

# UNBOUND BY PRECONCEPTIONS: URINATION AND ABSTRACTION IN THE ARTWORK OF CASSILS AND ANDY WARHOL

Alexandra Chalier

---

There are a number of artists who have used urine in their work in recent decades, but most people have only ever heard of Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* due to the vitriolic response it received from Catholic communities around the United States and Europe. Most other works are simply little-discussed. Why might this be? Urine is surrounded by connotations of dirtiness, of primal urges and even of hypermasculine competition that renders it inappropriate for polite conversation. In the 1929 book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud put forth the myth of the urge in "primitive" man to put out fire by urinating on it. If we accept the upward-shooting flames to be phallic in nature, Freud explains, then putting out the fire with urine is an act of degenerate homosexual competition, while resisting the urge represents rising above primitive nature in order to become civilized.<sup>1</sup> As implausible as this all is, Freud nonetheless touches on the cultural concept of the excretions and secretions of the body as a contaminating force that must be contained and appropriately regulated through societal mores. In other words, having an inappropriate relationship with bodily secretions has the potential to threaten notions of civilized life and "natural" social relations. David Harradine builds on this idea in a study of the works of performance artist Franko B, who often utilized blood, urine, and other materials in his work. Harradine explains how "dirt comes to be a formative exclusion for that which is produced as the 'clean' or the 'appropriate'."<sup>2</sup> Harradine explains how when Franko B performs abjection as a queer artist, he is making his body a metaphor for heteronormative society: both are considered to be closed systems with boundaries to separate inside from outside, and the horror of the abject comes from being reminded that the boundaries are thin, frail, and ultimately impossible to maintain.<sup>3</sup> Harradine brings attention to that which Freud takes for granted, which is that "cleanliness" and "civilization" are inevitably defined through what they exclude, what they are not. As such, cleanliness cannot exist without filth and civilization cannot exist without perversion. Two works of particular interest within the topic of using urine as an art material are the Canadian artist Cassil's performance/sculpture/installation piece *Pissed* and the late Andy Warhol's *Oxidation Paintings*. Despite the specificity of urine as a connotation-heavy material, the artists successfully pursue markedly different goals in their work. Cassil uses their own urine as a sculpture to evoke the viewer's shared humanity with the artist, and effectively materializes rage at transphobic legislation through an analytical, labour-intensive project. Warhol's use of urine to parody Jackson Pollock's drip paintings has a decidedly less discernible intention; one might say that the abstraction of the splatters in the urine painting and their intentional absence of iconic meaning echo Warhol's characteristic opaqueness throughout his career with regards to his political and social leanings. What both works have in common, in spite of their differences, is a satirical repudiation of societal rules about what deserves to be called "art," and indeed, what deserves to be called valuable.

This questioning of what is valuable is a recurring theme in the work of Cassil. Cassil is a trans artist from Montreal who uses bodybuilding both as form of gender expression and an art practice. Their works build off of their lived experiences as a masculine queer person and the often-fraught politics wrapped up in that experience. In February 2017, following the Trump administration's rollback of legal protections that allowed transgender children to use school bathrooms matching their gender identity, Cassil started to construct the work *Pissed* to protest and

call attention to the detriment it causes to trans and gender nonconforming people. In the days and weeks following the legislative decision, every time Cassils urinated, they captured the excreta in orange plastic medical collection bottles marked with the date of capture. After two hundred days, they had nearly two hundred gallons of urine, which they transferred from the bottles into a thick glass tank for their show *Monumental* in New York City. To conclude the durational part of the work, Cassils opened the show with a two-hour performance entitled *Fountain*,<sup>4</sup> where they stood in front of the audience, drank water, and pissed into the final collection bottle to fill the sculpture. In the gallery space, the huge glowing cube was accompanied by a wall holding all of the other orange bottles, as well as 4-channel audio taken from the court case of Gavin Grimm, a transgender teenager from Virginia who unwittingly became the subject of countrywide debate in 2015 when he sued his school for barring him from the bathroom of his choice.<sup>5</sup> Two hundred days, two hundred gallons, 255 plastic bottles—with its emphasis on numbers, volume, and repetition, at first glance *Pissed* gives viewers an arresting infographic of the dehumanizing and disruptive results of discrimination in public bathrooms.<sup>6</sup> Hugh Ryan writes for *Out Magazine* that “Cassils’ work may speak in violence, confinement, and condemnation, but ultimately, their art is about transforming those experiences into something useful—like turning urine into sculpture. They believe that ‘as much as we need rituals for anger, we need rituals for healing, and rituals for witnessing each other’s pain.’”<sup>7</sup> Thus, while the work is quite didactic, it is by no means simplistic. The giant cube is an unmistakable nod to the geometric works of male Minimalist sculptors like Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. The addition of two hundred gallons of urine gives the now-familiar style a new and volatile spin. If Donald Judd considered his stacks and cubes to be “specific objects” which are not anything but themselves,<sup>8</sup> then a cube filled with urine brings a whole new indexical meaning to “specificity.” In a conversation with Jennifer Doyle, David Gettsy discusses how Minimalism can effectively be queered due to the similarities it shares with camp, namely “the outright refusal of the rules of convention and medium (‘neither painting nor sculpture’), the hyperbolic performance of those rules as a means of critique or parody, and--most of all--the shift of emphasis from maker to user.”<sup>9</sup> By avoiding any traces of the artist’s own gestures, the unornamented glass cube and mass-produced plastic bottles provide a kind of utilitarian plainness that, to borrow David Gettsy’s words, “. . . allows for a less prescribed capacity for artists and viewers to see themselves in it.”<sup>10</sup>

The urine inexorably links back to Cassils’ body, and while technically a nonliving substance, it is nonetheless a biological product, which can spoil and discolour if certain conditions cannot be maintained. Its composition of water, urea, proteins and ions requires that the tank be attached to a filtration and temperature control system to keep it from deteriorating.<sup>11</sup> Unlike artworks made of more traditional sculpture materials, *Pissed* demands a higher level of upkeep, which introduces an element of irony: mechanical expertise and resources must be invested into preserving a waste product that would normally be flushed away and forgotten.<sup>12</sup> This extreme exaggeration of the preciousness of art is meant to call into question what we hold dear and to ask why: “why this and not that? Why me and not them?” The impressive weight and volume of Cassils’ urine, resting at eye level on a plinth, confronts the viewer’s body in a one-on-one relationship, like an abstraction of the artist’s body that is somehow larger than life. The viewer is reminded of familiar feelings of needing to use the restroom or the discomfort of resisting the urge, regardless of their gender. In this way the work serves to drive home the futility of trying to disappear trans and gender nonconforming people through oppressive legislature: the government can try to legislate trans people out of existence, but they will always be just as real and just as present as this huge cube. In a more recent development, Cassils is currently working on a collaborative reiteration of *Pissed* that will be shown in Houston, Texas. They conducted a “urine drive” through the Station Museum to get interested people to collect their urine in containers and submit it for use in the artwork as an act of solidarity.

The possibility of so many bodies being indexed in one piece will likely only further complicate the piece with layers of meaning.

In the 1970s, Andy Warhol created a series of “piss paintings,” as he called them, following his survival of being shot by Valerie Solanas in 1968.<sup>13</sup> The paintings were created by covering canvases with copper-based paint and then urinating on them to oxidize the copper and turn it green. According to Warhol’s friend Bob Colacello, Warhol only urinated on the first couple of paintings himself before deciding to pay a friend to do it for him, eventually inviting his male lunch guests to contribute.<sup>14</sup> These oxidation paintings were a “parody of Jackson Pollock . . . referring to rumours that Pollock would urinate on a canvas before delivering it to a dealer or client he didn’t like.”<sup>15</sup> Even if the rumour cannot be confirmed, Pollock was nonetheless known for peeing outside after dark while drunk and, on one infamous occasion, he even urinated in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace.<sup>16</sup> Pollock’s process of using a paintbrush to fling and drip paint onto a canvas placed on the floor has been considered ejaculatory by some,<sup>17</sup> and it is not difficult to expand that connotation to include urination on the ground. By actually urinating onto his canvases, however, Warhol one-ups Pollock’s macho gesturing and phallic allusions, entering into a cheeky metaphorical “pissing contest” with him.<sup>18,19</sup>

The pared-down aesthetic of the work does little to include the viewer in dirty inside joke that inspired it. In terms of appearance, the *Oxidation Paintings* are shiny and metallic, and the oxidized areas vary in colour, with some paintings having more black and brown colours and others having vibrant splashes of green. While copper is not generally regarded as a precious metal, the large size and dramatic splashes of the canvases give the jewel-like tones an air of grandeur and opulence. Mimicking the all-over compositions of America’s lauded Abstract Expressionist painters, the tableaux are visually arresting. Though painted on flat canvas, knowledge of its production provokes consideration beyond the two-dimensional plane--the argument has been made that the association of the paintings with the smell of urine is what “upsets a focus on the purely visual,” but I see no reason to end the analysis there. This multisensory consideration could arguably be extrapolated to the tactile aspects of urination--splashing liquid, steamy warmth, bodily release--making for a sensuous, maybe even hedonistic interpretation of the paintings.<sup>20</sup> This also gives the paintings a sense of the forbidden, for the way they encourage and celebrate finding pleasure in urination that goes beyond just simple relief and suggests deviant eroticism.

While Warhol was the director of the work’s creation and the one credited with the idea, overall his role does not easily fit into the convention of the singular artist and his studio assistants, instead pointing to something more collaborative and less definable. This unconventional process may be the real rebellion against societal norms, rather than the urine itself. In his essay “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Michel Foucault argues that enduring friendships and social lives between gay men are much more threatening to heteronormative hegemony than acts of gay sex. The possibility for completely new ways for men to relate to each other over the long-term, and the possibility for unfamiliar lifestyles is ultimately more transgressive.<sup>21</sup> The creation of the *Oxidation Paintings* required a kind of unorthodox camaraderie that resisted categorization as heterosexual male friendship or employer-employee professionalism due to its elements of titillation and the act of making urination into a social affair instead of a private one. He was reportedly influenced by the underground BDSM scene in New York City, most notably including a club called the Toilet where naked men would lie in tubs so other men could urinate on them.<sup>22</sup> In dealing with a taboo, abject material, Warhol and his friends were engaging in a kind of cultural production that had no established protocol of its own. Essentially, the painting series was made possible through queer social circles where people were unconcerned with labels and approached cultural taboos with

gleeful irreverence, allowing for the disruption of hegemonic artistic, social, and sexual practices in a number of ways at once. While it was nothing new for Warhol to poke fun at the sanctification of art with his seemingly inane subject matter, I would argue that these unconventional paintings reflect more than just Warhol's usual front of inscrutability. The work incorporates irony, to be sure, but hidden underneath this is an affirmation of his friends' lived experience with kink and homosexual relationships which complicate dominant heteronormative definitions of "partner," "assistant," and "friend."

Art historian Jonathan Weinberg's opinion is that the transgressive nature of Warhol's *Oxidation Paintings* would be erased if one attempted to establish an art historical genealogy based on earlier works that deal with urine as a subject, because including it with the mainstream canon would normalize it.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, if we consider Harradine's explanation of abjection then it becomes evident that the art historical canon is defined through its exclusion of work like the *Oxidation Paintings*. If we are to establish a connection between Warhol's work and other works about urine, then, it must be through the common transgression of mainstream concepts of "civilization" and "high art." In Cassils' use of abstraction, gestural marks and figuration are eschewed in order to focus on the material presence of the body and express a mood of rebellion and protest, that unsettles the viewer and encourages them to reconsider what they thought they knew about trans rights. Warhol, on the other hand, embraces gestural and intuitive mark-making as an index of the body, thereby effecting a greater degree of removal from the viewer; the paintings are only traces, only flat images, and what they mean is really up to the spectator. Neither artist is particularly concerned with the idea of doing something "disgusting" or taboo in order to catch the public's attention. Rather, they circumvent the binary of what is and is not permissible altogether to present alternative ideas and experiences, the complexity of which could not be achieved within such a reductive dichotomy. Ultimately, they demonstrate the futility of upholding such a dichotomy, since the boundary separating the two sides is precarious to begin with.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balingit, Moriah. "Gavin Grimm just wanted to use the bathroom. He didn't think the nation would debate it." *Washington Post*, August 30, 2016, [http://wapo.st/2c2Zuha?tid=ss\\_tw&utm\\_term=.eaefe784aaf4](http://wapo.st/2c2Zuha?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.eaefe784aaf4)
- Devine Thomas, Kelly. "Say It with Flowers—or Gourds, Goats, Fur Cups, or Fried Eggs." *Artnews*, September 1, 2006. <http://www.artnews.com/2006/09/01/say-it-with-flowers-or-gourds-goats-fur-cups-or-fried-eggs/>.
- Doyle, Jennifer, and David J. Getsy. 2013. "Queer formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in conversation," *Art Journal* 72 (4): 58-71.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. (Chrysoma Associates Ltd, Buckinghamshire, c2005), section 12, PDF, <http://w3.salemstate.edu/~pglasser/Freud-Civil-Disc.pdf>.
- Foucault, Michel. "Friendship as a Way of Life." in *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997).
- Harradine, David. 2002. "Abject Identities and Fluid Performances: Theorizing the Leaking Body." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 10(3): 69-85, DOI:10.1080/10486800008568597.
- Kellein, Thomas. *Donald Judd, 1955-1968*. D.A.P., 2002.
- "Pissed", *cassils.org*, accessed 22 November 2018, <http://cassils.net/portfolio/pissed/>.
- Puric, Biljana. "How Experimental Were the Andy Warhol Piss Paintings Actually?" *Widewalls*, November 19, 2016. <https://www.widewalls.ch/andy-warhol-piss-paintings/>.
- Ryan, Hugh. "This Queer Artist Collected 200 Gallons of Urine to Protest Federal Trans Bathroom Guidelines." *Out Magazine*, September 27, 2017. <https://www.out.com/art-books/2017/9/27/queer-artist-collected-200-gallons-urine-protest-federal-trans-bathroom-guidelines>.
- Smee, Sebastian. "Warhol's splashy tribute to Pollock." *Boston Globe*, January 13, 2015. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2015/01/13/frame/4OpbN6KtkEMxFAoFgwd1zM/story.html>
- VICE News, "This Trans Artist Collected 200 Gallons Of Urine To Protest Trump (HBO)," YouTube video, October 18, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=489&v=p-TT7GoJ2iw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=489&v=p-TT7GoJ2iw)
- Viveros-Faun, Christian. "Andy Warhol's Piss Paintings Aren't Exactly Number One." *The Village Voice*, September 1, 2010.
- Weinberg, Jonathan. 1994. "Urination and Its Discontents." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 27(1-2): 225-244, DOI: 10.1300/J082v27n01\_10, 227.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, (Chrysoma Associates Ltd, Buckinghamshire, c2005), section 12, PDF, <http://w3.salemstate.edu/~pglasser/Freud-Civil-Disc.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> David Harradine, "Abject Identities and Fluid Performances: Theorizing the Leaking Body." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 10:3, 69–85, DOI:10.1080/10486800008568597. 73.

<sup>3</sup> Harradine, "Abject Identities and Fluid Performances," 74.

<sup>4</sup> This title seems to be a direct reference to Marcel Duchamp's iconic readymade by the same name. It would be interesting to see future scholarship exploring how Cassils subverts the heavy cis-masculine connotations of the urinal by engaging with it from a queer perspective, as a masculine artist who cannot use a urinal without a tool.

<sup>5</sup> Moriah Balingit, "Gavin Grimm just wanted to use the bathroom. He didn't think the nation would debate it," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2016, [http://wapo.st/2c2Zuha?tid=ss\\_tw&utm\\_term=.eaefe784aaf4](http://wapo.st/2c2Zuha?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.eaefe784aaf4).

<sup>6</sup> From the artist's website: "This tank of glowing urine manifests what may seem abstract in discussion: the physical burden placed on an individual body when bathroom access is restricted by discriminatory policy." "Pissed", *cassils.org*, accessed 22 November 2018, <http://cassils.net/portfolio/pissed/>.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Ryan, "This Queer Artist Collected 200 Gallons of Urine to Protest Federal Trans Bathroom Guidelines," *Out Magazine*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.out.com/art-books/2017/9/27/queer-artist-collected-200-gallons-urine-protest-federal-trans-bathroom-guidelines>.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," 1965. Cited in Kellein, Thomas. Donald Judd, 1955-1968. D.A.P., 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Doyle, Jennifer, and David J. Getsy. 2013. "Queer formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in conversation," *Art Journal* 72 (4): 58-71.

<sup>10</sup> The original phrasing is as follows: "This is what I am really interested in these days-how abstraction is being used as a resource by young trans and queer artists because it allows for a less prescribed capacity for artists and viewers to see themselves in it." David Getsy and Jennifer Doyle, "Queer Formalisms," 64.

<sup>11</sup> VICE News, "This Trans Artist Collected 200 Gallons Of Urine To Protest Trump (HBO)," YouTube video, October 18, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=489&v=p-TT7GoJ2iw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=489&v=p-TT7GoJ2iw).

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in the video interview above, Cassils mentions that the work is about "which lives have value, and which ones are disposable, which ones will just be flushed away."

<sup>13</sup> Christian Viveros-Faun, "Andy Warhol's Piss Paintings Aren't Exactly Number One," *The Village Voice*, September 1, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Weinberg "Urination and Its Discontents," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 27:1-2, 225-244, DOI: 10.1300/J082v27n01\_10, 227.

<sup>15</sup> Weinberg, "Urination and Its Discontents," 229.

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Smeed, "Warhol's splashy tribute to Pollock," *Boston Globe*, January 13, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater-art/2015/01/13/frame/4OpbN6KtkEMxFaoFgwd1zM/story.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly Devine Thomas, "Say It with Flowers—or Gourds, Goats, Fur Cups, or Fried Eggs," *Artnews*, September 1, 2006, <http://www.artnews.com/2006/09/01/say-it-with-flowers-or-gourds-goats-fur-cups-or-fried-eggs/>.

<sup>18</sup> Biljana Puric, "How Experimental Were the Andy Warhol Piss Paintings Actually?", *Widewalls*, November 19, 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/andy-warhol-piss-paintings/>.

---

<sup>19</sup> Weinberg, "Urination and Its Discontents," 227.

<sup>20</sup> Weinberg, "Urination and Its Discontents," 227.

<sup>21</sup> In his own words: "I think that's what makes homosexuality 'disturbing': the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another-there's the problem". Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 137.

<sup>22</sup> Weinberg, "Urination and Its Discontents," 227.

<sup>23</sup> Weinberg, "Urination and Its Discontents," 229.