

**Title:** Refusing Ambiguity

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Nominations of ambiguity are nothing more than declarations of resignation. We call something ambiguous when we give up on it and when we avoid committing to learning about all that does not fit into our categories. Objects, people, texts, events, and acts are not themselves ambiguous. They are particular, unassimilable, unorthodox, unprecedented, or recalcitrant. To invoke 'ambiguity' is to flee from the confrontation with something that does not easily fall into one's patterns of knowing. This act of exhausted reading disrespects the particularity of that which is before us and instead writes it off as being at fault – as being unknowable, indiscernible, and incompletely categorisable. 'Ambiguity' is safe to invoke, because it places blame for our own limitations elsewhere. It is a method of deflection and scapegoating. It enables us to throw up our hands and lead a hasty retreat from confronting how limited our categories and systems are. After all, what do we really mean when we say something or someone is ambiguous? We mean that *we* cannot read, cannot identify, and cannot classify. Instead, I want to uphold the particularity and inscrutability that the backhanded slur 'ambiguous' attempts to manage. I want to see that particularity as a challenge to systems of knowing.

I've recently been writing about abstraction and ways in which gender nominations are vexed by abstract, non-figurative, and non-objective forms. My aim has been to show the limitations of binary accounts of gender by using art's rich history of debating what counts as an adequate figure (or a feasible departure) against compulsions to assign (binary) gender. When the body is invoked but not imaged, gender

nominations become open for debate and contestation, and it is in the dialogic situations of discord or successive nominations that gender's openness, mutability, and multiplicity can be manifested. This is *not* due to the ambiguity of the abstract form. Rather, it is because of the ways in which the same intransigent form means differently for different viewers. To call this situation 'ambiguous' is to fall back into hopeless subjectivity and avoidance. Instead, let's call this situation 'competing' to show how much it is in the viewer's incomplete attempt to classify that differences emerge and supposedly stable taxonomies unravel amidst contestations and divergences of reception. The difficulties of reading abstract art resulted from its withstanding attempts to categorise based on resemblance or the exterior. Instead, the limitations of a binary system of gender erupted repeatedly as viewers negotiated their divergent identifications with forms that resisted easy legibility. For me, such debates were deeply informed by the politics of transgender history and its demand that we look for suppressed evidence of non-binary genders and accounts of self-determination and successive personhood. This history again and again demands recognition that people are not ambiguous. People are themselves, for themselves. Mischaracterising any particularity for 'ambiguity' is a means of making their endurance of your scrutiny into a form of subservience to your desire for comfortable intelligibility.

'Ambiguous' as an invocation or description merely signals the limitations of the one who would deploy that term. This does not mean I want everything clear and in its place. Quite the opposite: I want to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies. This is a queer stance, for it denies the applicability or the neutrality of those taxonomies as adequate representations of the world's complexity. Rather, they are artificial impositions of normativity more concerned with policing boundaries than with engagement. To take this term to task is to demand that we see the greater structural limitations that its invocations hope to mask. 'Ambiguity' as a description is not just lazy. It's chauvinistic. More to the point, its deployment keeps us from recognising and embracing the chance to see beyond the categories that are nothing more than blinders forcing us to stay on a narrow path.

Especially today, we cannot afford ambiguity. We must attempt to embrace inscrutability and particularity, and we can defiantly exceed or jam the taxonomic protocols that seek to delimit and define us. The undertow of ambiguity is complacency and surrender, and it is misapplied to acts of refusal and self-definition.

# THE SPIT!

## MANIFESTO READER

A SELECTION OF HISTORICAL AND  
CONTEMPORARY QUEER MANIFESTOS

Frieze Projects 2017

SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!)

Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero

The *SPIT! Manifesto Reader*, a reader of historical and contemporary queer manifestos is the second component of the Frieze Project by SPIT! (Carlos Motta, John Arthur Peetz, Carlos Maria Romero) and was published on the occasion of Frieze Projects 2017 at Frieze London, 5–8 October 2017. The first component is a series of performative interventions by a group of performers (Daniel Brathwaite-Shirley, Joshua Hubbard, Claudia Palazzo, Malik Nashad Sharpe, Carlos Mauricio Rojas, Despina Zacharopoulou) that take five original manifestos written by SPIT! as a point of departure and that were performed daily at Frieze London.

Raphael Gy ax  
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PART I INTRODUCTION

# THE SPIT! MANIFESTO READER INTRODUCTION

**Author:** SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!)  
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**Year:** 2017

*The SPIT! Manifesto Reader* brings together a selection of historical and contemporary queer manifestos<sup>1</sup> to create a dialogue between radical queer histories, past and present. Arguably, queer histories can be narrated through these declarative statements of discontent with political systems that are inherently patriarchal, discriminatory, biased, racialised, class-based, or gendered. We consider these excerpted texts manifestos insofar as they are statements of intent, demands for visibility, or calls for autonomy in reaction to oppressive political environments. Ranging from the late 1960s to the 2010s, these texts express a progression of intersectional concerns and practices in the sexual and gender rights movements: from the sexual and gender liberation of the 1970s, to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, to the activism around identity politics during the 1990s, and the rejection of the international LGBTQI movement’s assimilationist agenda and its capitalist incorporation in the 21st century. We hope that this reader can be used as a linear timeline upon which to reflect or understand the progressions that have taken place in the queer and human rights struggles that have led us to the present. We also hope that this reader can serve as ideological evidence that underscores the urgency and importance of action, voice, and visibility in our social inheritance as queer people, asserting ourselves and the place of our desires in the world.

In addition to the historical manifestos published in this reader, the SPIT! (Sodomites, Perverts, Inverts Together!) Collective has produced five original queer manifestos to be performed and distributed on the occasion of the 2017 Frieze Projects in London. SPIT! consists of three cultural producers hailing from different disciplines – Carlos Motta from the visual arts, John Arthur Peetz from art writing, and Carlos Maria Romero from dance and live art – who share a long-standing interest in histories of queer activism and sexual and gender politics. SPIT! wants to consider what has been deemed ‘progress’ (social, legal, and cultural) and think

about the shifts in strategy and urgency that have taken place over the last four decades in search of social equality for queer people. Our collective is interested in thinking about *critical difference* as a productive way of challenging entrenched systemic discrimination on the basis of sex and gender. While the framework of ‘equality’ has succeeded in finding ways to be included and assimilated in society (marriage equality, inclusion in the military, etc.), it has failed to transform an inherently oppressive and violent system.

In a time of unprecedented visibility and advancement of legal rights for LGBTQI people in the West, SPIT! is concerned with the ways in which the strategies of tolerance and inclusion have only carved inroads into existing societal norms and institutions, and have left many of our most vulnerable behind (namely those who are not rich, white, gay, and male). While these moderate social trophies may represent ideas of political progress, we aren’t satisfied with the ways in which historical patterns of discrimination and exclusion have been cyclically reproduced. The radical raging ethos of sexual and gender liberation, and our demands for a truly just and emancipated society seem to have been mollified with crumbs from a table at which we don’t even want to sit. The acknowledgement of our struggle as a human rights battle, the recognition of our sexual practices, and the vindication from our social status as vectors of disease are milestones that have taken place only within the past decade in the Western world. We queers have been societal, moral, political, and religious scapegoats for centuries and, make no mistake, we still are. Being able to marry or serve in the military doesn’t necessarily improve the lives of impoverished queer people of colour who don’t have access to basic health services; or of queer incarcerated people who are unjustly detained without due process; or of trans sex workers who are battered on the streets and elsewhere; or of undocumented queer immigrants who are prosecuted on the basis of their ethnicity – these individual’s lives are still regarded as disposable. We have compiled these manifestos to remind our communities that our social protections are precarious and not guaranteed. SPIT! urges our communities to WAKE UP! and to fight for and produce systemic changes that will benefit those beyond our immediate social circles.

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<sup>1</sup> *The SPIT! Manifesto Reader* largely focuses on American and European struggles and histories and we acknowledge that there are a number of other voices and manifestos from around the world that deserve equal recognition but unfortunately remain out of our purview.