

**GSWS 1610: Queer and Feminist Media Art: The Queer Avant-Garde**  
**Fall 2024 (class number 31631)**

Monday 6-8:30pm  
4625 WW Posvar Hall

Instructor: John Musser, Teaching Assistant Professor  
[jjm183@pitt.edu](mailto:jjm183@pitt.edu) (I typically respond to emails within 24 hours)  
Office/Student Hours: Tuesday, 2-4pm

**Course Description:**

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the avant-garde signaled newness. New ways of making, looking, perceiving, and conceptualizing art and art practice. The avant-garde was ‘in advance of’—leading the way for culture to follow behind. When we think of the avant-garde, we might think of Dada or Surrealism, or figures like Martha Graham or Marcel Duchamp, but rarely ever do we think of camp, John Waters, or the drag queen Divine. Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner doubts the new-ness of the avant-garde today, claiming that most of what passes for avant-garde in the present is *not* future-oriented, but is rather bits of recycled culture and aesthetics from the past.

However, in this course I insist that we question Schechner’s assertion, and think about *queer* artmaking in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century as importantly invested in forging futures through exploring and manipulating history and the past, as queer histories are often ephemeral and subject to erasure. Many of the queer artists we will research have posed new questions, paved new paths, and expanded the aesthetic imaginary of queerness itself. I want us to think collectively about how queer artists have used varying strategies (innovative or resuscitated) to forge a future through a distinctly queer avant-garde practice. How are sex, desire, embodiment, trauma, race, class, and gender explored and performed in new ways or through new mediums by queer artists?

Throughout the course we’ll be reading critical texts in the field of performance studies and queer theory, while also looking at queer cultural workers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will be examining works by Erica Gressman, Kevin Aviance, Ron Athey, Narcissister, Vaginal Davis, John Waters and Divine, ANOHNI, and others. You will be assessed through frequent and insightful participation, 6 response papers, 2 creative projects, and a final project which asks you to develop a creative project and reflect on your aesthetic interests and inspirations.

**Required Readings:**

All essays, readings, or other course materials will be uploaded or linked to Canvas

**Digital Platforms:**

This course will require the use of Canvas, YouTube, Google Docs, and some music/film streaming platforms (like Spotify or Netflix).

- May secondarily require the use of open-source software like Audacity, or other free video/image editing software (though you are welcome to use ‘fancier’ varieties like Adobe Premier that you may have access to as a Pitt student).

**A Note on the required viewing/listening**

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You must have watched the film/videos or listened to the songs before each Monday class. Even if you watched or heard the text before, even if it was last year, you still need to do it again. You will notice new and interesting things by consuming it *with intent*. Even though we meet twice a week, please read/watch/listen to **all** the required texts before class on Monday

### **Grading Breakdown:**

Participation – 20%

Creating Inquiry Assignments – 2 at 10% each = 20% total

Response Papers – 6 at 5% each = 30% total

Final Project – 30% (15% creative project + 15% artist statement and annotated influences)

### **Office/Student Hours:**

Traditionally, office hours, or student hours, are set times where students can come and meet with the instructor outside of class to discuss course materials, their progress in the course, or to brainstorm ideas for projects/papers. If you'd like to meet, please reach out to me to set up an appointment time. If these times do not work for you, please make an appointment with me to meet at another time.

### **Center for Creativity:**

Given that this is not a Studio Arts course, you may not have access to the same kinds of resources or studio space to work that Studio Arts students might. Do not despair, though! Pitt's Center for Creativity has space and resources to help you think through how to make whatever you're planning. Please take advantage of the resources they have to offer:

<https://www.creative.pitt.edu/>

### **Voting at Pitt:**

In this presidential election season, eligible student voters and those educating themselves about the election process are encouraged to consult <https://www.pittvotes.pitt.edu/>. This site ensures Pitt students and other members of the community always know when elections are happening and have the information they need to vote with confidence. The site also provides election reminders, voter registration, applications for absentee ballots, and more.

### **Major Graded Assignments/Tasks:**

#### **Response Papers:**

You will write six 2-page response papers throughout the semester, as marked on the course calendar. Please hand in a paper copy of your response paper on the day it is due. I want each of your response papers to follow this exact formula:

1. **First paragraph** – Choose one of the readings for the week, and basically tell me what the reading is saying/arguing in your own words, with no quotations.
2. **Second paragraph** – Choose one of the performances for the week, and speak to an aspect or aspects that stood out to you. Offer up some brief avenues for interpretation.

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3. **Third paragraph** – put either a) the reading from paragraph 1 or b) the performance in paragraph 2 in conversation with another reading or performance we've covered. What overlapping themes/concepts do you see at play, and where do they diverge? (not applicable for the first response paper)
4. **Fourth paragraph** – offer some open-ended discussion questions that could be used to facilitate discussion in class or on the discussion board.

### Creative Inquiries:

Two times throughout the semester, I will ask you to complete short creative assignments that engage with the concepts we've been exploring. One of these assignments will ask you to 'queer' iconic found images/media, and the other will ask you to write and perform a two-minute-long queer and/or feminist manifesto.

### Final Project:

There are two components to your final project:

1. Create a visual or sonic interpretation of a common theme or concept that has emerged and reemerged throughout the semester. Choose something that fascinates or otherwise inspires your curiosity and creativity. Here are some possibilities and mediums to explore:
  - i. A short podcast or vocal performance exploring or replicating a particular sonic aesthetic (e.g. something in the style of Protest Art)
  - ii. A comic or series of comics that showcase the concept/aesthetic you choose (e.g. a comic that explores abjection and its relationship to queerness)
  - iii. A video performance (you could upload to YouTube, or use TikTok or Instagram TV) interpreting the same concept/aesthetic (e.g. a series of TikToks representing and interpreting the liveliness and excess of queer nightlife)
  - iv. Any medium that helps you to investigate an aesthetic!
    - i. My goal for you in this final project is to not only see the 'big picture' in terms of how queer artists engage with similar concepts and subject matter, but to also situate yourself in those same aesthetic conversations.
  - v. This will be due FIRST, some time before the end of the semester.
2. Craft a 1-2 page (double spaced) artist statement that explains some of rationale behind your aesthetic sense. What has inspired you, and what do you enjoy creating, and why?
  - i. In addition to the artist statement, add a 2-3 page annotated bibliography of aesthetic texts that have influenced and informed your aesthetic sensibility. List, cite, and describe the key pieces of art/culture/design which have helped to form you.

### End of Semester Art Show:

There will be a culminating art show (graciously hosted by the Center for Creativity) at the end of the semester featuring the work that you've created in this course!

### Participation:

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I believe that seminar-based classes like this are most enjoyable and most effective when students are participating and prepared to discuss the course materials. Trust me, you do not want a class involving critical theory to be a one-way lecture; a conversational approach to critical theory promotes deeper understanding and is more pleasant for all. Your input and enthusiastic engagement with the materials will make the class enjoyable and rewarding for all parties involved. Furthermore, not only is participation part of your grade, but contributing your thoughts and responses aloud to the class is a crucial component of joining an academic community.

- n.b. – good participation could look like several things: frequent and insightful comments in class, raising questions about the readings, lively engagement in small group discussions, generous feedback in workshops, or crafting consistently thought-provoking freewrites.

### **Course Policies**

#### Classroom Citizenship:

Good classroom citizenship is expected of you. Please be consistently respectful to others during class, even when you disagree (no insulting or offensive language). You also should practice intellectual generosity, which means that you should engage or respond to questions (even if they aren't perfectly phrased or formed) with a spirit of understanding and willingness to collectively learn.

#### Attendance:

It is in your best interest to attend class consistently. Anecdotally, I can say that the students who struggle with the material and writing assignments tend to be the ones who miss a great deal of class. I believe in having a generous absence policy: you are allowed to miss **two** classes (equal to two weeks of class), no questions asked. Missing any more than this will result in deductions to your grade. Of course, I will make allowances for students with DRS accommodations that mention attendance and for students who test positive for Covid-19 and other highly communicable illnesses (mono/flu/strep/etc).

#### Submission of work:

All assignments (except for the second Creative Inquiry Assignment) will be submitted through Canvas. For response papers, please also print out and hand in a physical copy (I am able to grade them faster this way).

- n.b. you have access to the Microsoft Office Suite through Pitt:  
<https://www.technology.pitt.edu/help-desk/how-to-documents/microsoft-students-download-and-install>

#### Late work:

I do not chase students for late assignments. If you find yourself needing more time to submit work, or anticipate that work will be submitted late, it is your responsibility to alert me.

#### A Note on Man-splaining:

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If there are men or more masculine folk in this class, please be mindful of how you are engaging with other students in the class. Thoughtful comments and reflections are always welcome.

### A Note on Making Mistakes and Intellectual Generosity:

In this course we may be discussing issues that you have many thoughts about, but perhaps you haven't articulated them publicly before. What happens if you say something wrong, or use terminology that you thought was okay, but isn't? It is my hope that in this class we will collectively respond to such mistakes or gaffes with a desire to help each other understand and learn. No one enrolls in a class completely 'woke.' Classrooms, even digital ones, are spaces where people can learn and make honest mistakes. Honest mistakes will be addressed with a spirit of generosity and compassion. Repeated, intentional instances of disrespect or harmful language will not be tolerated, however. For a longer explanation on this issue, read: [I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic.](#)

### Reading Theory:

This class will be asking you to read critical theoretical texts, and some of you may who have limited experience reading texts like this. Not to worry, there are some tricks to 'getting it,' many of which hinge on developing consistent active reading practices. Active reading practices involve developing the habit of highlighting, circling, writing questions in the margins, or responding to the text *as* you read the text. This will help your comprehension of dense theoretical material.

### Email Etiquette:

When emailing your instructor (myself or another), it is considered polite to start the email with a greeting, i.e. "Hello. Prof/Dr. XYZ." If you are unsure how to refer to your instructor, ask. It is also considered polite to close your email with "Thank you," "Sincerely," or something to that effect. Remember that you want to convey the right ethos in email, as well as in graded work!

- For the record, you may address me by my first name in email and in conversation. If you are uncomfortable with that, you may address me as "Professor Musser" or "Dr. Musser."

### Generative AI

For the creative projects in this class, I give you permission to use generative AI on a limited basis. If you use AI to generate an image, your assignment will be incomplete, **but** if you continue to arrange, manipulate, or otherwise curate that image—then you will have shown me sufficient aesthetic engagement and creativity. In other words, you may use AI as the starting point for your creative work, but not to create a ready-to-go final product.

- On the flipside, I do **not** allow the use of generative AI in written work for this course.

### Disability resources and services:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890 as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course. For more information, visit <https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/drs/>

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Academic integrity and plagiarism:

Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed. For the full Academic Integrity policy, go to:

<http://www.cfo.pitt.edu/policies/policy/02/02-03-02.html>

Violation of the Academic Integrity Code requires the instructor to submit an Academic Integrity Violation Report to the Dean's Office.

E-mail policy:

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This email address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

Non-discrimination policy:

As an educational institution and as an employer, Pitt values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, genetic information, disability, or status as a veteran. For more information, visit

<http://cfo.pitt.edu/policies/documents/policy07-01-03web.pdf>

- I encourage students to discuss and explore issues and topics surrounding any of the above categories in their academic work.

Gender-Inclusive language guidelines:

Aspiring to create a learning environment in which people of all identities are encouraged to contribute their perspectives to academic discourse, the University of Pittsburgh Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program provides guidelines and resources regarding gender-inclusive/nonsexist language ( [www.gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432](http://www.gsws.pitt.edu/node/1432) ). Following these guidelines fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment, strengthens academic writing, enriches discussion, and reflects best professional practices.

Language is gender-inclusive and non-sexist when we use words that affirm and respect how people describe, express, and experience their gender. Gender-inclusive/non-sexist language acknowledges people of any gender (e.g. first-year student versus freshman, chair versus chairman, humankind versus mankind). It also affirms non-binary gender identifications, and recognizes the difference between biological sex and gender expression. Students may share their preferred pronouns and names, and these gender identities and gender expressions should be honored.

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These guidelines fulfill the best intentions of the University of Pittsburgh's Non-Discrimination Policy: <https://www.cfo.pitt.edu/policies/policy/07/07-01-03.html>.

\*\*\*What to do if you accidentally misgender someone\*\*\* If you make a mistake, quickly correct yourself, you may quickly apologize, and continue with your statement as usual. The swiftness of your correction shows your desire to get it right, and prevents a long-winded apology that might make the mistake more about you than the person misgendered.

Content warning and class climate:

Our course readings and classroom discussions will often focus on mature, difficult, and potentially challenging topics. As with any course in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program, course topics are often political and personal. Particularly in this course, we may encounter performances that involve nudity, bodily fluids, or other graphic depictions of sex or trauma. These might trigger strong feelings—anger, discomfort, anxiety, confusion, excitement, humor, and even boredom. Some of us will have emotional responses to the readings; some of us will have emotional responses to our peers' understanding of the readings; all of us should feel responsible for creating a space that is both intellectually rigorous and respectful. Above all, be respectful (even when you strongly disagree) and be mindful of the ways that our identities position us in the classroom.

I expect everyone to come to class prepared to discuss the readings in a mature and respectful way. If you are struggling with the course materials, here are some tips: read the syllabus so that you are prepared in advance. You can approach your instructor ahead of time if you'd like more information about a topic or reading. If you think a particular reading or topic might be especially challenging or unsettling, you can arrive to class early and take a seat by the door so that you can easily exit the classroom as needed. If you need to leave or miss class, you are still responsible for the work you miss. If you are struggling to keep up with the work because of the course content, you should speak with me and/or seek help from the counseling center.

Sexual misconduct, required reporting, and Title IX:

The University is committed to combatting sexual misconduct. As a result, you should know that University faculty and staff members are required to report any instances of sexual misconduct, including harassment and sexual violence, to the University's Title IX office so that the victim may be provided appropriate resources and support options. **What this means is that as your professor, I am required to report any incidents of sexual misconduct that are directly reported to me, or of which I am somehow made aware.**

There are two important exceptions to this requirement about which you should be aware:

A list of the designated University employees who, as counselors and medical professionals, do not have this reporting responsibility and can maintain confidentiality, can be found here:

<https://www.titleix.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/resources-and-support-services/confidential-resources> An important exception to the reporting requirement exists for academic work. Disclosures about

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sexual misconduct that are shared as part of an academic project, classroom discussion, or course assignment, are not required to be disclosed to the University's Title IX office.

If you are the victim of sexual misconduct, Pitt encourages you to reach out to these resources:

\* Title IX Office: 412-648-7860

\* SHARE @ the University Counseling Center: 412-648-7930 (8:30 A.M. TO 5 P.M. M-F) and  
412-

648-7856 (AFTER BUSINESS HOURS)

If you have a safety concern, please contact the University of Pittsburgh Police, 412-624-2121.

Other reporting information is available here: <https://www.titleix.pitt.edu/civil-rights-title-ix/make-report>

**Course Calendar** (again, these dates and assignments are subject to change)

**Week 1 | Introductions, Terminology, and Methods of Reading**

**Monday, Aug. 26**

Course overview

**Week 2 | Monday, Sept. 2 – NO CLASS – Labor Day**

**Week 3 | Methods of Reading and Disidentification**

**Monday, Sept. 9**

**Response Paper #1 Due** (Respond to Davis or Sedgwick)

To read for class:

Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading..."

Somerville, "Queer"

Muñoz, "The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Crème Davis's Terrorist Drag"

View:

Select performances by Vaginal Davis

**Week 4 | "Turning on" the TV: Queer Afterlives of Media**

**Monday, Sept. 16**

**Response Paper #2 Due**

To read for class:

Muñoz, "After Jack: Queer Failure, Queer Virtuosity"

Manalansan, "...Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives"

View:

Select videos by Kalup Linzy

Dara Birnbaum, "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman"

Dynasty Handbag, "Remote Penetration"

<optional> Jack Smith, *Flaming Creatures*

**Week 5 | Playing in the Muck: Abjection, Weird Drag, Queerness**

**Monday, Sept. 23**

**Response Paper #3 Due**

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To read for class:

Excerpt - Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

View:

*Wigstock: the Movie*

Tom Rubnitz - *Pickle Surprise*

Select Performances by Klaus Nomi

**Week 6 | Digging Through the Trash: Camp, the Grotesque, and the Carnavalesque  
Monday, Sept. 30**

To read for class:

Excerpt from Mikhail Bakhtin, "Rabelais and his World"

Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'"

View:

John Waters, *Female Trouble*

Select music videos by *Divine*

<Workshop Creative Inquiry #1 projects>

**Week 7 | Protesting Performance/Performing Protest  
Monday, Oct. 7**

**Creative Inquiry Assignment #1 Due Oct. 9<sup>th</sup>**

To read for class:

Goodman, "Bodies and Stages: An Interview with Tim Miller"

Zoe Leonard, "I want a dyke for president"

Holly Hughes, "Clit Notes"

Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein..."

View/Listen:

Performances by Tim Miller and Karen Finley

**Week 8 |  
Monday, Oct. 14 – NO CLASS – Fall Break**

**Week 9 | The Avant-garde in the Era of AIDS  
Monday, Oct. 21**

**Response Paper #4 Due**

To read for class:

Wilson, "Diamanda Galas: Écriture Feminine, Abjection, and Feminine Jouissance"

Excerpt from Amelia Jones, *Body Art*

View/Listen:

Select performance by Ron Athey

Diamanda Galas, *Plague Mass* (full album)

**Week 10 | The Queer Aesthetics of Nightlife  
Monday, Oct. 28 | Dance and the Queer Aesthetics of Nightlife**

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To read for class:

Muñoz, “Gesture, Ephemerality, and Queer Feeling: Approaching Kevin Aviance”

View:

Select performances by Kevin Aviance, et al

<Workshop Queer Manifestos >

**Week 11 | A Synesthesia of Race, Gender, and Sexuality**

**Monday, Nov. 4**

**<Performance of Creative Inquiry Assignment #2 in *The Understory*>**

To read for class:

Ruiz, “...Getting into Gressman’s Cyborgian Skin”

View:

Erica Gressman, “Wall of Skin” and “Limbs”

**Week 12 | Objecting to Objectification: Queer Bodily Restructuring**

**Monday, Nov. 11**

**Response Paper #5 Due**

To read for class:

Barber, “Narcissister, a Truly Kinky Act”

View:

Select performances by Narcissister

**Week 13 | Final Project Workshops**

**Monday, Nov. 18**

Final project workshops

**Nov. 25 – NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK**

**Week 14 | Is ‘Nature’ Queer? The Non-human and Non-Heteronormative**

**Monday, Dec. 2**

To read for class:

Magnet, “Representing Insect Sexualities...”

View:

Selections from *Green Porno* and *Seduce Me*

**Week 15 | Feeling the Trans Future**

**Monday, Dec. 9**

**Response Paper #6 Due**

To read for class:

Zukic, “...Queer Worldmaking in Anohni’s *Hopelessness*”

Ladarola, “Nomi Ruiz Shares...”

View/Listen:

Nomi Ruiz and Animal Feelings, “Chemical Love”

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Anohni, *Hopelessness* (full album) and “Drone Bomb Me”

**Dec. 12 | Artist Statement and Annotated List of Influences Due**