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EMBRACING DISORIENTATION
IN QUEER EXHAUSTION:
PULSE AND CASSILS'S *103 SHOTS*

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It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer—that someone can be there as your companion—knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying: I'll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness.

— Dori Laub in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

When living in a world where one's desires are treated as abnormal and deviant, a club like Pulse offers a safe place away from those who choose to condemn our desires simply because we love and desire differently. The film *103 Shots* (2016) by Cassils' was made in response to one survivor's statement: "You're sitting there having a great time at a club and you hear what sounds like fireworks and balloons popping, and you assume it's part of the show, and then you realize it's not the celebration you thought it was."² *103 Shots* responds to the Pulse massacre and to the disorientation created when fear and anxiety impede expressions of love under the eye of violence. Peggy Phelan writes in *Mourning Sex*, "Queers are queer because we recognize that we have survived our own deaths. The Law of the Social has already repudiated us, spit us out, banished us, jailed us, and otherwise quarantined us from the cultural imagination it is so anxious to keep clean, pristine, well-guarded."³ Unfortunately, the labeling of queer love as deviant has not been exhausted.

On June 12, 2016, a shooter entered Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and killed 49 people and injured 53 others. When I heard what had happened in Orlando, I was sitting at my parents' home in a small coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania, where my partner at the time and I were visiting. My partner sat on the couch watching MSNBC, panicked. I had no words to console her, simply because I had not understood what had just happened. She felt horrified, saddened, scared, and completely disoriented in

¹ Cassils's work confronts queer desire, and homophobic and transphobic violence, while testifying to the struggle and endurance it takes to sit outside the hetero-/normative structure of the binary.

² Cassils, "103 Shots," video, directed by Heather Cassils, YouTube, June 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpEYQKfLk>.

³ Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 2009), 33.

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rural Pennsylvania with a partner who was unable to offer her any emotional support. She excused herself and went upstairs.

My mother looked at me and asked, “What’s wrong with her?” At that moment, I felt as though I had been punched in the stomach. I felt numb, had nowhere to turn—my mother had inadvertently confronted me with my invisibility as a trans* identifying person and the invisibility of my love. Simultaneously, I realized that those people in Orlando could have been me, my friends, or my lover.

The term “queer exhaustion” has been in the vernacular of queer discourse for quite some time. I am adapting the term to outline a theory of queer exhaustion that names the stressful dialectic of social and political visibility and invisibility as experienced by queer, trans, and intersex individuals in contemporary American culture. Queer exhaustion is the endless struggle between self-erasure and self-abnegation driven by continually negotiating hegemonic histories, desires, and experiences. The negotiation between invisibility and visibility requires those outside the heteronormative constructs to pivot on a dime for their safety. This continual swivel and whirl create disorientation. Desiring queerly proves to be an exhausting endeavor when revealing your love for someone can lead to your death. In turn, concealing love produces trauma. By further examining disorientation in *103 Shots* and queer exhaustion, can we create an entrance for empathy? By empathy I mean, in the most basic sense, sharing feelings of the “other” by providing a feeling of oneness. I suggest Cassils activates empathy in *103 Shots*, with sharp cuts and assaulting sound disorientating the senses, creating embodiment in the viewer.

Weeks after the shooting at Pulse, I attended San Francisco Pride. Pride is supposed to be a celebration; however, under the gaze of snipers perched atop the buildings surrounding Dolores Park, I watched two individuals get engaged under the “protection” of those guns. Being “protected” by the same weapons of war used to kill our companions creates disorientation. Both psychic and physical distresses are implicit in the idea that people need to be protected to celebrate and proclaim their love. Also under the watch of those snipers during Pride was Cassils, filming participants for *103 Shots*.

Couples participating in *103 Shots* were asked to stand far enough apart for a white balloon to occupy the space between

them. The weight of the couples' bodies provided just enough resistance so the balloon did not fall. The flexible rubber structure and malleable nature of the balloon, when filled with the oxygen from individuals' lungs, allows for pressure to be applied. Once positioned face to face in front of the stark white background, anchoring the gaze of intimacy, the couples onscreen tighten their embrace (fig. 1). The gesture of an embrace encourages one to hold tight. The expression of an embrace implies crossing a distance to visibly show love's existence, romantic or otherwise.

The balloon is an object of celebration and seems harmless. The action of the embrace implies affection or love, so when the embrace or loving gesture causes a pop, mimicking a gunshot, disorientation occurs. Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*, "We are affected by what we come into contact with. In other words, emotions are directed to what we come in contact with: They move us toward or away from such objects."⁴ When the couples make the choice to embrace, bodies come together, bursting the fragile balloon that was keeping them apart. Unsure of when the balloon will burst, the participants' reactions in *103 Shots* vary from pleasure to pain and apprehension. Grimaces, closed eyes, tense jaws, and indirect gazes are visible as some embrace quickly, some slowly, others reluctantly. Mimicking feelings of pleasure and pain, sexual orgasm and falling in love, the explosiveness that occurs when a balloon is suddenly put under too much pressure is both exciting and frightening.

The audience witnessing *103 Shots* sees a rise and fall of the chests during the embrace, signaling a violent loss of breath and even loss of life, as well as signaling the act of kissing or sexual excitement. The burst balloon ejects from in between the couples like a bullet from a gun. When someone is shot, flesh vibrates from the impact of the bullet, and the body falls. The sound of the bursting balloons causes the viewer to blink hard and recoil, like when one hears a gunshot or the impact of pots and pans hitting the floor. In *103 Shots*, the cadence of the exploding balloons quickens as though someone is firing a semiautomatic weapon, creating a pulse that runs through the film. The viewer becomes increasingly aware of their body as their chest tightens and fills with fear due to the loud pops occurring during each embrace. Although the bodies act as stand-ins for the lives of the couples at

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Figure 1: Film still, *703 Shots*, courtesy of Ronald Pedman Gallery in New York, NY.



Figure 2: Film still, *703 Shots*, courtesy of Ronald Pedman Gallery in New York, NY.



Pulse, viewers realize they have just witnessed something akin to dying in the arms of your beloved (fig. 2).

The use of black-and-white film renders the participants timeless, evokes past struggles with violence and loss within the LGBTQI+ community, and suggests the infinite gradations of gray in relation to expanding the black-and-white binary of male/female, boy/girl, man/woman. The black-and-white also suggests the genre of *memento mori*, and the tight cropping of bodies becomes reminiscent of some of Robert Mapplethorpe's images, specifically *Embrace* (1982) and *Self Portrait* (1975) (fig. 3).

Kobena Mercer talks about Mapplethorpe's images as *memento mori*: "In this mourning, there was something horribly accurate about the truism that death is the greatest leveler, because his pictures have now become *memento mori*, documentary traces of a style of life and a sexual ethics of the '70s and early '80s which of now largely disappeared and passed away into memory."⁵ It is by grappling with such passing away into memory and the possibility of such tragedy becoming forgotten that *103 Shots* functions as such an important reminder not only to the LGBTQI+ community but to society at large. Cassils brings together homophobic and transphobic violence throughout their work, which allows the LGBTQI+ community to come together and realize all of our bodies have suffered violence, no matter how you identify: queer or trans, gay or lesbian.

A minute into *103 Shots*, a still image in the film allows the viewer's gaze to rest on the back of someone's head, with their arm stretched out across a white background. Their gender becomes unidentifiable. The outstretched arm and white background recall Mapplethorpe's *Self Portrait* (1975), which shows the young, smiling artist with his arm stretched out across a white photographic background, fingers spread, looking directly at the camera (fig. 4). This image was eventually cropped in true Mapplethorpe style to make *Arm (Self-Portrait)* (1976). His arm appears lifeless, the stark white skin translucent as blue veins spread over his arm.

Another Mapplethorpe image, *Embrace* (1982), was taken at the beginning of the AIDS pandemic and shows a black and white couple embracing (fig. 5). They're naked from the waist up, wearing jeans, and their heads, pressed together, press their faces into one another's shoulders. The couple is deeply entwined, as if afraid to

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Figure 3: Film still, *103 Spots*, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, NY.



Figure 4: *Self-Portrait*, courtesy of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

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let go. The intensity of this embrace shows a deep need in both parties and speaks to the fear and anxiety created during the AIDS epidemic.

In comparison, a still from *103 Shots* shows a couple embracing, naked from the waist up, wearing jeans, but they are not burying their heads; rather, they are militantly gazing directly at the camera. The power of the gaze as explored through much of the film suggests that it allows participants to claim a sense of forcefulness, which makes them fearless in their love, confronting the viewer. When Cassils shows a couple wearing sunglasses, the direct gaze is reminiscent of Benglis's *Artforum Ad* and Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait* (1975) (fig. 5).

In these specific choices, Cassils is claiming the same unapologetic confronting gaze as Linda Benglis's November 1974 *Artforum Ad*, demanding to have their body and those of their subjects seen. There can be immense pleasure in being visible—after all, recognition determines viability. Ideas of pleasure tie into visibility in a club or social setting, where one not only desires recognition but simultaneously desires to be desirable, as in the case of the Pulse nightclub or at SF Pride. Individuals gather in what they have understood to be a safe place not only to come together, but also to allow themselves to be desired in a sexual way. We desire to be desired; we desire connectivity. There is an unease in the relationship one has with desire, including the distance one must traverse to act upon it (fig. 6).

The bodies in *103 Shots* represent a spectrum of gender and sexual identity. There are multiple ways one can desire, and this film underlines the beauty and tragedy, or the pleasure and pain, of queer desire. Cassils's and Mapplethorpe's works depict lost lives, utilizing death as the greatest leveler while confronting the viewer not only with recognizing these bodies, but also the desire and death they hold. Many demonized our desire as the cause of our deaths, rendering AIDS deaths and those in Orlando unable to be grieved by the public at large. Death does not see color, sexuality, or gender; death comes for us all.

Fragility in the balloon creates a point at which it does break. The balloon ruptures, it breaks, it breaks up, and breaks apart. Grief, trauma, and loss seemingly break apart all in its wake, especially after the loss of a loved one via a breakup, breakdown, or

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Figure 5: Film still, *103 Shots*, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, NY, and *Self-Portrait* The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



Figure 6: Linda Benglis *Attrition Ad*, Film Still *103 Shots*, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, NY, and *Self-Portrait* The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.



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death. Through disorientation, one gains another, and the empathy created within *103 Shots* allows people to become a witness to the testimony of queer love and loss, not implicated in its destruction and refusal.

The balloon stands in for the multitude of things keeping lovers or families apart: belief systems, fear of loss, miscommunication, etc. To explain or understand the barrier, one must break apart and relinquish the most familiar parts of oneself to truly know someone. If one is to truly know the other, one must embrace the disorientation that comes with these things. *103 Shots* and *Embrace* show the struggle that occurs when fighting against what normalized modes deem the right way to love or to come into being. To quote Butler:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you” by trying to translate but finding that my language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human being comes into being again and again as that which we have yet to know.

Language must break up and yield, leaving one speechless, for there are no words to encompass trauma, loss, or grief. Perhaps it is empathy, perhaps it is exactly this, knowing there will be moments with unfulfilled hope and incomprehensible pain, and perhaps having someone show up as your companion and being allowed to know that you is what we gain. Tremendous importance lies in having someone show up as your companion, someone who is allowed to witness your exhaustion, your pain and disorientation.

Pulse, Pride, and a family’s home are supposed to be safe places, but when you have nowhere you can truly feel safe and seen, this is exhausting. Returning to the story of when I first heard about the Orlando shooting: I needed my partner. But I also needed to *be* a partner. I needed to bear witness to her pain and disorientation. I needed to see her struggle to finally come face to face with the invisibility of my desire and love to my family. I failed to fully witness my partner, just as my mother failed to see *us*, see *me*. By making our way through disorientation, we find where and who we come to feel at home with, and in witnessing others’ pain and

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trauma, we come to know our own.

The dilemmas of love and desire don't yield simple answers, for they create feelings of attachment. In these feelings of attachment and love, one realizes there is potentiality for great loss. The couples in *103 Shots* stand within reach of one another, yet the distance between threatens to divide, the chance to embrace slips away. *103 Shots* asks us to hold tight to one another in the face of fear, suffering, and great loss. The idea of embracing through the giant, unexpected "pop" is asking us not to let go but in fact squeeze harder. The realization that the lost ones are not coming back becomes the most disorienting, painful, and exhausting thing to navigate. How does one let go of someone when life without them is brutally exhausting? When unfulfilled hope is the only option one has, how can one ever really let go?