

Notes from the Queer Zone:

Drawing Queer presence and invoking Queer peace

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Last Sunday, I felt such immense gratitude to be kneeling there, to be laying or crouched on cobblestones, silently drawing so many lines with members of the 2SLGBTQAI+ community out in public, on unceded xwməθkwəy'əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations territory in the place also called Vancouver. After the isolation of pandemic years and drawing mostly alone in a home-based studio recently, I felt extremely grateful to be present, with people, drawing whatever we wanted on the precipice of the coastal lands and waters where I really began my life in my twenties once upon a time, met my family and finally started my transition from male to female. Amid this privilege of being there and drawing lines, this also felt like an ultimately necessary local exercise in the relative freedom we have as queer people in this part of progressive, metropolitan Canada.

I have taken public transit to my job regularly and worked daily in public institutions as a trans woman over the last year, mostly uninterrupted by hate or other provocations. However, amid the constant, disproportionately frequent murder of BIPOC people, vilification of trans folks (with a disproportionate murder rate of BIPOC trans women), the influential political weaponizing of trans rights by the American and Canadian right, and the rise of fascist restraints limiting queer freedom globally, I felt I had a moral responsibility to respond to this call for participation as a way to reflect on what it means to be out, manifesting queer collectivity.

Designed by Vancouver performance artist Kate Barry and funded by a City of Vancouver Community Placemaking Grant, the Queer Zone was a temporary collaborative drawing performance for 2SLGBTQIA+ artists and allies manifested to enable the Queer reclamation of public space in the name of Queer peace that took place on Sunday, August 25th, 2024.

Barry invited Vancouver artists and co-creators Lily Flanjak, Vee CR, Sol Strandebo, Manuele Arias Saldarriaga, Kay Slater, and myself to Leg-in-Boot Square along False Creek to draw from 10 am to 2 pm within a large unframed canvas gessoed black with acrylic makers and on the surrounding cobblestones lining the square in environmentally friendly chalk.

As we began to craft a universe within the canvas together, artist and educator Vee CR recognized the space of black gesso anchoring the canvas as the void, the cavern of emergent human darkness manifesting today that we must confront to protect queer and trans existence. I later learned that Leg-in-Boot Square is named for the 1897 mystery of a gruesome missing human leg that washed up in this part of False Creek and was discovered still inside a boot. The leg and boot were displayed publicly on a spike by police and never claimed, goes the legend. As I write this, that historical colonial violence somehow seems like a more palpable part of the void Vee CR identified. Never the less, that day we gradually illuminated various abstractions from everyday life as we drew, drew on and around this black hole, greeted one another, gathered and met. Workers, gallery staff, students, profs, and artists under a tent, pulling a common understanding into being with Pasca paint markers for magic wands. Layers upon layers of coalescing words, colours and images formed the strata of the drawing underneath us.

As the canvas was etched, Kay Slater chalked up the cobblestones and laid welcome all around. Slater, a hard of hearing, non-verbal Vancouver artist was there in cutoffs and boots to create, but their focus was on manifesting support for the access needs of the Queer Zone. Slater and I conversed at length during Queer Zone while I took a break from drawing and ate lunch. Writing this, at my desk a week later on Labour Day, I email Slater to see if I can include some notes I made during our conversation about language. In the course of our dialogue, comments they made about the constant power of language made me reflect on the fact that my own concern with language, using language and listening, had brought me closer to the possibility of my queer expression all my life, during all my years of repression. Slater shared that during Queer Zone they eventually became exhausted from lip-reading all day but felt that gathering in silence alongside other hearing and verbal artists during the day was “a gift.” Two days after we left Queer Zone behind, Slater went back to Leg-in-Boot Square and noticed that all traces of the Queer Zone had been washed away in the rain, confirming that the materials we used were soluble and environmentally sound. “I even hunted a bit in the stone, looking for a trace,” Slater wrote to me. “I allowed for a moment of melancholy but then decided to reframe it as delight, appreciating that all things fade, change, and make space anew for new things.” Witnessing the project, Slater said, allows the Queer Zone to “exist in my mind as a performance that relies less on seeing, or having the final artwork described.”

As we drew on the canvas conversations about trans-autistic art making, new audiobooks, problems in art education, and more were discussed as we edged closer to one another. Members of the public visited to express support and sit down with us to contribute some drawings. A sweet guy with long hair and sunglasses sat down and said “what an immaculate vibe” as we began to draw on the void. Barry’s dog was celebrated for its fascia

paw print contributions. Queer was inscribed upside down on the upper lefthand corner of the canvas, an inversion I appreciated because it showed the circularity of the drawing, along with a tapestry of cuddling made by Sol Strandebo. The edges of the canvas were etched as a shoreline, complete with rising sea levels, and a house with a white picket fence I drew, burning. When Barry sprayed the final canvas, we saw a simultaneous cacophony and harmony of vision assembled, a summary of so many conversations, so many anxieties, gestures of peace, experiments, purpose, will. Possibility was convened and drafted into this space.

Still, I think about what Slater shared with me about the quiet of peace that we enabled together that day, and how valuable it was. As I write this reflection at my coffee table in my apartment a week later, I actually think I may have found the most joy in this public drawing performance in the careful silence we cultivated huddled together in the square, on the unfurled void. I think I savored most the moments I spent laying on my stomach on the canvas, the summer heat of the cobblestones below me, quietly propped onto my elbows with markers, intimately saying nothing while saying everything with everyone gathered. It felt like the most tangible form of affinity and solidarity I have incurred in so long. Perhaps, an embodiment of queer peace. Our drawing feels so open as I look at an image of it on my iPhone while I write this, the wild possibilities of future collectivity it secretes forces me to ask more of myself.

How do we best support others to manifest queer and trans peace in social territories of intense oppression where they may not be welcomed? How can I best help to enable Queer Peace and zones of Queer and Trans presence for all of the people in our global society who need them? Not just to feel grateful like me, but to survive and thrive culturally. To truly live at all.