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# **What Fucking Clayton Pettet Teaches Us About Cultural Rhetorics**

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“Art must have many layers. Art is not just about another beautiful painting that matches your dining room floor. Art has to be disturbing, art has to ask a question, art has to predict the future. It has to do all these kinds of things. An art concept has to have so many layers so that every part of society can take what it needs.” - [Marina Abramovica \(Adams\)](#)

Video “Art School Stole My Virginity” from [Clayton Pettet](#) on [Vimeo](#)<sup>i</sup>

Clayton Pettet’s series of provocations, “Art School Stole My Virginity,” first captured our attention in 2014. As a collective whose larger interest lies in charting queerness in cultural rhetorics, we (Casey, Becca, Jon, and Kathleen) were turned on by Pettet’s slow tease. Would he get fucked? Would he get off? Jon imagined Pettet on his back in a box; and that image became these fantasies, imagined for the 2014 Cultural Rhetorics Conference.

As the hype around the performance and the rhetoric of youth sexuality grew in intensity, our interests in Pettet’s performance art splintered across a myriad of themes. The result was this collection of theories, stories, and fantasies about vulnerability, risk, consent, hetero-economies of desire, temporality, intentionality, and spatial affect. As we, as a collective of authors, played with our ideas, our writing throughout the development of this piece, we became comfortable with dissonances in sexual desires. We listened to each others’ fantasies, considered them, held the idea of them in our bodies. Our responses were lyrical, analytical, and historical. The breaks in the narrative line of this story on sexuality happened spontaneously and include our insight on form, which we wrote together.

### FEELING IN THE FIRST PERSON

Pettet’s sole interview responding to his performance, for *Dazed* magazine, serves us with his narrative and rethinking of the previous night’s events. *Dazed* asks Pettet about the pièce de résistance, wherein he asked audience members to force-feed him bananas and spit expletives at him (Tsjeng “What actually happened”). In the following found poem, Jon reimagines Pettet’s experience, giving guidance to you, readers, on how to read our unusual review.

“Talking about performance is such a strange thing because it’s so immaterial. We are talking about soft matter. We are talking about something that is invisible. You can’t see it. You can’t touch it. You just can feel it. At the same time, performance has this amazing power of transformation which other mediums have too, but it’s much more difficult to get it. This is more direct. It’s so instant.” - Marina Abramovica<sup>ii</sup> (Vollmer)

**VIGENETTE I: PETTET “FEELS BACKWARDS” AND REFLECTS**

by Jon M. Wargo

“No, I’ve always said I don’t believe in virginity.  
It was about me  
Stealing the word  
Virginity  
Rather than having it stolen  
From  
Me.  
I think if people were expecting something else  
It shows what they really  
Wanted.  
They didn’t want an art piece.  
They wanted to see me have  
Sex.  
If they came for the art they wouldn’t be disappointed –  
They’d know there were things to read  
Between  
The lines for.”

**A QUEER SIGNPOST: NOTES ON FORM**

Perhaps you have come upon this text as an onlooker, someone who wants to know about the phenomenon entitled "Art School Stole My Virginity." Or, perhaps the word 'fucking' piqued your interest. This piece reads like Pettet's performance: disjunctive, disjointed, dissonant. We see this piece operating as transgenre writing (see Hawkins, "Exhuming Transgenre Ties"; Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*; Powell, et al. "[Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics](#)") that seeks to provoke and initiate, more than to proclaim or nail down. Like Pettet, we want to design, not over-determine, your experience and reception.

In "Art School Stole My Virginity," Pettet designs an experience, curating an exhibition of self which ultimately reflects the audience's own imaginary of what performance art, virginity, and sex are. As a collaborative, we work through Pettet's piece to draw connections between queer and cultural rhetorics that critically engage with "normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere ... expos[ing] their naturalization and torqu[ing] them to create different or counter discourses," as Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes say queer rhetorics must do. Inspired by Pettet's close relationship with his audience, and Eli Clare's plenary at the 2014 The Ohio State University *Queer Places, Practices, and Lives II* symposium, we were intentional to queer the conventions of the academic paper session at the Cultural Rhetorics Conference in 2014. During our session, we gave short responses

to Pettet's performance. Then, like Clare, we sought to incite a "community conversation," wherein theory was inspired and created through dialogue.

The four of us (Becca, Kathleen, Casey, and Jon) moved into small groups with audience members to facilitate a conversation about what they'd just heard. Afterwards, seeking to create a larger queer provocation, we invited audience members to contribute their theories on Pettet's performance art and our responses. To keep the community conversation alive, for the purpose of this collage essay, players are featured in order of appearance: Clayton Pettet, Kathleen Livingston, Ames Hawkins, Becca Hayes, Ezekiel Choffel, Casey Miles, Steven Hammer, Erin Schaefer, Jon M. Wargo, and Les Hutchinson.

We acknowledge the dissonance and disjointedness this project entails. Therefore, we provide no exhaustive remarks or conclusions, but rather a constellation of queer provocations. We work to render the "queer" intelligible by making the piece and our responses to it seemingly unintelligible to heteronormative cultural logics. Queer operates in this fashion as a signpost, a signal that traverses across, on, and through bodies. Along the way, we include disjunctures: signposts and spaces to give pause as you move across and between provocations. Reading this collage will require you to "read between the lines," as Pettet suggests (Tsjeng "Art school stole"). If you came for the art, you will not be disappointed.

#### **VIGNETTE II: "MY ART IS MY SEXUALITY..."**

by Jon Wargo

"It was interesting doing this to the audience to see how they'd react.

It was incredibly intimate and mentally exhausting.

Some guy fumbled for his belt. I don't know who he is.

He just assumed...

There was another guy who pulled my hair back and thrust his banana down my throat.

Those points made me feel a bit shaky.

I've had mixed responses. Some guy was really sad,

>He said I looked like a 13-year-old boy and that it was sad and traumatic -

But fantastic, because I made everyone think they came to a performance

To watch a

19-year-old boy

lose

his virginity.

I will never have sex.

My art is my

sexuality."

**“I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT: PLAYING WITH VULNERABILITY, RISK, AND CONSENT”**

by Kathleen Livingston

**DESIRE**

When Clayton Pettet, a 19-year-old art student from the UK, announced he would lose his virginity in a performance art installation called "Art School Stole My Virginity," a reported 10,000 people applied for tickets online (Merz). 150 of them came. They came for the spectacle. For support. They came to participate. They came because many humans are pleasure-seeking animals. They came to hear him moan. They came to see and be seen. They came because “gay sex” is salacious. They came because they were invited. They came to be turned on. They came to experience the precise expression on his face while he came.

**RISK**

In an interview with art and style blog *Daily Metal*, Pettet explains, “I never said to any journalist about me being penetrated or who’s giving, who’s receiving, any of that. All of a sudden there was so much press; it was the ‘live gay sex show of the anal virgin’ ... it is the strangest sensation.”

“Given the attention alone...” a media soundbite posted on [Pettet’s vimeo site](#) intones, “are you okay becoming the virginity artist guy forever?”

**THE ACT ITSELF**

Zing Tsjeng, writing for the London monthly style mag *Dazed*, went to "Art School Stole My Virginity" and describes the second act as follows:

The booth was very, very small. I crouched to get in. Pettet was sat inside, still in his pants, with two piles of bananas in front of him.

“I am your anal virgin,” he said. “You are my partner. Pick up a banana.” I immediately started to panic: penetrating a 19-year-old was not on my to-do list tonight, even if it’s with a piece of fruit. “Now penetrate with my mouth eight times.”

I gratefully slid the banana into Pettet’s mouth as he stared me down.  
(Tsjeng “Art school stole”)

There is much to be said on how Pettet’s piece reverses the gaze, requiring participants to examine their desires. *I know what you want*, his performance seems to say. *You want to see me get fucked. And I need you to know what you want as well.*

Audience, ask yourselves: what sensation is it that you came here wanting to feel, and did you leave fulfilled?

After the show, some critics seem cautiously open, but shame lurks underneath. One critic is grateful to penetrate Pettet’s mouth, not his asshole.

Some seem disappointed. One twitter critic, Suzanne Zhang, screen capped in an article for *Dazed*, writes: “I am completely embarrassed by #ClaytonPettet ‘s performance... Piece not even about #sexuality ... Worst thing ever + audience got hungry.”

#### VULNERABILITY

In an intimate interview with Charlotte Edwardes for *The London Evening Standard*, Pettet explains the reason for hand picking the audience, “I don’t want it only to be people I know, but I don’t want anyone who wants to hurt me or cause trouble.”

#### FEMMENESS

It is hard to believe that someone “beautiful in a way usually reserved for women is (still) a virgin...” Steffen Michels, a writer for *Daily Metal* speculates.

#### CONSENT

The reason I mention desire, vulnerability, and risk is because of how I understand consent. More than a moment of negotiating permission for access, consent is a process and a set of practices, embodied and deeply emotional.

While the media paints one picture of Pettet, a teenage narcissist, too young to make such a public choice as public sex, or at least the performance of it, I want to suggest he and many queer youth are actually much more sex savvy than given credit for.

Consider Pettet’s audience—“I don’t want it only to be people I know, but I don’t want anyone who wants to hurt me or cause trouble.” Negotiating risk turns out to mean more than using barriers.

Consider his privilege—access to perform public sex at a gallery space in London, supportive mentors to talk it through.

Consider desire—Pettet orchestrates an elaborate, queer ceremony around his virginity, invites the public, and they come.

#### WHY GO PUBLIC?

Entertain, for a moment, the possibility that public sex is about seeing a flash of your community’s queer desires, visible in your audience’s eyes for a moment, then gone.

I am reminded of the desire for queer sex while reading Gayle Rubin’s essay “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole,” a queer cultural history of the beloved leather bar, home to gay male fisting parties, a rare, invite-only haven shared for a

time with kinky lesbians, heterosexuals, and bisexuals, until it became a casualty of AIDS (226).

I am reading “Her Body, Mine, and His” by Dorothy Allison, thinking about Pettet and public sex. “Paul, Geoff—I am doing it as much as I can, as fast as I can. This holy act. I am licking their necks on Market Street, fisting them in the second floor bathroom at Amelia’s, in a booth under a dim wall lamp at the Box—coming up from her cunt a moment before the spotlight shifts to her greedy features... I am doing it, boys and girls, I am doing it, doing it all the time” (125-6).

I don’t remember a time before the witch hunts around AIDS. I remember being young though—lying in the grass in the Arb in Ann Arbor, a leg slung between my lover’s thighs in a gesture of open intimacy. Two photographs of me from that time: a portrait of my face, eyes closed, open palm cast casually overhead; a close-up of my hand.

If you could scroll down my body, you would see I have just acquired a new-to-me pair of boots from the free box. I am sprawled on my back on a soft, floral sheet behind a drift of tall perennials. Soon, we will have fast and frantic sex there in the grass, but first, this gender-bending sweetheart with the half-bald head is going to read to me from *Boys Like Her*, by the Canadian performance collaborative Taste This, Anna Camilleri’s poem “Sly Boots”:

*She looks like sly boots*  
*strong-eyed and cocksure.*  
*She looks like borrowed diamonds*  
*in the rough and she is*  
*rough and raggedy, but never ragged*  
*rough and tumble, but never falls*  
*rough around the edges, always sharp*  
*rough housed, never caged*  
*rough and ready always late.*

Thinking back, there is a chance my lover is trying to tell me he is not a masculine woman, but a femme man. Listening to the words then, I imagine the poem is about femmes. I read into that poem and learn a stance of fierce vulnerability and toughness. I learn to be a queer femme, “sly and cock-sure.”

**PETTET IN RI VU**  
by Ames Hawkins

Ri: Hey, I heard you got chosen to see the show. What did you think?  
Vu: You mean "Art School Stole My Virginity." Well, what I thought was that it was going to be about his virginity. I didn't think it'd be about mine.  
Ri: Really? You didn't? I would have thought you'd have understood that.  
Vu: Not exactly. Not like that.  
Ri: So, you wanted to go, but you didn't want to risk anything?  
Vu: I'm not sure what you mean.  
Ri: Are you saying you didn't mean to press and push and pulse into spaces you hadn't been? You didn't mean to puncture?  
Vu: Puncture wounds take a long time to heal, you know. It has to happen from the inside out.  
Ri: Let me ask you then, what is risk?  
Vu: Risk is an announcement.  
R: That's it?  
Vu: Risk is an acceptance, a boundary.  
Ri: And what else?  
Vu: A banana. Risk is definitely a banana.  
Ri: Then, what is vulnerability?  
Vu: Vulnerability is an agreement.  
Ri: What kind of an agreement?  
Vu: An agreement to be human in the presence of another human. To understand that the banana has always been both your vulnerability and my risk.  
Ri: So when there's a reversal, there's vulnerability?  
Vu: Sometimes. Well, yes and no, I think. Definitely sometimes.  
Ri: So, when there's a reversal, you risk vulnerability.  
Vu: OK, now you've lost me. What are you saying?  
Ri: Think about it, perhaps like this: Risk is the content, vulnerability the form. Narrative precedes and takes precedence. Change the trajectory of the narrative and the rhythm, the arc of that story, and risk and vulnerability change places.  
Vu: So would you let me puncture you? Tell you that I would like to stick my finger now, into your cock-cunt, tell you how beautiful your dick-clit is, how warm you are, how wet, how wonderful everything can be with just the right amount of pressure?  
Ri: Well, if I did, I imagine that my cunt-cock would get hard, you know, feeling you there just with the tip of my finger, phalanges as fronds, as feathers of flesh.  
Vu: Are you trying to tell me you want to put a banana in my mouth?  
Ri: I am telling you I want to pucker and pulse.



Vu: Just to be clear, are you saying that this whole thing is just an ouroboros, and we have no way of knowing whether it's risk swallowing vulnerability, or the other way round?

Ri: That's one way of making a connection.

Vu: Are there other connections?

Ri: They are, in fact, limitless.

Vu: So what will it take to objectively review the ways we've switched places here, this risk, this vulnerability, this me, that you?

Ri: It takes hope, no?

Vu: Well, yes. It does. But not always.

Ri: Are you sure?

Vu: No. I am not sure of hope. Only the paradox of our desire for it. And passion. Puncture and pleasure. And presence and prescience. I am sure of objects and the abject through which we desire. Fairly certain of consent and dissent, and bliss as delight. Universal knowing and cosmic constellations. Connective concoctions and queer-up rejections. I am sure I won't always know what it is I want, though I am pretty sure I could tell you right now. And I am sure that there's something but what it is I can't say. Maybe love, I have been thinking. But this is a conversation for another day.

Ri: I see. Thank you. I appreciate your honesty. You forgot one thing, yes?

Vu: You're right, Ri! I did!

Ri: And what is that, dear Vu?

Vu: No matter what, you want to keep your eyes peeled for the banana.

#### LETTER TO THE READER

Hello Dearest—

It was never my intention to keep anything from you, but I understand that you have your expectations. I have to admit, I really resist you telling me what to do, but as you well know, I so do not want to disappoint. So, even though I don't exactly know how to do this, or how you'll take it, here goes.

Have you ever noticed the occasional stack of books in the hallway, the alphabetic-detritus left by a professor in the wake of retirement or a mid-career office change? Usually, I walk right by these text-towers, all the old issues of academic journals, and outdated textbooks. I'm not interested in other people's rejected volumes, their academic trash. But every once in a while, I feel the pull to take a closer look.

This might sound crazy, but it's kind of like I can feel at least one of the books looking at me, as though it senses my innate, latent desire. It's similar to that sensation I get in a bar, in this giant sea of people, when I can see/feel someone looking at me, trying to stealthily catch my eye. It's so real that in that moment, I stop and turn around, expecting the book to be looking for someone else. But of

course, I'm the only one there. And, well, the book isn't really looking at me anyway, right?

The last time this happened was four, maybe even five years ago. I stood for a few minutes and stared before sliding the all-white prepublication paperback from its place in the stack: *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy. Not Myrna*, I noted. *Mina*. Huh. I had no idea who she was, and yet I felt as though I already knew her name. *Maybe one of the female beatnicks*, I thought, *yet another woman forgotten and ignored*.

I positioned the spine between the life line and Mound of Venus on my left hand, pressed right thumb to front-cover's edge, and increased pressure ever so slightly so as to tick-release the pages open so I could peek inside. Had I seen what I had expected—traditional paragraphing for prose—I likely would have brusquely pulled my hand away, returning the book to the pile with a quick, dismissive flick of the wrist.

But, something here was different. What I saw inspired in me excitement so acute that I shot an index finger as deep as I could, stretching fingers taught in order to splay wide the pages so I could have a closer look. It wasn't what she said, exactly, though "Gertrude Stein" caught my eye. It was how she wrote, all the ways she was playing with form. Micro essays. Particularized punctuation. Segmentation. I skimmed the introduction, noting that these were written during the first half of the 20th century. *Who was this writer? Why had I never heard of her before?*

This wasn't the beginning of a long-term relationship. I didn't become inspired to spend all that much time reading these pages, or learning about Loy. But, I did become fascinated with one particular piece, a ten-part segmented essay presenting the imagined a conversation between two characters—Mi and Lo—that focuses on the definition and role of form. I didn't get it when I read it the first, or second, or even third time. Not completely, anyway. What I finally came to understand is that it hadn't been written for me to get. Not exactly.

"Mi Lo" was a way for Loy to explore her own thoughts about form—the work it does, the ways it impacts her affective and aesthetic decision-making as a writer. I've never spent the time doing a deep textual read of the piece because I couldn't exactly find a way in. Each time I approach it head-on, it eludes me. As soon as I think I've figured it out, the point of entry shifts. "Mi Lo" lets me languish in her language, experience bliss through languaginal desire. As much as I want her—want to fuck her—she won't let me inside.

Yet, "Mi Lo" offers me a different site of pleasure: an essayistic glory hole. She's a piece of writing into which I can peer through every once in awhile, snatch a quick glimpse of what gets me hot about my own writing process. "Mi Lo" is hot textual-porn that allows me to become writerly-aroused.

And that's really all she's ever been for me until recently, until I accepted the invitation to write a reflection and respond to the interactive panel presentation, "What 'Fucking' Clayton Pettet Teaches Us About Cultural Rhetorics," I attended/participated in at the Cultural Rhetorics conference in East Lansing in October 2014.

From the second I started thinking about how to approach Pettet, I couldn't get "Mi Lo" out of my mind. Not because the artists/writers do/do not identify as queer, but because they turns the tables in their work and insists that YOU, as viewer/reader come to occupy a queer subject position in order to get the idea.

I have no idea whether Mina Loy herself ever identified as anything other than heterosexual, but as for her work? There's an argument to be made that its poetics and aesthetics align closely with what Joy Ladin describes as "Trans poetics":

Like modernist poetics (remember those?), trans poetics transform meaning from a product provided by the poet [*and/or artist/writer*] into processes within the reader. Like post-modernist poetics (remember those?) trans poetics transform semantic processes within the reader [*and/or viewer/participant*] into self-reflective reflections on the lust for and impossibility of meaning, knowing being. (307)

Neither Pettet nor Loy are clearly identifiable as poets. I get that. But each of them—each of these pieces—invites and even requires that a reader/viewer/witness transform/translate the meanings they assume have been made by the artist/writer into conscious knowledge-making processes within us. Simultaneously, the pieces demand self-reflexive engagement with the site of one's innate erotic relationship with/in text and textual lust.

Another way of thinking about it? Pettet's self-identification as a gay/queer man is heteronormed by any expectation of what it would mean for him to lose his virginity. Most of the audience/witnesses were so unable to queer the notion of virginity. They failed to entertain a definition that might include a range of orifice/caverns (sphincter/anus; labia/vagina; mouth/throat), explored/employed/penetrated motivated by something other than sexual arousal (though maybe some of the audience members did find the whole thing hot), by a member other than a penis: enter banana.

The desire to see him get fucked in the ass was so strong, so assumed, so NOT queer, that audience members could actually be relieved by the perverted act of fellating Pettet with a banana. Get it? Clayton likely lost his oral banana virginity that night, but this fucking paled in comparison to the way he fucked with you. What's Loy doing? Well, it might not be as explicit, but she's also fucking with expectation and the reader by fucking with form. I could go on and on here, but Dearest, allow me to save that whole-body exploration for another day and finally tell you what you wanted to know.

"Ri Vu" is a response to Pettet and homage to both "Mi Lo" and Loy. "Mi Lo" helped me to reimagine the relationship between Risk and Vulnerability in a way that would queer rather than pin them down in academic prose, in a way that would demand more of the reader in terms of desire of translation, that they come to the page full of lust. "Ri Vu" allowed me to reimagine and play with the relationship between Risk and Vulnerability—the two ideas brought to our attention

by the original panel members, ones we chatted about during our interactive reflection.

I used Loy's form because there's the sense that you're overhearing a conversation that hasn't been meant for you. It is always-never about you. Apparently, I was somewhat successful, because as one astute, (if insecure) and generous, (if discipline-(mind)ed), first-virgin reviewer-reader notes:

I was confused by what "Ri" and "Vu" refer to. My intuition is that they are short for "Risk" and "Vulnerability"—personifications of them, in ways that show how these terms are confusing, their boundaries unstable. I liked the inclusion of this section, but I wonder if a mark in the title or somewhere to make this interpretation (if it's correct) more explicit (or help readers interpret a little more).

I see you seeing the queer in here. I want you to know how much your words please me. I hope these marks—ones I made just for you—help.

With admiration and appreciation,

Ames

**“THE BIGGEST FUCK YOU”: LOCATING CLAYTON PETTET’S ART SCHOOL STOLE MY VIRGINITY AS QUEER CULTURAL RHETORICS WITHIN THE HETERO-ECONOMY OF DESIRE**

by Becca Hayes

When I first learned of Pettet’s planned performance I was struck by the reactions by various communities—from mainstream media to LGBT Christian groups to the art world—and by the counter-reactions by Pettet. What struck me in particular about the announcement of Pettet’s performance and the surrounding media frenzy was the way in which the rhetoric constellated around economics, monetization, and commodification: the word “stole” in his title, “Art School Stole My Virginity,” Pettet’s discussion of his “virginity” as a culturally-valued commodity with potential to “stimulate” both the London Art Scene and sociocultural discourse about virginity, the accusation of “cheapening” sex and art, and so on.

On his tumblr page, Pettet wrote of his performance: “My piece isn’t a statement as much as it is a question” (cited in Daily Mail Reporter “Gay Student”). So, here, following his inquisitive lead, I ask you to consider with me how Pettet’s performance both disrupts and complies with hetero-economies of desire. Through our consideration, I hope we might think our way to cultural queer rhetorics as a meaning-making practice.

In her book, *Reclaiming Queer*, Erin J. Rand, develops the idea of a hetero-economy of desire, arguing that: “Heterosexuality is the dominant economy that shapes and governs the kinds of discourses of desire that are allowed to circulate publicly and that are involved in the actual constitution of the ‘public’ itself” (108). “This is not just a matter of heterosexual desire or marginalized identities circulating in public,” Rand asserts, “but it is a matter of the circulation of heterosexual desire actually producing the public and becoming the very ‘marketplace’ within which products may acquire value and be made available for consumption” (108-109).

In examining the place of “Art School Stole My Virginity” within the hetero-economy of desire through a cultural rhetorics framework, I want to note, in the words of Malea Powell, et al. in their *Enculturation* piece, “[Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics](#)” that within cultural rhetorics it is a persistent focus on the how—the practices of meaning-making that create, negotiate and maintain those structures—that equals a focus on rhetorics. In other words, rhetoric is not so much about “things” as it is about “actions.” This orientation towards actions, then, teaches us how particular practices—ways of thinking, ways of problem solving, ways of being in the world—are valued (or not) within specific cultural systems and/or communities. (Act 1, Scene 2) In the case of “Art School Stole My Virginity,” the actions came in the form of interviews, media responses, and the performance.

Thinking through a cultural queer rhetorics framework and hetero-economy of desire as meaning-making system, I start with an interview in which Pettet himself seems to allude to his work’s place within the hetero-economy of desire. In

an interview published on *Dazed* following the performance, the interviewer asked Pettet, “Would the piece have even existed in its current state if there hadn't been such a media storm around it?” Pettet responded, “It exists 90 per cent because of the reaction the word ‘virgin’ got. The idea developed even more so because of the reaction: it was crazier than I could understand. It just goes to show our obsession with virginity and gay sex” (Tsjeng “What actually happened”). Pettet points to the value of the false construct of virginity within heterosexuality as one force behind the large public response. Further, I would argue that Pettet is noting the spectacle of the Other, “gay sex,” within the economy of heterosexuality. As Rand argues, “Heterosexual desire manages resources by motivating and shaping the consumption of popular culture products and humans and identities value directly in relation to the standards of this economy” (109). While queer sexuality is not—indeed cannot be—valued within the hetero-economy of desire, only as spectacle.

While Pettet’s work attempts to disrupt, rather than stimulate, the hetero-economy of desire, Pettet himself occasionally plays into the very system he aims to disrupt. For example, Pettet vetted audience members for the performance: People have emailed and I’m checking if they are fake names or just into gay porn or whatever—I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with porn but that’s not what this is. My piece is not porn. So, I don’t want perverts or people who just want to come and see a boy lose their virginity. I have a mix of people, I just want people who show a genuine interest. (Hines)

Pettet seeks to separate what he deems appropriate desire, the desire to view performance art, from inappropriate desire, a desire to view live porn or “a boy losing their virginity.” While I hardly fault Pettet for his wish to protect himself from people who might compromise his boundaries of safety and comfort or jeopardize the integrity he sought to create through his art, his policing of what constitutes appropriate desire, including what intentions and motivations are valid in the context of the exhibition, participates in heterosexuality as an economy, “an economy because it is the general system within which desire circulates; by way of the organizing functions of this system, desire become intelligible” (Rand 109).

The disruption Pettet aims for comes, at least in part, in the discrepancy between the announced description of the event and the event as it actually occurred. As Sol Lewitt says in his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”: “The work of art can be perceived only after it is completed” (79). That is, Pettet’s piece must be taken as a whole that includes its announcement and performance, as well as myriad responses. When Pettet first gave interviews following the initial announcement of the performance he indicated he’d be losing his virginity to an unnamed partner in front of an audience. He said “My partner and I will both have a light smattering of paint on our bodies while we’re having sex on an unstretched piece of canvas to create a permanent piece of the performance” that would be displayed immediately following the performance. He explicitly stated that the performance would “be aesthetically pleasing and not presented like a peep show or something dark and seedy” (Wilkinson).

Of course, we can't be sure about Pettet's intentions, motivations, or plans for his performance, and, those elements may not matter; however, I say that in some ways, he queers the expectations of representations of virginity, and even of sex. Though he titled his work "Art School Stole My Virginity" and described the event in ways that conform to hetero-normative notions of what constitutes sex, the performance as it occurred or/and as attendees and Pettet reported it became unintelligible and illogical as sex within the hetero-economy of desire. As Tsjeng of *Dazed* wrote, "So yeah, in case that wasn't obvious: "Art School Stole My Virginity" didn't actually have any sex in it." Pettet seemed to undo everything he initially announced he would do. For example, he initially said it would "not presented like a peep show," (Wilkinson) yet attendees/participants crawled into a "booth [that] was very, very small," reminiscent of a peep show booth (Tsjeng "What actually happened"). The performance was not read or experienced as containing gay sex, or any kind of sex, for that matter, nor the loss of virginity. Even Pettet has said his art is his sexuality and he'll never lose his virginity.

However, what happened at the event queerly calls into question the very constitution, the logic, of the idea of "sex." As Lewitt argued in his foundational piece on conceptual art: it is "not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at a time, only to be ruined" (79). In "[Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive](#)," Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander ask "whose logic is operating here? Whose rationality?," asserting that "Queers often find that the logics of the larger culture are aligned to discredit queers, disavow the legitimacy of their interests, and discombobulate their attempts to find social justice." They argue that a queer rhetoric can intervene in: "the conceptualization of the public sphere itself that relies on limited logical discourse, with pathos dutifully under control and ethos heteronormatively established."

The seemingly illogical and unintelligible nature of his exhibit prompts people to interpret him as deceptive, a charge not unfamiliar to many LGBTQ+ people. As one media pundit said: "He lied to us." Pettet said people called him a teenage narcissist (Edwardes). However, maybe this is a case of, to borrow from Sara Ahmed's twitterfeed, becoming "what you are judged to be in order to survive that judgment" (@feministkilljoy). Pettet and his "gay sex" performance was read as narcissistic spectacle and, thus, he sought to make it so. As [Nik Thakkar](#), one of the attendees, noted on his blog: "It was the biggest fuck you and rebellion against the world's expectations, played out artistically and maturely." Here, I understand "the world's expectations" as synonymous with the hetero-economy of desire.

How might cultural rhetorics and queer rhetorics, as both a meaning-making practice and a methodology for understanding meaning-making practices, interrupt hetero-economies of desire?

**I REALIZED I SAVED MY EMAIL AS A DRAFT AND IT NEVER SENT**

by Ezekiel Choffel

One of the major things I found myself considering while listening and interacting with the presentations at the "Art School Stole My Virginity" panel at the *Cultural Rhetorics Conference* was the ways in which virginity becomes commodified. There seems to be an intrinsic value placed on virginity as something that should be kept, saved (like a bank account), given (like to charity), sold, bought, etc. In heteronormative cultural expectations, men are supposed to cast away their virginity at the first possible moment, while women are expected to hold onto their virginity until some significant event (marriage, for example). But because the act of sex involved in the art presentation was *Gay Sex* (emphasis mine), these roles/rules seemed to bend and mirror aspects of both gendered expectations of virginity. In some ways, I wasn't surprised by the audiences expectations, but I was surprised at the queer ways in which virginity was navigated in this space.

There is a move to reclaim virginity by Pettet that exposes audience desires for public acts of sex as an act of commodification. What Pettet's juke provides is a chance for audiences and scholars to consider the cultural impacts on the human body. He illuminates how specific life experiences are commodified and considers the different ways that value is prescribed to human life.

Pettet provides a locus for discussing how dominant cultural norms become woven together with the agency a person wields in regards to their own timelines. Building on the concept of chrono-normativity discussed later in this piece, Pettet is queering his own timeline for when and how the act of losing one's virginity should happen.

What Pettet's performance offers cultural rhetorics is an entrance point to understanding what role sex acts play in hetero and homo discourse. The audience's response and the performance itself blur the lines between queer and dominant cultural expectations. Further, Pettet's performance considers the ways in which specific acts or cultural expectations are commodified in addition to the literal body. It muddies the waters of desire and expectations by putting into juxtaposition the body (which is problematically commodified often) and the acts the body can do/when it can do them (which are commodified equally as often, but not discussed as much).

**THE QUEER TIME OF CLAYTON PETTET**

I look at the anticipatory "befores" in relation to the unexpected "afters" of Pettet's performance. The idea I'm working with is a before-and-after of virginity, where once "it" happens, it cannot happen again.

In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman introduces the term "chrononormativity," which she describes as "the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane



workings of domestic life” (xxii), and “the use of time to organize individual human bodies through maximum productivity” (3). Chrononormativity is a sense of time as natural. She uses examples such as wage-based production and the subsequent household labor this created, a separation of gender-based forms of work, as well as the idea of “leisure time.”

Another example of chrononormativity is virginity. In “Art School Stole My Virginity,” Pettet plays out this notion of virginity as sequential by using the public’s reactions; there’s the hype before – the anticipation, the awkward “it,” and then the disappointing after – that feeling of “not what you expected,” and asking *how am I different now?* I then look at the “before” and “after” of the performance, via blogs and articles, pointing to the ways virginity is a chrononormative construct, a naturalized sequential moment in a person’s life, and the ways Pettet has queered time around his performance. Many readers can probably remember their “first time”, but probably not your fifth, or fiftieth.

### BEFORE

There were two moments of intense activity in the media before Pettet’s performance: first in October 2013 when it was announced, and second when Pettet delayed the performance, which was originally scheduled for January, until April 2014. I remember scouring social media in January when the performance didn’t happen, looking for something—did it happen? Did it not? If so, did “it” actually happen? In October, [Clayton said to James Nichols of The Huffington Post](#), “The key thing about performance art is that it should only be performed once, and this is the ultimate once-in-a-lifetime performance.” Here, we can see Pettet sets up the performance of virginity, as something that only happens once in a person’s life. But at the same time he challenges the concept of virginity itself, saying to the *London Evening Standard*, “There are a lot of assumptions about my definition of ‘virginity’ and how it will be ‘lost.’” He goes on, “I haven’t even said anything about who is penetrating whom. What I will say is that virginity is a flexible term. Is it even physically real?”

In just about every interview he gave before the performance, he plays with the “before” of the loss of virginity – creating the anticipation, teasing the expectations of the interviewer and the audience. He says to Steffen Michels of *Daily Metal*, “You don’t want it to be society’s version of virginity which is popping a hymen for the first time. If you feel like the virginity you lost was the first good experience you’ve had, make it the first good experience you’ve had. That can be losing your virginity.” Media played right into his hands, asking questions and making statements like:

[Zing Tsjeng of Dazed](#): “I’m assuming you are an actual virgin.”

Pettet: “Yes, of course.”

Tsjeng: “So, are you going to regret this in ten years’ time?”

[Nico Hines of The Daily Beast](#): “You realize this is going to stick with you for the rest of your life.”

#### AFTER

After the performance in April, there was another spike in the media coverage, this time with general expressions of “not what was expected,” which can often be said about the after moments of having sex for the first time, or even having sex with new partners for the first time. Those who wrote about the performance afterwards described the awkwardness and disappointment they felt. [Vienna Famous of Flux Magazine](#) wrote, “And so the event that prurient people across the world had prayed for and petitioned against played out like many first times; months of build-up and false starts, leading to a confusing and agonizing 5 minutes of action. And then came the disappointment and recriminations.” And [Theo Merz of The Telegraph](#) writes, “It was awkward, anti-climactic and only slightly erotic. And why not, considering it was a show about losing your virginity? The hype was much more interesting than the event and credit, I suppose, to Clayton for playing us well enough to generate it while still in art school.” So in the end, Pettet’s performance played on the anticipation of the public, particularly the public’s own ideas and expectations about virginity and its loss. As Vienna Famous writes, “And so the art turned out to be us, or at least our anticipation.”

Pettet also created anticipation around his long-term career as an artist. Many of the critics who attended the show asked questions about his future, things like:

[Peter Purton of Left Front Art: Radical Queers – art & politics](#): “How will his art develop?”

Theo Merz: “It will be interesting to see how he follows this up.”

I can’t decide if Pettet is brilliant or a fluke, or maybe both. Did he orchestrate this performance to play out like the chrononormative construct that the loss of virginity is? Was he this intentional and crafty? Or have I been able to shoehorn meaning into his performance? My own conceptions of time, particularly age, caused me to be skeptical of his intentions. Even now I think of him as a kid, but the performance, the art piece, it worked. I suppose time will tell if “Art School Stole My Virginity” is the commentary on virginity we hope it to be.

**PETTETRESPONSE SCREENCAST: INTENTIONALITY: [M]ODERNITY & STABLE IDENTITIES**  
by Steven Hammer

Video, "[Rhetorics of/and Intention](#)<sup>iii</sup>"

**TRANSCRIPT**

My response to this topic//exxxploration as a schol/a/rtist is rooted in and around the concept and hyst0ries of intentionality, so that we might think about how this pervasive notion governing making and interpretation might be disrupted, to qu33r spaces of making.

Intentionality: A Western Individualistic Tradition

Dominant, even nonDominant strands of Art have historically been rooted in hegemonic individualism that performs "with regard to [T]he 'history of [A]rt'" (read: intentional/genius artworks within the Western canon (Kolak 158).

Intentionality: Modernity and Stable Identities

Modernity's influence on [A]rt, evident in its insistence on a mastery of "grand narratives of the Western World" as well as fixxxed and stable meanings, identities, and responses (Dumitrescu).

Intentionality as Colonial Art Practices

Hystorically, Art has distanced and distinguished itself from so-called "primitive" art (especially indigenous practices), "craft," and various other making practices of Others, often based on notions of "genius" and intentionality.

In sum, relying on the idea or prerequisite of intentionality makes it difficult for us to live and make and exxxperience and interpret practices that seek to circumvent or disrupt or critique the very institutions and traditions that enforce intentionality as a necessary component to thoughtful making practices.

**PETTET'S PERFORMANCE AND MINDFULNESS AS SOURCES FOR DISRUPTING  
CHRONONORMATIVE NARRATIVES**  
by Erin Schaefer

Chrononormativity, and the associated anticipation and disappointment, is present in many dominant narratives in the United States. There's an underlying assumption that if we just reach a certain point of time, if we fulfill a given set of criteria, we will be happy, safe, and free. The normalization of chrononormativity is both limiting and harmful. When applied to the construct of virginity, for example, those who have experienced rape are left to believe that they have permanently "lost" their virginity. Not only has something irreplaceable been "lost," it's been taken against one's will.

Although I'm reminded, from time to time, not to fall into this trap, I still find myself operating from a chrononormative context. How, then, can I—can we—break free from the limitations of chrononormativity, both from the narratives it produces and the mode of thinking it fosters? One of the challenges is how we are drawn to these kinds of narratives (and the type of linear thinking attached to them). Chrononormativity puts us in the driver's seat: whether it's gaining a certain amount of knowledge, acquiring property, or getting promoted, we believe that if we try hard enough, we can reach these milestones; they're within our control.

We can, however, interrupt our narratives about chrononormativity, and I offer mindfulness as one such tool for interruption. Mindfulness encourages us to look at things with fresh eyes, but we still feel uncomfortable with the space it creates for re-examining our worldviews. Pettet similarly makes space for us to examine our narratives, and again discuss our reaction to this self-awareness.

I am tempted to offer mindfulness as a solution for interrupting habitual narratives that value chrononormativity. And indeed, I do believe that mindfulness is a useful tool for stepping back from our habitual ways of seeing the world. It encourages what mindfulness communities like to call "beginner's mind," seeing something with new eyes. Mindfulness alone, though, may not be enough to shake up our stories. In fact, one thing that instructors of mindfulness warn about is the tendency to use mindfulness as a tool for us to be more relaxed...in our habitual ways of doing and perceiving. In this way, mindfulness practice can become separate from our everyday lives; it's a thing to do when we have time and have finished the to-do list.

Mindfulness is not an easy practice. It is a messy practice, one accompanied by the discomfort of self-awareness. Internal thoughts, as well as external experiences such as our interactions with others, that challenge our worldview suddenly have room to take center-stage in our awareness, made space for through mindfulness. This experience is can be challenging and destabilizing, uncomfortable to say the least. It acts as an interruption to our habitual narratives, and our habitual emotional state of mind.

Pettet's performance demonstrates what happens when there is space for us to be confronted by narratives that challenge our usual worldviews. Pettet called up a common narrative in the audience—that of virginity as a climatic, life-transforming moment—and then, as Casey pointed out, pulled the rug from under our feet. He created a space, one similar to the kind of pause we might experience during mindfulness meditation, for us to experience the gap between our narrative and what's really happening in the present moment.

Like Casey, I can only speculate as to whether any audience member had any meaningful transformation in how they perceived virginity. Pettet's performance is interesting because of the space it created for interrupting narratives. As with mindfulness, one has a choice in what he, she, or they do with this interruption. This interruption is fruitful, in that we can use the opportunity to embrace different narratives, or make modifications to our existing narratives. Or, we simply react to our discomfort and cling to our existing narratives. In Pettet's performance, I believe many chose this latter path. Ultimately, I am left wondering what it takes for the kinds of interruptions created in Pettet's performance and elsewhere, to transform rather than temporarily disrupt our chrononormative narratives, and other limited narratives.

What motivates us to deeply re-examine the narratives we are invested in, including chrononormative narratives that give us a sense of control and security?

**GOING BANANAS FOR A BOY ON HIS BACK IN A BOX**

by Jon Wargo

In the days after what was supposed to be the so-called loss of Pettet's "virginity," I was awestruck by the lackluster coverage and mass disappointment his artistry and disavowal of anal penetration provided. People across Tumblr, Twitter, and even Facebook were heralding the performance as "awkward, anti-climactic, and only slightly erotic" (Merz). In fact, reflecting on the status of his April 1st banana-ram performance, I too was disappointed. I, after all, was slated to present on Pettet and theorize how this affective moment of spatiality and performance art signals new forays into cultural rhetorics and contemporary signs of queer performance. I was supposed to discuss touch, and the politics of art/istry. In sum, I felt perhaps, the same as Pettet was hologrammed to feel, shameful. In the weeks following what turned into a more "traditional" MFA carnivale of artistry to audience interaction, I thought about my initial response. Was I like the audience members Pettet talked about after his successful MFA defense? Was I curious about watching a young twink get fucked in front of my face; or, was I actually interested in the voyeuristic response it would elicit from the crowd and media?



Now, I will weave a quasi-rhizomatic read of Pettets' performative piece to the politics of spatial affect and begin to theorize how shame thrives as an act of political and personal agency. I'll conclude by asking: what does this teach us about performance, where does this leave us in relation to to this odd noun/verb "queer," and how does Pettet, quite literally, invite us to take it?

**WHY SHAME?**

On his back in a box? In the aforementioned promo that commences this piece illustrates, Pettet, with the audio backdrop of the American news coverage spotlighting his event, crouches in what appears to be a room encased as a white box of sorts. In the last five seconds of this 15-second reel, he stands up, breaks a porcelain cup, lights fading to black, and then walks off stage. This moment, a visual metaphor and preview of what so many sought to see, acts as a palimpsest of Pettet's own imaginary.



Les Hutchinson @les\_hutchinson · Nov 1

How can we theorize of the virginal seal that doesn't break? #CRcon #j7



How can we theorize this break? This metaphor of the virginal seal construct, shattering before our very eyes. Is this shame? Do we feel this break? “The very physicality of shame,” according to Ahmed (2004), “involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies ‘turn away’ from the others who witness the shame. . . . Shame involves a different kind of orientation from disgust towards the subject and others” (103-104). Shame acts as an agent through its capability to stimulate a response from our imaginary. Was Pettet’s token exchange of virginity a contract for his degree? An emergence into a field he felt displaced in; or, was it indicative of youth whose own sexuality would color him outside of the lines and into adulthood? What are the geographies of shame?

#### ON SPATIAL AFFECT

Shame acts as an intermediary to the conceptual lens of spatial affect and Pettet’s performance. I, like countless others (e.g., Thrift, Soja, and Lefebvre), want to move away from talking about affect as merely the expression and reflection of a phenomenological experience. This type of narrative inquiry, while worthy, is often glued to empirical prowess that misguides reality. Instead, I want us to think about how spatial affect, the affective component that the politics of space and place may have on experience, is Pettet’s blueprint for emotive encounter. It may, however, be a worthy exercise to nuance these geographies of affect, as it is important to understand how they work across multiple fields of “human spatiality” (Soja 65), always stretched between the material and metaphorical, the physical and the mental, and the real and imagined.



Les Hutchinson @les\_hutchinson · Nov 1

What are the geographies of shame? How does this define spatial affect? #CRcon #j7



For Pettet, (and for countless others) what was sure to be at first, a boy, on his back, in a box, this spatial affect was what first drew us to the experience he was interested in managing as art. Through discussions with our working group, I was curious, would I “feel backwards?” Would I think back to the boy on his back in my

bed? A boy reconstructing his own loss of sorts? A virginity that I felt all-too-real at the time. Pettet moved from performance artist to experience architect. However, in this design of affect, larger groups and bodies became interested in the project. [Nations and people began forecasting how this, an act by a 19-year old who in so many ways was selling his anal virginity for a degree, would speak to their own constructions of youth, of sexuality, and art \(The LipTV\).](#) How could Pettet, a singular student with one blog post destroy and/or destruct ideologies concerning something as sacred as art and youth was impressive. This vertical alignment from emotive moment to national disaster and shame scare was the experience Pettet, penultimate to his actual day of duty, was interested in creating. Or was he?

### AT THE RISK OF FEELING SPACE; OR, WHEN THE AUDIENCE IS GIVEN A FACE

While Pettet's prose and narrative response with *Dazed* magazine acts as an interesting moment to highlight the feelings of *artist*, here I am more interested in exploring first person accounts from audience members of the encounter. Take, for instance, Suzanne Zhang's tweet following the performance:



Zhang, as Kathleen mentioned above, could be read as “feeling” Pettet’s failure. Moreover, she dismisses the call and response to sexuality, noting how the zenith of her experience was her own hunger. I would query, hungry for what? In comparison to Zhang, Nik Thakkar from *Karl Is My Unkle* provides a much longer narrative, one that I want to share with you as we embark on this reflective 1st-person account of Pettet’s piece:

*We entered the industrial open space of Theatre Delicatessen on Marylebone High Street, mobile phones confiscated and seated in a space with no formal stage, just an extension of the floor with a steel bowl and raw broom head. After about fifteen minutes...silence fell upon the room, a near nude Clayton enters, dressed in just black boxer briefs with smears of paint on his body spelling out words such as VIRGIN, BUTT and the lettering of NSFW. Members of the audience are...escorted in groups to a small baby blue/lilac room on the lower ground floor – the walls of which are covered in the words of the world’s media written in a felt pen. Individually, we are picked out one by one from the room*



*to experience Clayton seated cross legged in a hut surrounded by ripe yellow bananas, we are asked to enter and sit with him. He asks, eye contact locked to me “I want you to penetrate my mouth six times with this banana.” The penetration takes place, and Clayton politely asks you to leave. His manner was almost aggressive ironically leaving me with a bitter taste in my mouth.*

#### CONCLUSIONS & PROVOCATIONS



**Les Hutchinson** @les\_hutchinson · Nov 1

feeling my body as a body in this panel, so rhetorically powerful. The intellectual pull by pathos. #CRcon #j7



[View conversation](#)

I want to highlight the emergent and sophisticated performative pleasure and shame Pettet creates for his audience as a cultural experience architect. The affective component, felt and illuminated by the geographic and ephemeral space and place of his exhibition (temporally catalogued by a finite amount of time and bounded, literally by steel bars and bananas), is a catalyst for new forays into how we may conceptualize queer and queering art. Perhaps, when archiving the affective experience of “feeling queer” and spatial affect, we should pay less attention to the disorientation of the “feeler” and, rather, trace the construction of experience back to the architect of the affect. What would re-readings of this type of performance theory look like? How could we re-read Munoz’s read of Nao Bustamante, of *Carmelita Tropicana*? While the blueprint of Pettet’s original project may have looked quite different than the exfoliant banana purge that commenced, the experience was the same. Pettet created the piece as a rise to speak back to the “shame” that was put upon him. Moreover, Pettet made bodies recognizable. Spatial bodies, too. By hailing and incorporating the interactive component to the performance, the audience was given a face. This interaction forefronts the subjectivity of the viewer as active participant rather than passive voyeur. The focus thus became about how one engaged with the performance and how one began to see and feel the art and self from that place, rather than any notion of what a body (or art for that matter) unchangeably or authentically is. Thus, Pettet meandered his way from the so-called bottom, and instead, fucked us, willfully leading us to the experience he imagined from the top.

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**NOTES**

<sup>i</sup> <https://vimeo.com/80684753>

<sup>ii</sup> Although we use Abramovic here to frame Pettet's inspiration for "Art School Stole My Virginity," the authors recognize recently uncovered stances from her past writings that perpetuate a white gaze and Western Imperialism in which we do not support.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://vimeo.com/113644847>