

Ten

Park McArthur
interviews
Christopher Aque



Regards,

Ten questions from Park McArthur for Christopher Aque regarding his exhibition *I am*, etc.

1. PM

I was first wondering a kind of organizing question, which is how do you think of your *Identity Intelligence* works? Do you think of them as one piece or separate works that form a “unit”? Does this “unit” expand and contract?

CA

The works came about over a several month period, walking, biking, or driving through the streets with a Mamiya 16mm sub-miniature camera from the 1950s — a tiny little spy camera that I would conceal in my hand (sort of at my crotch level most of the time) just taking pictures of men who I would look at — a passing blink of the camera shutter. There are probably a thousand negatives, and because the camera is so unwieldy, many of those are of nothing at all.

When I set about organizing the show, the editing process became a mapping of instants of desire, and in that way, they were conceived as a group, but from completely disparate moments (not to mention a certain distillation of typology — the beefcake, the model, the construction worker). Each one is an entirely instantaneous and discrete incident, but I like the narrative and sense of motion that is created when they’re placed together, one that very much mimics day-to-day life. I suppose I am often thinking of what objects mean when placed in relationship to one another, almost as a curatorial position, and in some ways that happens at a micro level within the series — what does it mean that my trip to SoHo is next to the image shot outside my studio? In that way, it’s always expanding, always desiring and consuming new locations, networks, and meanings.

2. PM

Summer, this summer, is one of the things I think about when I look at the works that constitute *Identity Intelligence*. How does the setting of season, almost as a site in and of itself, occur in the works and as a kind of specificity among the backdrops of Google Maps and the spy tactics of the Lavender Scare?

CA

Summers in New York have a particular grittiness for me, but also an emotional shift. There’s a reaffirming lightness despite the heavy humidity — the city slows down, everyone is sweaty, men go around with their shirts off. There’s of course a certain lurid sexuality to it, an invitation to look as we all strip down, but also just a very human, practical necessity to undress. Google and other information-gathering systems give the sense that bodies are all just data sets, more or less interchangeable (or *exchangeable*, perhaps). But in a way, the heat reaffirms a corporeality that might otherwise be obscured by thick sweaters and puffy coats.

But if I’m to read the subtext of your question correctly, this summer itself was of particular importance to me with the Supreme Court decision on marriage equality. It was an extremely strange moment, one that puts so much New York history of post-AIDS activism into strange perspective, and almost treats it with the awkward ending of a simple bureaucratic contract.

3. PM

One of the things I really appreciate about what *Bulge* and the *Handle With Care* works do is that they eroticize the fantasy of panoptics and the fantasy of delivery. Or, they draw out an erotics present in those objects and what generates them but is often ignored or denied or used with violence. Can you talk more about that?

CA

As slightly altered readymades, in a sense, both *Bulge* and the *Handle with Care* works highlight a certain complicity (my complicity, most accurately) within structures of power and capital by acting as bodies in their own right. Although different, they're very related, in this way — sort of anthropomorphizing an erotics of vision and a desire to see, but not necessarily altering its basic operations. Both offer the crude ability to "reveal" while simultaneously looking back at you: the boxes, generated by me as an online consumer, almost undress to reveal their flesh, implying a certain violence in this act to see past the surface; the mirror, on the other hand shows you everything that's possible to see in any given room, as long as you're staring at its crotch.

4. PM

I was curious if you had any response to a quote from Audrey Lorde that I've been thinking about, from her essay "The Uses of the Erotic":

"The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need — the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment."

CA

As I was making this show I was actually thinking a lot about the violence of the erotic (specifically, I had been reading the recent Ariana Reines translation of Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, and so many of the ideas they presented back in 1999 were lining up so strangely with the work I was making). There, the erotic is labeled as a system that has been co-opted by capitalism, just as any other (and I suppose in that way it becomes the pornographic). It too has the power to render bodies homogenous.

I think this becomes quickly complicated — complicity, desire, and identity are really at the heart of this work — but what's so lovely about Lorde's text is that it is actually much more optimistic in its outlook, in a way that I often find difficult to manage myself. And maybe where I find such a validity in art: it offers an erotic value — that which is personally messy, complicated, and impossible to deal with completely — and allows for an experience which might begin to approach fulfillment.

5. PM

In pulling forth one of the questions the show poses: what do we now do with tools Clyde Tolson and J. Edgar Hoover could only have (wet) dreamed of in accomplishing both their mission and their fantasies?

CA

I suppose I can only access this from a nihilistic point of view — it's already happened, so how can one live in spite of it? (But also, Hoover would have already been outed on Scruff by now... Surveillance can go both ways.)

6. PM

Through sculpture, photography, and printmaking — things we are very acquainted with — the show asks very deep questions about technological apparatuses of surveillance. It's not using things like video or other media that would more directly bring our minds to that set of issues. This leads me to wonder where the digital or technological is in your work?

CA

The photographs in particular have a way of mimicking what a cell phone would do automatically. If I had taken those pictures with my iPhone, the locations would be already inscribed in the data of the image. By printing them by hand as silver gelatin prints, my involvement, my body, becomes part of the work, rather than being simplified or maybe even negated by the apparatus. There's also some-

thing interesting about the tension of nostalgia of the silver gelatin prints in relationship to the Google maps, which have, of course, been screen-printed by hand rather than inkjet printed. The relationship to matter becomes one that is more part of lived experience, rather than mediated entirely by technology. In that way, I think the digital is so much in the background of the work, that it becomes the default way information is accessed and manipulated, that to revisit these processes more mechanically asks for a different type of agency.

7. PM

I like how Liberace appears in your press release and connects to your use of Hollywood as both material and subject in other works. How do you think about Hollywood and the films made there in mid-century USA?

CA

Mid-century Hollywood has always been interesting to me in its use of architecture and set design as a way to connote homosexuality, a way to push content into the background, but also incorporate an identity into space directly. It was also the site of real and strange political tension during McCarthyism.

I actually didn't really know much about Liberace until that HBO film by Steven Soderbergh, *Behind the Candelabra*, came out (hah) a few years ago — I just had this peripheral knowledge of Liberace's position in a certain gay culture, but one that felt very abstract and removed from me personally. He became this figure that was both indicative of a past but also highlighted my own uncertainty with what that meant. But the strange quest to reveal his sexuality through the tabloids was also really interesting to me as something that paralleled stronger narratives of persecution both within Hollywood and within the larger American political sphere — as if this question for transparency were

not always already written all over his fur coats and mirrored piano, all those gestures hidden away in the background.

8. PM

In thinking about some of your other work I've seen, it makes me think a lot about transparency and opacity and reflectivity: which is maybe how I think about your treatment both of surface and material, but also ways of knowing or even what, maybe, is knowable. I'm curious how you think about these surface technologies and the desire "to know".

CA

Even the title for the show sort of plays with this — "I am, etc.," being an abbreviated version of the very formal valediction, "I am, and always remain, your humble servant." I was interested in the truncating quality of this, a cropping of identity or selfhood; it is a certain linguistic obfuscation in its own right. But I've always been interested in the ability of a surface to disclose information and both implicate the viewer in their expectations of content. Reflection, in particular, does this very directly, but is often reduced to pure surface, and what's behind it often can't be accessed or isn't acknowledged — a sort of eradication of content despite a certain surplus of information.

9. PM

In my mind it's connected to one of many things that is both fucked up and ridiculous about scares and hunts. First of all, they imagine a "zero balance" of the number of queers or whoever in the workplace, or in the world; they imagine pieces of "evidence" as ways of knowing (and to a very specific end). But second, it imagines an ontology of queerness or nonqueerness that is knowable. I think your work complicates and critiques this (obviously!) in really important ways. Just curious if any of these thoughts are on base or important.

CA

Absolutely — but I think what is sort of strange in this is that as a queer you are also looking for that in others, you are looking for visual and contextual signs of similarity or support. But in that very basic looking, a hunt in and of itself, it becomes such a similar act to larger systems of surveillance and a decryption of information, albeit with very different goals. I think what is strange about the extent to which our lives have become sets of data stored on Google's servers is that this gigantic structure already knows the signs of personal identity, as if all this looking is still an impossibly primitive operation.

But obfuscation and reflection are also very basic mechanisms of camouflage — to a certain extent they are necessary tools of survival for queers at some point or another, or at very least a means to control information. However, these mechanisms also begin to self-reproduce dominant ideological structures that I find very complicated. Maybe this can even go right back to marriage equality — in what way is the goal to reproduce certain norms indicative of this desire to reflect?

10. PM

You touched on this a little earlier, but what are some things — both as reference content and as ways to think through distribution and control of information and identity — that you read when thinking about your work? And how do these various sources come together?

CA

Very often things will have resonance only after the fact, in a way that is very logical to me but likely very illogical. There are certainly more theoretical works that have been formative and to which I return often (texts by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, John Paul Ricco, and David Halperin come to mind), but I'm also invested in

the more personal implications of theory through fiction or semi-fiction — the ways in which these ideas actually begin to interact in a personal framework. In that way, things begin to mutate and become very abstract, very open. When I was thinking through ideas for the show, thinking about this very tenuous relationship between cruising and contemporary surveillance and its connections to something like the Lavender Scare, it was a complete discovery to find out about Hoover's unconfirmed but highly probable homosexuality. Obviously it makes sense, as a very real tactic of self-obfuscation through the persecution of others, but it also creates and implies this very deep historical narrative, in a way that selfhood, state, and data become impossibly intertwined.

Christopher Aque is an artist living in New York.

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October 30 — December 19, 2015



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