

the future is flaccid

By

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Abstract

This text focuses on the relationship between my thesis exhibition and a manifesto I have written, both of which are titled *the future is flaccid*. The manifesto proposes “flaccidity” as a radical embodiment and tool to queer and undermine what I call “phallic masculinity,” an ideology and identity that mandates the pursuit of being continually erect, potent, and strong. I employ flaccidity as a critical and political tactic through an exploration of embodiment and gesture. I am interested in gestures as carriers of queer ephemera and as performative expressions that can perpetuate or undermine gender normativity. By analyzing the film *Grease*, I make evident how hyperbolic gender performances contain the material for their own undoing. Lastly, I explore the political nature of my work and its relation to other artists’ practices, protest media, queer and feminist manifestos, and queer theoretical texts.

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Gestural Potentialities & Potential Gesturalities	3
III. Walking out of a Drive-In	5
IV. Manifesting Utopia	14
V. Hopelessly Devoted to Flaccidity.....	22
VI. Dueling Performativities (Playing for Pinks)	25
VII. Becoming Milquetoast	27
VIII. Doing a Wet Run	30
IX. Inconclusion	34
Works Cited	35
the future is flaccid: a manifesto.....	37

List of Figures

Figure	Page
1. A mind map I made in preparation for my thesis proposal in 2021.....	2
2. Me and Lisa, practicing our Halloween choreography	5
3. Barbara Kruger, <i>Untitled (You construct intricate rituals)</i> , 1981.....	6
4. Danny strutting for Coach Calhoun. Movie still from <i>Grease</i>	7
5. <i>Prowlin'</i> , 2022. Video still	8
6. Bandura's Bobo Doll Experiment, ca. 1960. Video still	9
7. <i>Observational UnLearning</i> , 2020. Video stills.....	10
8. Bruce Nauman, <i>Walking in an Exaggerated Manner</i> , 1968. Video still	11
9. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Durational Performance.	13
10. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Installation View	13
11. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Manifesto display	16
12. First installation of flaccid protest signs, 2022.....	18
13. Solo flaccid protest, 2022. Performance documentation	18
14. Sharon Hayes, <i>In the Near Future</i> , 2009. Performance documentation.....	19
15. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Durational protest	20
16. Robert Mapplethorpe, <i>Man in Polyester Suit</i> , 1981	23
17. Mark Newport, <i>Super Heroes</i>	23
18. <i>You Just Haven't Had It the Right Way Yet</i> , 2019.....	24
19. <i>Pink Beans Brooch</i> , 2018	24
20. <i>Plumbing</i> , 2019	24
21. <i>Dear Friends</i> , 2018	24
22. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Installation view	26
23. <i>A Pie in the Puss</i> , 2022	29
24. <i>A Pie in the Puss</i> , 2022. Detail	29
25. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Installation View.	31
26. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Installation Detail.	31
27. <i>the future is flaccid</i> , 2022. Being projected upon	33

Introduction

I think I might have done my thesis the wrong way. Rather than spending my final year finely tuning the research and work I have been developing over my time in graduate school, I started an entirely new project based around a manifesto I had not yet written. The result has been that this feels more like the beginning of a long-term project, rather than three years of work coming to fruition. The work feels propositional and a bit clumsy. Almost everything, including this written thesis, feels like a rough draft. I am only now, in the process of writing this text, figuring out what the work actually is or what it might be doing.

I open my manifesto with a statement of dysfunction, explaining how this year has gone and why I found myself unable to write the manifesto in the way I had previously planned. In a way, this introduction is doing the same thing, contextualizing where I am in the process of processing my thesis. In the following pages, rather than fabricating a conclusion where there is none, I openly explore unexpected connections and happy accidents as well as where my intentions went awry. Each section revolves around a theory that has been central to my work; however, the structure is a bit like a mind map that jumps from a theory, to a piece of work, to another theory, to a memory, and back to the first theory again.

This first section, titled “Gestural Potentialities & Potential Gesturalities,” explains the queer theoretical frameworks that have been central to much of my work throughout graduate school, specifically *utopic potentialities* and *gestural ephemera*. The next section, “Walking out of a Drive-In,” connects these theories to the film *Grease*, which is the subject of much of my thesis work. “Manifesting Utopia” dives into the formal qualities of manifestos and outlines some key themes of the manifesto I have written. “Hopelessly Devoted to Flaccidity” examines the use of flaccidity in the art world as well as in my past work. “Dueling Performativities (Playing for Pinks)” explores how I use performative tactics to counteract gender normativity. “Becoming Milquetoast” outlines the liquid qualities of queerness. In “Doing a Wet Run,” I write about the utopic potentialities of rehearsal spaces. Finally, in the “Inconclusion,” I will be discussing the unresolved nature of the project and my plans for continuing this work.

Gestural Potentialities & Potential Gesturalities

In the first few pages of Michael Chabon's novel *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, two college students, both named Arthur, meet on a street corner outside of the university library. After briefly exchanging names, they begin to part ways.

At Forbes Avenue, Arthur started left, his head half turned to the right, towards me, his right shoulder lingering slightly behind him, as though it waited for me to catch up, or was reaching back to hook me and carry me along.²

The first time I read this novel, a seminal queer text for me, I remember realizing something important was happening in those words. I knew I needed to go back and digest the phrase carefully in order to understand the exact movement. This small gesture—the lingering of the shoulder; a slight turn of a head—creates a moment of hesitation between the boys that opens the possibility for the entire story to take place. Had Arthur not performed this gesture, and had Art not known how to read it, they would have parted ways and the book would end before it began. Whether intentional or not, the boys demonstrated a gestural knowing, an awareness to what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz might call “queer ephemera.”

Ephemera are the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures such as the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering handshake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman.³

2. Michael Chabon, *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988), 15.

3. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65.

Throughout *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz explores gestures as carriers of ephemeral knowledge and queer potentiality, which he defines as “a mode of non-being that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense.”⁴ It is within these ephemera, says Muñoz, that we can detect traces of past or undisclosed utopia that we can bring to bear on the present and the future. In other words, utopia no longer exists as an abstract future. Instead, utopia becomes a process of world-building that calls for an awareness of the past in order to critique and alter the present, and thus the future. This theoretical foundation is important because my practice is rooted in this act of hunting or cruising for utopic potentialities—moments, gestures, feelings, or essences that can disrupt the way things are and open paths to new modes of being.

I define my practice as lying somewhere between queer theory and art praxis. My research is rooted in primarily queer, feminist, and trans theory on language, futurity, and gender. Yet, I also take up the role as theorist, digesting and analyzing culture through a queer theoretical lens, often adapting others’ methodologies or expanding on their work. My studio acts as a laboratory for the excavation and fabrication of queer ephemera found in popular culture, such as the fist bump, the novelty sex doll, the psychological study, or the hypermasculine strut of Danny Zuko.

4. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

Walking Out of a Drive-In

In fourth grade, my best friend Lisa and I started watching *Grease*, the 1978 musical film, every weekend (until we started middle school and she found cooler friends). We memorized every line and would reenact each scene while watching the film. We also learned all of the dances and would mimic the characters voices and movements, cluelessly parroting phrases about “sloppy seconds” and “getting lots of tit.” We even dressed up as Danny and Sandy, the leading couple, for Halloween and choreographed our own dance to perform while trick-or-treating.

I found out years later that while we were having play dates, our mothers were discussing our impending marriage.⁵ I imagine they thought that *Grease* was somehow facilitating our budding heterosexual relationship, showing us how to navigate the pressures of high school and still end up together afterwards. Little did they know that I identified with the boys in the film not because of their alleged raging desires for girls, but because of how much they seemed to want to touch each other.



Figure 2: Me and Lisa, practicing our Halloween choreography.

5. Lisa’s very religious mom apparently once said, “If Tyler and Lisa get married you better be sure he’s good at oral sex.” And my mom said, “How the heck can I make sure of that!?”

Others have picked up on this as well. "When Danny...struts his stuff for 'the girl,' the female figure is a stand-in, a buffer that masks the ever-present gaze between Travolta's character and the boys," writes K. Bradford, an artist and ex-drag king/John Travolta impersonator.⁶ Or as queer scholar Michael Borgstrom described the T-Birds, "Boys will be boys...though these particular boys wear silver lamé coveralls and grind against each other while engaging in traditionally macho activities such as car repair."⁷

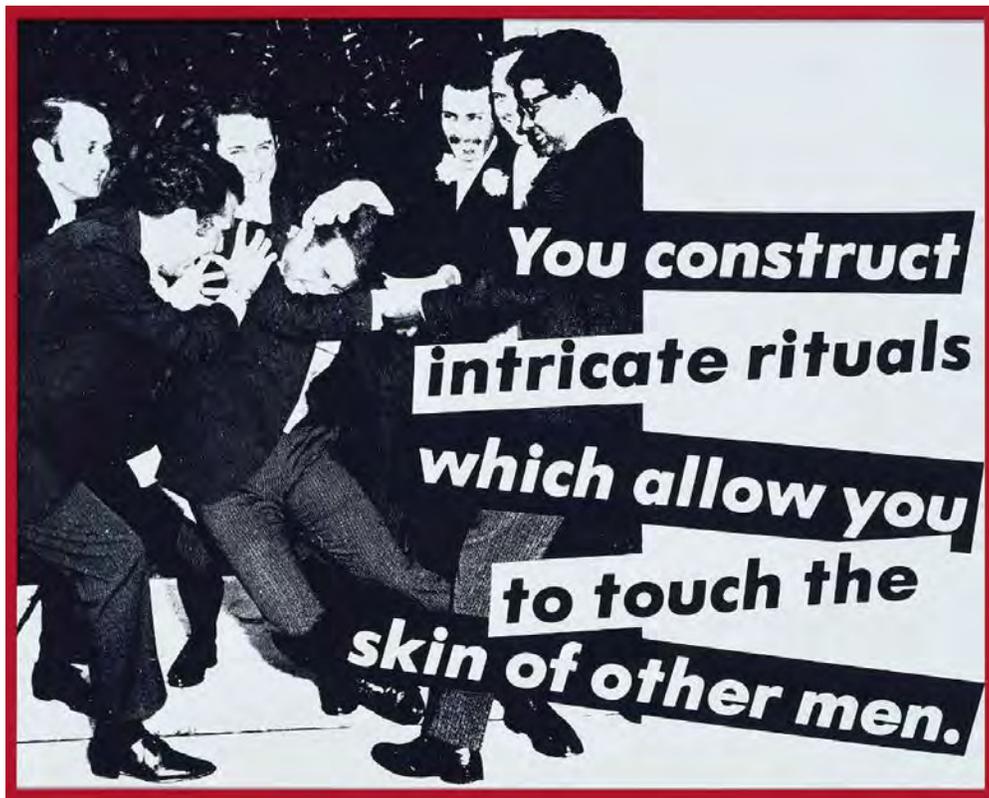


Figure 3: Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men)*, 1981.

Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men)*, created in 1981, three years after release of *Grease*, perfectly encapsulates this dynamic, portraying physical touch that is allowed and encouraged under heterosexual pretexts, while

6. K. Bradford, "Grease Cowboy Fever; Or, the Making of Johnny T," *Journal of Homosexuality* 43, no. 3-4 (2003): 21.

7. Michael Borgstrom, "Suburban Queer: Reading Grease," *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 2 (2011): 156.

simultaneously exposing its potential violence to the self or to others. Speaking about this piece, Kruger adds that these rituals do not only facilitate physical touch, but also allow for the witnessing and enjoyment of this physical touch by others.⁸

Danny Zuko, the leader of the pack and instigator of their intricate rituals, is also the leader of contradictory performances of masculinity. He switches rapidly throughout the film between classic archetypes: the nice guy, the horny teenager, the cool kid, the occasional misogynist creep. But all these characters collide with Travolta's cringey 1970's disco-boy take on 1950's greaser masculinity to create exciting and generative queer contradictions. Once again, K. Bradford said it best: "[His] swivel of hips, gyrating pelvis, flinging arms, faggy run, lilted voice and that underlying sensitivity combine with the distinctly Travolta butch strut and tough guy persona, transmuted his maleness into something subversively delicious."⁹



Figure 4: Danny strutting for Coach Calhoun. Movie still from *Grease*.

8. Barbara Kruger, "Resisting Reductivism & Breaking the Bubble," art21.org, December 2017, <https://art21.org/read/barbara-kruger-resisting-reductivism-breaking-the-bubble>. I learned of this piece after making a body of work that imagined the fist bump as a gestural trace or kinesthetic remnant of a forgotten ritual in which two men would merge their flesh by the knuckles, permanently conjoining themselves to one another.

9. Bradford, "Grease Cowboy Fever", 17.

In *Prowlin'*, a looped video projection, I continue my cruise for queer potentiality in gestures. I have isolated a specific walk, a saunter performed by Zuko throughout the film. It is an action he typically displays to amp himself back up again after an emasculating event, like when he gets rightfully chastised by Sandy or loses a wrestling match. My piece is comprised of a series of filmed gestural studies, in which fourteen members of my queer housing cooperative attempt to reproduce the Zuko saunter while wearing a greaser costume.¹⁰



Figure 5: *Prowlin'*, 2022. Video still.

The studies were set up in a similar manner to an observational learning experiment. Each person watched the same 30-second clip of Danny performing the saunter. Then, I prompted them to imitate the walk, turned the camera on, and left the room for four minutes. These recordings are informed by an earlier video performance of mine titled *Observational UnLearning*, a piece made in response to Alfred Bandura's Bobo Doll Experiments, a series of psychological studies from the 1960's. I was interested in how observational learning, the

¹⁰. Cooperation is another important aspect of how I redefine flaccidity. I have lived cooperatively for twelve of the last fifteen years, but this is the first time it has been a part of my work.

process of learning behavior through observation and imitation, overlaps with gendered social conditioning, the process by which humans learn to “correctly” perform the gender that was assigned to them at birth. More specifically, I was investigating how violent behavior became part of the learned performance of masculinity.

In the original experiment, child test subjects were shown a video of a woman, in a white blouse and black skirt, abusing an inflatable clown doll.¹¹ She kicks and throws the doll and pummels it with a wooden hammer. Afterwards, the children were put in a room with the same doll and were observed and recorded. The majority of the children imitated the woman, demonstrating violent behavior towards the doll. The results of the experiment supported Bandura’s social learning theory, proving that observation and imitation are one method through which we learn.



Figure 6: Bandura's Bobo Doll Experiment, ca. 1960. Video still.

11. Other children were observed after watching a video with a non-aggressive role model or without watching anything. These children showed far less violent behavior.

In *Observational UnLearning*, the same woman, reenacted by me, is back in the test room. Instead of a smiling Bobo clown doll, there is now a grimacing, aggressive-looking inflatable punching bag man with a black eye. She approaches the doll and begins to caress him. She embraces him, swaying side to side, brushing his cheek with her hand, massaging his shoulders. In another take, she pushes him to the ground, first straddling and then spooning him. This was my attempt to undo the damage done over time to the doll, which I imagine to be a direct descendent of the clown doll after 40+ years of continued violent treatment. I am simultaneously trying to undo the damage done to men, who are forced non-consensually to watch and learn this violence, and who later perpetrate and perpetuate the same violence they once observed.



Figure 7: *Observational UnLearning*, 2020. Video stills.

The Zuko videos perform a similar act, asking the audience to unlearn normative masculinity by observing and participating in humorous, hyperbolic, and failed performances. Watching the videos after the fact, I am reminded of Bruce Nauman's performative walking. In *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner around the Perimeter of a Square*, the artist walks slowly and deliberately around a square in his studio, resting in the classical contrapposto pose between each step. Despite both being set in a mostly blank studio, the pacing and mood of Nauman's video and mine are quite different. Nauman walks slowly and intentionally, while the majority of my characters clomp or scuffle around the space, several of them breaking character multiple times. Yet, in the same way the participants in my piece perform a hyperbolic masculinity from the

1950's, Nauman's pose recalls a pre-modern "ideal" masculinity often portrayed in classical sculpture. Ironically, many statues depicting the heroic male nude in contrapposto had to be supported by phallic props disguised as stumps or rocks because the pose made them weaker and more likely to break.¹²

Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson provides a queer reading of Nauman's contrapposto. "As Nauman evokes classical statuary, he brings it to life through the tilting of his hips in a stereotypically 'faggy' comportment...Nauman asserts that queerness might be momentarily inhabited or theatricalized...as a set of biopolitical habits, corporeal disciplines and physical codes."¹³ This reading intersects both with Muñoz's queer ephemera as well as K. Bradford's gestural analysis of John Travolta, describing the way queerness can seep out of a traditionally masculine performance through coded gesture, intentional parody, or accidental misfire.



Figure 8: Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1968. Video still.

12. For some beautiful work about these sculptural stands, please look at Lily Cox-Richard's body of work titled *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*

13. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Bruce Nauman: queer homophobia," *Burlington Contemporary*, May 2019, <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/bruce-nauman-queer-homophobia>.

Nauman's walk was carefully choreographed, rehearsed, and executed. The walks in my video are technically improvised, but the piece also seeks to expose how normative masculine choreographies are already rehearsed in all bodies, not just in the bodies of cisgender men.¹⁴ However, in my piece, without a community of enforcers or a mirror for self-correction, the reenactments are in constant failure of accurate reproduction.¹⁵ Over time, this failure becomes something else altogether, a new form of embodiment, masculinity having been abstracted or falling away entirely, creating new potentialities for gendered or post-gendered embodiment.¹⁶

In my thesis exhibition, the individual videos are overlaid, creating an ebb and flow, a mass of spectral Zukos that form the illusion of a queer collective or gang. The video is projected onto a wall, overlapping slightly with an electrical outlet and conduit. The bodies are at human scale, their feet landing at floor level. A set of tip-and-roll bleachers, standing on end, have been left partially in the way, becoming a projection surface. When the Zukos walk to the right side of the room, their bodies are distorted by the multiple levels of benches and footrests. This has the effect of dividing or segmenting the body, which isolates and amplifies the subtleties of each performer's gestures, while simultaneously preventing a fixed performance of masculinity from taking shape.

The bleachers also act as shelf for my manifestos and a privacy screen for a pair of performers, also in costume. These two Danny Zukos hang out behind the bleachers, cuddling, kissing, slow dancing, and reading the manifesto to each other. They have retained Danny's truant nature, hiding behind the bleachers from their flaccid comrades protesting outside (more about that later). At the same time, they are resolving the homoerotic tension in the film, allowing Danny to finally be intimate with his fellow T-Birds and with himself.

14. Lexi Lee Sullivan et al., *Walking Sculpture, 1967-2015*, (Lincoln, Massachusetts: DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, 2015), 45-46.

15. Despite the overall failure of replicating the walk, most of the participants said they believed they had succeeded.

16. I will speak more about failure in a later section.

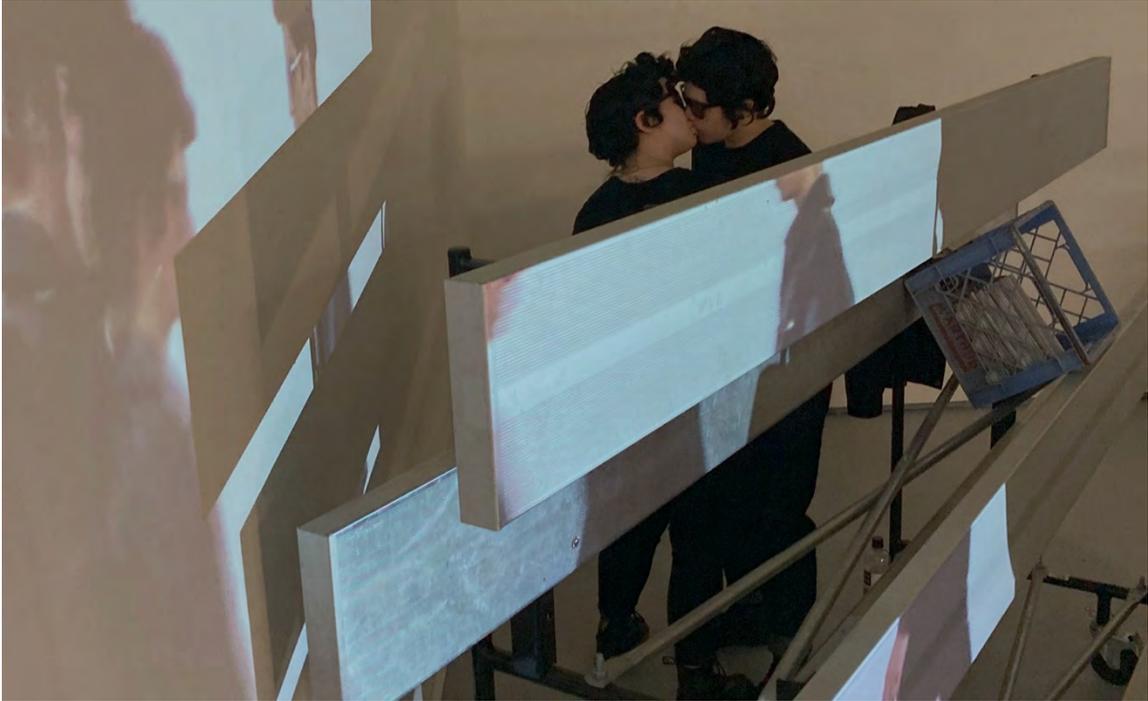


Figure 9: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Durational Performance.



Figure 10: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Installation View.

Manifesting Utopia

The backbone of my thesis work is a manifesto I have written titled *the future is flaccid*.¹⁷ The manifesto proposes “flaccidity” as a radical embodiment and tool to queer and undermine what I call “phallic masculinity.” I define phallic masculinity as an ideology and identity that mandates the pursuit of being continually erect, continually potent, continually strong. I develop new language and concepts around the attributes of flaccid tissue, proposing that we reimagine and redefine “flaccidity” so that it carries its own definitions and associations rather than being defined as a failed erection or as lack.

The project is essentially an experimental text around reforming the metaphors we embody through gendered performance. Throughout the manifesto, I take erection-themed medical and slang terms, often used to denigrate flaccidity, and I reemploy them as critiques or reclaim them as radical tactics. *Cock-blocking* becomes a collective anti-phallic act, while *shrinkage* is now a meditative practice of self-tamping one’s phallic desires.

The meta structure initially mirrors a medical treatment plan, appropriating tactics of western imperialism, but flipping the dynamic by pathologizing the phallus and normalizing dysfunction and impotence. This structure quickly dissolves into a more fluid exploration of flaccid embodiment, a way of being that operates through incorporation rather than categorization and division. In this way, the manifesto acts as a performative text, demonstrating the move away from binary oppositions like masculine vs. feminine, normal vs. abnormal, or functional vs. dysfunctional. It is also important to note that I present the manifesto as a temporary device to address the present state, not as an ideal utopian future. I call it a transitional text, a pragmatic in-between, offering it as a tool to get us somewhere else.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman defines “queers” simply, as “all so stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates.”¹⁸ Here, queerness is defined by its exclusion from

17. The lower-case title reflects the flaccid principle of resisting conclusion or permanence.

18. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

heteronormativity, essentially being defined as lack. It is in the act of reclaiming queerness as a political tactic, that queerness gains its own definition. Edelman continues, “the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.”¹⁹ Flaccidity mirrors queerness in its commitment to undermine the phallus, both in society and in ourselves. It is also queer in its refusal to define itself oppositionally against erection and against other binaristic thinking. Instead, it is a formless, transitional way of being that operates, like queerness, through incorporation, encompassing all states: the erect, the limp, the somewhere in between, the somewhere else.²⁰

Part of how I redefine flaccidity is a “doing for others.” My manifesto embodies this by pointing to others’ work throughout and by enacting prescriptions that feminist and queer writers have requested of men: Valerie Solanas demands that men “encourage other men to de-man themselves and thereby make themselves relatively inoffensive;”²¹ bell hooks asks men to “create the space for a new self to be born” and to help others find “the will to change;”²² Peter F. Murphy calls for new productive—or in my case destructive—metaphors for masculinity.²³ The less pragmatic, utopic goal of my manifesto is to create a formless, unstable foundation for masculinity, leading to its undoing and, with it, the end of the need or mandate to identify with a gender. The Gender Accelerationist Manifesto beautifully summarizes this process.

The identity may persist...but there’s no underlying logic to the identity, nor does it come out of or reinforce structures of power...In this way, there is no need or desire to force people to stop identifying with their gender. The end of gender as a system of power is our goal, and the end to gender identities is an eventual result, if it will happen at all, not something of importance or which we should strive toward.²⁴

19. Edelman, *No Future*, 17.

20. In my manifesto, I propose changing the word “erection” to “expansion.”

21. Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, (London; New York: Verso, 2015), 73.

22. bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 162.

23. Peter F. Murphy, *Studs, Tools, and the Family Jewels: Metaphors Men Live By*, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

24. Eme Flores and Vikky Storm, *Gender Accelerationist Manifesto*, (self-pub., 2022), 27.



Figure 11: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Manifesto display.

I chose the manifesto as a form because it lives in the same temporal world as Muñoz's utopia. Manifestos use the concept of futurity and an awareness of what has been, and currently is, to critique the present. I am also formally interested in manifestos because they employ tactics of temporal and authorial elasticity. By this I mean that they are often (but not always) written by a single author about a vision for the future, yet they generally speak in "we" and are set in the present tense, giving off the impression that there is already a collective enacting this vision in the present. In this way, they bring both the past and the future to bear on the present.

Authorial elasticity is also a defensive and offensive tactic. The use of "we" creates a collective, a mass—or the appearance of a mass—that promises a powerful retaliation if demands are not met. At the same time, the pronoun "we" incorporates everyone into their demands, without

asking permission. Feminist scholar Breanne Fahs writes, “[Manifestos] allow no possibility for equivocation, refutation, or disagreement, shattering possibility for other ways of seeing. Enamored with the sweeping “we” pronoun, manifestos imagine *everyone* as a member of their audience. *We need... We are... We must... We require... We feel.*”²⁵

I move away from this tactic slightly in my manifesto, which opens with a personal declaration of impotence and dysfunction, using “I” to contextualize where I am coming from and how I was feeling when I wrote the text. I continue writing in first person throughout my explanation of “the phallic mandate” and into my proposal of “flaccid masculinity.” The voice gradually shifts to “we” as I begin to explore the collective implications of flaccidity, eventually employing the incorporative “we” when outlining flaccid processes and tactics. In this way, I include the reader in the formation of the collective and demonstrate a process of deindividuation, another tenet of flaccidity.

I intentionally play with authorial elasticity in my flaccid protest signs as well. The signs are all written in the same hand-painted lettering, pointing to an individual author. However, they have been installed and used in several different ways, the relation to authorship changing each time. The sixteen signs were initially installed in a cluster, leaning against a wall in a gallery, with sixteen wigs lying around them on the floor. Their arrangement and the presence of the wigs speaks to a collective, though it is unclear whether they were put there after a protest or are staged for when the mass forms or arrives. Next, I performed a one-man protest, holding all the signs at once, playing the role of flaccid fanatic. Finally, at my thesis exhibition, my housemates, the same performers from *Prowlin'*, staged a protest on the road outside of the gallery, once again wearing identical Danny Zuko outfits and wigs. The protestors heckled drivers on their way to the exhibition and created their own chants, repeating phrases such as, “Limp is legal!” and “We’re stiff! We’re flaccid! Depending on what’s happening!”

25. Breanne Fahs, *Burn It Down!: Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution*, (London; New York: Verso, 2020), 9.



Figure 12: First installation of flaccid protest signs.



Figure 13: Solo flaccid protest. Performance documentation.

The phrases on the signs reference familiar slogans from past and present protests and pop-cultural moments. The title of my thesis exhibition, *the future is flaccid*, which is also written on the tallest sign, appropriates the highly commodified pop-feminist slogan “The Future is Female,” which has been critiqued by queer activists for its promise to uphold the gender binary in the future. Similarly, *Limp, Laugh, Love* pokes fun at the Bessie Anderson Stanley poem turned 2000’s lifestyle mantra/meme. #proudsoftie is an inside joke with myself, referencing what Justin Bieber’s father tweeted after his son’s nudes were leaked.²⁶

Though not an intentional reference, these signs and performances echo the work of Sharon Hayes’ *In the Near Future*. In this series, Hayes would stage one-woman protests, holding signs with phrases culled from historical movements as well as creating speculative signs for protests that had not yet occurred. Hayes calls this work “an ongoing investigation into the figure of the protestor, the speech act of the protest sign and the contemporary political construction of public space and public speech.”²⁷



Figure 14: Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future*, 2009. Performance documentation.

26. Justin’s dad tweeted, “@justinbieber what do you feed that thing. #proud daddy.”

27. Sharon Hayes, Artist’s Website, May 5, 2022, <http://shaze.info/work/in-the-near-future>.

My protests sit somewhere between Hayes' work and direct action. The slogans echo the content of my manifesto, which is a sincere political work, however the performance is quite theatrical. The protestors wear matching costumes and wave around signs containing penis puns, yelling about the joys of "Limpidity." At first glance, it could appear to be a gathering of Intactivists (an anti-circumcision group) or a more hateful men's rights group.²⁸ But the anachronistic greaser costumes and anti-phallic slogans point to something else, a staged proposal of a legitimate protest to be had in the near future, perhaps?



Figure 15: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Durational protest.

²⁸. When I was installing the installation version of this piece, someone looking in through the window said, "I hope they have some signs for women in there too," or something similar.

The protest costumes serve multiple purposes. They signify membership or solidarity, becoming a visual marker to organize around, similar to the pink Pussyhat in the 2017 Women's March or the French yellow vest protests in 2018. They also have the effect of deindividuating the protesters, creating an anonymous mass with collective demands.²⁹ The costumes mirror the outfits in *Prowlin'*, creating a throughline and possibly asserting the video as a political act and extension of the manifesto. In addition, donning this specific costume claims control of a traditionally masculine form, using it as a puppet to advocate for radical gender reformulation.

Halfway through the group performance outside of the gallery, the wind picked up and began to tear the signs off of their posts. The performers improvised, spinning and twirling the freed signs and using the posts to punctuate their chants. I instructed them to toss their costumes in a messy pile on the ground at the end of the performance and to walk into the exhibition costume-less. I see this as a performative act of stripping off the costume of masculine embodiment, but I am also interested in how the pile of costumes materially documents the protest. The addition of the broken signs to the pile was an exciting accident. There is something beautiful, and appropriately flaccid, about the way the signs negated themselves by falling apart and how the ephemera left behind archived the performers actions and gestures.

It was an interesting experience asking others to protest on behalf of my manifesto. I intentionally gave them very loose instructions because I wanted to see what would develop naturally, rather than writing a script for them. I love how they took collective ownership; however, in the process of creating chants, they also moved away from some of the key components of my redefinition of flaccidity. For example, they were using flaccid as a synonym for soft, rather than as a fluid way of being that incorporates softness as well as temporary hardness. I am not entirely sure how to reconcile my formal interests in manifestos and protest art with my flaccid manifesto, which is a sincere political proposition, but I am excited by this contradiction and ambiguity.

29. Consensual deindividuation is another important tenet of flaccidity.

Hopelessly Devoted to Flaccidity

Flaccid forms have carried a variety of symbolic meanings throughout the history of Western art. In Ancient Greece, a flaccid penis in a portrait or sculpture represented intelligence and self-control. This was in opposition to large, erect penises which were used to characterize excessive, barbarian outsiders, often from North Africa, evidencing how conditions of the phallus have been used to designate normal and abnormal since ancient times.

Germano Celant remarks on similar themes in Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of flaccid penises and flowers. "For Mapplethorpe as for the Surrealists, the flaccid, the soft, suggests latent power, and is identified with desire. It is a promise of something to be activated...The stiff, thickened penis, on the other hand, in its hardness and solidity, is associated with aggression, and is often likened to a hand brandishing a pistol."^{30 31}

At the same time, Celant also points out that in Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit*, he ironically pairs the large, flaccid penis with a poorly made, cheap suit, pointing toward a contradiction between flaccid potential and the normative performance of "businessman masculinity." Mark Newport's *Super Heroes* play with similar contradictions. Newport hand knits classic superhero costumes, as well as new ones of his own creation, out of cheap acrylic yarn. They are installed to hang limply off of the wall, asking to be filled, while simultaneously exposing the softness and vulnerability of the potential hero.

I have been exploring flaccidity as a formal quality in my work for many years, though what flaccidity communicates or represents for me has changed over time. I first explored flaccidity in jewelry, casting fleshy cement forms into pastel powder coated wire frames. The forms

30. Germano Celant, "Robert Mapplethorpe's Man in Polyester Suit," *Artforum*, September 1993, <https://www.artforum.com/print/199307/robert-mapplethorpe-s-man-in-polyester-suit-33866>.

31. I went with my mom to see Michelangelo's *David* in Florence. Coincidentally, there was an exhibit of Mapplethorpe nudes installed throughout The Accademia as well. My mom caught me staring at several of the photographs and later made a comment that I was looking *David* the same way many women she knew would look at him. She asked me if I was gay the next day. That is my coming out story.

resembled genitalia, breasts, fat folds, and other bodily creases. I was interested in using jewelry to adorn the body with the body, rather than covering or distracting from the body. Later, in cast sculptural forms that were often cinched or sagging, I used flaccidity to express my frustrations with feeling stagnant in my gender, stuck somewhere between traditional masculinity and queerness.

My first year in graduate school, I experimented with flaccidity as a material language that can carry multiple legibilities. I was trying to make flaccid forms that could be read as potentially ambiguous to most but could also draw out a specific discomfort from cisgender men by subtly pointing to impotence or the false promises of normative masculinity. I chopped up a plastic eggplant and roasted it on a George Foreman grill. I made fabric replicas of PVC sewage pipes. I cut a heavily used bath towel into the shape of the male bathroom sign and hung it on a towel rod. I hung up an under-stuffed punching bag that I sewed out of a floral comforter. I do not think any of these were particularly successful, but I think their lack of success led me to think about flaccidity in a different way. I have come to think of it now as an emancipatory queer tactic that can allow one to release oneself from the burden of the phallus and embrace softness, sensitivity, and impotence as revolutionary transitional tactics.



Figure 16: Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1981.

Figure 17: Mark Newport, *Super Heroes*.



Figure 18-21: Clockwise from top-left. *You Just Haven't Had It the Right Way Yet*, 2019. *Pink Beans Brooch*, 2018. *Plumbing*, 2019. *Dear Friends*, 2018.

Dueling Performativities (Playing for Pinks)

Like most queers, I am also interested in gender performativity, a concept first proposed by Judith Butler. I don't pretend to fully understand the complexities of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, but my favorite explanation comes from Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds*: "Judith Butler has shown how the rhythms of gendered performance—specifically, repetitions—accrete to "freeze" masculinity and femininity into timeless truths of being...repetition engenders identity, situating the body's supposed truth...or static existence outside of historical movement."³² In other words, the point is not just that gender is a performance—which of course it is—but that the performance is what defines and upholds, or freezes, how we conceptualize gender.

Verbal and gestural languages are one of the many ways that gendered performances are enacted. These languages communicate and construct our gender identities, both in how they uphold or queer the normative performance. "...language exerts power...it contains within it constructions of everyday life that have ramifications across a spectrum of behaviors and values," writes Peter F. Murphy.³³ In his book, *Studs, Tools, and the Family Jewels*, Murphy examines the assumptions underlying metaphors commonly used to describe male sexuality. Researching terms like "getting a hard on," "getting laid," "scoring," etc., he analyzes the current assumptions underlying these metaphors in relation to meta-metaphors such as "sex as machine", "sex as work and labor", "sex as sport," and "sex as war and conquest." In this way, he is exploring the performativity of language, understanding how masculinity is constructed, maintained, and limited by the language we use.

My work is rooted in utilizing performative countertactics to intervene or chip away at the feedback loops that maintain the gender binary. My manifesto on flaccidity is an attempt to instrumentalize the performative nature of language to neutralize—and ultimately destroy—how we conceptualize and embody masculinity.

32. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

33. Murphy, *Studs*, 6.



Figure 22: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Installation view.

Similarly, *Prowlin'* is an attempt to use the performative nature of gestural languages, this time exploring the productivity of failure. Literary critic Shoshana Felman writes, "The act of failing thus opens up referentiality—or of impossible reality—not because something is missing, but because something else is done, or because something else is said: the term 'misfire' does not refer to an absence, but to an enactment of a difference."³⁴ What is generated in the act of constant collective failure to perform the masculine saunter? The loop imitates the freezing effect of repeated gender performances, however this is a loop of *failed* performances, so we watch normative masculinity continually failing to take shape. Or if it is reifying any gendered performance, it is not one that fits within our normative understandings. The digitally overlaid walks projected on to the bleachers also prevent a unified narrative from taking form, replicating the refusal in my manifesto to prescribe a conclusive masculinity, even a queer one.

34. Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University press, 2003), 57.

Becoming Milquetoast

In my sculpture, *A Pie in the Puss*, a phrase meaning getting pied in the face, a homemade cardboard cutout of Danny Zuko is draped over the rungs of a metal A-frame ladder. His head and feet hang just above a pool filled with 15 gallons of white liquid.³⁵ A fountain pump continually pushes the liquid up a clear plastic tube, spiraling up the frame of the ladder. From here, it flows out of the end of the tube onto Danny's pelvis, where it then streams down his torso, head, and legs, keeping him moist and supple, before landing back in the pool below. The sculpture sits in the corner of the room. It is illuminated by a clamp light laying on the floor, which casts a shadow onto the left side of the projection.

Over time, the accumulated moisture has caused the cardboard to delaminate; Danny's feet have split into three separate layers that curl around each other like the tentacles of a jellyfish. The constant flow of liquid has washed away the toner in some places and completely removed the printed images in others. By the time the exhibition opened, Danny's face and upper chest detached completely from the cardboard, sitting in a fleshy pile on the lowest rung of the ladder, rendering him unrecognizable.

This piece is still a bit of a mystery to me, but I was thinking about the liquid as a queer substance. The dynamics of the liquid operate similarly to queerness, disturbing and disrupting the "normative," and incorporating what sloughs off. This leads to another process of deindividuation. The cutout is losing its identity; the markers of masculinity are being erased. It is unclear how long the cardboard can withstand the moisture. It threatens to disintegrate entirely and to be consumed by the liquid below.

35. The liquid is inspired by a paper I wrote exploring the queer, boundaryless properties of homogenous milk. Using Edelman's definition of queerness again, I compare the process of industrial homogenization with the process of cultural homogenization, the casting out of those that will not assimilate. The product of the first process is homogenized milk, a liquid that will not separate and can incorporate other homogenized milk regardless of the farm or cow it came from. The product of the latter is the formation of a queer mass, homogenous in its rejection of normativity, which operates through incorporation rather than assimilation and abjection.

I have heard viewers refer to the liquid as breastmilk, semen, and amniotic fluid. I am excited by the first two because they speak to a queer excess via the “misuse” of bodily fluids that are “meant” for procreation. They are also two fluids that have been associated with queer danger and death because both can be carriers of HIV. If you follow the trail of associations from the title, you can easily get from “pie in the face” to “cream pie” (which is also evocative sexual slang) to “dairy,” hinting at the milky association. I am also vaguely referencing two scenes from *Grease*: one where Rizzo, the local queer-coded “bad girl,” throws a milkshake into Danny’s best friend (and likely lover) Kenickie’s face; and another where the effeminate nerd, Eugene, successfully pies a teacher in the face at the school carnival after the T-Birds angrily fail to do so. It is also a nod to the infamous pieing of anti-homosexuality crusader, Anita Bryant.

The question of consent comes up for me in this piece, especially with the fairly explicit sexual references. I think of Danny as being there consensually. He used to have a big smile. It looked like he was fully embracing his flaccidity and eventual consumption. In reality, the cardboard cutout is quite stuck and will only be released if he is forcefully removed or if he falls apart. I address consent in contradictory ways in my manifesto as well, saying that consent is one of the foundations of flaccidity, but later naming “forced detumescence,” as an antiphallic tactic.³⁶ I am not sure what to do with this contradiction at the moment, but I do know that revolution cannot happen entirely consensually.

I initially thought of this piece as a closed system; however, it quickly became clear that this was not the case. Undetectable amounts of liquid would splash outside of the pool and within an hour, a puddle would start to form, eventually flowing across the gallery space, unless it was mopped up.³⁷ There are some nice, accidental metaphors here: the invisible formation of a queer mass; queerness as unable to be contained; flaccidity as a temporary state flowing towards something else. The mopping (and the need to eventually refill the pool) could also represent a necessary tending to queerness and flaccidity, which require constant attention and intention in order to continue to disturb the freezing effects of normative gender performances.

36. Detumescence is the process of losing an erection.

37. I told the gallery attendants that they could just leave the puddle unless it caused an issue.



Figure 23: *A Pie in the Puss*, 2022.



Figure 24: *A Pie in the Puss*, 2022. Detail.

Doing a Wet Run

The last feature in the installation is another set of bleachers lying flat, ready for use. They are installed across from the projection wall, oriented towards an ambiguous space between the projection and the fountain. They are also directly in front of you as you enter the space. The projector sits on the top bench and is positioned in such a way that if someone sits on the bleachers or passes in front of them, their shadow is cast onto the projection, joining the mass of Zukos. My personal collection of queer and feminist manifestos are dispersed around the rest of the bleachers, giving viewers the chance to sit and read the works I point to in my manifesto.

There is an old iPhone hanging over the edge of the bleachers by its charger cord. On the phone, there is a looping GIF made from a 1950's drive-in movie concessions advertisement that I have altered. In the original video, an anthropomorphic hot dog bun trains a disobedient hot dog. It teaches the hotdog how to do back flips and then rewards the dog by opening up its buns and letting it jump inside. In my altered version, the bun stands still, proudly displaying its open crease. The hot dog stands a few steps away, looking at the bun, continually shaking his head, opting out from diving inside.³⁸

The phone is another aspect of the installation that I am not entirely sure about yet. Most people did not look at the screen, thinking it was just someone's personal phone that they had left plugged in. Others kept setting it back on top of the bench. I was thinking of it as a covertly didactic piece, using an anti-phallic looping message as a strategy to counteract the feedback loop of normative gender performances. I am not sure it worked. Now, back to the bleachers!

³⁸. The original video can be seen playing in the background of the drive-in movie theater scene in *Grease*, while Danny is finally singing his true feelings. Though, he is singing to no one because Sandy already left after he clumsily and non-consensually tried to seduce her.



Figure 25: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Installation View.

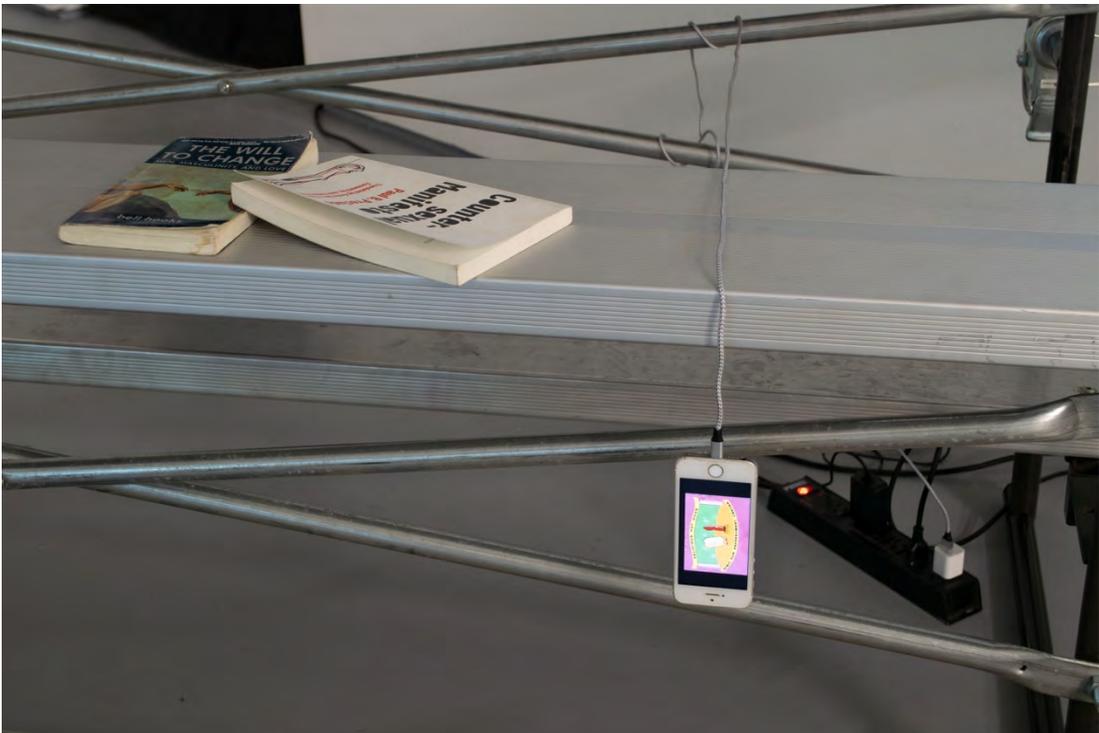


Figure 26: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Installation Detail.

I consider the bleachers flaccid infrastructure and carriers of potentiality. They facilitate collectivity, giving themselves to others, acting as a vessel to be filled. The tip-and-roll bleacher is a transitional device, built to be temporarily erected for a purpose, and then to move on to something else. My bleachers defy a singular, normative function. They act as a gallery bench, a reading room, a pedestal, a privacy screen, a projection surface, a stage for performance, seating for a discussion, and perhaps a utopian rehearsal space.³⁹

José Esteban Muñoz writes about these rehearsal spaces. “For those of us whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, these stages are our actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as late capitalism, heteronormativity, and, in some cases, white supremacy.”⁴⁰ In this instance, Muñoz is writing about stages in gay bars and punk venues, but I am interested in how a space could be set up to facilitate, or force—once again the question of consent—a potentially normative audience to engage in this anti-normative rehearsal. I attempt to do so in this installation by confusing the role of the audience in the space, insisting that the viewer directly participates in my manifestation of flaccidity, rather than remaining passive.

This happens in several ways. The bleachers are central in the room. They take up the majority of the floor space, becoming a focal point, confusing the relationship between seating and stage. As viewers enter the room, they are confronted by the bleachers, and by the people seated in them, becoming both viewer and viewed. The manifestos are on the other side of the room. In order to get one, you have to walk in front of the bleachers, across the hypothetical stage, casting your shadow onto the video and becoming a projection surface. This, once again, implicates the viewer as part of the work. By the time someone sits in the bleachers to read, they are (likely) aware that they are being incorporated into the project and are being asked to engage with flaccidity individually and collectively with others in the room.

39. I planned to host a collective editing session of my manifesto in the space, on the bleachers. This did not happen, but I am still planning one in the future. There was, however, a discussion group of six to seven people that formed of its own volition during my opening.

40. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 111.

Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal used similar tactics to complicate viewership. In his *Invisible Theater*, he would involve passersby in a situation they did not know was a performance, forcing viewership and often creating an unknowing actor if they chose to get involved. Later, in his *Theater of the Oppressed*, the spectators were required take an active role in the show, transforming the performance, and thus the reality they were living in. Art historian Claire Bishop writes, "One of Boal's key arguments is that spectators should be eliminated and reconceptualised as 'spect-actors'. However, this is not done in the name of symbolically realising a community to come (the utopian mode invoked so often in European participatory art), but more forcefully as a practical training in social antagonism, or what Boal vividly describes as a 'rehearsal of revolution'."⁴¹



Figure 17: *the future is flaccid*, 2022. Being projected upon.

⁴¹. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012), 122.

Inconclusion

My manifesto acts as practical training in social antagonism, but reading it alone is not enough. It is from Boal's cue that I conceptualize a more active or forceful implication of the viewers into my work, hopefully inciting a flaccid mass. I have attempted to do so here through installation decisions, though it is my intention to do this much more directly in the future. This is partly because I am not sure my efforts were successful, but also because as someone now hopelessly devoted to flaccidity, I am much more interested in the outcomes of collective imagination and participation, or of conflict, than I am in my own individual desires.

I have been talking about incorporating interventionist and participatory projects into my work since starting graduate school. I engaged with these through an online participatory storytelling project last year and this year in the gestural studies that became *Prowlin'*, but I had planned on much more. I have thought about giving performative lectures, intervening in men's groups, playing with the conference as a form of theater for rehearsing revolution, and recreating Valerie Solanas' "Turd Sessions," a happening where men confess their sins to a room full of jeering women. All of these would include some form of *spect-actorship*. Unfortunately, the past two years have been the worst time to engage physically with others because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting need for social distancing.

An invisible aspect of my recent practice has been an online feminist reading group called The Dude's Online Book Club. It is a group of around twelve cisgender men as well as two facilitators, one a woman, the other, non-binary. I joined originally because my friend, one of the facilitators, told me that they were about to start bell hooks' *The Will to Change*. This is a central text to my work, but I had not read it in years and never along with others, so I decided to join the group. It has been an entirely different experience reading this book alongside other men who are reading it for the first time. We share personal experiences, ask for clarification, discuss tactics of accountability, and show endless amounts of care and patience for one another, essentially putting hooks' call into action, embodying flaccidity (though they do not know it yet) and willing ourselves to change. It is this enacting of the will to change that I hope to cultivate or perhaps incite in viewers and participants into the future.

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the future is flaccid



a manifesto

If one understands words in the context of prevailing ideas, their meaning becomes clear: erection is not a delicate warmth which spreads from the penis through the rest of the body, nor a pleasant swelling of the penis when the senses are receptive to voluptuousness. Man decides otherwise; erection is the symbol of his power, the assertion of his potency, and its absence is simply his impotence.

-Emmanuel Reynaud

Holy Virility: The Social Construction of Masculinity

...if [men] are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity...We must all change.

-bell hooks

The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love

What better aspiration for men? To cede power, the spotlight, to let others speak, let the action continue without them.

-Alex McElroy

The Atmospherians

I am in a state of dysfunction.

I planned on writing a fiery manifesto that proposed a flaccid embodiment as a tactic to undermine the phallus. The text was going to mirror the process of detumescence, starting out “hard” and assertive and slowly becoming more ambiguous, receptive, and formless; in other words, becoming flaccid.

I still intend to write my original manifesto, but it would betray my own project to force myself into a state of firm outrage when I am feeling uncertain and sensitive.

This year has been challenging. I broke my collarbone when a fellow grad student (who also happens to be men’s rights activist) ran his bike into my bike at full speed. I also got a concussion, which rendered me unable to teach, think, read, or write for several weeks. Right when my bone healed and I was feeling back to normal, a close friend broke my heart. It has been four months (or really only two months since he broke it again.) That fracture is still healing. Along the way, I’ve developed tinnitus from clenching my jaw, hemorrhoids from clenching my butt, and relentless insomnia that keeps me from ever feeling fully present during the day. Of course, this is all set against the pandemic, the constant threat of the Big One, wildfires, global warming, etc.

I also finally caught covid, eleven days before my thesis opening. I’m currently experiencing pretty extreme cognitive impairment, so instead of editing my thesis, I’m sitting in the dark watching *Selling Sunset* and eating cold soup out of cans my housemates set outside my door.

I’m not saying any of this to ask for pity or to justify or defend my state of dysfunction. Instead, I am embracing my dysfunction, understanding it, and working from within it. So, for now, I’m going to write this manifesto from my current position of dysfunction, impotence, and shrinkage. I am going to start by telling you what I was going to write. And we’ll see if it eventually just turns into the thing.

This isn’t a text about radical self-care, or how to stay productive during heartbreak, or how to embody a softer, queer masculinity. This is about opting out of the battle to stay erect and opting into flaccidity as a mode of personal embodiment and, more importantly, as an individual and collective political tool. When I say flaccid, I do not mean soft, weak, or ineffective. In this manifesto, I will be redefining flaccidity by its own material traits, not as the oppositional lack of erection.

This manifesto is a temporary document, a stepping-stone, a transitional text, a pragmatic in-between. It proposes flaccidity as a temporary and transitional state of planned obsolescence, in between phallic masculinity and a more radical formation or deformation of gender and sexuality. I offer it as a tool to get us somewhere else.

This manifesto is far from being finished. Almost every topic needs to be expanded upon. This will happen after a series of collective editing events. I’d love to hear your feedback as well.

The Tyranny of the Phallus

I panned on opening the manifesto with a loud proclamation.

A Diagnosis:

“The time of the phallus is over! Masculine ideologies have become priapistic!⁴² We must detumesce! Willingly or forcefully!”

OR

“We are in a crisis! Masculinity has become priapistic! We must detumesce! By any means necessary!”

This is not a new crisis. Constitutions of masculinity (and thus the patriarchy) have for centuries been modeled after embodying the phallus, imitating the qualities of the fantastical symbol of perpetual erection. Staying hard, erect, firm, staunch, constant, functional, potent, productive, reproductive, penetrating, dominating, conquering, showing no sign of weakness (emotions). But just as it is impossible and dangerous to maintain a perpetual erection, it is impossible and more dangerous to attempt to perpetually embody phallic qualities.

Phallic masculinity is an ideology and identity that mandates the pursuit of being continually erect, continually potent, continually strong. Perpetual erection is a state that cannot be achieved, yet the attempt to embody this impossible way of being leads to a dangerous battle for power, wealth, influence, property, territory, etc. These provide a fleeting, misplaced sense of erection. When this temporary feeling ends, the pursuit continues.

False scarcity under capitalism extends beyond pumpkin spice lattes, cryptocurrency, and HIV medication. Erections have been commodified and rebranded as a scarce resource, as if they are going away, never to return. Perhaps they are a limited resource on an individual scale, but the fallacy (phallacy) is that the pursuit of the erection is the only path to pleasure and fulfillment. Aging, then, comes with diminishing returns. Luckily capitalism has a solution: Viagra, horny goat weed, penile implants, testosterone supplements.⁴³ This impending scarcity creates an anxiety, I might even say an insanity, aimed at keeping it up, at all costs.

42. Priapism is the term for an erection that has lasted dangerously long. If left untreated, the contained blood becomes hypoxic, and the tissues start to die. There are many causes; most are not useful for my metaphor. But it can be caused by Viagra when used in conjunction with other drugs to treat impotence. And a similar condition can occur if devices meant to sustain erections are left on for too long. When an erection becomes priapistic, the only option is to detumescence, which is the medical term for the process of losing an erection. This can happen in several ways: medication, ice packs, surgical shunt, or by physically draining the blood with a syringe.

43. These technologies take advantage of the anxieties of men, creating a pay-to-play mentality. Of course, not everyone can even afford to buy into this false reality (and not everyone wants to). Viagra can cost up to \$70 per dose. Testosterone replacement therapy can cost \$1000 per month. Penile implants can cost up to \$15,000. The message here is clear: only the wealthy can be allowed to access to the power of the perpetual phallus.

As with priapism, the phallic mandate causes damage to the self through what bell hooks calls “psychic self-mutilation,” the killing off of all parts of oneself that do not fit within the phallic template. This violence does not stop here; it is also transferred onto anyone or anything else that gets in the way.

In using the phrase “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” to describe the foundation of our nation’s politics, bell hooks points to the violence enacted by the phallic mandate of patriarchal masculinity.⁴⁴ hooks locates this violence in the social conditioning of boys, specifically in the ways we teach boys to control (reject & repress) their emotions.

The phallopatriarchy teaches boys that anger and violence are the only acceptable ways to express emotion (lest they be seen as flaccid). With no tools to recognize, experience, or process their inability to love and emote and feel, the resentment and grief caused by continually failing to meet the phallic standard manifests as violence. Violence in the name of the phallus, as another way to keep it up and keep others below: colonial violence, racial violence, ethnic violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, workplace violence, violence against women, queer and trans hate crimes, class warfare, random public acts of violence, self-violence, the list goes on.

Erection as goal and guiding principle mandates unfettered growth and accumulation, justifying and catalyzing neocolonialism, predatory capitalism, the exploitation of labor, unsustainable extraction of resources, acceleration of climate change, and the intentional poisoning of minority populations.

It is the basis of reproductive futurism—the investment in creating a better future for one’s children—which further justifies the management and hoarding of resources, and the control and restriction of those resources from others. Phallic masculinity creates the conditions for compulsory heterosexuality and maintains the sexual division of labor, perpetuating and justifying misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and violence against women, queers, and trans people.

Phallic exceptionalism drives the charge to create the “normal;” and to designate, police, and incarcerate the “abnormal” and “immoral,” attempting to exclude them from the power of the phallus. As the erection is a limited resource, some must be barred from participation. There is only so much phallus to go around. It must be hoarded, regulated, stockpiled, its availability prolonged, as is done with all limited resources. Of course, the truth is there is no phallus to go around. No human has ever been hard. We create monuments and architecture out of marble and concrete and bronze to give a false sense of phallic hardness. Yet, in reality, even at its “hardest,” erectile tissue stays soft, responsive, vulnerable, and malleable.

⁴⁴. As a side note, as soon as you finish this, or probably before you do, you should read *The Will to Change* by bell hooks. This manifesto was primarily inspired by her call for an alternative to patriarchal masculinity and creative solutions to reintegrate the male spirit. Though, I am instead attempting to disintegrate it.

This priapistic state is not new. But there is a new awareness to the pain of the perpetual erection or, more accurately, the pain of the failure to be perpetually erect. There doesn't appear to be much of an increase in awareness of the way this pain is transferred onto others, systemically or individually, but there is a heightened awareness of the pain caused to the self. The pain that comes from constant failure to fulfill one's phallic destiny.

This pain is easily manipulatable and has primarily manifested as increased hatred and violence against others—thinking here of men's rights activists, incels, Proud Boys, mass shooters—but as is the case in patriarchal violence, the feeling under this is the failed promise of the phallus, the realization that we do not always get what was promised to us; we are not entitled to everything, or really anything.

This pain can also be weaponized *against* the phallus. We must organize this pain against the priapistic patriarchy. We must do as Valerie Solanas asks and convince other men to de-man themselves.^{45 46} If we do not, the pressure will continue to grow until the whole thing blows and takes us all out with it. We must detumescence! We must become flaccid!

This is not a demonization or denunciation of all erections, erectile tissue, sexual organs, or sexual acts. This is not a call to rid ourselves of all phallic objects, especially sex toys.^{47 48} This is a proposal for a new metaphor to live by. And not even a permanent metaphor, but a proposal for a temporary, transitional metaphor just to get us somewhere else.

Flaccidity will start the journey away from gendered embodiment based on genitals. Away from a perpetuation of the gender binary, compulsory heterosexuality, perhaps away from feeling we need to identify with a gender or sexuality at all.⁴⁹

It may not seem like much of a leap to identify with a flaccid penis rather than an erect one. It is certainly not the ultimate solution, but it is a step in the right direction, or at least A direction. This manifesto seeks to act as a temporary, pragmatic solution between the present and many possible futures. In this way, the manifesto performs a flaccid act, putting itself in service of others, ensuring its own temporary, transitional nature.

This manifesto is in gentle opposition to previous attempts, my own included, to define a queer masculinity. Defining an identity in opposition to the phallus perpetuates the phallus through differentiation; queer masculinity puts itself in opposition to a normative masculinity that

45. *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas is required reading.

46. Throughout this manifesto, when I say "man" or "men," I'm referring to cisgender men. I'm not satisfied with this choice, and I will rethink my use of this word in the next version.

47. On the contrary, this was also partially inspired by Paul B. Preciado's *Countersexual Manifesto*, which explores how the dildo is an anti-phallic political tool and technology. Read this book!

48. I am also interested in sex toys that focus on alternate acts to penetration, such as expandable butt plugs, which closely mirror my proposal of flaccidity. They expand, but they always return to their original state.

49. For an interesting description of how identity might look after the need to identify ends, please read *The Gender Accelerationist Manifesto*.

continues to exist. A reclaiming of masculine femininity may carry traces of toxic masculinity with it.

The gender binary, whether defined rigidly or fluidly, normatively or radically, asks us to place ourselves along it, to name a status, even if that status is fluid. This, in turn, reifies the gender binary. In *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell writes, "When we reject the binary, we claim uselessness as a strategic tool. Useless, we disappear, ghosting on the binary body."⁵⁰ Similarly, flaccidity embraces uselessness, via impotence, as a strategic tool to reject the gender binary.

By staying in the phallus, rather than exploring the emancipatory powers of the anus or the dildo (as other queer theorists have done), I am attempting to highlight the ways the phallus betrays itself; draining it from the inside, a form of affirmative sabotage.⁵¹ Essentially, treating the priapism by creating a metaphorical shunt that will not allow the blood to stagnate again.

I recognize that there are many people who have already emancipated themselves from the tyranny of the phallus, from women and queers living outside the erectile mandate and outside of the gender binary to entire cultures who do not see the world through genital metaphor.

Flaccidity is not a demand for a new, universal way of living. It is only a tool for those who still live under the panoptic gaze of the phallus, or who wish to help others escape from its reign of terror. Echoing bell hooks' call, we need to help men find "the will to change", or perhaps give them no other choice.

Flaccidity

The constitution of the phallus is precarious. We all know that erections can and do end way more often than we'd like to admit. We've medicalized the loss of erection, and with it the failure to embody the phallus. If you do not have erection-on-demand, you are labeled as having erectile dysfunction or impotence. These are troubling diagnoses for several reasons; they define a man by his ability to procreate (and thus his ability to hoard his wealth for future generations); they insinuate that an erection is necessary in order to experience pleasure; and they create the binary of "hard" as normal, "soft" as abnormal.

These forces of normativizing the erection and pathologizing softness can be seen working simultaneously in the current understanding of *flaccidity*:

"Lacking normal or youthful firmness; especially as to look or feel unpleasant; lacking force, vigor, or effectiveness; wanting in stiffness; out of condition"

50. *Glitch Feminism* is another incredible manifesto that you should read.

51. Gayatri Spivak says affirmative sabotage is the "deliberate ruining of the master's machine from the inside...because the only way you can sabotage something is when you are working intimately within it."

This is the word we have chosen to name how our genitals live 95% of the time??? No wonder we avoid flaccid associations at all costs!!! It is unclear whether the word has always been used to define limp tissue and came to mean "failure," or if it was the other way around. It doesn't matter for the sake of this project. What matters is the current state of things and how we might change them.

Flaccid does not have its own definition, it is defined as absence of an erection, defined by lack. Rather than just being comfortably limp, flaccidity is defined as a *lack* of an erection. Because erections are normal, flaccidity is *lacking* normality. Because erections stand for strength and productivity, flaccidity *lacks* force and effectiveness. Because erections are desirable, flaccidity is *wanting* in stiffness.

There are dangerous parallels here between a cultural understanding of flaccidity as "lacking an erection," and the still pervasive conception of woman as "lacking a penis," which is only one of many ways that anatomy has been used to justify the subordination of women.⁵² It is not surprising that anti-flaccid rhetoric, like homophobia, has deep roots in misogyny. However, it is yet another reason why it is everyone's problem.⁵³

If we are so dead set on identifying with our penises (or other erectile genital tissue), then let's identify with how they actually are, rather than constantly failing to uphold an exhausted and dangerous metaphor. It is in the act of redefining flaccidity on its own terms that we find the strategy to topple the phallus, or undermine it, or consume it.

I propose a flaccid that is:

rooted/grounded/embodied/integrated

A good place to start is to reincorporate the genitals into the self and the self into the genitals. This matters because the language we use to describe genitalia and sexuality communicates our underlying assumptions and metaphors that we embody.

In this way, it is important to remember that our genitals are a part of ourselves. The penis does not extend beyond or outside of the body. It is *in* the body and *of* the body. It does not have a mind of its own. There is no brain down there. The genitals are not other, they are not "it", my penis is not "he," it is "I" a part of "me." We are responsible and must take accountability for what we do with our penises and what we do in the name of the phallus.

52. We actually all start with the beginnings of a vagina, so if anything, cis men are lacking vaginas. Look up "perineal raphe" if you don't believe me.

53. I will add more here later

The flaccid is rooted in the body, grounded in the local. This is in direct opposition to the phallic, which promotes a detachment with the body and is concerned with exploration and frontierism.

In other words, rather than seeing how far we can reach, flaccidity asks us to feel into where we are and what is already here. This foundational link to the body is what allows flaccidity to become an embodied way of living that can be wielded as a radical individual and collective tool.

formless/unfixed/dynamic/shifting/transitory/transitional

Have you ever watched a video of a flaccid penis being flaccid? Or stared at one in real life? Even at rest, there is a constant movement, an ebb and flow, a slight expansion and retraction. A pulse might be visible. If tumescence begins, it may pause, reverse, restart, continue, pause again, reverse, then reverse again.⁵⁴ If you do reach “full” erection (whatever that means), it is a temporary and unfixed state. Erections are not constant, the ebb and flow persists. At some point the cycle will continue, or reverse, the erection will end, and flaccidity will begin again.

But there are contradictions even in how I write this. When does the erection end and flaccidity begin? What designates one from the other? Is it when a state of “hardness” is reached? It can’t be because flesh is never hard. There is also no “state” because blood is always ebbing and flowing, the form constantly changing. Erections and erectile tissue are in this way formless, dynamic, unfixed. They cannot be pinned down. There is no set shape, no fixed length, no maximum hardness. They are in a constant process of shifting, changing, expanding, contracting. There is no set path to their changes in form.

There have been “scientific” efforts to create a normative erectile narrative, through a presentation of certain “sexual response cycles” as normal (based on male orgasm as guiding principle) and a designation of other ways of experiencing pleasure as abnormal. The tissue itself betrays this understanding. There is no set cycle, no set form, only a constant state of transition.

If we describe flaccidity as the fluid, formless, dynamic state of being which characterizes the behavior of erectile tissue, then flaccidity can encompass the erect. The erect is not in opposition to the flaccid; it is one of the many forms flaccidity can temporarily take. In the context of flaccidity, we call this expansion.

In this way, we acknowledge that expansion is a form we must sometimes inhabit. Yet, it must be anti-individualist, temporary, and always receptive and responsive.

54. The process of becoming erect.

cyclical/anti-growth

The cyclical nature of flaccidity points to an inherent non-growth. Expansion may occur;⁵⁵ however it is always followed by retraction—a returning to a similar size—and perhaps a temporary or permanent shrinkage. As opposed to erection, flaccidity is committed to living within one's means, committing to maintenance and subsistence over growth and accumulation.

This cyclical nature also negates linear, ends-focused thinking. Flaccidity is concerned with process over conclusion, experience over hard facts, and presence over function. There is no end, and also no after, which promotes a caretaking for the now as well as for the future.

responsive/receptive/sensitive/perceptive/reflective

Changes in erectile tissue may be brought on by physical stimulation but can also be in response to environmental changes (temperature, moisture, pressure), internal changes (movement, rest, sleep), sounds, sights, smells, imagination (fantasizing, dreaming, reading), and probably several more ways I'm not thinking of right now.⁵⁶

In this way, flaccid erectile tissue is responsive and perceptive, rather than spontaneous or initiating. You don't just "get" or "have a hard on," you must first be perceptive and receptive to voluptuousness, to expansiveness, to being filled. This responsiveness exists at all stages of flaccidity and is integrally tied to the dynamic nature of flaccidity as well.

reciprocal

This inherent, underlying receptivity challenges the masculine notion of penetration, and the binary of giving (topping) vs. receiving (bottoming).⁵⁷ By breaking the binary of giving and receiving, erections become a reciprocal act. Flaccidity then comes to mean a reciprocity.

55. My therapist says "We all need to expand outside of ourselves sometimes..."

56. And of course, some ways of engaging in sexual stimulation actually inhibit or interrupt an erectile sexual response cycle.

57. *Penetration* carries connotations of non-consent. "To make one's way into or through something." This word should be excised from our sexual language altogether, unless being used responsibly in kink practices.

consensual/relational/collective/communal/collaborative

When positioned against the notion of penetration—which carries associations of the non-consensual—the responsive, reciprocal expansion under flaccidity also connotes an inherent consensuality. Extending outside of a two-person model,⁵⁸ we can see how the flaccid notions of responsiveness, receptivity, reciprocity, and consensuality speak to a commitment to collective, communal, and collaborative practices.

vessel to be filled

Erectile tissue is essentially a vessel; one that can be filled for the self (phallic model) or one that can be filled on behalf of the collective (flaccid model). Flaccid here points to a doing for others; a being for others; in service to others. This references back to flaccidity's anti-individualist commitment. Even during times of expansion, this vessel is filled for the communal good.

already having failed/always failing

Though the flaccid is not a failed erection, it is a failed phallus. It is important to acknowledge and embrace this already failed state. In this way, flaccidity destigmatizes failure and turns away from concerns with the functional. Flaccidity embraces all forms, uplifting dysfunction, valuing impotence, encouraging shrinkage.

Flaccid Masculinity

What would it look like to embody these flaccid principles as an anti-phallic tactic, or a way of being?⁵⁹

We can now describe flaccid masculinity as:

- sensitive and responsive to one's environment; focused on living in the body rather than in the mind; expressive; determined to feel and emote
- deprioritizing the self; attentive to the collective; guided by anti-growth models of sustainability and subsistence
- focused on redistribution of wealth rather than hoarding; committed to equity, reciprocity, and consensus; non-hierarchical; being for others

58. This must happen, as a heteromonogamous mandate is another tool of the phallopatriarchy.

59. I'm running out of steam. This section will be further developed in future iterations.

These traits come together to form an abolitionist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, revolutionary masculinity.⁶⁰

To make this revolution happen, we must first bring together all those who already embrace aspects of flaccidity. They will likely not call it this, but we will learn how to recognize the traits. Then, we must spread the word and find others to willingly join our movement. Finally, we must use our collective power to liberate the phallic, bringing them into flaccidity, willingly or forcefully.

Throughout this process, the majority of time and energy will be spent supporting revolutionary work already being done. Flaccid masculinity offers itself as an empty vessel to be filled and wielded by other radical anti-phallic movements. We will put all of our accumulated wealth and resources behind these movements. We will also contribute our labor and our bodies.

We must commit to the following anti-phallic tactics:

Shrinkage

Anti-phallic work starts with the self. Shrinkage is a practice of intentionally reducing your access to potential phallic behavior. For example, this means stepping down from a position of power and transitioning from leadership to followship roles; or if you are upwardly mobile, commit to redistributing your wealth and reconfiguring your life to become horizontally mobile, or depending on your income and assets, even downwardly mobile.

Shrinkage can also be an emotional and spiritual practice; a time of increased awareness and receptivity; a time for self-education, introspection, and adjustment. Perhaps, a time for practicing flaccid affirmations.⁶¹

60. This will not happen just by thinking of ourselves differently. We must also commit to a lifelong process of anti-racist, decolonial, feminist self-education.

61. Possible Affirmations:

- I am not nor have I ever been hard.
- The phallus does not exist.
- My body has a multitude of functions.
- I am limpid and loving it.

Boner-Killing

Engage in the collective criticism of phallic ideation. Destroy the fantasy of the phallus. If you hear your friends, family, coworkers, or complete strangers scheming or dreaming up a phallic act, remind them all of the unsexy consequences of their phallic behavior.

If it's an investment plan, challenge what they are investing in, talk to them about the evils of accumulated wealth. If your brother has dreams of space tourism, remind him of all the impacts of his travel plans; the extraction of fossil fuels and metal alloys to make the ship, the dangerous work conditions and exploitation of labor to process those materials, the environmental impact of the single flight, etc. Do not let the side effects of their decisions remain abstract, bring them into the material realm.

Dick-Shaming

If boner-killing doesn't work, use the strategies of masculine socialization against the phallus by engaging in the collective discouragement of phallic behavior, while demonstrating corrective flaccid behavior. This should be done with patience and compassion. If a friend looks to you for validation after a phallic act, let him know that it's "not cool, man..." Use your body language to further withhold approval. If he goes in for a fist bump, turn it into a hug; hold him and tell him you know he can do better. Show him how much easier it is to connect with other men when you're no longer in competition with them or withholding physical affirmation from them.

Cock-Blocking

If the phallic behavior still continues, name it, disrupt it, get in its way. Put yourself between the phallic force and its target. This could look like the more traditional use of the word—getting in the way of unwanted or non-consensual sexual advances—but can also extend into any situation in which you see phallic behavior being used to defend or expand the reach of those with power, or to spread phallic ideologies.

Forced Detumescence

At times physical intervention is necessary. Especially when the phallic behavior becomes violent. I need to do more research here and will likely just point towards someone else's work. I don't know how to force someone to become more flaccid.⁶²

62. Leeches, perhaps?

Notes on Anti-Phallic Tactics:

It is important that all of these tactics are practiced in a flaccid manner. Do not perpetuate the powers of the phallus to end phallic behavior. You do not need to stay calm or soft, but be perceptive and responsive to the situation. Enact collective resistance (this is not your individual battle to be won). Follow instead of leading. Make it a collaborative disruptive act.

Do not forget that you are acting as a vessel for others; you are being for others. You are not doing this solely (or even primarily) for yourself, but for the emancipation of all who have been oppressed under the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, phallic patriarchy.

If you lose track of your flaccidity or feel a phallic urge coming on, self-cock-blocking is a very effective tactic. Let those around you know. Step back. Stand down. Ask for help. Remove yourself from the situation. Invite your community to hold you accountable for your behavior.

Limpidity

The final act of flaccid masculinity is to negate itself. The dynamic and transitional nature of flaccidity prevents any new solid or fixed form of masculinity from developing. Without the ability or need to identify or differentiate, the word *masculinity* will eventually lose all meaning and fall out of use.

It is here that I suggest the word *limpidity* as a temporary, post-masculine identity, for it carries both a vestigial reference to the flaccid (limp), but indicates a clarity, a lucidity, an openness; free from the tyranny of the phallus and compulsory heterosexuality; perhaps located outside of gender altogether.

Once again, it is important that the Limpid do not lead the charge in deconstructing the gender binary or defining new genders; they are the supporting cast in this act. The Limpids' real responsibility is to continue doing anti-phallic work and support the radical world-building projects of collectives who have been visioning and working towards post-phallic utopias for millennia.

Conclusion

Flaccidity has no conclusion. It is only the beginning.
Go detumescere yourself and undermine the phallus!

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