



Statements
Andrew Atchison

2.6.23–24.6.23

Partiality and Passion: Andrew Atchison's Quotational Abstraction

One of my favorite quotations is about quotation; or, at least, that is how I remember it. I've excitedly paraphrased it many times to share its lessons with others. This borrowed idea has been a guiding principle and a balm because it seems to capture so much of the thrill and the frustration of encountering others' ways of thinking. In my hazy reconstruction, it goes something like this: *sometimes when we read books, an idea will seize us and inspire us—so much so that we have to put down the book to follow our own racing thoughts. Many good books go unfinished because of such departures, but those unfinished books also sometimes give us the new paths that make us who we are.*

Of course, I was incorrect about my favorite quotation about quotation. I went to look it up for this essay, only to see (again) how badly I had remembered Samuel R. Delany's words that I had found so useful. My animating passage is from Delany's 1988 memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water*, and his voice reads:

Writers who influence us, at least when we're young (pace Harold Bloom), are not usually the ones we read thoroughly and confront with complete attention, but rather the ill- and partially-read writers we start on, often in troubled awe, only to close the book after pages or chapters, when our own imagination works up beyond the point where we can continue to submit our fancies to theirs.
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Without doubt, I had distorted the quotation, fabulating it to meet my needs and to make it workable, adaptable, and catalytic. Much as Delany said I would, this quotation spun me out of his book to take a life of its own. It authorized a mode of capacious reading, and it gave license to follow the thoughts—however partial—that animate. (I did, however, finish Delany's essential book.) Ideas enable; they change our experience of the world and our perception of its horizons. They take root in us only to grow (or go fallow) in unexpected ways. Ideas can be shared, but the grounds for others' roots yield different crops than our own. To be shared, ideas must be condensed, and the quotation from an inspiring text is one way we contain our ideas and put them into transit with others.

When Andrew Atchison and I were talking about the work in this exhibition, this quotation (and by that I mean my distant paraphrasing of it) came to me, again. Predictably, I marshaled it in this context, as it seemed to be a good way to query the emotional investments we might find in a quotation, a slogan, or an idea that becomes foun-dational to us. Atchison's exhibition is, after all, a love letter to ideas and to the words that might encapsulate or convey them. Throughout the gallery, he has presented in neon script a selection of fragmentary quotations from queer theoretical treatises. These borrowed and treasured phrases act as lightening rods for ideas and actions. Atchison's quotations are made material—fabulously so—with their glowing, polychrome anatomy. But, they are also guarded from our attempts to dissect them; blank parallelograms shield the phrases. Radiating yet redacted, Atchison's wall sculptures both offer and withhold, and this two-step is an act of care for these enabling ideas that Atchison holds tightly to despite wanting to share.

Atchison's shielded phrases are not, properly, discrete quotations so much as they are the anchors of the texts that have lodged in his thinking. In their carefully shortened forms, they stand not just for the full prose from which they are taken but also for the life of thought that each evokes. Each performs as a talisman, condensing Atchison's enthusiasms, intellectual labor, and the attempt to see the world differently through the lens of these guiding words. But, the rest of us are external to those enthusiasms, so it is fitting that Atchison's wall sculptures are characterized both by an alluring glow and the redaction of the words that lit the way. The neon's colors are perceived indirectly through their absorption of the white walls on which they hang. Like the talisman that stands for the beyond, we don't see the thing itself—only its radiant effects. Instead, we are faced with the screens underneath which the words burn, and we fill those purposeful blanks with our inquisitions and projections.

These works are a tease, and they know it. They make us work to discern “a great refusal” (José Esteban Muñoz) or “another discursive horizon” (Teresa de Lauretis). They promise “a kind of evidence” (Roland Barthes) but leave us nothing but “ambiguity and legibility” (Jack Halberstam). Each is “an identity without an essence” (David Halperin), and all perform “ways of not saying” (Michel Foucault). They flirt, they demure, and they remain ungraspable.

With this queer theory pantheon, Atchison's work might seem, at first, as cerebral or didactic. After all, he is presenting us with erudite quotations made into sculpture that is geometric, reductive, and minimal—in other words, blank and hermetic. The neon-written words are not accessible or approachable. We can't see them plainly or look at them head-on—only askance. They are only legible with extreme effort to piece them together (and the blindness caused by looking sideways into the light). As well, we could go track down the source, read the full text, and teach ourselves. But most of us will not, and that is no failing or flaw of ours. Our not knowing the source makes the halo of effects all that much more entraining and open. Room has been made for us; we don't really need to cede to the authority of the writers whom Atchison has lovingly enshrined as screened words. They matter to him. They could matter to us, but they need not. Inspiration can't be duplicated,

but it can be shared. I prefer to see Atchison's resplendent yet withheld textual fragments not for what they say but rather for how they show what they feel. The blank redactions of Atchison's works burn with energy underneath. *That* we know without following the reference to an authorial or authorizing origin.

All together, we have been presented with a diary of Atchison's priorities and rallying cries. The gallery is nothing less than a missal for queer living, and it offers proof that ideas can nourish, fortify, and animate us. The rainbow glow of the gallery is full of his most cared-for watchwords; the ones that get him through. The fact that these precious principles are given to us only partially, illegibly, and with their message withheld is not, however, parsimonious or disdainful. No, it is generous. There is room for each of us to consider the phrase or the idea that whisks us away yet stays with us. Perhaps the feeling we should have amidst Atchison's carefully cultivated yet redacted slogans is not clarity or comprehension. Perhaps, instead, it is the passion they channel. The glow is just beyond, waiting for us to chart our own way towards new horizons.

—*David J. Getsy, 2023*

Andrew Atchison is an artist based in Melbourne/Naarm who works across multiple artforms and has ongoing critical interests in queer identity formation, language, public space, and the aesthetics of withholding.

From 2019–22 he was a studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary. He has exhibited widely, including at Gertrude Contemporary, LON Gallery, TCB Art Inc, Incinerator Gallery, Testing Grounds, Greenwood Street Projects, Light Projects, First Draft, West Space, Kings ARI, Seventh, First Site Gallery, and Next Wave and Midsumma Festivals.

In 2018 he completed a Master of Fine Arts (research) at MADA, Monash University. In 2021 he curated *Education Space: Creating Art in Public* as part of the exhibition *Who's Afraid of Public Space?* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), and in 2019 curated and published the catalogue for the exhibition ... (illegible)... at Monash Art Design and Architecture (MADA) Faculty Gallery.

Andrew has completed a number of public space projects across Victoria, with recent projects in the City of Yarra and City of Melbourne.

David J. Getsy writes about queer and transgender methods in contemporary art and art history. His books include *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art* (2022), *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (2015/2023), and *Queer, an anthology of artists' writings* (2016). He teaches at the University of Virginia (USA), where he is the Eleanor Shea Professor of Art History.

LON GALLERY

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www.longallery.com
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Image: Andrew Atchison, *Statement and stratagem (José)* 2019, neon and aluminium, irregular dimensions, Photograph: Christian Capurro