



*Allyson Mitchell, Killjoy's Kastle (2013), view of Killjoy's Polyamorous Vampiric Grannies at play.*  
*Photo: Lisa Kannakko, courtesy of the artist.*



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## Haunted by Queer Affect: Geoffrey Farmer's *The Intellection of Lady Spider House* and Allyson Mitchell's *Killjoy's Kastle*

### Abstract

*Recent installation projects by Canadian artists Geoffrey Farmer (The Intellection of Lady Spider House, 2013–14) and Allyson Mitchell (Killjoy's Kastle, 2013) have taken up the architectural, atmospheric and affective structures of the haunted house. These two projects suggest distinct environments for working curatorially with queer affect, defined here as the fraught or stigmatized feelings that often adhere to queer experience. While Farmer's quasi-museological project draws on the archive and the uncanny in its juxtapositions of varied objects (examined here through camp and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of queer shame), Mitchell's performative and pedagogical work explicitly employs Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy to reckon with undead tropes from feminist herstories. The affective significance of the distorted domesticity evident in both installations lies in how they animate and explore uneasy queer feelings, which can be traced to the projects' collaborative origins and the ways that they assemble objects and experiences to highlight difference as much as cohesion.*

### Keywords

queer art  
queer affect  
haunting  
collaboration  
feminist curating  
queer curating

In late 2013, two ambitious installations by Canadian contemporary artists appropriated the display strategies of haunted houses to decidedly queer ends. Haunted houses are spectacular, theatrical spaces that



draw on horror and the supernatural to construct affectively charged experiences, whether for entertainment and/or for education (as in the case of evangelical Christian ‘hell houses’ that stage the horrific results of various sins). In the hands of Geoffrey Farmer and Allyson Mitchell, the haunted house becomes a curatorial form for experimenting with collaboration and the bringing together of divergent objects and practices. As simulacral environments, haunted houses have a distorted relationship to the representation of domestic architectural forms. As art historian Michael Camille has expressed, the simulacrum ‘threatens the very notion of representation itself [...] because it subverts the cherished dichotomy of model and copy, original and reproduction, image and likeness’ (2003: 35). Echoing this, Farmer notes that the haunted house typically juxtaposes ‘*tableaux vivants*, sculptures, still lifes and performances’; in other words, the haunted house blends divergent forms of representation and the real into a single setting (quoted in Sandals 2013). The haunted house is only truly frightening when a visitor begins to doubt its representational quality, when they become uncertain as to whether it *represents* the haunted or actually *is* haunted. The critical edge enabled through its simulacral qualities gives the haunted house affective power and excitement.

Whether homemade and do-it-yourself or commercially produced, haunted houses generate feelings of consensual and cathartic fright, thrill and vulnerability. Haunted houses inherit and perform Gothic literature’s fascination with acts of extreme violence, the spectral and the psychotic overlaid onto the domestic, as evidenced in stories like Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839). These narratives imply the malevolent presence of supernatural forces in a home environment (Mariconda 2007: 269). Art historian Sarah Burns’s research studies the connections between Gothic and Victorian architecture, and the stylistic tropes of the haunted house. She outlines how the aesthetic elements now associated with the haunted house in North America were solidified in the interwar period. At the time, Victorian architecture was under fire as an ‘ugly, excessive and un-American’ style, and Victoriana’s supposedly horrific qualities were rapidly integrated into American popular culture as a corrupted style – as with Alfred Hitchcock’s use of a Victorian home as the setting for the film *Psycho* (1960) (Burns 2012: 3). The Victorian, in that instance, was haunted as a site of repression and grim activities: homicide, implied homosexuality, transvestism and taxidermy. In such cultural expressions, the Victorian – positioned as degenerate and even dangerous – served as an antipode to normative American culture.

The commercial practice of theatrically staged haunted houses is connected to the history of amusement parks. Cultural historian Russel B. Nye theorizes amusement parks as sites of ‘harmless surprise [that] is itself an essential component of the fantasy the park evokes’. He stresses that visits to such parks, through their use of surprise and fear, confirm that the outside world is *also* an absurd place (1981: 67). Franco La Polla agrees with this idea, adding that the amusement park is also a site of the *unheimlich* (‘uncanny’), Freud’s term for the tensions of something being familiar yet uncomfortably strange:



In fact, on the one hand [the amusement park] re-purposes architectures, stories, characters that, although they do not always belong to our daily life, are familiar to us in so far as they are cultural images; but on the other hand, and for the same reason, it makes us wonder what reality we live in.

(La Polla 1988: 236)

Haunted houses are both sites of leisure and sites of persuasion that, as Nye (1981) explains, refashion and call into question reality. Contributing to but diverging from this tradition, hell houses evoke the *supernatural* as *real* for quite different purposes: to use terror as a tool of evangelism. Performance studies scholar Ann Pellegrini points out that unlike other haunted house formats, which provide visitors with “safe” experiences of being afraid, hell houses ‘want their audiences to see the gruesome realities that await them if they do not live wisely: not just pain and brutality [...] but everlasting damnation’ (2007: 915). This type of haunted house, which was profiled for the popular imaginary in George Ratliff’s documentary *Hell House* (2001), was in operation as early as the 1980s. Hell houses are also simulacral spaces since they challenge the divide between the real and representation: while they are theatrical, they stake claims on a very real supernatural realm that involves demons, spirits, the devil and eternal damnation – or salvation.

While most haunted houses stage a variety of subjects and situations commonly agreed to be frightening by dominant culture, Farmer’s and Mitchell’s haunted houses deploy queer affects amid unsettling combinations of collaboratively engendered objects and situations. Queer affect theory resists concise definition, but is typically interpreted as the body of scholarship unpacking the complex relationships ‘between the somatic and the social’, and examining some of the uncomfortable, negative and stigmatized forms of affect that are tied up in queer experience (*Theoretical Living* n.d.). Affect theorists Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth locate queer affect as a mode of politically engaged inquiry ‘that attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of “experience”’ (2010: 7). In this article, we will pursue the uneasy feelings associated with queer experience, using the display strategy of two artists’ haunted houses as orienting affective environments. These case studies demonstrate distinct ways of employing the vernacular site of the haunted house as an exhibition format in which to generate queer affect.

The phenomenon of haunting is a distinctive element of queer affect rooted in queer childhood shame. In her canonical text on the psychiatric establishment’s war on effeminate boys, ‘How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay’, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) valiantly decries the psychiatric industry’s ‘therapies’ routinely inflicted on children to eradicate gender-inappropriate behaviour. Kosofsky Sedgwick found around her a tacit cultural desire ‘that gay people *not be*’. She proposes that the effeminate, proto-gay male child is the ‘haunting abject’ that inflects gay male adulthood with the shame of gender deviance (1991: 20, emphasis in original).

Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theories surrounding queer performativity’s roots in shame are useful in considering the relationship between



haunting and queer affect. She writes that queer performativity 'is the name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect of shame and to the later and related fact of stigma' (2003: 61). For Kosofsky Sedgwick, shame is the mightiest emotional force produced by 'the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood' (1993: 4). She suggests that the word *queer* is 'politically potent' because it 'cleaves to that [childhood scene of shame] as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy' (1993: 4). For Kosofsky Sedgwick, the foundational sense of shame that, for us, characterizes queer affect is a 'permanent, structuring fact of identity', but also one that has 'powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities' (2003: 64). Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on this subject has itself been incredibly generative, sparking much discussion about the affect of shame within queer theory. In her eyes, shame makes a contradictory movement, at once 'toward painful individuation [and] uncontrollable relationality' (2003: 37). If the haunted houses discussed in this article invoke decidedly queer affects, we propose that they do so towards the transformative ends of social metamorphosis, as Kosofsky Sedgwick describes. She writes that 'affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, institutions and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy' (2003: 19). By extension, we are drawn to the potential for these projects to generate a sense of *excitement* around queer haunting, transforming the fearful and sombre into the thrilling and even joyful. Overall, then, the foundational experience of shame that marks queer childhood can be understood to haunt artists' uses of the haunted house as a display form that incites uneasy yet productive feelings.

### **Geoffrey Farmer's *The Intellection of Lady Spider House***

Organized by Geoffrey Farmer, *The Intellection of Lady Spider House* was an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA) in Edmonton that took place from 14 September 2013 to 12 January 2014. Farmer's practice employs eclectic taxonomic and collage practices to archive visual culture, such as creating thousands of stick puppets out of figures cut from *LIFE* magazine for *Leaves of Grass* (2012), in addition to more recent kinetic light, sound and sculptural installations and digital montage projects. With his constant collecting and assembling, Farmer's practice is highly curatorial. As the invited artist-cum-curator at the AGA, Farmer selected the eleven participants for his exhibition from a circle of artist-friends, including Valérie Blass, Julia Feyrer, Hadley+Maxwell, David Hoffos, Brian Jungen, Tiziana La Melia, Gareth Moore, Judy Radul, Hannah Rickards and Ron Tran. Each responded with either new or pre-existing works to a collection of haunted house, horror film and theatre props that Farmer had acquired.

Farmer has stated that his idea of exhibition-making came from constructing a haunted house at the age of 13 – the architectural and affective structure of the haunted house therefore becomes a kind of origin myth for Farmer's practice, which is rife with hauntings in the form





*The Intellection of Lady Spider House (2013–14), installation views of an exhibition by Geoffrey Farmer. Photos: Owen Murray, courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta.*



of charged historical references. *Lady Spider House* is obliquely haunted by Farmer's queer childhood, and with it the experience of trauma:

[The childhood haunted house] was my first memory of my fabrication of the other. It was also the time I began to ruminate on the concept of death and began having recurring nightmares. It was a time that I first experienced physical violence and the socialization that occurs when you are sent to school.

(Farmer, quoted in Sandals 2013)

Farmer highlights his sudden awareness of 'othering' via the haunted house environment, a space that offers an opportunity to explore the shameful and fearful affects of *being* and *seeing other*. This is a queer world-making project that involves a recuperative harnessing of negative feeling similar to the transformative work of camp.

A recurring characterization of gay male childhood in both academic and popular texts involves a sense of isolation – the 'painful individuation' Sedgwick describes as one pole of the dynamic of shame – where the child follows solitary or inward-looking pursuits such as reading, drawing and collecting. For example, queer scholar Simon Watney's writing on Andy Warhol describes the artist as a teased and humiliated queer child who invented himself and 'his own America' from the detritus of mass culture: 'the radio, comics, Saturday morning children's cinema and so on' (1996: 22–23). Such a characterization of queer childhood provides a foundation for understanding the (adult) gay male cultural practice of camp as – among other things – a heightened sensitivity to objects, including artworks and cultural artifacts, which have been discarded or devalued by the dominant culture. For us, a camp gesture is when a degraded cultural object is taken up by a queer subject, who invests it with love and value beyond its apparent worth. This process of revaluation is infused with the marginalized subject's own desire to transcend their similarly low status. In sexuality scholar David M. Halperin's indispensable *How to Be Gay*, he notes that '[t]he ability to identify a particular object as camp, and to induce others to share that perception, thereby creates a basis for community' (2012: 189). When staged in world-making projects such as Farmer's *Lady Spider House*, camp's transformation of value from discarded 'other' to recuperated treasure can therefore provide a bridge from shame's 'painful individuation' into 'uncontrollable relationality'. To be painfully individuated is to be set apart, affectively *othered*. To experience uncontrollable relationality is to feel affectively cohered to another on a heightened level. It is worth noting that Farmer's haunted house also bears the dusty or distinctly 'spoiled' quality that characterizes certain camp objects, and his collaborative venture suggests a provisional community invested in camp's ethos of celebrating what was once reviled or *déclassé*.

Upon entry to *Lady Spider House*, the visitor encounters a series of constructed environments that can be navigated in more than one sequence. Booby-trapped, the door to the exhibition is weighted with a rope on a pulley holding a large fake spider so that when visitors enter, the arachnid sculpture falls into one's path. Beyond this entryway lay a





*The Intellection of Lady Spider House (2013–14), installation views of an exhibition by Geoffrey Farmer. Photos: Owen Murray, courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta.*



quasi-domestic interior, decorated with pendant lamps and chandeliers with mismatched coloured bulbs, hanging Styrofoam objects resembling meteorites, and a mannequin's arm suspended on wire from the ceiling among other bric-a-brac. Cord stanchions surround a papier mâché boulder hanging from a rope. The visitor then proceeds to an interstitial space decorated with a sarcophagus and ornate rugs, where it becomes evident that the first room is constructed from false walls held up with sandbags and wooden struts. An adjoining passage connects to a courtyard, which can also be reached through a tunnel navigated on hands and knees, which is subdivided by false walls and picket fence. Nearby is a graveyard, and a fragmented series of walls with wood siding, suspended paned windows, and doorways that recall a deconstructed theatre set of a village. These spaces are all fashioned from *objets-trouvés*, film and theatre sets, props and artworks.

With Farmer and his collaborators arranging the exhibition, *Lady Spider House* employed a range of design and decor strategies to construct a house haunted by history. The artworks are choreographed as overlapping elements in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that included photography, audio, projected moving images, architectural environments, sculpture and assemblage, alongside works and documents from the Art Gallery of Alberta's collection and archives, as well as repurposed props, building elements like walls and windows, and references to pop culture, art history and the history of Edmonton – a prairie city in western Canada surrounded by agricultural and resource extraction industries. The didactic material for this sprawling project encourages visitors to read everything they see and experience in the exhibition space as a collaborative rather than a singularly authored curatorial venture (for example, titles of individual artworks were not provided to the public). In the space, the visitor discovers serpentine, dramatically lit and sometimes claustrophobic spaces punctuated with startling arrangements of uncanny objects and images including bizarre creatures, severed appendages, skeletons and broken glass. The tendency towards the macabre, the spectral and the *unheimlich* is prevalent in contemporary art production, and Farmer shrewdly arranges his and his fellow artists' works in a disorienting series of spaces sectioned off by fences and false walls supported by two-by-fours and sandbags. Wall sconces, pendent lights, chandeliers and the gallery's track lighting offered only a dim illumination. Even though the gallery was a cavernous 6,000-square-foot white cube, such staging effects created scenes that heightened the visitor's unease and brought out the frightening qualities of the artworks and objects.

The props and other found material merged with the objects, images and environments crafted by the participating artists. Museological objects and paintings from the Art Gallery of Alberta's collection were interspersed with the theatrical props and the contemporary artworks. Rather than attempting to maintain a respectful distance between individual objects in the exhibition, these components were shown in close proximity – often within a matter of inches: for instance, stage props of a guillotine and wooden pillory were installed next to Valérie Blass's monstrous humanoid figure *L'homme paille* (2008), evoking the threat of corporal punishment while also suggesting a sympathetic relationship between the



forms of representation employed in the theatre and those of contemporary art. Another striking example of this collagist curatorial approach was the inclusion of the audio work *Thunder* (2005) by Hannah Rickards. To make this piece, Rickards first recorded a single clap of thunder and digitally stretched it to last over seven minutes. She then transcribed the sound into an orchestral score and recorded the instrumental performance. Works like *Thunder* present curators of group exhibitions with challenges: how to fully enable the presentation of a powerful sound piece without overwhelming the quieter works of the other artists? The decision to have *Thunder* bleed over the environment of *Lady Spider House* was highly theatrical. Collapsing all the selected projects into an immersive experience demonstrated a contract – and a trust – between Farmer and his collaborators. *Lady Spider House* therefore evidenced a network of close artistic relationships and friendships. This sense of intimacy, along with its moments of humour, nuanced the exhibition's primarily unsettling affects. In the visitor's experience of *Lady Spider House*, affective states of fear and uncertainty blended together.

The project crafted an atmosphere of haunting, the structure of which can be further understood in light of Teresa Brennan's research on atmosphere and affect. Drawing from neurological research into pheromones, Brennan suggests that the sense of smell is 'critical in how we feel the atmosphere' (2004: 9) of a setting – with sight playing a contributing role (10). Brennan's work suggests that because of the release of



The Intellection of Lady Spider House (2013–14), installation view of an exhibition by Geoffrey Farmer. Photo: Owen Murray, courtesy of the Art Gallery of Alberta.



pheromones, the tense and anxious environment of a haunted house such as Farmer's would be heightened by the affective state of other visitors navigating the space. However, she notes, 'Visual images, like auditory traces, also have a direct physical impact; their reception involves the activation of neurological networks [...]. These also constitute transmissions breaching the bounds between individual and environment' (Brennan 2004: 10). The haunted house's labyrinthine structure, density of detail and the focus on small, fragmentary objects all challenged the museum visitor's ability to claim visual mastery over what was displayed. It was a perplexing and even anxiety-inducing environment of disjunctive spaces ranging from a hall of mirrors to a rat-catcher's market stall. With its confusing and sometimes dark layout, including a narrow passageway to be navigated by crawling, the artist's haunted house could be said to literally 'reek of fear', or 'the smell of anxiety' in Brennan's sense (2004: 68). Likewise, Brennan describes the affectively divisive nature of cacophonous or discordant sound that, in her words, 'leads people to stand apart from one another and generates unease' (2004: 70). Rickards's *Thunder* projected just such a jarring sound throughout the entire exhibition space, effectively sustaining an atmosphere of anxiety.

Each artist's contribution both stood on its own and became part of a wider, collective *mise-en-scène*. Theatrically staged, every object seemed to speak in a unique tongue, contributing to a chorus whose sound is even richer for its disharmony (with Rickards's audio work singing loudest). The most provocative element of a haunted house is that it is a space designed to antagonize the viewer, to repel them, even to scare them away completely – and the visitors experience a heady mix of fear and pleasurable, adrenaline-rush thrill. Certainly the impact was disquieting, oneiric and spooky (Tousley 2013). Just as secrecy and uncertainty were core qualities of the atmosphere of *Lady Spider House*'s architecture and its curatorial structure, so, too, the provenance of what was on view was ambiguous. This context collapse generated uncertainty as to what exactly differentiated an artwork from other kinds of objects. The constructed interiors proceeded from a cabinet of curiosities, through eerie domestic spaces, to a spooky courtyard and sinister cemetery. And beyond the gallery, references to Edmonton's history, such as the devastating 1987 tornado, propelled the exhibition into the city outside. Farmer organized the project as queer *bricoleur*, collector and caretaker of both the discarded and the precious – a dynamic characteristic of camp. If, as Kosofsky Sedgwick has proposed, queer people have a heightened relationship with the affect of shame, this condition uniquely enables them to identify with the discarded and even the abjected, and to bring a special sensitivity and love to artworks and objects of outcast cultural status, such as the found, ragged film props and shop-worn furnishings included in Farmer's haunted house. Queer hauntings, then, are ripe with power; they can be harnessed towards transformation. Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of queer affect – which highlights how queer people are haunted by complex, negative affective states that linger from their formative experiences of shame – is given material, theatrical form in Farmer's curatorial project, based as it is in his own adolescent experiences of dis-ease.



## Allyson Mitchell's *Killjoy's Kastle*

Allyson Mitchell is a self-described maximalist artist who draws on an abundance of craft practices from crochet to papier mâché to explore both lesbian pleasure and excess, and feminist knowledge and activism. Her practice is perhaps best exemplified by *Ladies Sasquatch* (2006–10), an installation of a coven of towering, hot-blooded lesbian-feminist sasquatches made of fun fur and found vintage fabrics. Mitchell's fearsome creatures would have felt right at home in *Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House*, an off-site project by the Art Gallery of York University that took place at the corner of Lansdowne Avenue and Dundas Street West in the West End of Toronto from 16 to 30 October 2013. Mitchell engaged in everything from community conceptualizing and brainstorming sessions to produce *Kastle* with fellow artists such as Deirdre Logue (her partner in the innovative DIY Feminist Art Gallery), Johnson Ngo, Hazel Meyer and Brette Gabel. Mitchell also coordinated the labour of the many performers who animated *Kastle* on its opening night, when hundreds of visitors lined up for hours to experience the installation.

Mitchell was inspired by the hell houses created by communities of evangelical Christians to dramatize the perils of premarital sex, homosexuality and abortion – with her project oriented towards ideologically opposed ends. While both Mitchell's and Farmer's haunted houses were collaborative artworks, Mitchell's project took on the negative



Allyson Mitchell, *Killjoy's Kastle* (2013), Valerie Solanas and 'Because I Am a Ghoul' volunteers supervise the first few participants, opening night. Photo: Lisa Kannakko, courtesy of the artist.



qualities of queer affect more directly by identifying with and drawing power from a specific concept, outlined by feminist and queer theorist Sara Ahmed (2010) in *The Promise of Happiness*: ‘the feminist killjoy’. Mitchell’s haunted house decidedly aimed to be both performative and pedagogical.

With *Killjoy’s Kastle*, Mitchell set out to craft a haunted house that would raise some of the abjected spectres of feminism and specifically lesbian-feminism in the popular imaginary, drawing on stereotypes of castrating cat ladies, potlucks overflowing with hummus, and unbridled polyamory. Her intent was to stage those aspects of feminist history and iconography that haunt the contemporary moment. What are the grotesque distortions that continually cast their shadow on the discourses of feminism, making so many people fearful of identifying themselves publicly as feminists? Despite exerting a high degree of control over the narrative structure of her project through the use of tour guides, Mitchell’s haunted house was vulnerably public, visible and debated in a way that Farmer’s was not: it took over a large space adjacent to a major intersection and attracted enormous interest among various Toronto queer and trans constituencies. It also raised the ire of right-wing detractors at Sun Media news corporation. Whether at the ‘activated’ opening or throughout its two-week run as a guided installation artwork, Mitchell’s *Kastle* and its theatrically presented feminist satire were very much alive,



Allyson Mitchell, *Killjoy’s Kastle* (2013), *Killjoy’s plaid Ball Bustas hard at work*. Photo: Lisa Kannakko, courtesy of the artist.



marked by a more carnivalesque and confrontational atmosphere than the cloistered museological feel of Farmer's *Lady Spider House*.

Mitchell scripted a narration that was delivered by 'demented women's studies professors' who guided visitors through the labyrinthine space (where, unlike Farmer's environment, it was impossible to get a sense of one's bearings), framing the spectacle with a melange of feminist camp and probing criticality. Preparing anxious visitors for the self-described maximalist horrors that awaited them inside, the guide explained that '[m]illennium upon millennium of persecution, ridicule, erasure and abject misunderstanding would put anyone in a bad mood' (Mitchell 2013). The tour of the *Kastle* continued through an assortment of hand-crafted quasi-vaginal passageways that transformed the rough interior of the sprawling industrial building into a shadowy and tactile 'dank cave', rife with bodily excess and political satire in the guise of horror. Visitors were led past such 'problematic' spectacles as a giant bearded clam, carpet munchers, polymorphously perverse vampiric grannies, paranormal consciousness-raisers, a socially awkward 'riot ghoul' dance party, and the 'secret tunnel of two adult women in love'. Like Farmer's installation, this tunnel offers the opportunity for visitors to (consensually) navigate part of the space by crawling vulnerably on their hands and knees. The house was highly tactile and colourful, decked in all manner of handmade surfaces with the different spaces adorned with crocheted panels, for example, graffitied walls, or homemade tombstones for defunct lesbian bars. The vampiric grannies – puffy, life-sized dolls sewn from cringingly soft materials – were enclosed within a net of yarn spider webs. The room containing the consciousness-raisers, meanwhile, was kitted out in reflective silver, mimicking the hand mirrors the ghosts held to inspect their vaginas for all eternity. Whether animated by performers or remaining 'still' as a labyrinthine installation work, all the scenes in the *Kastle* portrayed how women's bodies and sexuality and lesbian-feminist politics have been warped by misrepresentation from the outside and by 'bad politics' from the inside.

The tour guide's narration cleverly flipped the script on these distorted misrepresentations, filling in visitors with valuable information on the history of lesbian-feminism while titillating them with the corporeal horrors on view. Just before the gift shop, the tour culminated in a room where visitors were 'expected to contribute, to be accountable, and to feel' as they discussed their experiences of the provocations they had just encountered with others in a veritable 'tsunami of processing' (Mitchell 2013). Such a theatrical confessional stood to involve discomfort, shame and a type of affective haunting connected to the experience of relaying one's personal politics in public – much as one would have to in a university women's studies course, for example. Here again, through participating in confession, viewers were performatively implicated within shame's doubling of 'painful individuation' and 'uncontrolled relationality', as conceptualized by Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 37), where each visitor might feel either profoundly alienated or deeply in accord with the emotions and experiences, political critique and calling-out expressed by other visitors in the processing room. The didactic narration provided a trail of breadcrumbs to get visitors safely through spaces that were often





*Allyson Mitchell, Killjoy's Kastle (2013), the Paranormal Consciousness Raising gets majora. Photo: Lisa Kannakko, courtesy of the artist.*

visually overwhelming, aurally cacophonous and spatially disorienting, only to lead to the processing room to be encouraged to respond by professional feminist killjoys.

Mitchell's haunted house drew on theorist Sara Ahmed's recent critiques of the imperative towards happiness, developed through examining such contemporary figures as the feminist killjoy and the melancholy migrant. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed describes how feminism has a unique relationship to unhappiness, seen as both causing it and caused by it:

Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? It is not just that feminists might not be happily affected by the objects that are supposed to cause happiness but that their failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others.

(Ahmed 2010: 65–70)

In the context of consumer capitalism and its promises of fulfillment and comfort, Ahmed suggests that hampering others' joy is usually seen as a sabotaging and even villainous intervention into otherwise 'stable' affective environments marked by an assumed consensus. *Killjoy's Kastle* both





*Allyson Mitchell, Killjoy's Kastle (2013), Killjoy's Craft Monster checks in at the Riot Ghouls and Gender Studies Professor Dance Party to ensure the 'each one teach one' philosophy is still being used for disorientation affect. Photo: Lisa Kannakko, courtesy of the artist.*

satirically stages some of the monsters that haunt feminism's past and present, and enacts an active killing of joy through critically examining visitors' own politically inflected affective responses to what they have seen inside. Ahmed (2014) reflects on the killjoy's relationship to space and consensus, how she is cast as potent enough to affectively spoil entire environments:

[H]ow often [do feminist killjoys] ruin an atmosphere? To become assigned a killjoy is to be the cause of the loss of shared merriment. [...] We learn how histories are condensed in the very intangibility of an atmosphere, or in the tangibility of the bodies that seem to get in the way. Perhaps atmospheres are shared if there is an agreement in where we locate the points of tension.

(Ahmed 2014)

*Killjoy's Kastle* represented the material and performative labour of scores of feminist participants, united in a shared critical mass to 'ruin the atmosphere', through transforming the highly charged affective environment of a haunted house into a space of feminist self-criticism. Taking on the role of the feminist killjoy invites discomfort, and the *Kastle* provided no easy answers or means of escape from feminism's troubled herstories.



As Ahmed describes, the killjoy affects the very atmosphere of a room, tainting the fun with her scolding. At a moment when art exhibitions increasingly take the form of entertainment blockbusters, exhibition visitors typically do not expect to be asked to discuss and work through their political positions and opinions, particularly in a quasi-public space like *Killjoy's Kastle*. In this installation, the risk of feeling political discomfort was juxtaposed with the affective shock of theatrically performed female sexuality and hyperbolic misandry, exaggerated to monstrous dimensions. Its staging of a ghoulish female sexuality and souped-up man-hating drew on Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on the transformative potential of shame, while elements like the pedagogical structure and processing room described and enacted the distinctively feminist affect of Sara Ahmed's killjoy.

By engaging heated contemporary feminist and queer political debates in so public a fashion, and in being accessible to be used by various conflicting publics, *Killjoy's Kastle* became subject to twin controversies. On the one hand, queers of colour and trans people took on the killjoy role in their vigorous critiques on social media of the white, western and primarily cisgendered orientation of the project. Arguably, Mitchell made concerted efforts to work similar critiques into the project's own calling out of the racist, Eurocentric and transphobic strains within feminism. On the other, right-wing news crews and journalists descended on the house, armed with cameras, to protest (male) taxpayer dollars funding a project seemingly hostile to heterosexual men (Warmington 2013). The ironic tone Mitchell brought to the installation through hyperbolized decor, costume and character – the sinister ball-busters and the obviously-racist-white-woman-with-dreadlocks, for example – was central to her project and to the processing of these persistent spectres, and arguably the irony did provide a 'way out' of its scarier threats. This ironic tone became open to misinterpretation, however, when the *Kastle* took on a life of its own in both mainstream and social media, where Mitchell's humorous guiding narration was absent.

Both *The Intellection of Lady Spider House* and *Killjoy's Kastle* highlighted difference by bringing together divergent objects and scenes, and mining affective power from the intensities of experiential proximity. These pressures occurred both in terms of aesthetic form and curatorial method, configuring works composed by multiple authors, with Mitchell and Farmer acting as facilitators. Mitchell and her collaborators staged *tableaux vivants* illustrating how feminism in the popular imaginary resembles a kind of Frankenstein's monster of often-conflicting stereotypes and distortions that can only be complicated and critiqued through the affective work of the feminist killjoy. The result was a provocative experience for visiting publics with different views on feminism and its demons.

Farmer's exhibition, meanwhile, assembled scenes stitched together through intertwining artworks and objects. The ominous feeling it generated drew not just on the aesthetics of Dada and surrealism – Lautréamont's chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table – but of a kind of *fin-de-siècle* exhaustion with the museum itself. In this sense, *Lady Spider House* can be read as a kind of graveyard for the museum and the institutional authority it represents. Much as the



convention of the haunted house has drawn on cultural others (such as Victorian architecture in an American context), *Lady Spider House* haunted the institution of the museum and its contents with degraded others: spooky spectacles, musty artefacts and tools of illusion such as theatre and film props. Such intermingling is an example of the recuperative work of camp that has its foundations in the affect of queer shame.

Both artists' haunted houses present an assemblage of affects – including wonder, fear, surprise, elation, anxiety and guilt – that echoes the formal and curatorial strategies they employ: collisions of disparate objects and experience inside sprawling multi-authored exhibition environments. In their amorphous forms and ambiguous affects, these two projects epitomize the term *queer's* complexity that resists categorization. Ultimately, Mitchell's and Farmer's haunted houses, with their collaged and unsettling atmospheres, and slippage between private and public feelings, exemplified the power of queer affect – in its many guises – to shape and manipulate the experience of space. Haunted by queer open wounds, these artists' houses are potent models for future curatorial considerations of queer affect.

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