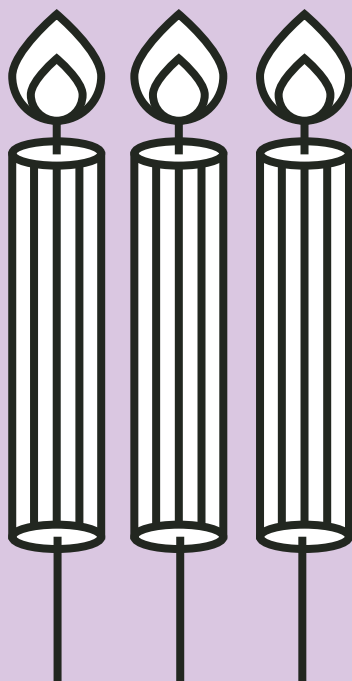
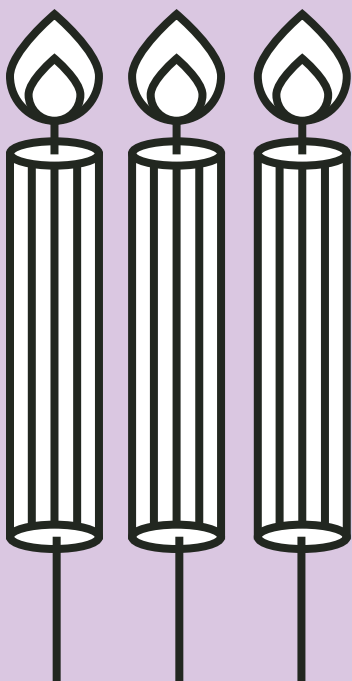
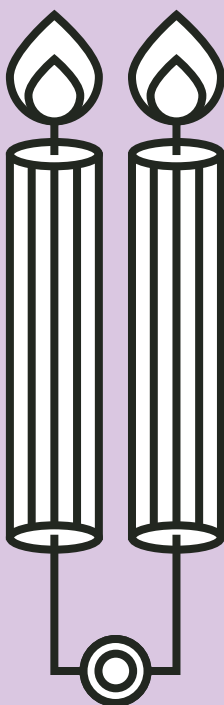
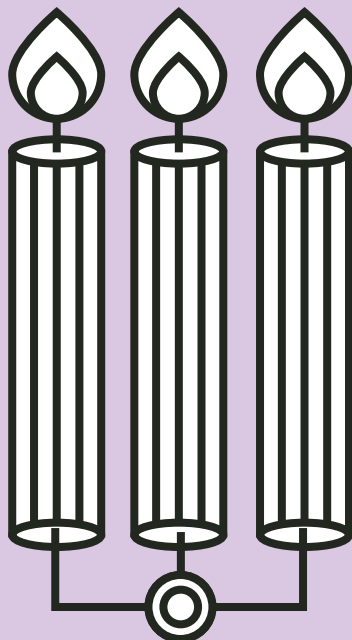
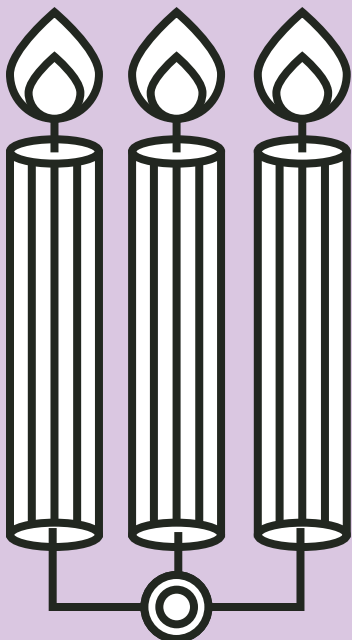


XIV



Matt Morris

Power Up and Party Downer

August 15, 2015 | Chicago, Illinois

On the Fourth of July this year, I didn't attend any of the festivities to which I'd been invited. Mostly, I ignored the world beyond my apartment, opting rather to sit close to my partner and read Nancy Princenthal's biography of Agnes Martin; perhaps in my mind Martin's grids and her many relocations from New York to New Mexico better characterizes the territory—spatially, historically—our nation occupies. It was only when the firecrackers in our neighborhood were at their most resounding that we moved to a window to watch for a few minutes. Standing in the bay of our north-facing windows, I opined conspiratorially that this celebration was a sleight of power and a pacifier. Where does this jubilee reenact “the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air” that signaled American liberty, and where is it a perverse inversion of the rebellion upon which our country’s founding is predicated? Within most city limits, most of these pyrotechnic displays are illegal, so the show of police permission (especially amidst the mounting number of incidents documenting unwarranted—and murderous—police brutality in America) is significant. Here citizens may rebel against their government. With firecrackers. Sanctioned by the benevolence of their rulers to have a party. As often as we want to burn these cities down in protest of injustice, it’s meant to be cathartic that we might illuminate them with sparkly chandeliers hung in the night sky over America. And it seemed considerate to my friends and their invitations that I didn’t show up and speak widely about this morass.

Not all parties, then, are queer¹ spaces, and not all queer spaces are parties. But my interest for the moment is in a correspondence—between the ways that parties inhabit and temporarily augment, and the ways that spaces may appear to us as queer. In the latter case, I’m distinguishing between the activist drive to construct queer conditions for living and the reflex that notices when circumstances are much queerer than they are purported to be. So *queer* not only as alternative, inverted, nonnormative, confounding, and Other. *Queer* also as the ruptures in the text, processes of misrecognition and disidentification, the means by which regulated society compromises itself, and the means to see and then exploit its failures to do so. In other words,

¹ The exercise of teaching *Painting Queer* at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Spring of 2014 was to test how and whether these two titular terms could hold, in relation to one another and in the service of the subjects who claim them. I think we found that they don’t, and the failure is worth talking about. My use of “queer” in this text is a bit of decadence, like referring to our present as “late capitalism,” more aspiration than substance. My use of “queer” is a marker of the feeling of requirement to name, a placeholder for what should be an empty, reflective, disco ball non-place. It is tinged with collapse, disappointment, and the hope that we can talk around those conditions with the same endearing humor two lovers could have in remembering a night of bad sex together.



Macon Reed, *Incantation*, 2013 Photograph, 41 x 61 inches.

a pervasive condition in the queer/ed party is an annotated relationship to power. Sometimes accidental, these ephemeral foils to mainstream living are a form of resistance. But perhaps that is a perspective only observable at some remove.

Not all queer parties are prissy, and not everything prissy is a queer party (necessarily). But my interest for the moment is in a jumble of reference points for queer parties that are probably pretty prissy. The final, culminating scene in Virginia Woolf's 1925 *Mrs. Dalloway*, the festivity for which the whole book has been conspiring, when the hostess' bisexual past keeps bumping into itself in nooks, beside open windows, and on couches. Scant years earlier, the eccentric (and most likely lesbian—in spite of the family's crafted representations of her) painter Florine Stettheimer's weekly New York salons from 1916 onward, where she played host to art intelligentsia like Marcel Duchamp and his pals—gatherings most likely imitative of Gertrude Stein's across the pond.

When called upon to speak about queer space, I consider phenomena like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the bacchanals in the comic series *The Wicked + The Divine* by Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie, and, yes, Chances Dances. From there, I almost always [already] arrive at the *fête galantes* paintings of Jean-Antoine Watteau, rococo painter of the early eighteenth century. The manner by which Watteau inscribes conditions of power and otherness, ephemerality and loss amidst his revelers is enchanting, badass, and a strategy with which I have long identified.

At the close of a century, Watteau was born in the French border town of Valenciennes, which had been absorbed into France from Spanish Netherlands territory only a few years before his birth. Already Othered within a national identity, historian Iris Lauterbach calls him “an outsider, a loner,” and continues:

He had no apartment of his own and remained a bachelor, working and living sometimes with his friends, who included picture dealers, collectors and clergymen, sometimes with his employers and patrons—prosperous members of the bourgeoisie and the moneyed aristocracy—and once even with a perfume-maker.²

These descriptions of his life condition excite, if you hold them against the frothy excess of life lived inside of his blushing little canvases. In a different era, this unmarried itinerant could have been a punk house queer, in Helmut Börsch-Supan's telling, “a man inwardly wishing to get away from this center



Jean-Antoine Watteau (French, 1684-1721) with the assistance of Jean-Baptiste Pater (French, 1595-1736), *Fête champêtre* (*Pastoral Gathering*), 1718/21. Oil on panel, 48.6 x 64.5 cm (19 1/16 x 25 3/8 in). Max and Leola Epstein Collection 1954.295, The Art Institute of Chicago

of power.”³ Anyhow, I claim him as such because if queer parties annotate their relationships to power, none do so with the cutting finesse (Jean Cocteau called it “sadistic charm”) of Watteau’s fêtes. And we might will to remember that before parties, he established himself as an artist through frank portrayals of war: exhausted soldiers, evacuations, and enemy lines. As is regularly noted among scholars, Watteau can be distinguished from the further saccharine stylings of Boucher and Fragonard in reading his military and party scenes across one another.

What do the party-goers Watteau observes aim to celebrate? In his paean to Watteau, critic Jed Perl sets the objective permeating these pictures thus:

...An endless round of flirtations, a grandly pleasurable buildup to pleasure or to the possibility of pleasure. There is also, however, a confounding or distracting or confusing of amorous signals, so that love’s arrows far from ever flying straight, do corkscrew curls, ricochet, bounce, float, zigzag in a scattering pattern...⁴

3 Helmut Börsch-Supan, *Antoine Watteau, Königswinter*: Tandem Verlag GmbH, 2007: 9.

4 Jed Perl, *Antoine’s Alphabet*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008: 66.

Far from ever flying straight, one could convincingly speculate that these parties are queer, as they are constructed with the aim of never resolved, unsettled amour. These merry-makers cruise the crowd of crinkled silk for coupling that lasts for the duration of the moment depicted. As the drag artist Adore Delano oft incites, "Party."

But with respect to the reflexive version of queer aforementioned, it is the framework more so than the contents of Watteau's fêtes that so emphasize difference and disidentification. As Perl notes in an entire section devoted to this condition, in Watteau's paintings, partiers turn their backs on the painter more often than not. In the 1718 *Gathering in the Park*, every figure among the eleven shown is turned away at the neck or fully withdrawn, facing into the garden that surrounds them. This device repeats across all of these such scenes. Tenderly depicted at some remove, Watteau renders these bourgeoisie classes while remembrance of his own itinerancy and his slippage in and out of these circles is persistently evidenced. Always obscene. The Art Institute of Chicago's own *Fête Champêtre (Pastoral Gathering)*, 1718/21, by Watteau with the assistance of Jean-Baptiste Pater, overwhelms with downcast gazes and turned backs, prominent among them a withdrawn woman turned away, sheathed in pale pink, billowing cascades.

I don't mean to limit this reading to rejection as a queer feature; while the unrequited quality that lingers in the parties Watteau throws is richly poignant, the positions from which the paintings are composed demonstrate a dance of difference that resists giving over fully to the fantasies of the upper classes and their attachments to one another. Herein is the potential of laying out these paintings as precedence for my questions within and more specifically outside of a contemporary condition of queer partying. Drenched with pleasure, vigilantly critical. While class is the most evident stratification Watteau discriminates, his strategy of including or suggesting a social outside has a splintering effect that can and should be taken up as a tool of identity variance in myriad registers.

Queer isn't cohesive (nor coherent), and its parties aren't always [intended to be] fun. While community—that is, operations of systems—can provide a sense of belonging through common ground, also needed is a space beyond tactical shared interests for political representation. What is that beyond-space that might splinter our condensed, rainbow coded LGBTQIA*, that notes (and eventually celebrates) that we share "no necessarily common element?"⁵ Can it avoid being named? With differences noted and fully intact, can I get onto the guest list?

INTERLUDE

When the art school where I spent my undergraduate years announced that its facilities would now be open 24/7, my studio mates and I took it as a challenge to prove dedication to our practices. After a dinner break from classes, we would check back in with the security guards at the start of our late night studio sessions. This staff of security guards were, of course, nearly doubled with the school's new hours, a precondition of whatever creative endeavors we cooked up in our studios. Now, as a teacher, I call attention to these material consequences that accrue around my students' painterly *joie de vivre*: before they ever get to painting in my classroom, properties are leased, contracts are signed, payments are made (and student loans may be issued), electricity and other infrastructures are ordered, health benefits are not provided to part time faculty, and security guards are hired to watch over the entrances and hallways of our facilities. Their pleasure to paint is already entangled in a system of power with a complexity of controls in tension with one another.

And so was mine as I was spending most of the hours of my week in my junior year of college at my studio. One of the new security hires observed my constancy. I first noticed him staffing the front desk where I would tap my I.D. upon entering the building. His Harry Potter charm appealed at precisely the time when the world was being dazzled by the big-screen movie blockbuster translations of Rowling's novels: wire glasses, tousled brown hair, eyes that I presumed were like his mother's. One could guess how differently he dressed when he wasn't at work because of how stiffly he wore the cheapest versions of the required white oxford shirt and khaki slacks worn with the company issued navy jacket. His name was Tony. His lips were narrow and curled as if painted for a doll's face.

As he walked his hourly rounds, he began to linger at the doorway of my studio. I accepted his company in a way that was visibly offhanded and tacitly seductive. His nerdy vibe was complemented with a childish rush to talk big: about his other job ambitions, about his own interests in drawing, about his girlfriend. It's difficult for me to be specific or totally clear to myself or you here, but this is what I do. I draw out the contents of that which is clothed in authority. I step up to the line where his job is to regulate and more than his sweet features, or rather because of them, I was attracted to just how poorly he backed up the power of his uniform, and by extension the institution that housed our meeting. When our paths would cross in other places in the building, as I washed out brushes in a painting studio or he exited the bathroom, I would pause and say a couple of things that would elicit his lengthy self-disclosures. We were both driven in part by boredom. I was also compelled by a growing promiscuity around my commitment to the form of painting: looking, without knowing, for adjacent terms of engagement.

One time, very late at night, I waited for the freight elevator on the fourth floor. A light blinked and a bell dinged as the doors opened. Tony stood inside the elevator, arms crossed, the cheap fabric of his jacket akimbo. I boarded and didn't select a destination so we continued down to the number he'd pressed. We were chatting when the doors opened and didn't disembark, instead leaning against opposite walls of the elevator as we swapped anecdotes from our days. The doors closed again, and we both grinned, then he started to tell me a story about his life outside of work. Amidst his animated

account, as I listened patiently and looked cruise-y, the light inside the elevator went out. We gasped and giggled, since it clearly didn't sense we were still there. He flicked the flame of a lighter while I stepped over to him. First my hand on him. then my mouth. Then his mouth. Then his jacket. Then his belt. Then both my hands. Then his arched back and pert behind. Then hugging. Then tasting.⁶



Panel reproduced from *The Wicked & The Divine* by **Kieron Gillen** and **Jamie McKelvie**, Issue 11, Image Comics

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Platforms upon which lusciously fat figures with silver stretch marks dance in skimpy costumes; trans men who look like the band members of One Direction; wheelchair accessible ramps, bathrooms, and dance floors; BenDeLaCreme twirling past with her manic smile and bouncing, padded breasts; infectiously enjoyable DJ sets constructed from obscure corners of Soundcloud that resist being decoded with apps like Shazam; glitter; DIY fashion shows, menstruation themed posters and decorations, chosen names and pronouns; high hairstyles and cheekbones; drink options to fit every budget; community.

Is that what Chances Dances is like? To be honest, I've never been to a single dance party organized by Chances, and saying so here is accompanied by considerable embarrassment bordering on shame. When queer identified acquaintances have relocated to Chicago and asked for help orienting, Chances Dances is first among my recommendations to find more of "our people." And I've hung out in the backyards, homes, rooftops, cookouts, art openings, screenings, residencies, panel discussions, and lectures of many of the people who organize and frequent these dance nights. Given my treatments above of roaring fireworks, rococo paintings, and a romanced

6 Hi! Thanks for reading! This interlude is Part One of two in a crossover text. My story about Tony the guard continues in a concurrent publication—the catalogue for *Finocchio*, an exhibition curated by Scott Hunter that runs from September 5 to September 26, 2015, hosted by The Franklin, an alternative gallery in Chicago's East Garfield Park.

security guard, what would it mean to participate? And in what forms could meaningful participation manifest?

First a few (possibly valid) excuses: Sometimes it feels as if relevant representation of nonnormative genders and sexualities comes at the expense of introversion as an additional framework in understanding identity. My nonconformities are nonetheless insulated with privileges that decrease a sense of urgency in pursuing gathering spaces for those who can offer me context. And however a history of night life in America has been shaped by gay aesthetics, polysexual liberation, androgynous fashion, and more or less iconic bastions of the brittle LGBTQIA*, society's demanding shift to a 24/7 economy (to which I was introduced, really, in the expanded hours of access at my art school) with the expectation of always being on and available, but with requisite whining about how busy and exhausted we are, inspires in me a shift in the site of resistance, where to sleep is to be queer now.

But what language can I provide for even deeper constitutive qualities in my in/decision? In one respect, the differentiation to which I previously referred can be extended toward states of dispersal. We don't have to be together; that is, I don't necessarily have to be with you. This is a stance seen in lesbian separatist communities who have opted to withdraw from mainstream society in various extremes of self-sufficiency. Likewise, black feminism has struggled against the wounded egos of the more centrally privileged who blister with feelings of exclusion in light of the news that not every space need be intended for them. It's not always about you (this is a hard lesson for individual egos and one that is not particularly teachable). Both of these precedents still hold together some number of subjects, even if withdrawn from and in opposition to a dominant culture. I fantasize of going further. Going further away. Perl says of Watteau that, "the artist himself is always at best caught in the process of disappearing from view." Similarly, from Börsch-Supan, "It is as if an invisible wall separates the painter from the world he is painting." (Pages 14 and 6 respectively.)

Born jointly out of coalition politics and the contemporary art world, gatherings like Chances Dances are chased down by the baggage of reification. To their credit, they mostly dance their way free of its grip, experimenting constantly with shifting sites, times, hosts, DJs, and the other properties of their form. The specter of the symbolic object lingers and in my reticence is a desire to see it fragmented and far flung. What can matter even if it is not materially present? How might invisible attachments be rendered recognizable when affinities are felt but not enacted through closely drawn proximities? These are questions posed to sculptures and publics and psychoanalytic methods—outside of theory we can watch how desire and investment are often quite disruptive.

I return to the proposal that a queer party annotates its relation to power in hopes of implicating myself in this problem. Without a security guard—that



Aay Preston-Myint, *It Gets Worse*, 2011. Offset/digital print, dimensions variable.

is a checkpoint between subject and the material substance of power—to tempt and derange, my position isn't specialized (you see, hard lessons for the ego). I am scared of the ways that identity is almost solely an expression of commodity. It isn't only drinks that are purchased to party, but predetermined countercultural conceptions of selfhood as well. Even if the queer dance floor can be sanctified as a safe space for us lovable morlocks, does it not still circulate in the service of capital and profit? What do we agree to by showing up, and in what are we complicit through our revelry?

To be clear, these questions do not land at the feet of the Chances organizers; those people are admirably sensitive to matters of difference and economy, and cautious of the risk of politics dropping below bottom lines. Their grant programs, fundraising, and advocacy aim by mission to offer an alternative to powerful overlords. And more than that, nowhere in my critique do I mean to suggest that there ought not be such spaces as these for those in search of acceptance, recognition, and comfort in the face of a violently unpredictable (but mostly predictably violent) public. Apart from delusional Watteauesque gardens of privilege, there is need not only for the quiet solitude of a desert (or an apartment with a book): we also need hearths. I don't know if those who gather on dance floors or around hearths form community, but I am of profound conviction that rather than fire our flaming flames into the air as some neutered ritual of rebellion, we ought to warm and stoke a practice that has been called queer in the past. Set fire to perfumed groves and dance-stomp over the remaining pastorals. Fuck the police, and fuck security guards, and fuck the powers that be. We may not be together when we boogie and rage, but my elsewhere is probably somewhere nearby to yours.