confession of a wallflower by rendering her with outrageous glittering hot pink nipples. And maybe the subject of "So Shy" is a drag queen – her protruding breasts and glitzy glam belie any notion of shyness.



I imagine that Johnston would have enjoyed Tisa's humor, his DIY aesthetic of iffy proportions and whacko pizzazz, though I'm not sure she'd understand how the rest of the exhibition derives from her dynamic vision of the future. Instead, Morgan plods through queerness with scholarly abundance. In the press release, he bloviates an infinitude of options for the queer artist: decontextualization, romanticization, aestheticization, collage, cartooning, the gritty, the glittery, the decadent, the out-moded, the extravagant, the degenerate, the outré, the déclassé, and (ironically) the indecipherable. From this academic word salad, I sense that the everything can be everything, and that queerness is so diverse that it has no significance at all. Perhaps that's true, but the notion significantly undermines Johnston's hope for a queer cosmic future.

Morgan's word mountain is his own biggest challenge, but he makes matters worse by including pieces in the show that are simply off the mark. What do I gain from Carrie Yamaoka's Tumblr-esque moody stained paper poetry? Or from Roberto Juárez's punny abstractions on linen? The curation feels tenuous and sparse, preventing greater works from artists like Libby Rothfeld, Julien Ceccaldi, and Sam Lipp from taking flight. Instead of visualizing Johnston's approach to queerness, Morgan uses her words as table setting to his own dissertation on the invariable permutations of queer art. Accordingly, her vision for a vibrant queer tomorrow becomes an opaque history of yesterday.

in the hopes of not being considered continues at Kate Werble Gallery (83 Vandam Street, Greenwich Village) through August 11.