

Ariel Goldberg
**Simplicity
Craving**

01/11

There was a dyke story in one of Max's porn magazines. It was my favorite, but not because I liked it exactly. Reading it by the light of my flashlight was like examining a photograph of dead relatives.
– Camille Roy¹

Help us poison position.
– Dawn Lundy Martin²

I got a speeding ticket from a surveillance camera on my way to what was being talked about as the biggest and most controversial show featuring artists who represented homosexuality. Half a year later, my father handed me a blurry photo he got in the mail with his car's license plate and the amount due. I am willing to confess I harbored a strange enthusiasm for "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture." I thought it would be an easy target to exercise the nascent argument of this essay – "it's dangerous to label art queer." The show was curated by Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, two white gay men, and presented an overwhelming majority of gay male artists and subjects. In 2010, "Hide/Seek" was not "new" or historic outside its tenuous government walls and focus on portraiture. It was record-breaking only in terms of how many tax dollars funded it.³ The show compelled me to ramble through recent histories on my own, not only by way of the curators.

Through interlibrary loan I ordered the catalogue for "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art," the New Museum's now trendy sounding 1982 show. Some artists refused to be a part of this show; they refused to be thematized, or to be outed. Then I read the catalogue for the 1995 Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive's exhibition "In a Different Light," which announced itself as the "first queer art show" that included artists who did not necessarily identify as queer, but rather whose work the curators interpreted as queer. Robert Atkins reflects on how "In a Different Light" "rejected the notion of identity politics in favor of an amorphous notion of queer sensibility."⁴ To include artists and writers who didn't identify as queer was a decision that appeared to Atkins "apolitical" and "over-aestheticized."

A lukewarm form of irrelevance characterized the "Hide/Seek" show in its adherence to a flawed canon. Yet this canon still exuded risk within the context of the National Portrait Gallery. Many arts organizations across the country responded in protest to The Smithsonian Institution's baffling decision to

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

02/11

sensor David Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*; I saw an "emergency screening" at San Francisco Camerawork directly after the work was removed from the show.⁵ The super-8 film collages scenes familiar to Mexico City (but not to the tourist) with staged gestures in private tableaux. *A Fire in My Belly* contrasts how violence is performed for the voyeur of mass entertainment (Lucha Libre wrestlers) against emanations of pain (a hand sewing a mouth shut, blood slowly dripping). Destruction and pleasure slowly brew: an effigy of Jesus Christ appears at times with ants crawling on it, as does a flickering view of a person jerking off. The flashing images accumulate into a crescendo of a map of North America burning. Mexico's fire spreads to its northern neighbor. A spinning toy eyeball that opens the film, covered in bulging red veins, combusts. Coins fall into a bowl of blood (splash) and a bandaged hand (ow). Wojnarowicz's visual ingredients mix to tell overlapping stories of how colonialism and capitalism inflict and lick their wounds. Wojnarowicz shot the film between 1986 and 1987; it was left unfinished at the time of his death, in 1992. The film now exists in two versions, one thirteen minutes, the other seven. I sat on the floor of SF Camerawork taking in this work, thinking about the steady but frantic images of violence and witness refracted onto the standing-room-only crowd.

I had visited SF Camerawork a handful of times already in the fall of 2010 to see the exhibition "Suggestions of a Life Being Lived," which represents the more common "queer art" show – one at a small nonprofit in a city with no shortage of gay and queer culture. I was eager to see a show that was, as the press release promised, "unconcerned with coming-out narratives." In contrast to the looming 1995 precedent of the organizational structure of "In a Different Light," the curators of "Suggestions ...," Danny Orendorff and Adrienne Skye Roberts, wanted to address "how a sense of liberated queerness is pursued and mediated within public spaces and behaviors."⁶ Gay Shame protest documentation and Killer Banshee ephemera hung in the entrance to the gallery; records of direct action activism served as the entry point of the show.

Adrienne gave me a guided tour of the exhibition as I interviewed her. I held on to her catch phrase: "What I'm interested in is a queer set of political alliances." I was admittedly flirting a little with Adrienne, and hoping to impress her with my handheld tape recorder. She had mentioned a partner, but I wondered if that also meant an open relationship. When I asked her why, on encountering this show, I felt so frustrated with the phrase "queer art," she told me she could relate. She had just been

interviewed for the web series Culture Wire, where Meg Shiffler of the San Francisco Arts Commission asked, "What's the show about? What is queer photography?" Adrienne responded: "I don't know. I have a better sense of what queer means to me. Queer art is what makes that sense of queerness visible."⁷ Shiffler's proposition to define something hit as the gravest offense.

When wall texts, press releases, and artist statements are littered with the word "queer," I start to grow suspicious of what the word is trying to say, as if temporarily fooled into the word functioning as a measuring tool. The word "queer" easily loses its gunpowder when used effusively. In what ways can language persist as "radical" when the language is being used in a predictable routine?

My primary apprehension about "Suggestions of a Life Being Lived" was based on the concern that this was the one chance a San Francisco alternative art space was getting at a "queer" show, outside the month of June, when there are always multiple "queer art" shows. What did I want from this show? For there to be art with no trace of stereotypical "queerness"? That stereotype is both too wide and too subjective to understand. Knee-jerk associations with queerness are often what shows like "Suggestions" are working to resist. I had to shake that feeling that there wasn't enough space for artists who are queer.

A catalogue for "Suggestions" went to print after the exhibition so that the curators could include their evolving thoughts on the work they'd curated. In it they reflect on the process of making the exhibition in the contemporary climate of assimilation and violence. Adrienne describes how the illusion of "police officers escorting [gay pride parades] rather than raiding our bars ... completely denies the reality that there still exists state-sanctioned violence against minority subjects, including queer people, in our cities, on the streets, and through the prison system."⁸ Halfway through their conversation, which spans the entire length of the catalogue, Adrienne says to Danny, "I think we should also talk about our ambivalence towards the category 'queer art.'"⁹ I have found this ambivalence toward the category to be its most common characteristic.

When I first saw "Suggestions," I crudely tried to put the work on a spectrum of "queer content" to imagine *if* a curator of a "queer art show" ever evaluated how much "queerness" was in a work. The show was organized around themes such as the public sphere, intentional communities, utopia, and self-determination. Kirstyn Russell's large-scale photos of landscapes are whispers of "queer content." Her

photo series *Where We Are Not Known* features gay bars or building exteriors with traces of a word that can be read as queer, even if only by the recontextualizing frame of the camera. The “Dyke” on signage for a store shows a fraction of a business owner’s last name. I imagine how people may watch Russell when she is constructing or finding gay signposts, how that live action of cropping is a quiet but powerful performance. The viewers in the gallery, when looking at the pictures framed on the wall, stand removed from the scene. But postcards of the images, on a rack free for the taking, are ready to travel outside the gallery. Aay Preston-Myint represents a seemingly louder version of “queer content” with *SMILE II*, a photobooth installation that “invites visitors to imagine themselves within a post-apocalyptic family portrait studio where gender and sexuality have become fluid.” Crocheted beards, wigs, and other textile costumes made by Preston-Myint reroute gender norms to riff on the conformity underlying the portrait studio. As opposed to Russell’s finished photos, visitors must ultimately produce Preston-Myint’s work at the site of the gallery.

The failed endeavor of quantifying queerness calls on the verb capability of “queer” as a lifeline to escape the fixity of an adjective. At least verbs need action to be performed. I have watched the unsavory trends of the art market temporarily crown ever-incomplete versions of “the political” or “the queer” as fashionable. In order for “queer” or “political” to also be risky adjectives, they must fall out of fashion. One cannot control all the language that swarms around art. Especially unrealistic is the possibility of control over which word form (adjective versus verb) is used. I am reminded of the game rock, paper, scissors. An adjective is the paper that covers the rock, suffocating it, a verb the scissors splitting the paper into a new shape. I hope the demarcation of work that critiques hegemonic discourse is not the only work named “political.” I like to use the word “political” to describe work that isn’t “counter-whatever-the-culture-is” but rather hides its opinions – if the art has any at all – and maneuvers to mirror the safety of the status quo.

“Suggestions of a Life Being Lived” did not use the word “queer” or “gay” in the title, nor did “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture.” I cannot parse the words “difference” and “desire” as euphemism or rejection. Many of the smaller-scale group shows that thematize queerness play effusively with the word “queer.” For example, San Francisco’s SOMArts June 2011 show was named “Queer It Yourself – Tools for Survival.” But “Hide/Seek” did not serve an explicit queer community. More than one friend told me that they saw the show

with their parents. The national exhibition brought a discussion to supposedly not “queer” or “gay” spaces or relationships. This gesture to produce “culture” felt dizzying because the national government’s dominant culture has been to keep artists who are gay or queer without funding – in other words, to keep artists who are gay or queer as unseen as possible, which ultimately has threatened the most basic survival of artists who are gay or queer, especially those without independent wealth or patrons.

“Hide/Seek” could afford to produce a perfect-bound catalogue that, in its girth, resembles the level in *Super Mario Brothers* when everything is enlarged. Long after the guards gently reminded me the National Portrait Gallery was closing, I studied the show’s every decision about how to present information. I was torn between learning new things and feeling frustrated by the curators’ blind spots. The wall text, reproduced to face all the plates in the “Hide/Seek” catalogue, is concerned with decoding the “desire” embedded in the portraits by pointing out either that the artist was known to be gay/queer or the subject was gay/queer. Katz and Ward’s quantification was that simple, which I find devastating. Berenice Abbott, whose portrait of Janet Flanner adorns the “Hide/Seek” catalogue cover, once responded to questions about her homosexuality with the statement: “I am a photographer, not a lesbian.”¹⁰ Abbott vociferously denied “homosexual” framing of both her life and her wide-ranging body of work, which includes New York City in its constant state of transformation, physics textbook illustrations, and portraits of artists and writers in 1920s Paris. Her early portraiture documents what history now refers to as a formidable cadre of lesbians, though Abbott and her contemporaries did not call themselves that.

The image in “Hide/Seek” that continues to haunt me is Peter Hujar’s portrait of Susan Sontag. The wall text reads: “[Sontag] later regretted that she had not spoken more publicly about her lesbianism, but that kind of personal revelation was at odds to her cool analytical tendency.”¹¹ In Hujar’s portrait, she is on her back, glancing upward over her shoulder, supremely self-satisfied. Her chest appears almost flat in a ribbed turtleneck. Drips of hardened white paint are visible on the imperfect wall behind her. When first writing about this image from memory, I saw endless drafts of paper with messy handwriting strewn about her like a fan. This is actually a photo Annie Leibovitz took of Sontag but I saw it as a double exposure onto Hujar’s portrait.

In 2012, The Builders Association premiered *Sontag: Reborn*, a performance based on her

03/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

adapted journals. A video of an older Sontag plays throughout, talking back to the younger Sontag. Moe Angelos, who has been working as an out lesbian in downtown New York theater since the early 1980s, plays Sontag at both ages. Angelos's adaptation highlights the entries where Sontag struggled painfully with lovers, soaked up philosophy, wandered helplessly as a prodigy in Europe, and whoops, got married. Having just read the first published journal in the trilogy, I mouthed along to the line I had transcribed into my own journal: "My desire to write is connected with my homosexuality. I need the identity as a weapon, to match the weapon that society has against me."¹² I left the play unsure of how to maintain my criticism of Sontag's not being out enough and of the historical dishonesty of the "Hide/Seek" exhibit's focus on the fulcrum of out versus not out. I started to understand how Sontag came of age in a different time, a time when the word "queer" wasn't actively used as a label to describe a potential aesthetic, a time when she coded a related endeavor with the word "camp."

Sontag's journals send me to an uncomfortable memory of seeing Leibovitz's retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007. Looking at the many pictures of Sontag felt like suddenly finding a yellowing lesbian newsletter past its heyday of circulation. Sontag is pictured in bed, in a bath, in the hospital, on vacation. Leibovitz also shot still lifes of Sontag's literary traces, such as an early apple computer alight with a chapter to her book *The Volcano Lover*. Standing in the museum's galleries, facing the photos on the wall, I learned for the first time that Sontag was staring into Leibovitz's camera as her lover. I strained to remember my history of photography classroom, the lights turned off, where a slide projector hummed next to my guide, Shelley Rice, who thrives on adding brassy gossip to her memorized lectures. I couldn't recall if Shelley digressed into a story about Sontag and Leibovitz. It was much easier for me to associate the slides of Claude Cahun's self-portraits with lesbian history than Sontag's *On Photography*.

I reread Sontag's *New York Times* obituary, which clearly maps her marriage to a man, and their divorce, which, in the scheme of her life, was a blip. In the year of her death, 2004, the *Times* mentioned absolutely nothing about her lesbian partnership. Only an insulting trace: she was "photographed by Annie Leibovitz for an Absolut Vodka ad."¹³ *The Believer* ran an article on how divisive the international-straight-mainstream-media's obituaries were for Sontag: the overtly supportive and then the overtly undermining of her writing and thinking.¹⁴ One point remained united in these obituaries: no

mention of her dykehood. I think of AA Bronson, thirteen years Sontag's junior. Bronson's career as a successful gay male artist is credible in the art world. He is a sort of inspiration to mostly young, gay, male-identified artists, while Sontag is a problem for me to reckon with.

Now that Sontag is dead, her lesbian relationships seem to be all people want to talk about. When Sontag writes, "Being queer makes me feel more vulnerable,"¹⁵ she takes on both the "strange" and the "slur" of the word "queer"'s official definitions. "Queer" sounds quaint in the context of her journals, but Sontag's irresolute relationship with her sexuality and its relationship to her work is far from outdated. I imagine her handwriting as I read her mass-produced journals, the typeset words working like a stencil to help me draw a line between Sontag's choice not to "come out" and the zero pressure I feel to be silent about my sexuality. Sontag's rockstar intellectual status complicates her desire for privacy. Which begs the obvious question: Would she have had so many book contracts with mainstream publishers if she had been "out"?

And then my mom calls to tell me how the Poet Laureate is a lesbian *and* she teaches basic skills English, like I do. She read an article about it in *The New Yorker*. I forgot about this news flash for what felt like a year. When I finally looked up Kay Ryan, Library of Congress, I was surprised to see Ryan's salt-and-pepper hair trimmed in a scruffy James Dean just-back-from-a-whirl-on-a-mountain-bike look. My butch vocabulary is surprisingly limited. In her author photo, Ryan's fingers rest on her chin in a classic pensive pose while her white shirt pops against the professional photographer's red backdrop. Her blue eyes asked me to see her, to which I promptly replied, not just any poet who is also a lesbian is necessarily relevant to me.

But then I was haunted by the question, how does a dyke get to be the Poet Laureate? The obvious answer: she keeps her mouth shut about it. Dogma has its blind spots – how does "lesbian poet" feel in my mouth – this identification doesn't make much sense when applied to Ryan. Sarah Schulman flings me into urgency when she writes in 2009, "Lesbians are being treated as though we are not human and do not deserve representation – in literature or anywhere else."¹⁶ Kay Ryan has plenty of "representation," but she is not explicitly representing "lesbians" with her language. It's not unfathomable for a Poet Laureate to be gay (Elizabeth Bishop). What's unfathomable is for the very lesbian content that I keep problematizing to be present in a Poet Laureate's work. The Library of Congress's description of Ryan on her profile page reads:

04/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

Unlike many poets writing today, [Kay Ryan] seldom writes in the first person. Ryan says: “I don’t use ‘I’ because the personal is too hot and sticky for me to work with. I like the cooling properties of the impersonal.” In her poem “Hide and Seek,” for instance, she describes the feelings of the person hiding without ever saying, “I am hiding.”¹⁷

I feel suspicious of how distant Ryan’s “personal life” is from her work. Ryan is out by virtue of her frequent reference to her late partner Carol Adair, who died of cancer when Ryan was in residence at the Library of Congress. Ryan dedicates all her books to Carol. In *The Poet’s View* documentary, which claims “unprecedented access into the life and work of America’s Finest Poets,” Ryan says she likes to write “Personal poems in such a way that no one has to know that.” Then, on her plush beige couch, she tells a story about reading the Sunday paper in bed with Carol, who found an Aaron McGruder *Boondocks* comic that happened to quote one of Ryan’s poems about the “sustainability” of “waiting.”¹⁸

Ryan’s first book of poems, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends*, was published in 1983, the year I was born. Ryan’s early work was slightly more willing to get into “the hot and sticky.” In the poem “Letter from the Front” she writes:

I have enlisted in a
disbanded army – always
attracted to the supernumerary –
...
Louise, I am not welcome as I enter the city.
Mothers do not hold their children up to see
me.
What would be the point of remembering
one;
no single costume is a uniform.¹⁹

While this poem narrates a tale of a male soldier in some European war, I was eager to read it otherwise. I want to know, who is Louise? She is addressed in the first person, followed by a metaphor about being invisible and misunderstood. “Letter” does not rhyme. The poem has less of a children’s book vibe (an oft-cited muse for Ryan) and more a tenor of what adults talk about after the children go to bed. The majority of Ryan’s work is devoted to an air of constancy. As if to intuit there is no unknown in her work, she will choose one poem to read twice at her public appearances, interjecting with explications on the second reading. On the page, I find her poetry’s confidence grating. Yet Ryan’s banter at readings rouses ample laughter from the audience, mostly because of her lighthearted, self-effacing jokes.

Ryan’s poetic language matured to become more vague, as if to unite human behavior with such tidying formal motifs as recombinant rhymes. She adores wisdom derived in hindsight. Her vocabulary includes words like “innocence,” “god,” “truth,” “savior,” and “man.” In Ryan’s poem “Outsider Art” the narrator produces an *ars poetica* in reverse. The lines react against cluttered art, characterized by such eyesores as “burnt matches” and “glue on charms.” The “dense admonishments” that adorn the art are rendered “too small to be read” perhaps because they were written in with the illegible pen of “nail polish.”²⁰ The poem portrays a set of artists who have excessive desire or complaints:

Most of it’s too dreary
or too cherry red.

Ryan mocks the “outsider artists” whose work drips beyond flat two-dimensionality to “the backs of things.” I understand this poem as a disparagement of a supposedly uncrafted, undisciplined aesthetic that only gets shown because of the social ties that support it.

There never
seems to be a surface equal
to the needs of these people.²¹

I have no idea what Ryan means by “Outsider Art” and find this poem to be a confused portrait. Perhaps Ryan penned the poem after being irritated at what she thinks is bad art in a Marin strip mall café.

I am not interested in going on a journey tracing the label “Outsider Art.” Instead, I pause at the word “outsider,” as a loaded and derisive term because of its blanket othering of groups of people and stabilizing an unspoken “inside.” I wonder if this poem is a way for Ryan to distance herself from stereotypical associations of “Outsider Art” because she came to be a successful poet “outside” of well-trodden routes. Ryan did not take poetry workshops. She never narrates an entry into a social scene of readings to share her work with a local audience, which is the route I see many poets take. Instead, she taught herself writing by doing it every day. For years, she faced rejection from sending poems cold to nationally-established publications and contests. The succinctness of Ryan’s poetry aligns with her restricted public persona.

The more I encounter Ryan in interviews repeating the same punch lines, the less and less I care that she is gay. Ryan does claim allegiance to the teachers and students in free and low-cost higher education. She poured her energy as Poet Laureate into the Community College Poetry Project, initiating a National

05/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

Poetry Day on community college campuses and a website featuring students' work from colleges across the country. She made a point of doing most of her public events when Poet Laureate at community colleges. Ryan and Adair taught for over thirty years at Marin Community College. Ryan identifies as working-class and attributes her success to the education she received at Antelope Valley College in Lancaster, California, which she insists provided a better education than the one she received once enrolled at the massive UCLA, due to the personal relationships she had with her teachers.

Ryan rejects various poetry establishments in favor of the unpretentious hermit trope of the poet. In doing this, she disassociates herself from being a writer within a community of writers. Ryan admits, "I never read poetry" and "I like to read my poems, but I don't like to hear other people read theirs."²² At public events, she makes fun of poets as a way of connecting to her audience, which is apparently sparsely populated by poets. I might as well be asking how a poet rises to national recognition in this country – which is relevant to how someone dodges certain notions of identity in their public persona and embraces others.²³ I sense a connective tissue between how Ryan maneuvers around the lesbian label and the poet label and her separateness from their associated, overlapping communities.

More familiar and admirable to me is the poet who embeds in every aspect of their work their systems of survival as dependent on communities of writers. In her essay "Poetry in the 80s," Eileen Myles writes about running The Poetry Project at St Mark's in New York for two and a half years (1984–86). The sexism and homophobia she dealt with every day defined her experience and influenced how she used her position of power. Myles recalls how Tim Dlugos, who edited the Project's newsletter at the time, ran paintings of his friends who died of AIDS. Readers actually complained, asking: What does this have to do with poetry, with The Poetry Project? Myles witnessed the sudden appearance of art galleries and limos in the East Village amidst the neighborhood's cheap rent, homelessness, and crime. Meanwhile, the NEA was figuring out ways to defund the arts by encouraging non-profit organizations to turn to corporate funders. In "Poetry in the 80s," Myles describes her visit to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. to defend The Poetry Project as an organization that (still) serves poets and audiences in ways more infinite than calculable. She documents how the Project's programming was read as unknown:

Tim O'Brien screamed why doesn't

06/11

anyone read Shakespeare anymore. Stanley Elkin [*sic*] in response to the fact that 20,000 people used our programs each year – I did the math – had I exaggerated. What if it was twenty. What if it was two. He screamed is this a literary institution or a gymnasium. It gave you sort of a racist feel. More bad public smell. The bodies were unavoidable in the 80s. That was the problem. Cynthia Macdonald raised a list of all the people who had read at the Project since 1966. Who are these people she screamed and she really did scream. At the break everyone calmed down. We walked around and schmoozed people we liked which were few. Heather McHugh came over to me and explained kindly and sweetly I really like street theater. I was thinking she meant Nuyorican poets but I really didn't know what she meant. I remember her purple clothes and that she was nice and meant well. She was not them, she was us was what she wanted to say. But the flag of us and them had been utterly raised over the room and what I had learned was the central poetics of American life as I understood it was now one stream next to a roiling corporate affiliate, the mainstream.²⁴

What this stuffy wing of the government snubbed most was the notion that poets could run an organization for poets. Existing outside the mainstream brands, the Project was deemed threatening in its unquantifiable-ness. Poets had taken on a form of self-government. I link this account of Myles's brush with the state's highly exclusionary version of literary support to how she ran for president in 1992 as a performance piece. This intervention might as well have been saying, I'll never be Poet Laureate but I'd rather be the president anyway.²⁵

I have a memory of Guillermo Gómez-Peña performing at Charlie Jane Anders's "Writers With Drinks" series in San Francisco. In between pieces, he told the story of his fraught relationship as a correspondent with National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. Gómez-Peña reflected on how NPR tried to steer him toward talking *only* about art and culture. Not politics. As if current events aren't an artist's realm of expertise. Similarly, poets put in proximate association with the state are often in a promotional exchange with the state and therefore too compromised to make much of a statement.²⁶ Barack Obama chose Elizabeth Alexander to read at his first inauguration. Kevin Quashie, in his book *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, examines how Alexander's reading stands as an important

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

moment of “quiet” as opposed to “resistance,” which he argues is the dominant expectation of black culture:

Many people felt underwhelmed by her reading, largely because Alexander is a poet who reads with measured emphasis rather than dramatic performativity. Perhaps she did not match this moment when the whole watching audience wanted an expressiveness that would speak to their excitement, to the historic elation of the country’s first black president, to the hope brimming around the corner and the desperations lingering in the air. Perhaps she did not – or even could not – match the public expectations of the moment.²⁷

Four years passed. In the winter of 2013, I heard the word “poet” spoken on the radio, which felt like a shocking news story in and of itself. The voice belonged to Richard Blanco. The interview cut to a clip about his experience of being invited to read a poem at Obama’s second presidential inauguration:

Of course, the first impulse was – because I was the youngest, first openly gay, first Hispanic or Latino – the first impulse was: I have to represent all this in the poem, and sort of be more of an in-your-face kind of poem. Then I took a step back from that and I realized, well, yes, it’s all those things, but I think there’s a larger platform here.²⁸

The word “first” repeats as if trying to convince Blanco of something. He is not “the first” of any of these identifications outside the context of reading a poem at the inauguration. And so, “the first” becomes contingent on the delivery of a nugget of literature, not on the literature itself or the life producing the literature.

I had a dream that the writer and activist Sarah Schulman attempted to clarify how Ryan’s absence of lesbian content is as predictable as a clock’s second hand. Time is upside down. Minutes don’t add up. Things are moving slowly like gravity nodding its head no. I said what about Eileen Myles’s aesthetic of complete straightforwardness, where the “lesbian” cannot exactly be excised? Schulman demanded eye contact; look at me, “I have been censored because I say what no one wants to hear.” I tried to reply, “But it’s also how you say it.” In the dream, Schulman’s voice grew soft after this gust of polemic. “All I really want are for my lesbian protagonists to be with all the other protagonists.” I then dreamt of going to my playground of a bookstore and finding the “LGBT

section” (or “queer section”) gone and Schulman’s books shelved in “fiction” and “nonfiction.” I panicked. I wanted the section back. I woke up and thought of the Bureau of General Services – Queer Division, with its separate shelves for all the various identity and genre based subdivisions a queer bookstore houses, like neighbors who may or may not say hi to each other.

Then I was actually scouring a used bookstore in Lincoln, Nebraska, for books to help me write the one this essay is part of, on a stop along the cross-country drive that pulled me back to New York. I asked the bookseller to point me to the LGBT section, which was tucked away in the back, a cove akin to the porn section of a video store. I found Schulman’s *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years* on a stack yet to be alphabetized and shelved. Then I walked across to the poetry section and found a few of Kay Ryan’s books. I told the poet Jocelyn Saidenberg about this problem as we sat in the packed audience of a screening for the documentary *T’Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s*.²⁹ Jocelyn asked: “Can’t we have both?” Ryan and Schulman’s books should be located in “both” sections.

Jocelyn was one of the first people to answer an awkward call I sent out for interviews about how art is labeled “queer.” She invited me over for dinner in her amazingly adult home. I remember cabinets encasing books, to reduce dust and enhance archival endurance. Jocelyn served me a nourishing vegetable curry while I asked her to tell me about how she came to be a poet in San Francisco. I didn’t turn on my tape recorder. I left the conversation understanding how queerness is extremely valuable because she told me about the ways her queerness has been honored, not marginalized. I was shedding my internalized homophobia as she spoke. She recalled being welcomed into the Small Press Traffic poetry community where fellow queers, Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy, invited her to read. Jocelyn told me about Kris Kovick and her 17 Reasons reading series at the Red Dora’s Bearded Lady Café. Kovick introduced Jocelyn to the audience as a geeky brainy poet – which I translate to mean Jocelyn did not read autobiographical prose. When Jocelyn began curating at Small Press Traffic and later at New Langton Arts, she looked to Kovick as a model for how she brought together different aesthetics at the risk of the audience’s discomfort. Five years after this conversation, I emailed to ask about what exactly she learned from Kovick. She wrote about the importance of alliances: Kovick “never championed a particular aesthetic to the detriment of other kinds of writing. She was loyal

07/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

to her friends and also very inclusive.”³⁰

Jocelyn’s life as a poet, she told me, is really a lot about friendship. I began to understand “queerness” in poetry functioning similarly to the ways friendship unfolds in the life of the writer. At the early stages of writing this book, I read Jocelyn’s work fervently because I identified with it. Like my bad experiment to quantify the “queerness” of the art in the “Suggestions of a Life Being Lived” exhibition, I started to study Jocelyn’s poetry by locating the “queer” content as though tracing a map. I was massaging the question of, am I trying to theorize the untheorizable? Jocelyn traverses a range that includes Ryan’s feigned “hot and sticky” of lesbian subjectivity in the first person, as well as challenging the gender binary altogether. Jocelyn begins her first book, *Mortal City*, by addressing the process of resisting the impulse to name something:

this is called
the impermanence of things
of nothing shows
behind the image
except the nail

and the wall³¹

Artistic production is a routine and so Jocelyn’s poem shows us the image’s backside. In asking how visual representations operate in codes, the narrator turns their attention to the structural support underneath “the image.” In the contractual poem entitled “SIGN HERE,” Jocelyn instructs the reader to “desert the surface” and “wrestle platitudes.”

I have a theory about Jocelyn’s poetry after reading it over the past five years: she steadily uses the language of weather patterns to express how individuals and groups navigate turbulent emotional atmospheres. The narrator in *Mortal City* struggles to activate a singular voice as though lost in a fog; they are studying a place by emphasizing its disparate parts. I pretend to be a meteorologist and find restlessness in Jocelyn’s poetics, not unlike the Bay Area’s mix of microclimates. Themes of gender, desire, politics might seem quantifiable, but the writing is more about the permeability of all of the above, like the way glitter sticks on a pillowcase after lightly poking your eyelids.

In Jocelyn’s fourth book, *Dead Letter*, she tells the story of Herman Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener from the tormented and inexplicable copyist’s point of view, not the boss’s. On Jocelyn’s terms, Wall Street becomes the stage for a failed romance between the path of least resistance lawyer and Bartleby, whose refusal to

work has no perceptible logic. Jocelyn’s narrative begins where Melville’s story ends, with the realization that Bartleby’s previous job was in the dead letter department of a postal service in a time of more robust mail activity. Bartleby announces, “I am the dawn.” Then, I am “atmospheric” and finally, “I am as weather shadow cloud and as weather shadow cloud I depart.”³² The poetry chants a reflective opaqueness that suggests cause and effect but resonates instead as fixed generalities of “weather shadow cloud.” Sunlight, and the lack thereof, shapes Bartleby as disposable. He dies of a hunger strike in jail. Dead Letter circulates around the poetics of fending off and embracing vulnerability and perception after one has received the secret missives of so many bodies through undelivered personal letters.

Jocelyn’s context is the fairly insular world of Bay Area experimental poetry. She has published with small presses, which operate with a different type of visibility than Kay Ryan’s publisher, Grove Press, does. This is a crude division and one based on the numeric quantifiers: book sales and distribution, grants and awards. I was interested in Jocelyn’s work because she accepted my invitation to ask her about how and why she wrote it. I am always reckoning with the reality that poets are rarely household names in this country and that the relative notion of a queer’s invisibility is not so different than a poet’s invisibility. For a person who is queer and a poet (among many other “things”) their potential “invisibility” becomes a long division equation with a trail of numbers stretching past the decimal point. By invisibility, I do not mean to make visibility the goal; I’m invested more in “invisibility” as an honorable un-doing of the popularity routine. “Visibility” with a capital V often prioritizes the lowest common denominator of the masses as opposed to prioritizing the material needs of a poet who is queer.

The book that includes this essay has been a cover for what feels like many urgent and messy conversations. When I began writing, I was desperate to feel swaddled in dyke mentorship. But I never admitted that to myself, exactly. Instead, I did things like get Judith Butler’s haircut. I brought a picture of Butler to the Male Image, a barbershop in the Castro. Butler poses as if to end up in the neat grid of a yearbook. Her hair is gray and side parted in a graceful mushroom cut. Her smile complies with conventions of the school portrait studio. I covertly printed the picture at the Academy of Art Writing Center when a student didn’t show up for their session to fix grammar mistakes. I ripped the paper around Butler’s portrait to make my haircut stamp-size and portable in my wallet.

08/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

The barber was slightly irritated when I pulled it out; a tension radiated between his scissors and me. Was it that a dyke interfered with the man-on-man vibe of the space? I said the haircut was for a performance. He asked when it was. I said, I don't know, soon.

I retold this story at a holiday party filled to the brim with queers and I felt a sense of victory when the room responded with roaring laughter. Then I felt like I had to start really reading Butler, past her pop song essays. I was relieved when no one quizzed me on Butler's recent work on precarity. I then found a French documentary about Butler, where a soundtrack of klezmer music plays as she attests to not knowing what "queer theory" was until people were telling her she had a hand in making it.³³ She started out in feminism and gender and now adamantly writes a philosophy that considers feminism and gender but is mostly about the dehumanization of people the US is waging war against. Starting in 2013, she became active in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian Liberation.

Jacqueline Francis's *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* brings up Harold Rosenberg's "famous" question from the 1960s, "Is there a Jewish art?" Francis notes "in subsequent decades many exhibition catalogue writers and survey text authors have taken up the question as well in discussions that answer Rosenberg's query in the negative and simultaneously expanded the notion of Jewish Cultural Production."³⁴ The questioning of labeling is so firmly planted in history, yet the reappearance of the question isn't exactly redundant. It's like tourists going through the motion of taking the same picture of a beautiful site. Everyone needs their own copy. Why did I pretend, with the flimsiness of a haircut, to look like Judith Butler? I criticize myself now for choosing a famous philosopher to be in imagined dialogue with. She's packaged as a hero, ready to be adored by the newly queer. Why did I study Jocelyn's writing? Why did I parse Sontag's obituaries? I think about the bizarre façade in ethnic longing. So what if I am drawn to these white jewish lesbians of varying generations away from mine? There was a moment when talking to Jocelyn and reading her work that helped me fit some pieces into place: the legibility of art labeled as queer depends on highly specific localized groups of people and the individuals supporting each other within these communities. "Queer" means little when stripped from its context. There was a moment of trying to reach Kay Ryan through her agent and giving up. I had to remind myself I'm not searching for long-lost family – I'm trying to build my own.

Perhaps it is not that I want to stop critiquing what is called "queer art" but just to recover from being barraged by it. My eyes grow tired when any word repeats. I lose interest. I don't want reinvention. I want more specific language. This particular naming needs a counterpart of always asking about all the art that falls outside the "queer" category that might really be sharing something with this category. When I first began writing this, a friend warned me about how I was using the word "scene," not "community," in my understanding of social and artistic landscapes. I asked, "What's the difference?" not yet understanding how cynical and critical the word "scene" sounded. Like I was locked out. But really, I was young(er) and hadn't been in one place long enough to contribute to various communities built around shared interests and experiences. I could only have been compelled to write this at that acute moment of estrangement.

x

"Simplicity Craving" is an excerpted chapter from Ariel Goldberg's book-length essay *The Estrangement Principle*, forthcoming from Nightboat Books in October 2016.

09/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

Ariel Goldberg's publications include *The Photographer* and *Picture Cameras*. They have received research fellowships at the New York Public Library's Wertheim Study and Allen Room, a Franklin Furnace Fund grant for a series of slideshow performances, and have been an artist in residence at Headlands Center for the Arts, The Invisible Dog, Residencias Artísticas Intercambios and SOMA in Mexico City.

10/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving

1
Camille Roy, *The Rosy Medallions* (Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 1995), 27.

2
Dawn Lundy Martin, *The Morning Hour* (New York: The Poetry Society of America, 2003), 8.

3
Holland Cotter, "Sexuality in Modernism: The (Partial) History," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2010. Cotter writes, "The whole enterprise looked like an exercise in Hall of Fame-building, rather than like an effort to chip away at the very idea of hierarchy and exclusion."

4
Robert Atkins, "Goodbye Lesbian/Gay History, Hello 'Queer Sensibility': Meditating on Curatorial Practice," *College Art Association Journal* 55, No. 4 (1996): 80–85. Atkins criticizes curators Lawrence Rinder and Nayland Blake of the Berkeley Art Museum 1996 "In a Different Light," as well as *Art in America's* "After Stonewall," which was a "package of 12 interviews conceived and realized by Holland Cotter...At its most problematic, the contemporary-oral-history format obviates any give and take. This reader yearned, for instance, for Cotter's response to Hugh Steers's observation that 'gay art is a marketing label ... it's important to discuss it and expose the fallacy of lumping us all together.'"

5
Chuck Mobley, Julia Haas, Alison Maurer, Irene Gustafson, Jonathan D. Katz, Kim Anno, Julian Carter, and Robert Atkins, "Emergency Screening: *A Fire in My Belly* – a short film by David Wojnarowicz and Panel Discussion," SF Camerawork, December 10, 2010.

6
"Suggestions of a Life Being Lived," SF Camerawork, San Francisco, CA, September 9–October 23, 2010. Exhibit featured Steven Miller, Tara Mateik, Killer Banshee, Gay Shame, Kirstyn Russell, Jeannie Simms, Lenn Keller, Mercury Vapor Studios, Chris Vargas, Greg Youmans, Jason Fritz Michael, Aay Preston-Myint, Allyson Mitchell, Eric Stanley, Torsten Zenas Burns, and Darrin Martin.

7
Adrienne Skye Roberts, in discussion with the author, October 13, 2010.

8
Suggestions of a Life Being Lived, ed. Danny Orendorff and Adrienne Skye Roberts (San Francisco: SF Camerawork, 2011), 13.

9
Ibid., 34.

10
Jonathan D. Katz, *Hide/Seek:*

Difference and Desire in American Portraiture (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2011), 23. Katz quoting Abbott in an interview with Kaucyila Brooke. Katz also cites Tee A. Corinne's self-published 1996 book *The Lesbian Eye of Berenice Abbott*.

11
Peter Hujar, "Susan Sontag," "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery), 2010, Museum Exhibit Label.

12
Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947–1963*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 221.

13
Margalit Fox, "Susan Sontag, Social Critic with Verve, dies at 71," *New York Times*, December 28, 2004: http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/28/books/susan-sontag-social-critic-with-verve-dies-at-71.html?_r=0

14
Lisa Levy, "Critical Intimacy: Comparing the Paradoxical Obituaries of Susan Sontag," *The Believer*, April 2006. Terry Castle eulogized Sontag in a very "out" way by reflecting on difficulty in their friendship in *The London Review of Books* in 2005. Castle also cites Allan Gurganus's *The Advocate* obituary, which expresses the wish that Sontag came out.

15
Sontag, *Reborn*, 221.

16
Sarah Schulman, *Ties that Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 122.

17
"More About Kay Ryan: Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, 2008-2010," The Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/poetry/more_ryan.html

18
The Poet's View: Intimate Profiles of Five Major Poets, directed by Mel Stuart (Filmmakers Library, 2009), 95 mins.

19
Kay Ryan, *Dragon Acts to Dragon Ends* (Fairfax: Taylor Street Press, 1983), 26.

20
Ryan, *The Best of It* (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 110–11.

21
Ibid.

22
Ryan, interview by Ian Mylchreest, *KNPR's State of Nevada*, 88.9 KNPR FM, November 4, 2009.

23

Danielle Evennou, "The Elephant in the Room: Kay Ryan," *Beltway: Poetry Quarterly* 10 (2009), Vol. 4.

24

Eileen Myles, "Poetry in the 80s." *Eileen Myles*, June 2012, 7-8, <http://www.eileenmyles.com/pdf/PoetryInThe80s.pdf>

25

Myles, "How to Run for President of the United States of America," DO IT Manual, e-flux, 1995, [../projects/do_it/manuals/artists/m/M005/M005.html](http://projects.do_it/manuals/artists/m/M005/M005.html)

26

Sharon Olds, "Open Letter to Laura Bush," *The Nation*, September 19, 2005, <https://www.thenation.com/article/open-letter-laura-bush/>. Sharon Olds declined an invitation by Laura Bush to the White House in protest of the Iraq war.

27

Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 97.

28

Richard Blanco, interviewed by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, February 18, 2013.

29

T'Aint Nobody's Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s, directed by Robert Philipson (San Francisco: Shoga Films Foundation, 2013).

30

Jocelyn Saidenberg, email to the author, February 22, 2016.

31

Saidenberg, *Mortal City* (San Diego: Parenthesis Writing Series, 1998), 7.

32

Saidenberg, *Dead Letter* (New York: Roof Books, 2014), 15.

33

Judith Butler: Philosophical Encounters of the Third Kind, directed by Paule Zajdermann (First Run/Icarus Films, 2006), 52 mins.

34

Jacqueline Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 10.

11/11

e-flux journal #75 — september 2016 Ariel Goldberg
Simplicity Craving