





or

Queer Readings of Legibility
and its Refusals

Seppe-Hazel Laeremans

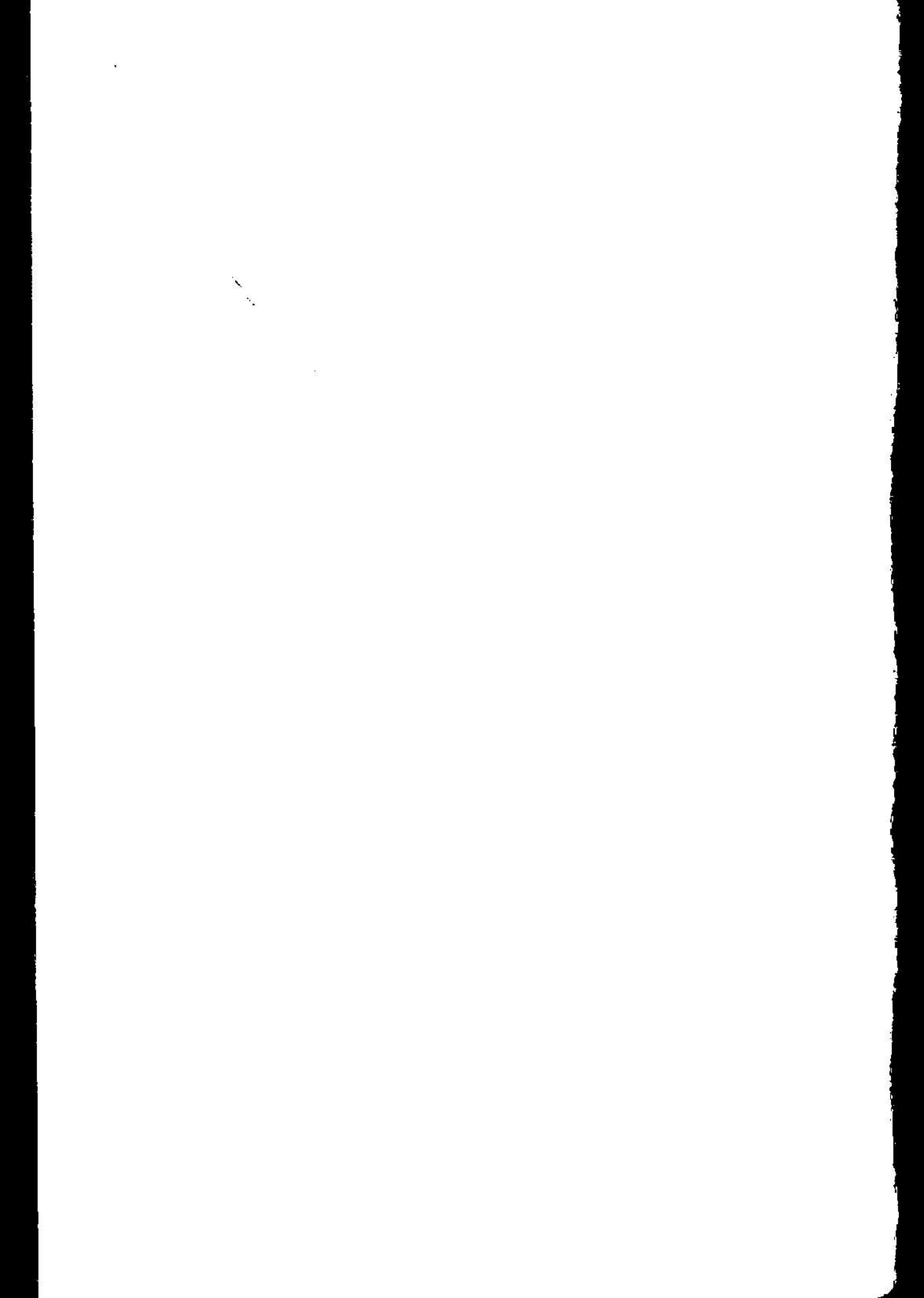
With contributions by...

Carlo Canún,
Anna Wittenkamp Rich,

and a conversation with...

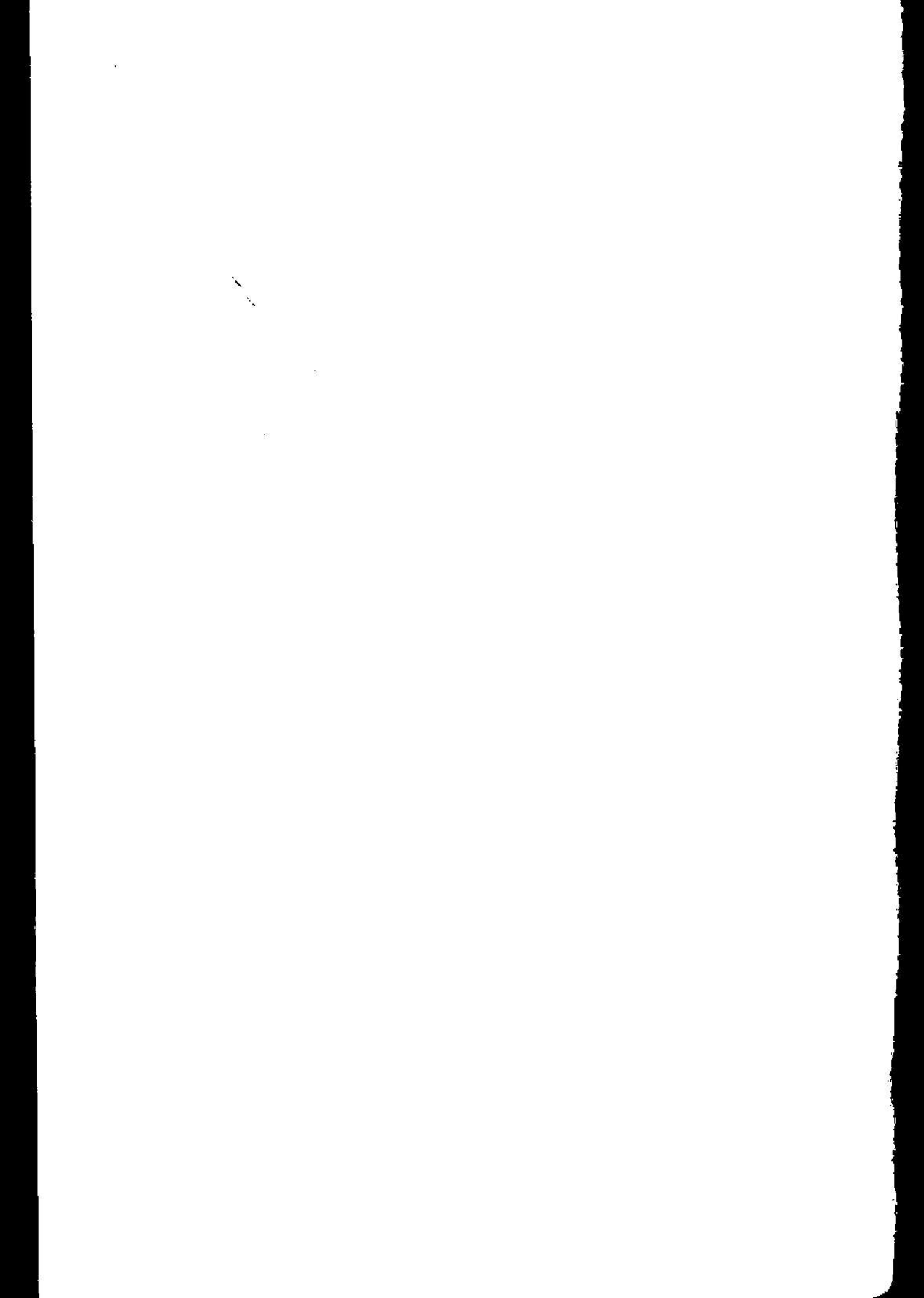
Henrique Magalhães

Tallinn, 2026



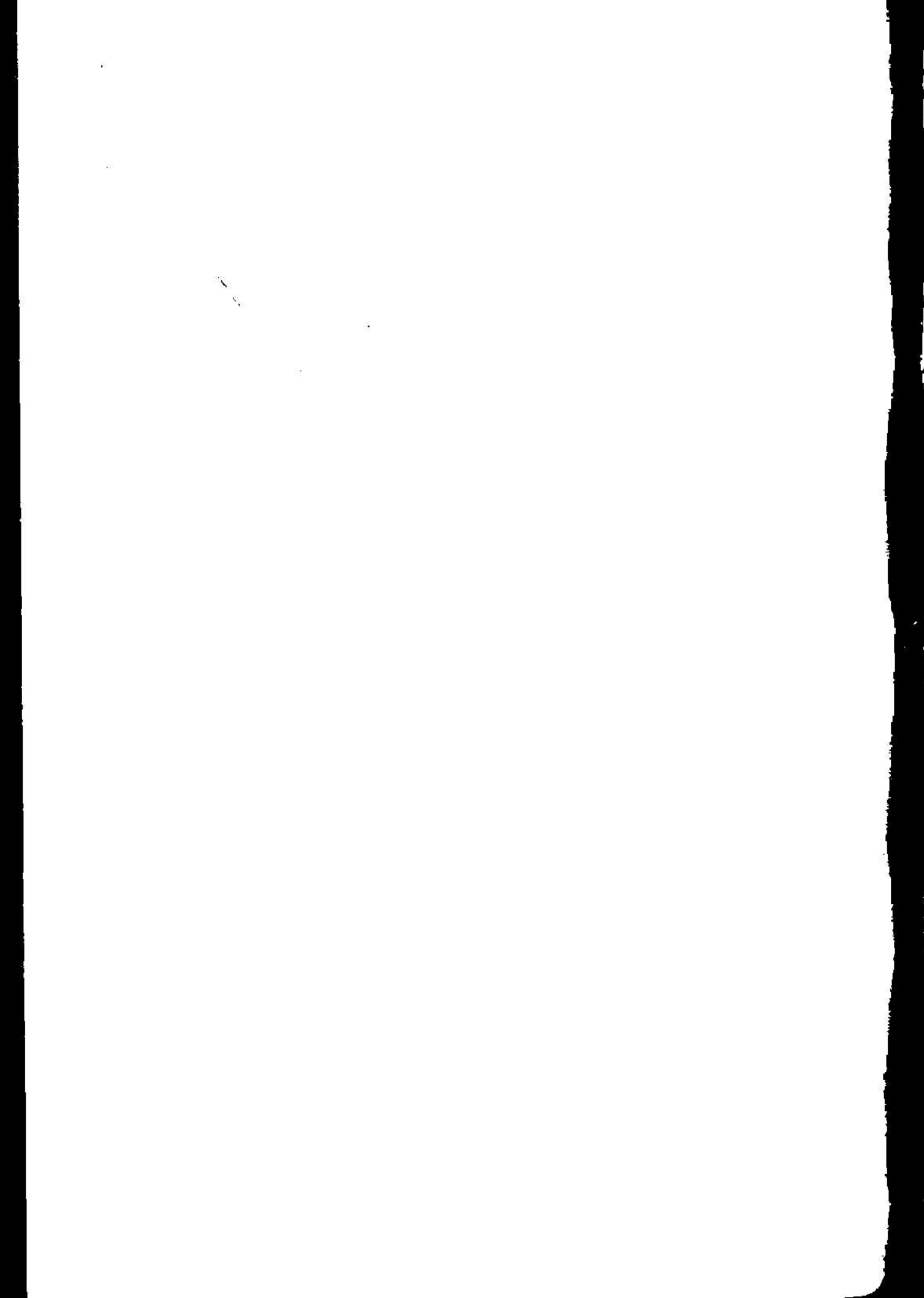
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Between Revolutions



It's a feeling familiar to early mornings; the grass feels wet under my feet as I jump over the harebells and bend eastwards to say hi to my neighbor. It's late June, but the redcurrant berries were slow to ripen this year, which means lovely news for today's breakfast. He is slowly winding his way through the garden I grew up in, with three or four chicken eggs rolling around in the tiny off-white bucket swinging along with his left arm.

As I approach him, I notice how his shoulders have sunken down further than last summer, and how my neighbor's back now sits at such an angle that only allows him to look down at his own juniper rubber boots. He must be eighty-eight now, I count quickly. Ever since I turned eleven it became noticeable to me how he seemed to grow towards the cabbage and kale crops he cares for so tenderly. Today I'm happy to have spotted him crawling out of the chicken meadow from the kitchen window, because I don't get to talk to him as much anymore since I moved out of town, Herselt that is, and into the city, about a hundred kilometres westwards, Ghent.

When I carefully enter his field of vision, he slowly arches his back to look up at me. It takes him a while before he reaches the right height for eye contact, and when he does he seems caught off guard. He drops the bucket to the floor, eggs rolling out onto the wet grass, and he asks me who I am. This surprises me. He saw me growing up, and my brother and I would build tree-houses in his backyard, and then he would be mad about it. He pierces his eyes at me, and stammers when

I say my name. He gestures at my hair and how long it is and tells me how he thought I must have been anyone else, really. I agree, and we both laugh it off, but I notice later in the afternoon how I keep wondering, and keep feeling conflicted, about both *being* and *not being* perceived. It continues to feel unsettling. I pick up the eggs and wave him a good day before he trudges off towards one of his many backyard sheds.

I spend that same afternoon, and the first two weeks of summer that follow, reading a tattered and dog-eared library copy of Sarah Schulman's 2008 *The Gentrification of the Mind*. Someone recommended it to me after reading something I wrote, but I never seemed to find the time until now.

Schulman knots together personal anecdotes of living in New York City as a lesbian in the 1980s, the 1990s, and the Aughts, with reflections on what she identifies as an assimilationist turn in certain parts of the queer movement following the AIDS crisis.¹ At first glance, I like how she writes about fellow writer and activist Larry Kramer being somewhat of a sell-out. When I first read his 1978 novel *Faggots*, I was reminded how difficult it can be to discern an author's intent, especially when much of the texture, nuance, and reference is anchored in a particular time and place. I now find myself drawn to Schulman's candid voice and assertive, provocative language. She lays some of it bare for me.

¹ Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

On the book's cover rise a threefold of façades and doorsteps of what I assume are Brooklyn brownstones. In chapter three I read a specifically resonant passage where she reflects on noticing, in her neighboring streets, how the rampant numbers of queer men passing from AIDS, didn't seem to leave a symbolic or physical empty space for much time. Rather, these queer men's grieving partners would be brutally evicted out of these brownstone buildings, just to be swiftly (sometimes a question of mere days) replaced by richer, middle class, tenants. The consequences of these new neighbors, apart from physical erasure of queer-ness, were gentrification in its urbanist reading. Schulman however extends her reading on the term to include a gentrification of a community she saw simultaneously perish and recast itself in co-optive and (self-)effacing assimilationist manners. She pleads for this to be named and historicised...

First of all, I would like to put in a request to historians to periodize gentrification.

It should go in this order:

the Cold War,

Civil Rights,

Vietnam,

the Women's Revolution,

the Disco Years,

the Boom,

Perestroika,

and the Plague.

Next is

Gentrification

and then, the Crash."² ² Ibid.

* "Plague" also more accurately conveys the enduring entanglement of disease, social marginalisation, and institutional failure, emphasising a chronic state of neglect, stigma and vulnerability, rather than a (short-term or isolated) "crisis."

Gentrification, she proposes, sits nestled right in between the Plague (the AIDS crisis)* and the Crash (the global financial crisis of 2008). I linger over this list and try to visualise all these different histories that are complex, and deserve some time and some digging into. I read her proposal as one that attempts to trace how these different (queer) movements (both literally and figuratively) move *from* and *towards* assimilation. Meaning, as I'll continue to propose, also *from* and *towards* a legible position towards a more *general* audience.

It all reminds me of a novel, a manifesto-cum-fable, really, self-published thirty-one years prior to Sarah Schulman's publication, in 1977. *The Faggots and their Friends between Revolutions*, written originally to be a children's book by novelist and publisher Larry Mitchell and adorned by illustrator Ned Asta, follows its many fictional characters between revolutions against the Men. The Fairies garden, the Queens rebel, the Queer Men blend in with the Men, while the Faggots masturbate and plot a next revolution against them.³ I first read a copy I borrowed from my dear friend Guillaume on the train to and from a hike up a snow-covered hill. With me I had brought some lovely flatbread from the bakery in the morning, two bananas and a mandarin, since it was the season. I finished reading it at once, and remember that I, before handing back Guillaume's copy, xeroxed a bootleg of my own.

The story winds through a thousand years of fights against the Men, and paints a gorgeous and fabulated

³ Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (New York: Calamus Press, 1977).

image of the many subversive strategies implored by queer people to survive from oppression and censorship by going through different modes of hiding and uprising. While it functions as a handbook for anti-assimilationist survival strategies, it also concurrently functions as a historical document *recording* those strategies thought of by queer liberation groups of the seventies.

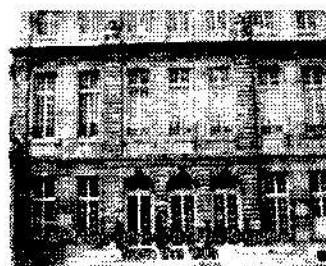
Some magic, and an eerie feeling hidden in its predictive storytelling, are what struck me up on that snow-covered hill. Both in its title and in its stories, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* seems to predict a next revolution soon. A lingering sentiment of a nearing war, struggle, or revolution, is everpresent.

In hindsight I believe this struck me specifically because I had grown so accustomed to neoliberal messaging of gay linear progressivism;⁴ where queerphobia is a problem that gets 'solved,' irreversibly so, over time. I have to think of the writings of writer, historian and artist Morgan M. Page, where they decisively name these cycles of visibility, as well as these cycles of violence...

⁴ How Lemmey and Ben Miller, *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History* (London: Verso, 2022), 305.

It has become clear to me through my work researching and sharing trans histories (...) that our current cultural moment*—the so-called transgender tipping point—is not the panacea we're told it is. Drowning in a sea of media and legislative visibility, we've been sold the lie that visibility and "awareness" will save us.

*This excerpt comes from an essay published in 2017, one can assume Morgan M. Page refers to the mid-point of the last decade.



It's an incredibly seductive lie, one that preys upon our culture's obsession with celebrity and its false narrative of linear progress toward equality. But this lie begins to unravel with only the slightest tug. The loose thread is the notion that the current media moment is somehow new. But the truth is that we've been here before.⁵

⁵ Morgan M. Page, "One from the Vaults: Gossip, Access, and Trans History-Telling," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 142.

⁶ Ernesto Macias, "Faggots, Dykes, and Fairies: Welcome to the World of The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions," *Interview Magazine*, 28 June 2019.

⁷ *Lavender Hill: A Love Story*, directed by James Dowell and John Kolomvakis (2013), film.

⁸ Ibid.

Writing from a gay and lesbian refuge and commune called Lavender Hill⁶ in Ithaca, upstate New York, Larry Mitchell positions himself similarly to Morgan M. Page. This might have been out of habit, I believe. He assumes that something has to be coming soon. And it took only around four years for that something to materialise.

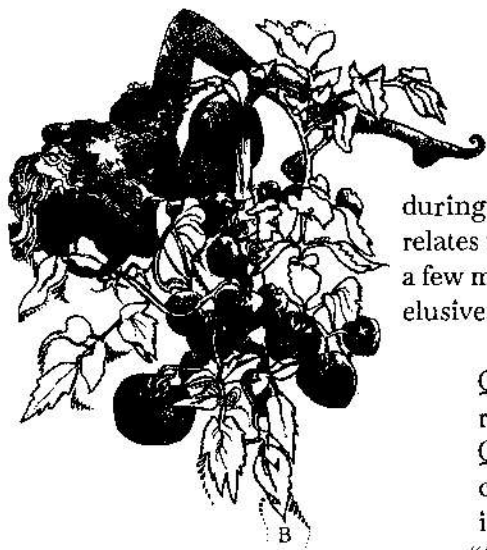
Reading backwards now, I find it chilling how the Plague would arrive so devastatingly, but also recognise how it would simultaneously become a galvanising reason for, and the backdrop to, a next revolution.

On the rocky hillside that was nicknamed Lavender, commune member David Hirsch led and tended a vegetable garden⁷ that reminds me of the one I grew up next to; around the corner, just north of the chicken's yards. I imagine, alongside Ned Asta giving shape to Larry Mitchell's fables, David teaching his fellow gardeners how to plant the broccoli seedlings, in the nude or in a floral dress.⁸

Over the last few years, I've grown to understand my interest in the ways queer stories are given shape to



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during and between these queer revolutions, as one that relates to my position as a queer graphic designer. Just a few months ago, in an attempt to be assertive rather than elusive, I jotted this down...

Queerness and queer lived experiences historically relate to frictions between privacy and publicness. Queer stories specifically, those murmured and those cried aloud, are always queer, are always othered, in relation to a dominant audience. The word *queer* “(from the Greek for cross, oblique, adverse)”⁹ is marked by its wayward relation to what it crosses, to what it leans against, to what it gainsays.¹⁰

I feel an affinity for how queer stories are told, because in some ways, I believe my work as a non-binary graphic designer (that regularly works with other queer artists) relates heavily to one of storytelling. I’ve personally come to believe it to be an essential part of my responsibility, as someone who deals with queer stories and publishing, to read into a queer genealogy of *being* and *making* public; and to assess strategies that align with the intentions of my queer forebears and their attempts.

In Sarah Schulman’s and Larry Mitchell’s stories, I enjoy noticing how the fictional and the non-fictional have to move themselves and their characters, in between abundantly different modes of assimilation and nonconformity to survive.

⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

¹⁰ Seppe-Hazel Laeremans, “I Would Love to Do it with Gusto,” in *To Flaunt, Really*, ed. Lieven Lahey (EKADOMA, Tallinn, 2023).

Queer people, as well as their stories, have historically had to co-opt *and* encode cisheteronormative modes of language to survive, depending on 'the' 'general' audience's 'toleration' to their queerness. Encountering, reading into, and experiencing many different forms of queered language, has made me recognise a historical lineage of queer stories moving between modes of legibility and illegibility. Much like how I read the gentrified gays moving into emptied Brooklyn brownstones, or how I read the Fairies moving into their Gardens, away from the Devastated City. How public queerness exists, in comfort or in discomfort, has always depended on *the general* audience's willingness to see.

I get up from my spot under the birch tree and walk alongside (rather than through) the harebells this time, before curling up the stairs inside to return to my temporary writing table. I stare for a few minutes at the treetops rocking back and forth, before calling a curator who works for a provincial cultural institution in Belgium I've been collaborating with. She tells me that the leaflet I've been working on for an exhibition with queer artists, opening next month, should, in her opinion, become more legible before it goes to print.

It feels ironic, *yet understandable*, but also redundant, *while yes, simultaneously more accessible*, as well as historically inaccurate, *and socially coded*. It seems *well-intentioned* as well as assimilated reasoning, all at once. The word and its many meanings topple over every time

Legibility (from the Latin *legere*, meaning *to read, to gather* or *to leak*, and the suffix implying at least some ability to be read, gathered, or leaked) refers to the ability by which a reader is able to read a text, object, happening, or person.

Illegibility (from legibility, and the prefix implying at least some inability to be read, gathered, or leaked; or also the ability to not be read, not be gathered, or not be leaked) marks the inability by which a reader is unable to read a text, object, happening, or person.

I reconsider, question, and complicate legibility and its assumed antipode. A similar sentiment moves my thinking around strategies while designing, as someone who is in a position to give form to stories. It's a back-and-forth.

We hang up thirty minutes later, and I dash to the edge of the vegetable garden when I recall the redcurrants.



1

As a general practice, graphic design is often theorised as a relatively novel field. This historiographically imposed sense of novelty tends to locate the discipline's theoretical *naissance* in 1922, with William Addison Dwiggins' essay *New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design*. This specifically modernist-framed reading* positions its emergence within a specific moment shaped by new industrial printing methodologies, but also one that is historically bound to Bauhaus,¹¹ the art school and movement, and thus, through it, to the broader project of modernism.

Designer and writer Jeffery Keedy notes that, in the early days of modernism—when it, too, was still young—“it was a radical idea that positioned itself in opposition to a more conservative traditionalism,”¹² and that it aligned itself with contemporaneous socialist ideologies.¹³ Over time, however, “the modernist ideology spread into all areas of cultural production, eventually becoming the dominant esthetic ideology.”¹⁴

What becomes visible then, through this reading, is that this narrated emergence of graphic design, which is situated within that very specific Euro-American temporal and spatial frame, coincides with, and becomes entangled in, the rapid acceleration of consumer capitalism. The 1920s are marked by Fordism, mass production, and expanding commodity culture, all of which intensified throughout the decade. Consequently, this reading's

*This reading of graphic design history, of course, foregrounds ...

¹¹ Mr. Keedy, “Zombie Modernism,” in *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, ed. Steven Heller and Philip B. Meggs (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 160.

¹² Ibid., 159.

¹³ Peter Bellharz, *Socialism and Modernity*, (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2009), x.

¹⁴ Mr. Keedy, “Zombie Modernism,” in *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography*, ed. Steven Heller and Philip B. Meggs (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 159.

... a particular trajectory while inevitably eliding many other histories connected to approaches to language, dialogue, writing, and drawing; histories that have been overshadowed by this modernist framing. Nevertheless, I will continue to engage with this perspective in order to interrogate how the practice has been repeatedly theorised over time.

logics suggest that graphic design's very foundations are built upon capitalist logics of expansion: of wealth, of audience, and of reproducibility. Many, if not all, outcomes of graphic design (read products; such as posters, publications, or other communicative objects) are intended to reach as many consumers as possible.*

* The capitalist aim here is not simply to circulate information but to...

¹⁵ Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, "Some Aspects of Design from the Perspective of a Woman Designer," *Arts in Society* 11, no. 1 (1974), 115.

¹⁶ Steven Heller, "Cult of the Ugly," *Eye* 3, no. 9 (1993), 3.

...drive consumption, encouraging audiences to absorb, buy, and internalise products rather than to learn or share knowledge. This differs, for example, from communist propaganda, which also sought to reach as many people as possible...

¹⁷ Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, "Some Aspects of Design from the Perspective of a Woman Designer," *Arts in Society* 11, no. 1 (1974), 116-117.

...but focused on education and the dissemination of ideology rather than on consumerism.

The logics of modernism rested, in broad strokes, on a desire for simplicity and clarity.¹⁵ Many graphic designers in the first half of last century followed this reasoning. This "smoothing out of the rough edges of communication"¹⁶ was often achieved through delimiting the number of possible options, making way for forms of standardisation.

These logics of standardising have, of course, plenty of times been subject to acts of subversion throughout history. In her essay *A Reexamination of Some Aspects of the Design Arts from the Perspective of a Woman Designer*, designer and artist Sheila Levrant de Bretteville notes how, for example, many of the radical, anti-hegemonic, political movements of the 1960s questioned the structures and institutions that engendered unquestioning conformity.¹⁷ One of the sites in which this manifested was visual production, through, for example, subversive uses of language.

It is in that same 1960s zeitgeist that the post-structuralist theoretical framework emerged, laying the groundwork for feminist theorists and, subsequently, creating space

for the queer theorists of the 1990s, from whom I will draw insights for my writings.

Post-structuralism, with thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, challenged fixed meanings, hierarchies, and universal truths, emphasizing the instability of language and identity. Later, feminist theory and queer theory both evolved in ways that informed and were informed by post-structuralism, collectively interrogating gender and sexuality as socially constructed, fluid, and politically contested categories.

This critical lineage invites reflection on how the material and symbolic structures of capitalism shape not only social norms but also the production and circulation of language. It is the intersection of both that I am most interested in. As a graphic designer, I believe it is incredibly important to consider how the work of designing both mediates and perpetuates these frameworks, which ends up, unwittingly or not, influencing how meaning is produced, consumed, and then reproduced.

I am reminded of queer theorist Jack Halberstam's writings on queer time and space, in which he describes how success and productivity are constructed within a heteronormative, capitalist framework.¹⁸ One thing that has always stood out to me specifically in his 2005 book *In a Queer Time and Place*, is how he considers the consequences of our societal cisheteronormative emphasis on reproducibility (an assumption of continuity of life,

¹⁸ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

Within the choreography of Cine Savoy, non-verbal codes organise the meaning of the dance: a sustained glance that is returned signals interest; sitting down in the seats amounts to declaring availability; fondling cocks functions as the venue's official greeting.

In the drive of desire, the body becomes text. The physical boundaries of aesthetics and of meaning are broken. Arousal dissolves the coldness of exclusivity. What emerges is a form of immediate, non-rational reading, where knowledge does not pass through words but through touch, proximity and the repetition of gesture. In this state, the body knows (*sabe*) and tastes (*sabe*) of something. The space itself ceases to be merely a cinema and becomes a living text, written and rewritten by bodies, in relation and in motion.

When I leave Cine Savoy, the choreography continues outside, though under a different reality. The body dresses itself once again in identity, but it does not shed what it has lived. The text remains inscribed in bodily memory, the dance as a sequence learned in the very place of rehearsal. Like any meeting place, even when it is emptied, it does not disappear. It remains, waiting for the next crossing.

This text presents excerpts from the original "Lugar do encontro", written in Spanish by Carlo Canin and translated into Portuguese by Pedro Cerejo for issue 14 of *Cortina*, edited by João dos Santos Martins, Clara Amaral, and Maria Monteiro, and published in February 2026.

It is based on personal memories of a visit to Cine Savoy, a porn cinema in Mexico City. It does not seek to reveal or document what happens inside, but rather proposes itself as a point of departure for further reflecting on the body, language and gay culture.

of "bloodlines", and of species) in terms of queer and trans bodies. Ever since reading it first, a few years ago, I've had a (rather vague) hunch on how that would somehow have to relate to the production and reproduction of language I experience so regularly as part of my studies and work.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam further proposes how such success-oriented narratives might be queered.¹⁹ I've taken these notions just as close to heart over the last few years while continuing to work in the context of cultural production. He theorises how such cultural production, by embracing failure, refusal, or illegibility, might resist normative expectations of achievement, such as legibility. These propositions have since taken up a significant position in my practice.

Reconsidering the logic of standardisation, and how closely it has been entangled with questions of legibility; one can question: who is invited to read,* who is presumed to understand, and whose modes of reading are excluded or rendered askew.

With the context of a modernising field in the first half of last century came a sustained effort to standardise and institutionalise the practice of typography by establishing rules, most of them justified in the name of improving legibility. This (universal) legibility is, of course, never neutral; it is always context-specific, and its apparent universality is historically manufactured.

Illegibility rejects homogenised practices of storytelling that preassume an expansive audience is the author's biggest desire, and instead implores a partial or total rejection of audience. When *the* public rejects a story's legitimacy, it could find itself a counterpublic.

Legibility often presumes that one singular exemplary reader exists, which then excludes a polyphony of readers that aren't reflected in this one conceived and dominant reader.

¹⁹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

* I believe it is worth recognising here that legibility also holds a specific, if not obvious, emancipatory potential. Making something legible to as many people as possible can be understood as making it accessible. Within contexts of disability, migration, and linguistic difference, a pursuit of legibility can also be a necessary act of care. I remember, for example, about a year ago, having a chat with a fellow student when they mentioned how they would struggle with reading some of my cursive lettering. One could similarly assume that for many who grow up learning to read and write in non-Latin scripts, more embellished handwriting may be significantly more complicated to read. This memory lingered with me for a while, as at the time I felt delighted by the increasing agility of my own calligraphical drawings. However,...

The people fucking around me, in the spirit of an orgy, both in the space beneath the screen and in front of the seats, function as footnotes. They may be overlooked, yet when acknowledged, they reveal meaningful information. The seats function as the body text, arranged in two columns. Nothing else can be understood, or could possibly make sense, without their existence. They are the essential element in this space. The very structure. The base on which everything else rests. Finally, I notice the margins, marked by the aisles. They are those spaces that can go unnoticed, but where too often, times, the most wonderful things occur. They are thus a territory of uncertainty and possibility. A space that, when utilised well, makes all the other parts come to the forefront.

Like the pages of a book, this meeting place too is a space for reading.

After taking part in the initial choreography, I sit down in the seats and discover that the film is dubbed into Spanish. At first I find this to be somewhat cometic. On second thought, however, it seems rather logical. And when I analyse it once more, it becomes a metaphor for the translations of desire that take place here.

Roland Barthes speaks of the similarity between the French words "savour" and "savour". In Spanish, similarly, "sabor" can refer both to flavour and to knowledge. Which begs the question: what kind of knowledge might pornography contain? Erotic content is loaded with specific cultural symbols, meanings and signifiers. Porn also operates as a source of information and learning, a repertoire from which many of us have incorporated sexual positions, ways of performing certain acts of desire and even forms of knowledge about sexual health. In this sense, pornography functions as a historical and cultural reference.

Typography, after all, is built upon conventions that carry with them a long lineage of history and meaning, and that often reflect and enforce particular social norms. Each of these rules produces a particular kind of legibility, one that becomes readable only through repeated exposure, education, or cultural conditioning.

I like how designer and educator Ott Kagovere, over a coffee on a dark Tallinn afternoon, tells me how he believes that these rules might be better understood as invitations to historical awareness rather than fixed truths. Whether or how they are implemented depends entirely on the context in which they are interpreted. During our conversation, however, we do also reflect on how many of his fellow design educators may disagree, theoretically or pedagogically, which in turn reminds me of philosopher Paulo Freire's critique of institutionalised learning. Freire writes, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that institutionalised systems perpetuate specific models of knowledge through what he calls the 'banking concept of education,' in which information is deposited rather than questioned.²⁰

The banking concept of education serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world.²¹

²⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970).

²¹ Ibid.

Readability (from the Old English *rædan*, related to the Dutch *raden* and German *raten*, meaning *to advise* and *to guess*, then later *to read*; and the suffix implying at least some ability to advise, guess and read) means "the ease with which the eye can absorb the message and move along the line." Differently than for legibility, which relates most-ly to form, readability also marks the significance in how a text (considering its content, its use of grammar, and vocabulary, and structure) is being written.

The members of this dance change. They come and go, but the dance itself remains. It is always the same and, seemingly, neverending.

After some further inspection, I realise how the composition of the theatre reminds me of the layout of the page of a book. Within this page, the porn movie functions as the headline. It dictates the possibilities of what is about to happen, an initial cue that orders the reading and conditions everything else.

The people fucking around me, in the spirit of an orgy, both in the space beneath the screen and in front of the seats, function as footnotes. They may be overlooked, yet when acknowledged, they reveal meaningful information.

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That being said, I believe Paulo Freire's pedagogy could offer another fruitful entry point here. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that literacy is never neutral, and that reading and writing are always acts situated within relations of power.²² A critical engagement with legibility, then, requires us to question whose language, whose reading practices, and whose understandings of clarity are being privileged.* In other words: no form of language is inherently more legible than others, but rather some forms are socially or culturally constructed and imposed to be considered more legible over time.

Another nuance worth underscoring here is that legibility operates much less as a dichotomous binary than as a spectrum, or a scope, in which certain forms of language sit in more comfortable, familiar positions than others. This again, is personal. "Comfortable," in this sense, simply marks what we have been socialised to recognise.

Considering these notions, I would argue there are three distinct registers and readings of legibility.

One is personal, shaped by an accumulation of prior experiences of reading, interpreting, and navigating. These experiences are multitudinous and unique to the individual. A second is collective, but not all-encompassing. These first, individual, experiences of reading, interpreting and navigating can over time create some enclosed and encoded language patterns, bound by the limits of community or shared lived experiences.

Legibility relates to standardisation and regulation, insofar as it designates certain forms of language as readable and, in doing so, excludes others from being recognised at all. It also relates to pedagogy and policing, since these sanctioned forms of language are expected to be understood and deployed by an expansive audience.

²² Ibid.

*This includes the frequently privileged positionalities of whiteness, maleness, class, cisheteronormativity, able-bodiedness, neurotypicality, and literacy in dominant languages.

*1.
Meeting Place
Carlo Canin

On the upper floor of Cine Savoy there's a room that screens gay porn. On the ground floor, another one is dedicated to "heterosexual" porn. Even though the latter is larger, it was full of men looking for other men. Central in the space there are two pairs of seats, one on each side, facing the screen, creating a central aisle between them. On the side, more aisles run along the walls, as well as within the space between the screen and the seats. Together, these different elements seem to form a circuit of some sort.

When I first enter the theatre, I become part of a pack that moves along the aisles, circulating in a shape that marks infinity. Similar to dance notations with precise trajectories, these seem repeated and choreographed. The collective movement of the room takes on a mechanical quality in which everyone knows its exact steps.

The choreography does not only organise the movement of bodies, but also the way sexual encounters are produced within this space. It functions as a system in motion, where intervention, suspension ^{and/or} disruption depend on the chance of an encounter. One is part of the dance until their gaze fixes on another dancer, or until one decides to take a seat.

I think, for example, of beachside or porn cinema cruising* etiquette. A third reading is *universal*. This one too is collectively shared, but with an emphasis on its cross-lateral intelligibility. It employs conventions designed to facilitate broad comprehension, within a heterogeneous and all-encompassing audience, enabling information to be conveyed across varied social and cultural settings.

This last one has been reiterated many a time, but it is a reading I find difficult to engage in. I believe it is a destructive interpretation of language, in which textural and individual, as well as subcultural and dialectical, experiences are replaced by a standardised and homogenous imposition that dictates exactly what is, and what isn't, legible.

By examining legibility through this lens, we can recognise how much has already been lost: the nuances that different forms of legibility could, and once did,* encapsulate.

In privileging standardisation, graphic design specifically has played a significant role in detaching language from the many polyphonous ways in which it has been used historically. It often participates, whether unwittingly or not, in the erasure of dialects, gossip, and other forms of communication. I would, however, argue that recognising this opens a space to resist the assimilation of language and to queer the readings of its legibilities.

* Standardisation comes with a significant loss of individual and more subjective, idiosyncratic modes of relating to visual language.

"Before the advent of the printing press, the imprecision of manual copying meant that punctuation evolved as it passed from scribe to scribe, encompassing both bright new avenues and dark cul-de-sacs along the way."¹ With the arrival of the printing press came, as author Keith Houston notes, a gradually imposed standardisation of language and punctuation.² This standardisation has, however, grown increasingly precise over the last few centuries.

In one of many conversations with artist, typographer, and researcher Tabea Nixdorff—who very generously helped me piece together these writings—we stumble over this very tension. Later, in an email, I find it amusing to read her retelling of this (unsourced) story

Intelligibility (from the Latin *intelligibilis*, meaning *what can understand or can be understood*, implying at least some ability to be understood) refers to the ability by which an interpreter is able to understand, for example, a story.

Bold Against The Men

Queer stories, through being othered, have historically navigated legibility in particular ways. They have frequently moved between the personal and collective registers to survive; to avoid persecution, and to communicate towards and within much smaller audiences.

Before exploring the encoded and the illegible, I believe it to be important to first consider moments when legibility, or even heightened forms of hyperlegibility, became a tool of queer survival. One such significant moment was the Plague, as historicised by Sarah Schulman.

Because of their historically marginalised positions, these queer stories, chants and shouts have (at times) had to co-opt an assimilated language in order to be heard by a *general* audience. During the unfolding of the Plague, for example, we can imagine the AIDS Memorial Quilts, alongside large banners and protest signs shouting for help at a time marked by violent political silence and inaction. In moments like these, and in moments that echo them, silence equals death.

Legibility, when examined from a queered perspective, resists the binary of legible and illegible and instead operates along a scope in which its qualities vary in degree and context. One can recognise that some things can be readily read by certain audiences and not by others, and that some narratives are inherently more complex or less accessible than others. The ease of reading may be great, moderate, strained, or even tentative, and the capacity both *to read* and *to be read* shifts over time through repeated contact, familiarity, and changing social conditions.

Around the turn into the second half of the Eighties, in New York City, Avram Finkelstein, Brian Howard, Oliver Johnston, Charles Kreloff, Chris Lione, and Jorge Socarrás decided over dinner to collectively look for ways to raise consciousness about what it was like being gay in the age of AIDS. And they all lived it. Just a few



C

...
Saddly I haven't found
the one text I was
looking for, it is one
that speaks of Goethe's
unruly spellings and
the random dots and
spaces in his prin-
ted texts (I remember
it very visually, it's
funny how now it
would just look as if
someone wrote a very
frantic or enraged
email, like,.....
where...was - this!!!)
Although I'm also
pretty sure the text
would be in German,
anyway."

¹ Keith Houston, *Shady Cha-
racters: The Secret Life of
Punctuation, Symbols and
Other Typographical Marks*
(New York: W. W. Norton,
2013), 96.
¹¹ Ibid.

years prior, for example, artist, writer and activist Avram Finkelstein lost his partner, Don Yowell, to the illness in one of the city's hospitals, nicknamed the Snakepit for its reputation of dire conditions.²³ They all experienced, up close, the suffering of friends and loved ones—and the political negligence that violently enabled this suffering. In the following few months, they worked together through conversations to determine how and where to allocate their energy.

In the memory of many, the Eighties are marked by then-sitting president Ronald Reagan's, as well as his government's, total silence and inaction, which is speculated to have cost countless queer lives. Historian Randy Shilts, for example, contrasts the official inaction with the long-standing, unaddressed and rapidly escalating death toll.²⁴ One morning, flicking through his morning newspaper, Avram Finkelstein noticed a headline claiming how deafening the silence of a community can be. When bringing it up during one of the collective's regular meetings, the group ended up reformulating this pressing sentiment into the now-iconic line...

²³ Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP! New York, 1987–1993* (New York: Picador, 2022), 320.

²⁴ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 311, 329–330.

SILENCE=DEATH

I believe this sentiment is something to hold on to. Even as I continue to question and complicate the notions of legibility, I believe there are instances, much like moments of broader political inaction and silence, where a total, maximum clarity to reach an as wide as possible



D

audience is absolutely necessary. Sometimes life-saving. In times of censorship and marginalisation, the urge and need for visibility sometimes becomes urgent and unavoidable.

The newly formed Silence = Death Collective decided to place the phrase on a poster in white, bold, and condensed capitals, right at the center of a black background, underneath an inverted pink triangle. The message* was given form in hyperlegible ways and signaled, unmistakably, a sense of urgency.

Finkelstein, reminded of Eight Street and how abundantly it was plastered in posters, manifestos, and more, proposed to cover the printing costs. The others "hired an underground, Mob-controlled 'company' to illegally wheat-paste three thousand posters on walls and wooden boards propping up on construction sites and semi-abandoned billboard spaces" throughout the city.²⁵ Over the following years, the phrase continued to be relevant, and the visual was reiterated across various media. A sentiment lingers on: there are times to be bold.

Visibility (from the Latin *videre*, meaning *to see*, *to look*, or *to perceive*, and the suffix implying at least some ability to be seen, to be looked at, or to be perceived) refers to the ability by a viewer to see a subject, which could be text, a body, a happening, a person, or else. Rather than a possibility to read, or to interpret, visibility only invites to see. With this comes a certain superficiality.

* Four out of six members of the Silence = Death Collective had been working as commercial designers and art directors, and were thus able to use their knowledge of advertising languages that operate through and trade in immediacy, clarity, and impact.

²⁵ Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993* (New York: Picador, 2002), 323.

²⁶ Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (New York: Calamus Press, 1977), 106.

ACTION: BOLD AGAINST THE MEN²⁶

3.
So Similar, Though

It is interesting to me how these moments when legibility and boldness become necessary out of sheer urgency often seem, afterward, to be followed by movements that reappropriate this legibility in favour of homogenisation. I second Sarah Schulman in saying that this appears to be a recurring trend.²⁷ Perhaps it begins out of habit, or maybe through the gradual comfort that comes with adapting to, and then adopting, a centralised, dominant language. I believe it relates to a desire to fit in, with a quiet yet considerate pull toward the recognisable.

²⁷ Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

Similar to how Sarah Schulman writes about the assimilationist²⁸ turn that took place alongside, because of, and in spite of the Plague in *Gentrification of the Mind*, writer Cyrus Dunham historicises and argues that...

²⁸ Ibid.

(...) the decades after Stonewall, as the assimilationist turn continued and the gay rights movement grew more visible, a multitude of factors changed the relationship between the so-called gay, lesbian, and trans communities and the state. On the one hand, white gays and lesbians continued to build their platforms around such normalizing agendas as marriage rights, employment security, and the general tenets of equality. At the same time, (...) ²⁹

²⁹ Cyrus Dunham, "Trans Resistance, 1969–2018," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 94.

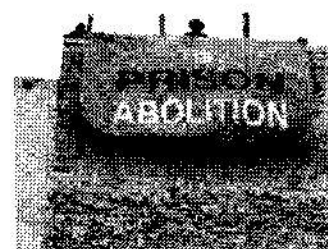
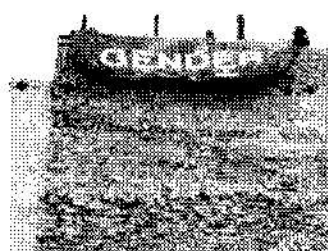
³⁰ *Criminal Queer*, directed by Eric A. Stanley and Chris Vargas (2013), film.

³¹ Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), XVIII.

In the opening scene of the film *Criminal Queers*, from 2013, which is the sequel to the 2006 film *Homotopia*, directed by artist Chris E. Vargas and academic Eric A. Stanley, one follows a group of radical queer and trans people as they sneak into a suburban backyard to disrupt a lesbian wedding with much wit and many water balloons.³⁰

The wedding guests appear shocked and frightened and call the police, which leads to one member of colour of the militant queer and trans liberation group being arrested. The scene stays with me, in part because the film feels so incredibly honest to queerness and queer cinema, but also because of the proposition it makes. With it, the two directors suggest that queer liberation—specifically in the decades following the Plague, might place its energy, time, and resources anywhere but into the pursuit of assimilationist goals such as (gay) marriage. Their proposal is abolitionist. The film critiques the prison industrial complex³¹ and how disproportionately affects marginalised groups by imagining a fictional prison break, which is interluded with cameo appearances by, or rather, interviews with, activist, philosopher and writer Angela Davis. I like this rare instance of a very specific alternative being proposed.

Of course, there are many ways to understand this desire for institutional recognition. The urge for one's partnership to be acknowledged legally did not emerge out of thin air. It grew from the very real losses and vulnerabilities that queer people experienced. I think again, for instance, of how Schulman describes queer men



E

Legibility is deeply tied to statehood and legislation. The degree to which someone or someone's stories are rendered legible to governing institutions can profoundly shape their social position and, in turn, constrain the conditions under which their lives are lived, and their stories are told.

in Brooklyn being evicted from the homes they shared with their partners because those relationships were not recognised. Or of how people were denied access to their partners' hospital rooms, again because the relationship was not considered legible to the state.³²

At the end of *Gentrification of the Mind*, Schulman recounts a conversation she had with Andrew Sullivan, a conservative gay commentator. In it he argues that gay people must demonstrate that they are "just like everyone else" in order to be accepted and protected.³³ Many conservative gay thinkers today echo these sentiments, insisting that assimilation is a valuable strategy for securing protection. There is a certain temporary safety in siding with the oppressor and in adopting their vocabulary. Historically speaking however, that safety does not last long.

All that said, I believe it is necessary to consider what happens to queerness—which is etymologically bound to be oblique and off-line,³⁴ and can only maintain a queer position if it remains reactionary to what it gainsays—when it is institutionalised in such a way. What happens when queer relationships, forms of commoning, and partnerships are filtered through a cisheteronormative lens?^{*}

I contend that these brief movements toward legibility can remain queer only if they remain unstable. If they retain the potential to shift back, sideways, or elsewhere. Queerness depends on these ever-shifting relations. Much less queer, I believe, are the impulses toward assimilation and homogenisation.

³² Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

^{*} This seems an apt moment to complicate my reading of assimilation by quoting novelist Edmund White on publishing *The Joy of Gay Sex* in 1977, co-written with σ. Charles Silverstein: "At the time assimilation itself seemed a provocative and progressive idea." He goes on to note that this was particularly so because "there were so few openings in the united front against homosexuality."¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Edmund White, "The Personal Is Political: Queer Fiction and Criticism," in *The Burning Library: Essays* (1994), 370.

If we approach this turn toward assimilation through the lens of legibility, it raises a further question about how we formulate our queer stories. An assimilated queer story is one that homogeneously repeats itself in the hope of one day totally assimilating, and is therefore also attached to a 'straight time' believing in linear progress, so as to then disseminate into a vast sameness. What perils does this homogenisation carry? Or, to put it differently, how protected is the assimilated queer really when the next approaching wave of war, struggle, or revolution arrives?

4. Visible Again

On the very last day of summer, I rode my bike up the one lonely hill Ghent has to offer, towards the city's Institute for Social History. It's there, on the archive's wide burgundy tables, that I carefully skim through a pink folder left behind by one of the volunteers of LGBT archive Fonds Suzan Daniel.

The envelope carries a selection of booklets and ephemera published by Roze Aktiefront (or in short: RAF) between 1981 and 2000. The Belgian, socialist, and mostly student-led queer liberation group, I read, organised public interventions with the aim to resist queer oppression and self-oppression.³⁵

As I read through their bulletins, membership cards and *flikker**-party invitations, I stumble over a series of seven identical postcards. They're not silver, really, but do gently reflect the light slanting in from the building's courtyard. The image on the postcards' front depicts a short-sleeved crowd carrying balloons and flags and banners through a park in Antwerp on a sunny day. The image historicises the city's and the country's very first Roze Zaterdag, *Pink Saturday*, or Pride parade, on the fifth of May in 1990.³⁶ Right at the centre of the image, on a firm white wooden panel, a message reads in all capitals: *Gays and Lesbians Visible Again*. I enjoy noticing how tiny the slanted apostrophe is that follows *homo*'s second 'o'. Even tinier are the two diacritical dots above the 'E'

³⁵ Roze Aktiefront, *Een ander strand: Homo's in verzet tegen hun onderdrukking en zelfonderdrukking, de Rooie Vlinder, radikale homopolitieke beelden en verhalen* (Antwerp, Stichting Rozegeur v.z.w. EPO, 1982).

* *Flikker* is one of many Dutch renderings for *jaggot*, *fairy*, or *fruit*. It is a word that is...

³⁶ Roze Aktiefront, *Een roze zaterdag—wie is daar nu tegen?* (Antwerp, self-published, 1990).

...most often left, in my experience, *not* reappropriated by queer people, unless in ironic cases. *Flikker* also denotes, much like the English and very similar *flickering*, a light or flame burning or shining unsteadily, which loosely reminds me of how designer and writer Carlo Canùn speaks of *Traces, Glimmers, Residues, and Specks of Things*.^{IV}

^{IV} Carlo Canùn, *Glory Holes* (EKADMA, Tallinn, 2022), 10.

Visibility is the (assumed) counterpart of invisibility. In it lies a possibility to shed light on those stories that have been subject to censorship and/or social erasure.



in lesbiennes. I also enjoy reading 'again'. It reminds me, again, of Larry Mitchell's fable.

The postcards' backsides, I find out, are set in a totally different season. Here we approach the winter holidays, and with that, a new year. The postcards were part of a fundraiser organised by Roze Aktiefront, to collect some money for the following year's actions. A small introductory note, however, specifically addresses men, Flemish and famous, closeted and gay, to come out publicly...

As a well-known Flemish public figure, you are in an exceptional position that allows you to stand up for gay rights. Yet every time you hide the fact that you are gay, you inadvertently reinforce the notion that it is something to be ashamed of.

I believe it to be time for lesbians and gays to speak openly and proudly about our lives, and by publicly coming out, you could contribute to a positive representation of who we are. I deplore your continued silence and hope that next year you will choose to break it.

Much love, and best wishes for 1991³⁷

Essentially, people could buy these postcards, and they would then be encouraged to send them to a closeted person in the public eye, pleading how their coming out would benefit others. The campaign is explained to be inspired by sensationalised and public outings across the pond in the us,³⁸ where figures like Richard Gere,

Alle bekende Vlaamse bent u in een
onzoederlijke positie die u toelaat op te komen
voor homorechten. Iedere keer als u uw
homofobie verbergt versant u het idee dat er
niet verstand is.
Ik ben van mening dat voor alle lesbiennes en
homos die het tijd is om openlijk en met
hefheid over ons bestaan te spreken. Door er
publiek voor uit te komen wordt u mee aan een
positieve houdwijzing van wat we zijn.
Ik bid voor uw stilzwijgen en hoop dat u het dit
jaar zult verbreken.

Zelfs, en het beste voor 1991

Foto: Roze Aktiefront, Antwerpen, 3 mei 1990

³⁷ Roze Aktiefront, untitled postcards (Antwerp and Ghent, Belgium: self-published, December 1989), envelope BG2/6, Fonds Suzan Daniel, Ghent.

³⁸ Roze Aktiefront, *Outing en Coming Out: een discussie in Vlaanderen* (Antwerp, self-published, 1991).

During a cold October afternoon, after passing four bridal shops and thirteen fruit stands, I escape the snow-covered streets of Prishtina into a queer community centre called Project Space Sekhmet. Inside I am warmly welcomed by journalist and community organiser Dardan Hoti, who talks me through their library, their publishing efforts and their rakija-filled refrigerator. When given the choice between quince and plum, I go for the latter since plums remind me of home, and of September, and picking them from the trees with my grandmother instructing me how to use her flower-patterned linen bag on a long broom stick.

Hoti talks about their efforts to create both physical and literary spaces for queer makers in and around the city. I specifically like one book made with five Kosovar and five Macedonian poets. We leaf through more books and magazines, as he tells me all about the city's rapid decline in printing facilities since the war. I ask how that impacts Sekhmet's queer self-publishing efforts and he mentions how much of it is small-scale and self-produced.

We continue to scroll through poetry and zines until we reach a 2012 copy of the (now-online) magazine *Kosovo 2.0*, an issue titled *Seks*. It contains written accounts of lived experiences by queer Kosovars alongside portraits of queer couples. He lights up a little when I take it out of the shelf and he eagerly starts telling me about his very first date with a guy, which happened to coincide with the magazine's launch event. He continues gesturing with wide and open arms. Before intending to join the launch event, he tells me, they strolled all around Prishtina. When they moved over to the Red Hall in the Youth Centre, however, they noticed how an oppositional and queer-phobic mob of men started violently attacking the event's organisers.³⁹

I'm pretty struck by the story, and about his enthusiasm about it too. He concludes it by telling me about how, in paradoxical ways, the publishing of the issue and its subsequent violent

[illegible]

H

I wash the dishes, and then we head out together right until we see the tall statue, and the mosque with its tall and green shoe rack in front, where we wave each other goodbye. I continue my way downhill and think about these moments of exposure due to hypervisibility, the violence and fear that comes with it for some, and on a few occasions then (much like with the raf's post-card campaign) a collective borrowed safety.

The intentions behind the publication seem in line with the poster campaign by the Silence = Death Project, with a subtle shift from sound to vision. Rather than emphasising the lack of publicly voiced care and

VII *Roze Aktiefrent, Outing?!*
(Antwerp, self-published,
1990).

^{VJ} Piro Rexhepi, *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and the Balkan Route* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

investment in dialogue with and around queer people, RAF instead focuses on the lack of queer visibility within society itself. This historically temporary yet intense desire for visibility—for a certain loudness, recognition, and the claiming of space for queer people—could be illustrated through many other case studies.

Visibility can offer a form of familiarisation, which holds the potential to eventually lead to understanding and compassion from those first unfamiliar.

...

In the same pink envelope left behind for me in the archive, I find a reflective pamphlet published later that year, in 1990, titled *Outing en Coming Out: een discussie in Vlaanderen*, (which translates to *Outing and Coming Out: a discussion in Flanders*) where RAF examines and reconsiders what the inclusion of the seven men's names ended up meaning after the threshold of publishing, and how their initial intentions diverged (in some ways) from the eventual outcome.

A few days after the start of the postcard campaign, in December of 1989, some infamous gossip magazines, and then afterwards some more established news outlets too,⁴⁰ re-published the closeted men's names, making them momentarily hypervisible to the public eye. The 'general' public's eye that is.

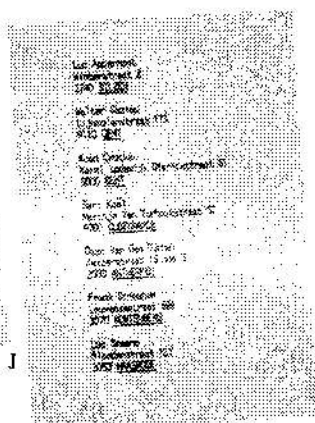
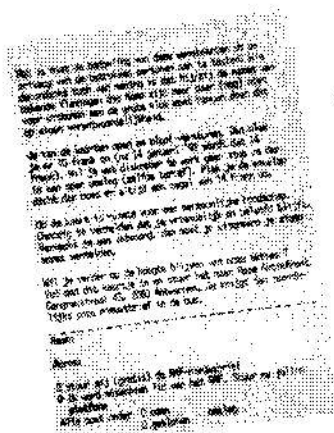
This familiarisation, however, regularly comes with consequences related to homogenisation or hypervisibility.

...

What followed for Luc A., Walter, Koen, Bart, Daan, Frank and Luc S. were years of public scrutiny and continuous ridicule; while also impacting others through the increased normalisation of similar social witch hunts for closeted queers.



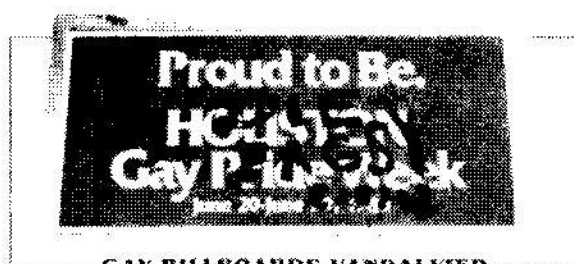
⁴⁰ Roze Aktiefrent, *Outing en Coming Out: een discussie in Vlaanderen* (Antwerp, self-published, 1991).



Visibility relates to the precarious politics of becoming visible and being seen. Glancing, for instance, can be understood as an exaggerated form of surface-level looking; one that doesn't require interpretation, engagement, or dialogue with the person being glanced at.

I am once again reminded of the writings of Morgan M. Page, and that they note how "these circles of visibility over the past one and half century that had and continue to have direct, often negative impacts upon the lived realities of trans peoples". They continue arguing that "visibility, this supposed cure-all, might actually be poison."

I look out onto the courtyard once more before handing the envelope back to the archivist and waving her goodbye. On my way to the park, I consider how this reasoning might remain similar, and how it could diverge in meaning if viewed through a lens of legibility rather than visibility. And if so, what might be a possible antidote to this presumed poison?



GAY BILLBOARDS VANDALIZED

HOUSTON — Two of the eight Gay Pride billboards have fallen victim to vandals, according to a message to **TWT NEWS** after viewing the billboard on West Gray at Shepherd turned over. The entire billboard was found lying face down on the ground. The incident took place within days of its being posted.

The latest incident occurred with the Gay Pride billboard located at South Shepherd and West Main where, earlier

this week, someone climbed up and painted in blood-red dripping letters "The Faggy Eas me" above the word "Pride." **TWT NEWS** Managing Editor has verified the graffiti, which almost obliterated "Gay Pride" and dated.

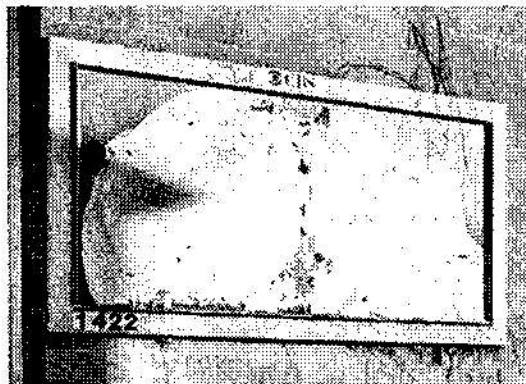
To those who are defacing our Gay Pride billboards, **TWT NEWS** states: You may tear down our billboards but you will not tear down our gay pride because we are Proud to Be! ♥

©1995 TWT NEWS

K



L



M



2

I am the one to thank you. I would love to continue this conversation. The next time you are in Paratiba it will be a pleasure to show you all my material. It is all with me, archived at home in my apartment. We should set a day for that.

SEL

Perfect, that really would be wonderful. I will bring *donz Socorro* so we can have some coffee together. I still want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your time, attention, and generosity. I send a hug to you and one to your partner as well. Enjoy yourselves there in Pahlano.

1.

To Be Opaque

The air feels dense and wet, and the city is quieter than one could've expected, as it often goes during the early mornings of a Rio de Janeiro winter. Soon the sun will begin its ascent, but for now the light remains muted, gentle, and forgiving. A young artist named Hêlio Oiticica and a dancer named Nildo da Mangueira walk up one of the many hills that both enclose and perforate and shape the city. When Oiticica deems the moment right, he invites Nildo to step into one of his new Parangolés. It is the fifteenth in a growing series of wearable works the artist has been working on.⁴¹

This Parangolé exists of many fabrics that lie over Nildo's shoulders like a book's pages would too. One of the textile panels is a bright, urgent red, and seems lightly padded. It reads: *Eu incorporo a revolta, I embody the revolt*. The other panels are cut from burlap, remnants, and textile scraps in teal and black and yellow.

To Oiticica, Nildo is not just a model but a collaborator in this moment, and the work can only be completed through him. On the cobblestones Nildo dances, as body turns the capes into both a declaration and a refusal, set against a landscape shaped by censorship, surveillance, and the moral policing enforced by a military dictatorship.

⁴¹ Sophia Vieira, "Pajubá: A linguagem-segredo que nasceu da repressão e floresceu na resistência," *Jornal USP*, 27 May 2025.



N

other groups, which arose, that focused specifically on the fight against the disease. In the case of *Nós Também*, we ended our activities with the production of *Baltazar da Lomba*.

SHL

There is a scene in the film that I always found striking and poetic. At the end, after crossing the São Francisco River, Baltazar arrives in Pernambuco in his boat, still in 1993, and suddenly a typical 1980s car turns around the corner. The members of *Nós Também* get out and head to Carnival in Olinda. This anachronism has always felt so poetic to me. It reminds me of certain films by Derek Jarman, like *Edward II* from 1991, where he purposely inserts similar anachronisms. It is a celebratory and powerful ending, both for the short film and for the group.

HM

It indeed was the Carnival in Olinda we went to. The idea was to show that Baltazar's rebellious and freedom-seeking spirit was not stuck in the past. Rather, it continued to live on in 1993. I still believe that to be the case today. And in a very similar way, the work of *Nós Também* always had that somewhat carnivalesque quality. In the film we deliberately placed ourselves inside the story. There are some other scenes at the beginning when the narrative cuts and the team appears directing, setting things up, discussing the film. It was our way of saying that we are also part of this history.

(...)

SHL

I want to thank you very much for this conversation, Henrique. It has been really special after so many years of following your work from afar.

The year is 1967, nearly three years into this dictatorship that controlled Brazil and would not end until 1985. The regime grew increasingly repressive, sharpening censorship, intensifying police raids, and driving queer people, who were already heavily policed by religious conservatism and moralist rhetoric,⁴² further to the margins of society.

Homosexuality itself was no longer a specific criminal charge, since Brazil had removed sodomy from its penal code in 1830.⁴³ Yet police relied on elastic interpretations of a vaguely worded law on "public assault on decency" to harass, detain, and silence queer people.⁴⁴

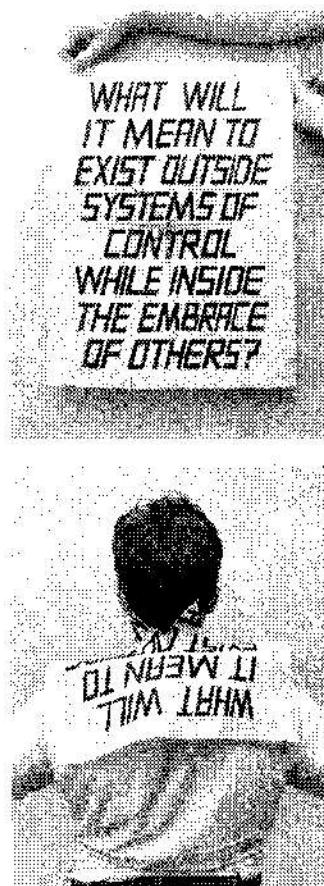
In a conversation with alphabet artist Nat Pyper, they tell me how coming across Oiticica's work has influenced theirs profoundly. They emphasised this specific context in which Oiticica made his work. One in which an oppressive and queerphobic political climate actively shifted the stakes of communication and expression for queer people...

When I first turned to a more body-based practice around 2016, I looked towards artists who had made their work under conditions of pressure and censorship. It felt relevant at the time, like I assume it now feels relevant to you too. What I found interesting was noticing how, earlier in Oiticica's career, he made formal, abstract paintings, but as the dictatorship hardened, he and his peers

⁴² Daniela Mayer, "The Queer Politics of Hélio Oiticica's Babylonian Cinema," *Art Style Magazine*, 12.

⁴³ João Silvério Trevisan, *Devassos no Paraíso: A Homossexualidade no Brasil, da Colônia à Atualidade* (São Paulo: Objetiva, 2018), 148.

⁴⁴ Daniela Mayer, "The Queer Politics of Hélio Oiticica's Babylonian Cinema," *Art Style Magazine*, 12.



It was a radical intervention that provoked a revolt against me and against the billboard. It is interesting because I started working with billboards and then later on ended up involved in this intense cultural conflict, confronting the religious institution itself. It was a very exciting moment.

SHL

Looking back historically, I see that the group, *Nós Também*, ended its activities in 1982. I would like to hear you reflect on how and when the decision to stop was made.

HM

The group's last work was the short film *Baltazar da Lomba* in 1982. The film portrays the historical figure Baltazar da Lomba, the first person punished for sodomy in Paraíba since Portuguese colonization in 1595, and tells his story from sex and repressed love to persecution and finally his escape in search of freedom as he crossed the river in a small wooden boat to the state south of Paraíba, Pernambuco. It was important for us to historicize that moment as the first record of the repression of homosexuality in Paraíba. Specifically, we wanted to show how homophobia in the Brazilian context functions as a form of repression rooted in colonization. Much of the film was shot in the historic center of the city.

At that time we were reaching a certain point of collective exhaustion. Meeting every Sunday to study, present work, and plan activism started becoming a heavier commitment. The film consumed all our last energies and the process felt intense. After that, we decided to dissolve the group. Everyone went on with their lives, without any breakups or disagreements. We called it a natural ending.

It is also important to note that a DS was emerging and spreading quickly. The epidemic led to a general retreat in movements, which made place for

began to work in less containable, less easily classifiable ways. More bodily too. And this shift changes the work dramatically, and it's this shift that I continue to revisit, because there's just so much to process there.

In the days after my talk with Nat, I keep thinking about this shift in stakes. How increased pressure on queer people does not only silence them, but also reshapes how they find ways to speak, exactly when they aren't allowed to. Censorship, both social and institutional, transforms the relationship between queerness and publicness, making it fraught and precarious. It pushes stories into new forms, through new strategies, with new disguises. What cannot be said openly thus has to find other ways of circulating, and these often move much more quietly, and carefully, or sometimes, playfully.

Around the same time Oiticica was inviting people to activate his parangolés around Rio de Janeiro, many travestis* and other intersectional queer marginalized groups were developing their own cryptolanguages to evade the military's surveillance. They functioned as secret languages that enabled survival.⁴⁵

Pajubá, such a cryptolanguage, emerged from Afro-Brazilian cultural and religious worlds, and thus remains entangled with the vocabularies of Candomblé and Umbanda. It borrowed words from Yoruba, Kimbundu, Umbundu, and other West-African languages; and also from Spanish,

* Travesti is a Latin American, non-binary, and trans-feminine gender identity,...

⁴⁵ Sophia Vieira, "Pajubá: A linguagem-segredo que nasceu da repressão e floresceu na resistência," *Jornal USP*, 27 May 2025.

...related to the term "trans-vestite," but emerging from a distinct context. One shaped by specific histories of resistance, community, and survival. I really like how author Camila Sosa Villada writes about it, in an editorial note on the word 'travesti' in her novel *Las Malas*, or *Bad Girls*...

Down below the equator, right at the end of the world, we banded together to dig up the word travesti. It had been decorously buried under terms that were completely alien to us. People were calling us...

This reminds me a bit of two moments of publishing I came across in my research. One is this Polish lesbian photographer Karolina Breguła, who in 2003 carried out a cultural campaign with billboards in five cities in her home country. A few days later they were vandalized, covering images of gay and lesbian couples with paint and homophobic messages and slurs. The other example is one that occurred during the first Pride in Houston, Texas, in the United States, when a billboard campaign by a gay liberation group was vandalized in a very similar way. Did you ever experience something like that with your billboards in Paraíba?

HM

Not in the 1980s, specifically, but there was a case a few years later, in the early 1990s, when I was already a professor. I built a billboard near the university for cultural promotion, next to my department, near the entrance to Castelo Branco, in the Communication Department.

On that billboard I published a message protesting against the Catholic Church, after the pope declared that second marriages were a disgrace. I in turn wrote, "The Church is a disgrace," listing phrases such as Inquisition, discrimination, homophobia, sexism, and support for dictatorships. Everything the Church had done wrong, while also mentioning the pope.

This created a revolution in the city. People were outraged. Newspapers and radio stations criticized the billboard and criticized the professor who was "attacking religion." The Workers' Union went there and tore the panel down. All of it was recorded, photographed, and published in the newspapers. I even made a dossier to keep that moment on record, which I still have at home.

Intelligibility only comes into being through interpretation, and in that differs from legibility. Rather than the reading of a text, object, happening or person (which could very well occur passively); understanding them requires them an active approach from their interpreter.

Unintelligibility (from intelligibility, and the prefix implying at least some inability to be understood, or the ability to not be understood) considers the inability of interpretation and/or understanding. In literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, she points out how marginalised voices are rendered unintelligible within dominant discourses; not because they do not speak, but because the very frameworks for hearing them are hostile and exclusionary. This inability can then, of course, also be used by those same marginalised voices to communicate unintelligibly.

French, and English, and its use thus significantly obstructed the intelligibility of the conversations had in a mostly Portuguese-speaking context.⁴⁶

The word *pajubá*, or *bajubá*, itself, translates to *gossip*, *news*, or *updates*; all terms that themselves reflect the circulation of information within communities that the state sought to control or suppress. (I specifically like how it also translates to *gossip*.) It functioned much like Polari did in the United Kingdom, another queer argot used from the nineteenth into the mid-twentieth century by gay men, sailors, theatre workers, and others whose livelihoods or identities placed them on the margins.⁴⁷ (Polari the language, by the way, similarly translates to *to chat*, or *to talk*).⁴⁸ Both are, and were, languages of the outlawed—languages that allowed people to identify one another and to stay safe by remaining unintelligible to outsiders.

I find it remarkable how, when such conditions persist long enough, illegibility stops being only a technique of avoidance. It can, at times, become part of how a community understands itself, and become a marker of identity. Many queer and trans Brazilians, especially those engaged in sex work, still use *Pajubá*, or parts of its vocabulary, today. This is not simply because it once shielded them from police violence, but because similar forms of oppression continue to shape their social worlds. These vocabularies carry memory, and through that, they carry belonging.

...trans women, transsexuals, or transgender, and even mentioned conditions such as gender dysphoria and sexual dissonance. Once again Northern academia was being thrust upon us while down here we were busy surviving, living, fucking, and eating, even if all there was on our plates was dirt. They developed theories about us to make our existence more hygienic because they couldn't stand letting something go unexplained. We, the Latin American travestis, sculpted by the hands of all those who went before, knew what we were, unaware that we'd be buried beneath a story avalanche of identity. Or something else just as deadly.

VIII Camilla Sosa Villada, *Bad Girls*, trans. Kit Maudslayi (London: Serpent's Tail, 2022).

Author's note.

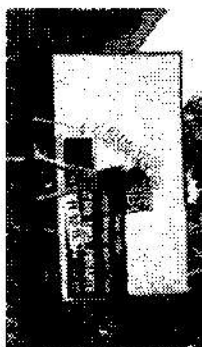
Bruno Santana noted that you put up three or four billboards around the city. He described how you used them both to support your studies and your living expenses and, in other moments, to spread activist messages from *Mós Tambein*. I would, of course, love to hear you elaborate on this.

HM

At the time of *Mós Tambein* I was still a student. I come from a lower middle class family without many resources, so I could not rely financially on my parents. Around that time only a few commercial billboards had been popping up in the city, and so I thought of making myself some informal billboards as a way to earn some money.

The commercial standard in Brazil is huge, three meters high and nine meters wide, which makes twenty-seven square meters. I built billboards the size I could assemble by myself, which ended up being two meters by four. At first I made two panels, then increased to three, then four, all thus smaller than the business standard. I created all artworks myself, assembled and glued them, and so on. It was informal work, but with those four billboards I was able to support myself for a while.

I do feel like it is important to highlight that I mainly offered them to businesses connected to culture, such as art galleries, language schools, exhibitions, theater performances by amateur groups. My billboards were cheap, handcrafted, and my aim was always to publicize the city's cultural work rather than simply make a profit. That was always my intention.



Looking into these histories reveals a tension with the neoliberal demand for constant visibility and transparency, a demand I grew up being taught to equate with truthfulness and moral correctness. These assumptions presume that all stories should be accessible to all audiences, framing opacity as a refusal rather than a right.

In stark contrast, the writings of theorist and poet Édouard Glissant offer another perspective. I first encountered them during a conversation with my friends Abel and Sjoerd, probably over coffee, where they shared with me some of Glissant's assertions. "We demand the right to opacity."⁴⁹ I later found out that he elaborates on this towards the end of his book *Poetics of Relation*, in a chapter titled *For Opacity*. There, Glissant argues that insisting on full transparency, especially from marginalised peoples, reproduces the dominant gaze. Opacity, for him, is not concealment for its own sake, but a way of preserving alterity without forcing it into legible, consumable forms.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Communities shaped by censorship, repression, and misrecognition might not seek legibility as their ultimate horizon. Much like how Glissant argues, there lies a special kind of value in remaining partially unreadable to those dominant, or to those who are in power, and to be cast opaque is sometimes not only a condition but also a choice.

Unreadability (from readability, and the prefix implying at least some inability to be advised, guessed, or read, or the ability to not be advised, not be guessed or not be read) may be, and has been, used as a subversive tactic: a space of innuendo, undertone, or homoerotic suggestion, where hints resist absorption into dominant readings.

in my early twenties, discovering myself and becoming conscious of my sexual orientation. I was coming out of an eight-month relationship with a friend from university. It had already ended, and so it somehow felt like everything was falling apart, and so that whole moment became one of transformation, openness, and awareness for me.

We collectively decided to create *Nós Também* because we were inspired by the national movement for gay liberation and activism. We spent three years producing art, events, parties, and occupying this bar called *Bar da Xoroba*. That was, in broad strokes, the trajectory of *Nós Também*.

SHL

In the book *Nós Também* by Bruno Santana, which discusses the group's visual production, I read that you worked as a graphic designer and illustrator outside the group. I became curious about how this influenced your contributions to *Nós Também*.

HM

At the time I had been very connected to both journalism and graphic arts, because of some other jobs. I had already been working as a comic artist for the local newspaper, and had been editing my own magazines, so I had a certain understanding of graphic composition. I would work on materials that have a more visual and graphic side, while other members of *Nós Também* worked with photography, film, or poetry. The group's visual communication was my responsibility. I worked on the manifestos, book layouts, newsletters, everything graphic. I also handled the distribution of our flyers and support material.

SHL

In the same book I read this one line that I found particularly interesting:

2. In-jokes

Censorial conditions force queer stories to employ strategies that keep them unintelligible to the public, if they do want to be continued to be told. In prolonged moments of social and institutional suppression of many marginalised groups, there is often a move, a pull, toward alternative forms of expression, language, and communication. Forms that diverge from the dominant ones imposed on the public. In an article titled *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, philosopher Nancy Fraser observes how "members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics."⁵¹

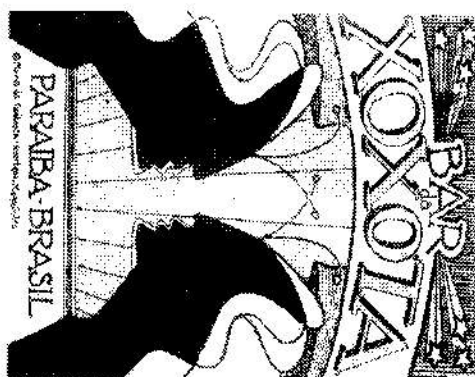
Unintelligibility marks a refusal, rebuttal, or impossibility of sense, meaning, and interpretation.

In some ways, this resembles self-censorship, though here it becomes subversive rather than suppressive. It withholds legibility as a tactic, making information unintelligible, and thus safeguarding what the dominant public was never meant to access.*

One thing that facilitates these alternative ways of communicating directed toward these alternative publics, is similar to what literary critic and author Michael Warner contributes to Fraser's arguments in his book *Publics and Counterpublics*. Warner notes that "dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as

⁵¹ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 122–23.

* Giving such access would give that public the power to dominate and control. Much power lies in illegibility, precisely for its ability to refuse that domination. Simultaneously, of course, that is the very reason why illegibility is so incredibly threatening to those in power.



left was very conservative—Trotskyist and Stalinist—and viewed homosexuality as petit-bourgeois decadence, a minor issue. Their priority was overthrowing the dictatorship. In these contexts, and many others, talking about homosexuality was frowned upon. So within the student movement I did gay activism. It was a revolution within the revolution, activism inside activism.

The return of the exiled population changed the country a great deal. People who had been repressed by the dictatorship returned and brought new voices and new impulses. Feminist, Black, and gay issues gained visibility during the opening. But even in that effervescence the atmosphere felt tense. *Nós Também* rode that very transgressive wave of the early 1980s, but there was always conservative backlash.

We used to frequent this place called *Bar da Xoxota*, which pretty much translates to *the Vulva's Bar*. It was on a narrow street in Tamboré, a neighborhood a little more than a kilometer from Alipiano, right next to the ocean. It was a completely libertarian bar that attracted all kinds of people: travestis, gay people, curious straight people, couples kissing. It felt and was culturally revolutionary.

inflections that operate within ordinary-sounding language patterns to convey information that members of the Gay culture can understand. The idea is that hidden things may be least noticed when contained in what is most obvious.

Gertrude Stein perfected this style in an apparently innocuous story published in 1922. Consequently, I first heard the word Gay used with reference to homosexual love in a high school literature class, although I didn't know that members of the homosexual underground culture called themselves Gay, and neither did my teacher.

The teacher read to us in class Stein's inexpressibly clever and completely overt Lesbian story of two women learning to be lovers, "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene." First the two live together in the city, learning 'ways of being gay,' and ending each day in "a gay way," until Miss Furr finds that "She was gay enough, she was always gay exactly the same way, she was always learning little things to use in being gay... she would always be gay in the same way, when Georgine Skeene was there not so long each day as when Georgine Skeene was away." And so they broke up, without any longterm unhappiness. The story is guileless and utterly typical of the behavior of Lesbians. It is my favorite coming-out story. And Stein slid it perfectly through the censorship of the era, so that everyone could read it, but some could decode it and learn more about themselves than others could.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Ibid.

moments within it. Am I understanding correctly that *Nós Também* began its activity after a period of a political opening-up?

HM

In the late 1970s the dictatorship was forced, not out of goodwill, to propose a political opening. It was losing its ability to convince the majority of the population. That was when Lula emerged, for example, as a union leader and organizer of strikes during the dictatorship. There was a lot of pressure from social movements both questioning and weakening the regime.

The military governments then conceptualised a slow and gradual transition until handing power back to civilians. In 1979, under pressure, they created a national amnesty. But it was a trap: they granted this amnesty to both the left, and to the activists, but also to the torturers. Unsurprisingly, the dictatorship protected itself. That way no one could be punished.

The return of exiled civilians, including politicians, artists, and intellectuals, triggered a wave of cultural transformation. Issues previously dismissed by many on the left gained importance: feminism, gender equality, and homosexuality. The Black movement already existed but also gained momentum. These three movements, Black, feminist, and gay, exploded during this political opening. It was a tense period. There were cultural and political advances on one side, and the dictatorship still present on the other, with constant advances and retreats until 1985.

SHL

I wonder now, how did that affect your life in João Pessoa at the time?

HM

At the university I was an activist in the student movement and openly gay. This was during a time when even the

In this (sweet-sweet) chapter, Grahn illustrates how, historically, these subversive uses of "ordinary-sounding language patterns"⁵⁶ have involved humorous, subtle, and otherwise witty ways of communicating messages to queer audiences. In other words, an in-crowd often comes along and up with in-jokes.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

I am reminded of when my friend Juca first told me about Lisa Ben's work. Her magazine *Vice Versa* was launched in 1947 and has since been historicised as the first lesbian magazine in North America. Edythe D. Eyde, Ben's given name, worked as an editor, publisher, and science-fiction writer, and was instructed by the employer at her day job to "appear busy" whenever she had no office tasks to complete. As a typist, she thus began typing the magazine during her work hours.

For each monthly issue she produced only nine copies, which she distributed herself around Los Angeles, all under the name Lisa Ben.⁵⁷ In a 1990 interview with her, I read how today these survive only through reproductions so often copied that they have become nearly illegible.⁵⁸

Her pseudonym, Lisa Ben, was a nimble, coded anagram for "lesbian."

Pseudonyms, anagrams, and other kinds of wordplay are, in my opinion, remarkable tools of encoding, for they each smuggle meaning through the ordinary, tucking signals inside jokes and names that only the right readers would catch. This while always carrying the

⁵⁷ JD Doyle, "Vice Versa, by Lisa Ben: A Historic Project of Edythe Eyde," *Queer Music Heritage*, <https://queermusic-heritage.com/viceversa.html>.

⁵⁸ Kate Brandt, "Lisa Ben: A Lesbian Pioneer," *Visibilities* (January/February 1990), 9.

Illegibility is inseparable from context; in space and in time. What is unreadable in one space, or in one moment, may become legible in another, and meanings shift as interpretive contexts change. Because of this, a sign or practice can lose or gain meaning over time. This is especially relevant for codes and encoded argots, which may either suffer the consequences from being revealed to wider audiences or, conversely, fade from collective memory altogether.

is why the group was so different from other movements in the country at that time.

SHL

May I ask you to tell me a little more about that specific period and the context in which *Nós Também* emerged?

HM

Nós Também emerged at the end of 1980, during a very significant moment for the country. We were still living under the military dictatorship, but there was huge pressure from social movements to open space for dialogue and to raise their issues. Gay activist groups began to appear across the country, mainly in São Paulo with *Somos*.

The name *Nós Também* was created as a response to *Somos*. They proclaimed, in their very name, "We Are" and we said "We Are Too." Later it became simply *Nós Também*, "Us Too." The group was made up of professors and students from the university, mainly from the Arts and Communication departments, but there were also people from Psychology, Social Sciences, and Humanities.

Another way in which the group stood out was because it was mixed. While most gay liberation groups at the time were organized separately, with gay men on one side and lesbians on the other, *Nós Também* brought gay people together across gender binaries to discuss homosexuality and activism in a much more harmonious way. This specific and special environment gave me the strength to maintain a position and a posture of visibility: not to mask myself and not to hide. Everything was out in the open.

SHL

I'm quite surprised to hear you say this actually, because I already knew that the dictatorship ended in 1985, but I had no idea that there were such distinct

risk that even those intended readers might miss the clues. I think of trans liberation group STAR,⁵⁹ and I also think of queer archivist Cesar van Pinsett. These wordplays also remind us that even under censorial pressure, queer storytelling has found ways to invent, disguise, and circulate itself.

These, and similar, practices of encoding and codification point to a long history of both necessity and (a less-necessary and subversive form of) creativity. They demonstrate not only how queer storytellers protected themselves but also how they articulated belonging through forms that were never meant to be generally legible. Throughout times of imposed censorship, in which illegibility became a technique for survival, one could start to also recognize how queer storytellers have acquired illegibility as a lived sensibility. Being one that relates to both intimacy and to self-identity.

⁵⁹ Che Gossett, "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 183.



R

more about this artistic movement in the city that I had never heard of before. I knew she had been part of local activist groups, and it was then when she told me about you. About how the two of you spent so much time together, sharing one desk at the office that housed both the gay and environmental activism groups at the university campus.

She told me this one memory that I have loved ever since, and then showed me photos of her and children, back when they were young, painting these big signs onto the wall in front of her house. And she said you were the one who taught her how to do those *letrados*.

She also told me about the gay liberation group *Nós Também*, which you co-founded. May I ask you to explain a bit about what the group was, how it worked and what its proposals were?

FM

Yes, of course. I was indeed one of the founders of *Nós Também*, together with some other professors and students from the university. The group had a clear political stance but also a very strong artistic dimension. Most of the time, we would gather to study theoretical works to better understand the issues and to have a foundation for our activism.

About seven years ago now, the group gained attention in the work of João Silvério Trevisan, a writer and researcher who published this book, *Devassos no Paraiso*, about the history of homosexuality in Brazil. He recognized something important in our group, which was a specific and different way of doing activism, through art.

We brought together people who worked with film, comics, photography, and poetry. Each person expressed themselves and raised their concerns through their own art in transgressive and creative manners. This

3. For its Sake

In the context of queer storytelling and visual production, what began as a strategy for survival gradually becomes a recurring motif in the circulation of media. The act of embedding hidden messages, of tucking secrets subliminally into works, is not only a method of protection but also a way of shaping how the work enters *the* public view. In other words, illegibility itself becomes a subject.

I think of the artist couple Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who lived and worked together from 1954 to 1961.⁶⁰ This period, which roughly overlaps with both the Second Red Scare⁶¹ and the Lavender Scare too⁶²—a period of intense anti-communist sentiment related to McCarthyism in a post-World War II United States, which coincided with severe public scrutiny and political suppression of queer people. Conservative anti-communist politicians regularly aligned homosexuality with communism, framing one as a trojan horse for the other. The result was an atmosphere in which homosexuality was made hypervisible as a moral panic, while queer people themselves were forced to remain as hidden, and invisible, as possible.⁶³

It is in this political and social context that Rauschenberg and Johns moved into two apartments stacked directly on top of one another,⁶⁴ in New York City, shortly after they met. For the following decade they lived and

⁶⁰ Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns & Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 190–91.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁶² David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns & Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 190–91.

Invisibility (from visibility, and the prefix implying at least some inability to be seen, to be looked at, or to be perceived, or the ability to not be seen, not be looked at, or not be perceived) relates to censorship and marginalisation, when stories are pushed into the peripheries of society. It relates heavily to hypervisibility, since what is invisible at one time can easily become the centre of spectacle if light is shed onto it; if it were to be exposed to a wider audience.

I am the one who is grateful. I have imagined this conversation happening for years now. It's also been quite some years, since I've, little by little, been learning about your practice.

I remember one day in Socorro's kitchen, when showed me your comic drawings of the character Maria. I was about to go back to Belgium in a few weeks. I was nineteen at the time and about to start my bachelor's degree in graphic design. She knew that and showed me the book she had of Maria. I read it right there next to a big glass of café juice.

Some time passed, and in 2023, in the city where I lived, in Ghent, Belgium, there was an annual film festival going on. As part of the program there was a short showcase of queer films called *Shameless Memories* from Latin America. I remember there were only three short films. One of them was your *Era Vermelho Seu Batom*. The others were, I believe, *Clothes* by Pedro Nunes and *Batizar da Lomba* by the group *Nós Também*.

At the time it moved me a lot to, unexpectedly, encounter these films. I felt some kind of intimacy with them. It reminded of this city where I had once lived, where I had felt at home because of dona Socorro and so many other friends, and where I had figured out much about my identity.

HM

It is beautiful to hear that it touched you so much. I see *Era Vermelho Seu Batom* almost as a reflection in which to show the life we lived at that moment in the 1980s, the anxieties, the homophobia, the discrimination and, at the same time, the irreverence of Carnival.

SHL

The film really does feel like a carnivalesque poem. Later that week I called dona Socorro wanting to know

worked closely, sometimes indistinguishably, producing work often grouped under Abstract Expressionism yet set apart in a very particular way. Where many abstract expressionist painters were discussed to be revealing their interior states onto their canvases, Rauschenberg and Johns, could not. As gay men under repression, they understood that this kind of self-exposure was not available to them.⁶⁵ The art movement's myth of self-determinism did not reflect their, and others', lived realities. As Jonathan Katz writes, "Even if he (Robert Rauschenberg) could paint such revealing pictures, how could he ever believe that images generated by a gay man could have universal intelligibility?"⁶⁶

Across that decade, motifs in their work repeatedly reflected their hidden social position, embedding references that, as Katz observes, only constituted a kind of "coming out" for those who were already "in." Both artists developed strategies that obscured parts of their images and their messages.⁶⁷

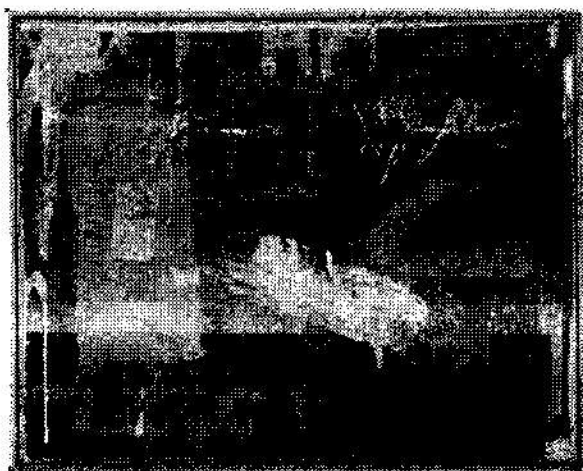
Rauschenberg, for instance, smuggled in imagery of gay icons such as Judy Garland,⁶⁸ alongside other camp-adjacent visual cues. Significant here is that this happened years before Susan Sontag's 1964 essay *Notes on Camp* made the sensibility public and thus legible to a wider public. Many of his works acquire similar subliminal or coded messages into the very logic of their compositions.

Johns, meanwhile, focused on the question of recognisability itself. He continually asked which symbols

Intelligibility, refers to the ability by which an interpreter is able to understand, for example, a painting. The process of interpretation makes it subjective to the one interpreting. Queered and encoded forms of storytelling complicate generalised understandings of *who* understands *what*.



S



S

EM

I can hardly imagine that now. When I was still a professor at the Federal University of Paraíba and an activist in the Workers' Party, I worked on state and municipal political campaigns. I used to go around town to do *placards*; to spray-paint slogans and drawings and so on, onto the neighborhood's façades. And it was in that period that I met Socorro, in the neighborhood of Castelo Branco where she lived. I am not sure if she still lives there, actually?

SH

She does. I imagine it is in the very same house too.

NM

At that time I myself lived in the residential neighborhood of Altiplano, about two kilometers from Castelo Branco, which today has been gentrified into a neighborhood full of thirty-six story towers for the elite. Completely gentrified. But back then it was still very simple, as Castelo Branco still is.

I shared a house with two friends. We split both our bills and our daily lives. Our main political activity was in Altiplano. We painted walls with drawings, campaigning for people we believed were important in politics. But we also worked in Castelo Branco, and it was there that I met Socorro. It was a great discovery. She is extremely kind. And so we became friends. After the campaign everyone went their separate way. This was the late 1980s and early 1990s.

After that I hardly saw her again. I went to France to do my doctorate in Paris. I spent a few years there, and there so we slowly lost track of each other. But so I was really surprised when she sent me a message talking about you, saying that you wanted to talk to me and that you knew of my work. I thought, "How could I have imagined my work to reach Estonia?" I am very grateful for your interest.

were deemed stable or universal by the dominant culture. In one of his lithographical works, such as for example, *Alphabets* from 1982, he used stencil letters that appear sharp in some places and blurred in others, some others entirely obscured by black marks.⁶⁹ The result is an alphabet that simultaneously announces its legibility and undermines it, questioning and complicating the notion that standardised symbols always disclose themselves fully.

⁶⁹ Ximena Santiago, *Factory of Two: Matson Jones Blueprints for Window Display* (New York: Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Hunter College MA in Art History, n.d.), 12.

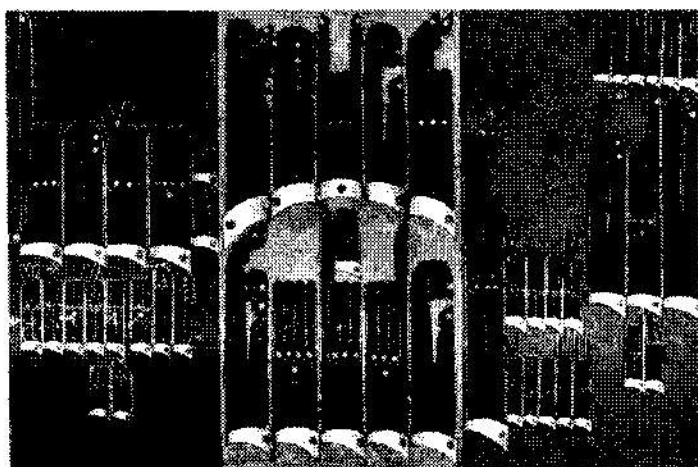
This also makes me think of one of painter Martín Wong's most recognisable motifs.

The story goes that one day Wong met a deaf person on the metro who handed him a donation card. The front read "Hello, I'm Deaf," and the card's back displayed a manual for American Sign Language (or ASL)'s fingerspelling alphabet.⁷⁰

Wong began painting adjacent, large, exaggerated, and disembodied hands, often with a rolled up shirt's sleeve showing, crossing the canvas horizontally in a way that mimics the direction of written language. These hands spell messages that only ASL-literate viewers can read. Through this methodology of using encoded messages, Wong keeps their meanings inside the community of those who can decipher them. In some other paintings he offers tiny clues, such as tiny translations of the fingerspellings hinting carefully on the shirt's buttons.

The first time I saw one of these works was during his retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam,

⁷⁰ Daniel J. Fuller, *Martín Wong's Traffic Signs for Hearing-Impaired / Public Art Fund New York City July 1990-Today*, <https://danieljfuller.com/martin-wongs-traffic-signs-for-hearing-impaired-public-art-fund-new-york-city-july-1990-today/>.



period in 2022 and 2023. She is an activist, singer, educator, backyard tomato grower, and the affectionate bridgebuilder who ended up connecting Henrique and I. She was the one who made this encounter possible.

SHL

A pleasure to meet you, Henrique. I am very excited to talk to you today. Thank you for making time. May I ask where you are calling me from?

HM

The pleasure is mine. The place where I am right now is called Palhano. It's quite near to Aracati and Canoa Quebrada, in the eastern part of the state of Ceará, about hundred-fifty kilometers from Fortaleza. It is my partner's hometown. It is very different from João Pessoa, and much hotter. The area where I am right now is close to the coast, but it looks like the sertão: very dry, low humidity, vegetation with twisted branches, and so on. And being here is wonderful. I love this place. João Pessoa is, in my opinion, very urbanized today, but this town is small, with a lot of open land. Many people here like to plant, to garden, and spend much of their time in the town square. Much like in Paraíba, I also feel at home here.

João Pessoa, by contrast, is much less dry and greener. It is part of a coastal forest zone, which is quite a particular position within the Northeast. I think of the Mata do Barquinho, the botanical garden in the middle of the city, and the university you must have gotten to know well. All of that softens the heat. Speaking of universities, actually, when you mentioned you were studying in Estonia, I looked it up on the map. It is near Scandinavia, right?

SHL

It is. At this moment I can only dream of the heat you have there in Ceará. It started snowing here this morning.

in 2023. I remember feeling both estranged and drawn in at once when attempting to read his work, held at an exciting and novel (to me, that is, at the time) threshold between the visible and the readable.

A different context reveals another facet of Wong's interest in coded communication. During his residency at the New York City Department of Transportation's sign shop between 1990 and 1991, he produced a multisite work that he later distributed across the city.⁷¹

Traffic Signs for the Hearing Impaired translated his alphabets into the visual vocabulary of street signage. These screen-printed signs, made from hand-cut stencils, were installed throughout various boroughs, often near schools for deaf children and teenagers.⁷² They sat among and alongside objects designed with the intention to be fully legible to everyone in the public sphere, but differently than these neighboring street signs, they were only decipherable, or legible, to those familiar with ASL.

U It is in the strategies implored by Rauschenberg, Johns, and Wong, and similar ones too, that illegibility becomes not only a protective measure but a subject in its own right. I think of many other artists that have trodden similar paths, with similar motifs and intents; like collage and mail artist Ray Johnson, and musician John Cage, and artist and musician Sylvano Bussotti, and so on.



V

Legibility relates to the in-crowd, for something illegible to a general audience may be perfectly clear and interpretable to those embedded within its codes.

Illegibility pertains both to the lived experiences of people who are rendered invisible to the general audience through social or legislative marginalisation, and to those who must conceal themselves to avoid similar forms of social or legal persecution.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.



2.
A conversation with
Henrique Magalhães

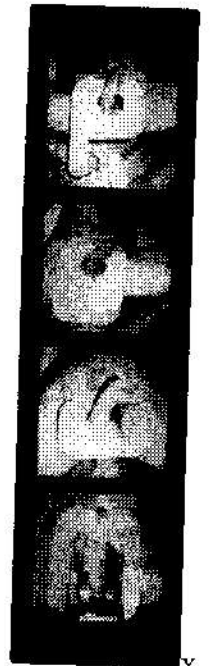
Henrique Magalhães is a filmmaker, activist, graphic designer, and one of the central figures of political comics in Brazil's Northeast. His practice begins, and continues, to revolve around the city of João Pessoa, on the eastern tip of Brazil, where, in the final years of the military dictatorship and the early 1980s, he co-founded gay liberation group *Nós Também*. The group brought together gay and lesbian artists, students, and activists in a bold proposal for gay liberation and political action through art. Film, poetry, photography, and comics intertwined in parties, performances, and interventions that often revolved around the irreverent *Bar da Xaropa*, a space of resistance in the city of João Pessoa at the time.

Our conversation took place over a video call between Tallinn, Estonia, and Palhano, in the state of Ceará, Brazil, with almost forty degrees of temperature difference. I came to know Henrique Magalhães through dear dona Socorro, with whom I lived in João Pessoa throughout 2018 and 2019, and again for a

These practices remind us that encoded expression does more than only evade surveillance. It holds the ability to acquire (like Nancy Fraser coined them first and later Michael Warner seconded them) counterpublics, and to build with and for them, audience-specific counter-narratives. Being and becoming part of the in-group, with the select few who are meant to understand, makes for intimate forms of belonging, through both obtained safety *and* reticent pleasure.**



W



4.

What *Now* Provokes

Times now feel quite different from the period of the Lavender Scare in some ways, but simultaneously quite similar in others. Thinking back of Sarah Schulman's attempts to frame the Plague, Gentrification, and the Crash,⁷³ I feel an urge to also formulate where we were recently, and where we are now.

⁷³ Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

When I think back to the small town I grew up in, I remember feeling promised an increasingly safe life. A future was supposedly opening up to me and my queer peers. Queer life back then might have been tough in some ways, but we came to know, through stories, that things were better than yesteryears. And one day, it seemed, all bigotry would *naturally* disintegrate. I remember rainbow crosswalks popping up next to the town hall, centrist politicians walking their party's carriages through provincial Pride parades, and a general belief in progress. Portrayed were *bright* times.

These bright times, however, were marked by their own particular representational politics, and inflict, as mentioned earlier, a specific kind of visibility that can easily expand into one that scrutinises much more than it makes space. In such a politics that advocates for representation, the many stories it aims to represent also risk being oversimplified or flattened for the *general* audience.⁷⁴ It relies on the idea that something should reveal itself

⁷⁴ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2003).

immediately; without friction, without hesitation, and without opacity. Representation demands a quick read, a stable meaning and thus a version of visibility that behaves itself, and that aligns with the expectations of that *general* audience.⁷⁵ And this expectation has become so naturalised that opacity can appear suspect, even irresponsible. ⁷⁵ Ibid.

I recognise a very similar expectation in the contexts in which I've learned and practiced graphic design. Where clarity is often treated as a necessary and moral good. One where accessibility quietly, or unwittingly, becomes equated with universal transparency, in the name of care. The consequences that accompany this insistence, however, are the same ones that shape representational politics more broadly. Ones of overexposure that accompanies being constantly read, classified, and interpreted.

Now, however, the times feel different than then, and so I question what representation comes to mean during a moment that feels increasingly precarious? If we are, as Larry Mitchell reminds us, still BETWEEN REVOLUTIONS, then how do we relate to these flattening representations of queerness?

Bright times start clouding, it feels. In the context of thinking through legislative, social, and cultural forms of queer legibility, it is difficult not to think of anti-trans legislation sweeping across the United States and

LE MONDE SE FASCISE



L'ÉPIDÉMIE S'ÉTERNISE

Y

the UK, or of the rise of far-right movements across Europe and beyond. Fascism, it is whispered, and one feels it too, is on the rise. And it becomes increasingly troublesome to pretend that these shifts are distant or abstract.

Against this backdrop, queered forms of il*legibility acquire, in my opinion, a different kind of urgency. More than just as valuable references to past tactics or coded histories, il*legibility begins to feel (to me) like a method of survival again, as well as a method of care and refusal; one that makes publics otherwise.

I increasingly understand graphic design through this queered reading (think of its form-giving and its publishing and so on) as a field marked by these negotiations. To publish is, yes, to make something public, but with it also comes this entangled responsibility to decide what remains withheld, encoded, or resistant.

These gestures form a language that resists reduction to a single audience's expectations. They create space for an in-between, and it is in these spaces of friction, where things hesitate or stumble or refuse to align neatly, that many of the most exciting forms of language happen.

One example of such an exciting, frictional space being occupied is in the work of Bye Bye Binary (or BBB), a collective based between Paris and Brussels, made up of graphic and type designers, and activists. Their collective practice centres around questioning the binary

A multitude of spaces exist between and outside of the binary of the legible and the illegible. I will henceforth refer to these spaces as "il*legibilities."

...

...
These spaces are worth attending to, as they provide and demand necessary and urgent non-dichotomous interpretations of two supposed opposites, offering readings that challenge and expand the binary logic that separates them.

They obstruct—in a manner still feels both novel and fantastical to me—the smooth reading experience that legibility promises. This reminds me of what designer and educator Ramon Tejada has come to call puncturing, a metaphor of punching holes into dominant narratives, small openings that offer glimpses into alternative grammars or futures

These queer ligatures invite a wide audience in, but also invites that audience to stumble, similarly to how queer people have long stumbled over language that was not constructed with them in mind. They demand that readers recognise their own positionality, and that they confront their assumptions about what legibility should feel like.

I also really enjoy reading into the poetry that such simultaneous, polyphonous scriptures propose. They remind us, palimpsestiously, that language is a collective construction, rather than a singular one.

Further along in my conversation with alphabet artist Nat Pyper, they describe some of the intentions behind their project *A Queer Year of Love Letters*, which began mostly audienceless on Tumblr, and has recently been published as a book. The project revives and reinterprets letterforms used in queer contexts of publishing throughout recent histories. Pyper described starting this work as a way of gathering dispersed stories—people, collectives, counterpublics—that existed at the margins of publishing, archiving, and recognition. Their alphabets function both as historicisations and as proposals for possible futures.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Nat Pyper, ed., *A Queer Year of Love Letters: Alphabets Against Erasure* (Inventory Press, 2025).

It's in these proposals that I read a similar impulse as in the proposals made by Bye Bye Binary. Much like BBB, Pyper's typefaces also expect something from the reader. They are, at times, exaggerated and incoherent. But their approach differs in intriguing ways. For example, in the typeface Pyper designed for Ernestine Eckstein, they deliberately left out significant glyphs, both in the uppercase and the lowercase, so that a similar instance of stumbling would occur not just when reading, but during typesetting too. In the act of composing text, the designer, or the writer, encounters gaps, absences, and unfinished forms.

Pyper proposes a different kind of access, that comes to exist through learning, rather than access through default readability. Their scripts are not universally, or easily, legible; they require time, proximity, and desire to gradually become acquainted with their codes. They ask both the reader and the writer to consciously enter these adjacent histories.

Thinking again through what Nancy Fraser coined as counterpublics, I see both BBB and Nat Pyper as finding, in different ways, how queered forms of legibility can open generative spaces for queered readings. They approach design in ways that obstruct the reader while also inviting them into an expansive and deviant space—if they recognise themselves in its gestures. Rather than preaching to a *general* audience, they speak directly to those who intuit the power in these stumbles, who will

...
However how easy it is, however, doesn't always ensure that a story will be received by the audience. For a story can be made entirely intelligible to someone, but the ability to interpret doesn't insure that will be willing to put in the effort to interpret; leaving the story untouched. A story's legibility still requires its reader's will, their determination to engage with the story.

stay with the trouble, and who feel at home in its strangeness. Perhaps, then, what provokes now is speaking to those, who do.

In the flicker between what is shown and what is withheld, between legibility and its refusal, new modes of language and of relation gather and, both tentatively and fiercely, take shape.



Between Revolutions

It is, once again, a redcurrant time. Half of them are sour, and half of them are sweet. I recall how my grandmother used to warn me that "wishing for only one kind is a losing game." We would be picking very similar berries from the shrub next to the vegetable garden, and I have since taken it to heart.

These berries my friends and I gathered by the end of summer in a forest near Haapsalu, in the far east of the Estonian mainland. Now the berries are frozen and glint faintly under the kitchen light, as I scoop them from a bright orange, neatly folded plastic bag from the freezer, into my bowl. I also pour myself a cup of coffee.

Right as I decide to sit down, a gust of wind creeps in from under the apartment door. I slip on an extra pair of socks, knitted in this gorgeous dodger-blue thread by my friend Eva. Only one out of two socks has bright purple toes. I recently thought that they are among my most treasured possessions. I recall my breakfast bowl while the winter continues its attempts to enter the living room. My mug warms my hands a little before I decide to make a move.

I lace my hiking boots, grab a book I know and like from the window sill, and jump on bus ■■■-■■■, heading toward the peninsula at the edge of the city. There, I contribute to a long lineage of people who have trodden a narrow pathway into being, which bends around the rocky coastline. I have come to know this wasteland intimately since moving to Tallinn. Midway through the

third bend, I stumble over a feast of rotten apples, next to their tree, nearly hidden under a thin layer of snow. I notice how they have turned all shades of orange and maroon.

I remember picking an apple or two from one of the tree's laden, low-hanging boughs, before heading to this sweet-eyed guy. He was waiting for me further along the beach. I handed him one of the fruits, and we later had tender sex in the wet grass next to the bush with its arched branches. We felt nicely tucked away by the shrubs and the tall grasses, with the occasional dropwort flowers peeking through. I believe we were an eavesdrop away from the wooden walkway where most unknowing passersby strolled, while still visually and safely hidden from them. I also recall that night, how we biked home when a sudden thunderstorm broke.

Even in this state of decomposition, these apples remind me of, and evoke me to imagine, all the many stories and intimacies that have passed along these same pathways. I stare at the pile and at the waves, as I wonder how many apples have similarly been dispersed by fellow beach-going storytellers. How many of those half-eaten apples have then themselves grown into other fruit trees?

During my first summer afternoon here, I quickly found out that this shoreline is one that mimics distant shores, albeit *en mineur*. Its composition is quite alike that one river island near Munich, or Fire Island near Long Island. There is a beach in the nude, and behind it, bushes trampled from all the sex and from all the waiting too.

Today the space feels desolate, and it is actually quite hard to imagine how just a few months ago its visitors would read each other so subliminally, to then refuse or engage with one another. Now that winter has bared the trees, the same pathways are left without their usual summer crowd. I assume that this crowd would suffer from the cold, as well as from being seen.

I like how this beach negotiates its publicness seasonally. It moves in extravagant circular motions that unsettle the idea of forwardness. Legibility here is no fixed virtue, but rather a series of intersecting spectrums.

I continue my walk along the ruins of what used to be brambles full of fruit and horniness and cornflowers. Now it mostly feels cold to the fingertips, is what I think, when I notice a man in a thick winter coat, toddling around through the muddy snow. I cannot tell if he is just a passerby or a regular. One of those men, perhaps, who left his imprint on the birch trees to overlook the spectacles. Whether he knows the codes, or the gestures, or if he has seen Alain Guiraudie's film *L'inconnu du lac*, or read Yukio Mishima's novel *Forbidden Colors*.

As we get closer to one another, I'm reminded of how I can't be very sure of his intentions, really, as it often goes with queer stories. They are riddled with friction, stumbles, in-jokes, and refusals; and all of these tactics protect, gather, and shape them so.

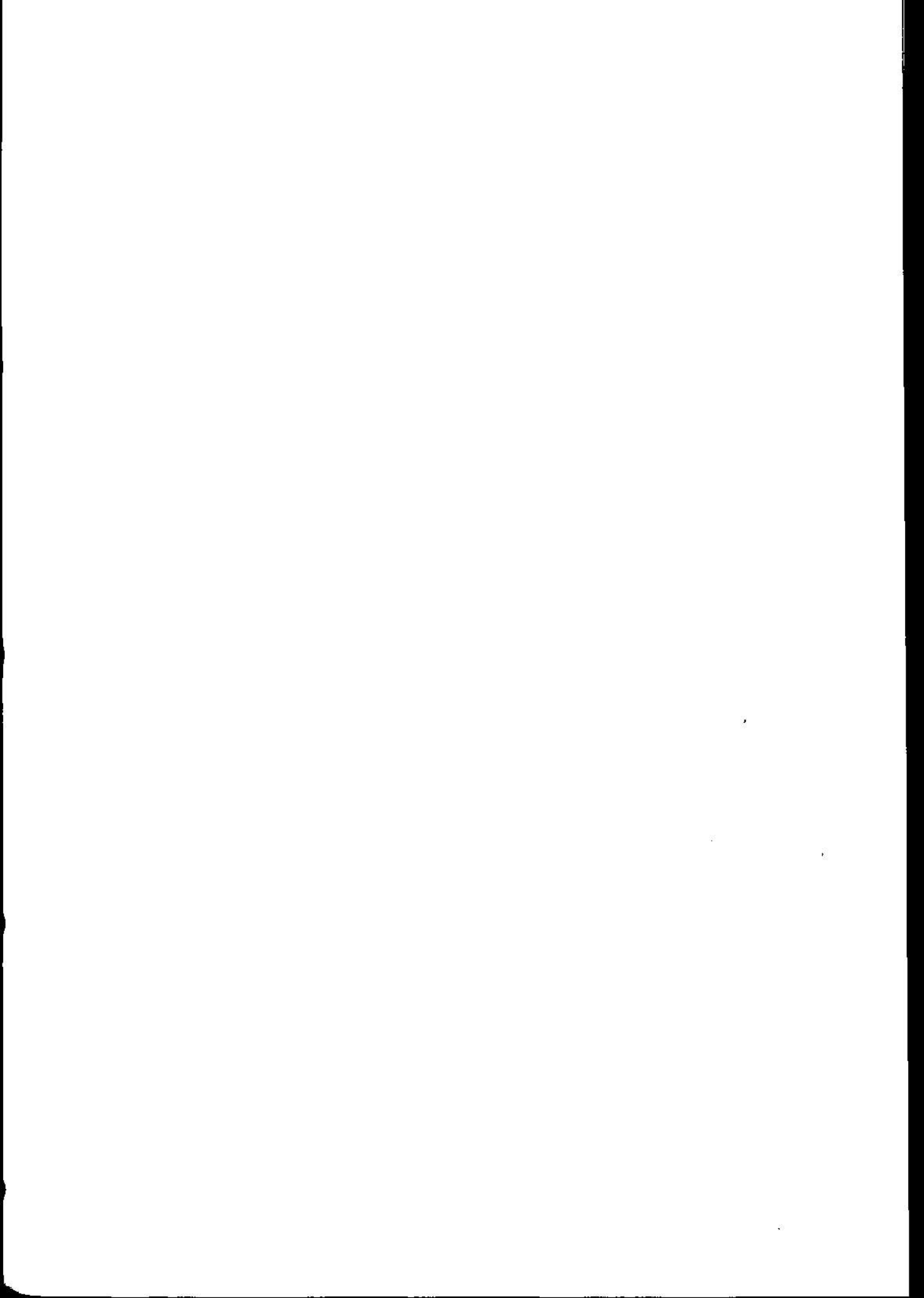
We look each other in the eyes as we cross paths, but I suddenly decide to tilt my head shorewards, when I see a woodpecker approach a nearby tree. When it lands on one of its branches, a tiny flicker* (*flikker) of snow glitters downwards. When I look back, the man has passed, rounding the corner toward the parking lot. It might have been better that way.

As I loop around the last tree, I think of the many stories that have passed through these spaces, of how histories and intimacies are carried in gestures and glances.

As a queer graphic designer, I am regularly confronted with the tensions of storytelling; of what to make public, what to leave private, what to render legible, and what to let remain opaque. It feels crucial to question what to reveal and what to withhold. I, and fellow queer storytellers alike, carry a sense of responsibility to our forebears, whose strategies for exposure and elusiveness shape how we make public today.

I decide to walk back to the bus stop, sprint the last few metres, and plan to grab some tea somewhere along the way.

It is a recurring time. I smooth my scarf, while it repeats itself from white to pink to blue and so on. I finish the very last page of my xeroxed copy of *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, and let the book rest on the empty checkered bus seat beside me.



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The great gardens of the faeries prosper. The faeries worship their plants and they grow and bear abundant food. In the afternoon, they sing and chant and weed. As the sun cools they make love with each other, surrounded by tomatoes and marigolds. At night they sleep curled around the cucumbers or intertwined in the beans or covered by the corn. When they awake in the cool mornings, they stroke the plants and give them food. And sometimes the faeries are so overcome with love and passion that they lie in the watermelon patch and masturbate.



