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## On Frottage and Other Queer Feelings – Mark Clintberg & Jon Davies

In 2014, artist and art historian Mark Clintberg and curator and writer Jon Davies engaged in this epistolary dialogue. They talked about queer affect in contemporary art and curatorial practice, and on the queer qualities that characterize the often intense emotional relationships that curators/scholars have with artworks/artists.

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**Jon Davies:** Mark, your recent work has productively taken up the concept of *frottage*, which means ‘to rub,’ as a way of conceptualizing curators’ or scholars’ intense affective relationships and even love for the artworks – and by extension, the artists – they study, which can complicate expectations of critical distance. The first definition of *frottage* from the Oxford English Dictionary is ‘the technique or process of taking a rubbing from an uneven surface to form the basis of a work of art.’

The second OED definition – for *frottage* as a sexual act – surprised me, in that it situates the act publicly, tinged by connotations of criminal misconduct: ‘The practice of touching or rubbing against the clothed body of another person in a crowd as a means of obtaining sexual gratification.’ I thought it best to consult a more authoritative source, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (first published in 1977). I discovered a [YouTube video](#) of a trans guy reading the third edition’s ‘Frottage’ entry as a way of measuring how testosterone had deepened his voice (since reading the same chapter in a YouTube video a year earlier). He recites,

**Rubbing against someone while clothed or naked to the point of climax is called frottage. Unpleasant, beady-eyed straight men and not-bad-looking gay men too [or vice-versa, y’know, I’m just sayin’] practice it standing up in crowded elevators, in rush-hour subways and buses, or waiting on line in front of theatres. Teenagers in the fifties and sixties did it to excess in the backseats of jalopies – it was called ‘heavy petting’ by the media. It’s also something two naked men can do together at home. Some even prefer it these days because there’s no exchange of bodily fluids and so it is considered safe... [Turns off music, loses place in book]**

The definition of *frottage* thus maintains its disreputable baggage and murky shades of non-consent despite the radically different perspective. So perhaps we can begin with you introducing your appropriation of *frottage* as an art historical methodology considering dynamics of activity and passivity, privacy and publicity, penetration and surface contact, as well as thinking through the various serendipitous and circuitous ways that we come across, develop attachments to, and become changed by contact with cultural objects and artworks in the digital age.

Mark Clintberg: I first used the term *frottage* to refer to a research method and an orientation, and chose to do so in reply to Roland Barthes’ theory of the *punctum*, explored in his book *Camera Lucida*. The *punctum* – a term that literally refers to a ‘sting, speck, cut, [or] little hole,’ – is the detail in a photograph that ensnares the viewer, according to Barthes. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes uses the theory of the *punctum* to search for the ontology of the photograph, and he eventually turns to a very personal photograph of his mother to demonstrate *how* the photograph stings or hooks.

Beyond photography, I have been intrigued by the subjective qualities that the *punctum* encapsulates for Barthes, and I find it a useful way to think through the research process used by curators and art historians because it accounts for an often small detail of an artist’s practice that hooks the researcher and compels them to investigate further. *Frottage* builds on Barthes’s idea by accounting for these types of gratification and pleasure as factors that motivate research.

The two OED definitions cited above are both important aspects of my use of the term *frottage*. First, when I encounter and research artworks, I effectively take a rubbing or impression of that practice, and there is a record – an interpretation – that is created. What

I have argued elsewhere is that my own subjective state is the surface material that receives the impression of the artwork in question. With a *frottage* drawing, the particular paper, mark-making tool, and amount of pressure influences the appearance of the facsimile that is produced. Rather than attempting to create an objectively accurate facsimile, the methodology of *frottage* instead proposes that my research is produced by a meeting, a rubbing up, between my subjectivity and the creation of another person. The second, erotic component of *frottage* is equally important. When visiting museums and studios I often do find myself in states of excitement and attraction in response to the works I encounter. Recall that the ‘criminal’ goes into public space to ‘rub up against’ others for the sake of their own gratification; this individual is not so different from the museum-visitor or the researcher, I would argue, since such people are in the business of becoming as close as possible to their ideal object. The agency involved in *frottage* is crucial; unlike the *punctum*, which suggests the image has done a form of violence to its recipient by cutting or pricking them, *frottage* is a way of thinking about my encounters with artworks as an act that I consensually choose to engage in.

**JD: In terms of the consent of the researcher to be impressed upon, is not the viewer potentially equally ‘willing’ in Barthes’s concept of the *punctum* – might not being punctured be as pleasurable as being rubbed up against? I also cannot help but think of the ‘consent’ of the object or artist of the researcher’s study, for example in the work of Berlin-based artists Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz. Each of their projects originates from an encounter between a performer in the present day and an image, object or figure from the past. Working with material that is either ‘unauthored’ because it is considered to be in the public domain, or with dead artists and other cultural figures, allows one a significant degree of freedom, and of course with great power comes great responsibility. Boudry / Lorenz are specifically drawn to difficult and non-normative queer figures like Jack Smith and Jean Genet who likely would not have wished to be resurrected and ‘used’ (another term that invokes sexual impropriety) by contemporary artists. In their 2010 work *Contagious!* Vaginal Davis performs as Aida Walker (1880–1914), who popularized the cakewalk in Paris, a dance form that originated among African slaves satirizing their masters. She performs it for a Berlin club crowd, at one point screaming—in a camp voice—‘Stop it!’ Here the figure from the past refuses to be brought back to life in the Europe of the 21st century for the delectation of this new (yet still primarily white) audience.**

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MC: I appreciate the potential pleasures of the *punctum* too. To be pierced by an artwork is a distinct but equally valuable model. If the *punctum* explains the startling effect of an image that ensnares me, then *frottage* probes the compulsion to *remain* ensnared, and to become further emotionally entangled in an art practice.

I think Félix González-Torres's poster- and candy-based artworks, which my MA research was dedicated to, can elucidate this idea. I frequently returned to a question: what level of objective distance from an artist's work is appropriate or desirable for a researcher, particularly in cases where erotic and emotional relations are the focus of the practice being studied? As part of my research strategy I had taken to collecting the artist's posters and displaying them in my own home. Over the course of several months it became clear that I was becoming amorously attached not only to these objects, but also to the relationship they represented: González-Torres's work often revolved around his relationship with his lover Ross Laycock. At the time, I questioned the wisdom of allowing myself to have such emotional contact with the historical narrative surrounding two men I have never met – and never will meet – while writing a dissertation on the art practice that brought me into contact with their story. 'What exactly am I feeling?,' I asked myself. Obviously such a situation is not a reciprocal relationship between the involved parties.

Working through the emotional and scholarly stakes of this scenario, I developed the concept of *frottage* as my methodology. Rather than chastising myself for developing loving feelings for these men because such emotions might cloud my judgment of the value and the meaning of González-Torres's work, I chose to consider his practice to be a surface that I rub against to reveal the state of my own heart. The feelings that resulted were not purely aesthetic, libidinal nor affective, but a combination of these elements.

Many of González-Torres's projects, such as his works including strings of lights, can be installed in a variety of physical arrangements according to the curator's or collector's wishes; his is a practice that can be changed by being loved differently. This malleable quality has long intrigued me – in part because it makes these objects adaptable to a very broad range of exhibition settings, and therefore allows them to be disseminated variably and widely. This is the “viral” component of González-Torres's work he often spoke of.

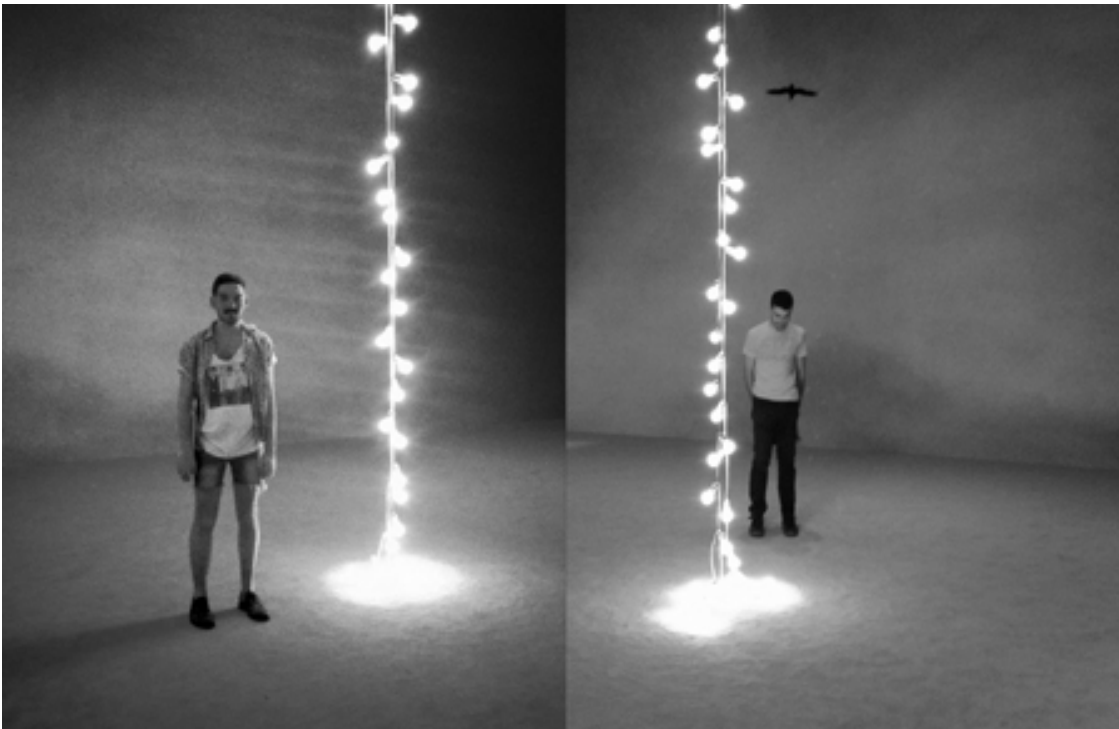
**JD: I feel compelled by the role of fandom in curating, especially because queer people have historically be forced to locate their forebears and objects inspiring *punctum* and *frottage* more circuitously and covertly. Fandom becomes a means of mapping these affective trajectories and allegiances. This reminds me of artist Helen Reed's *Art Criticism & Other Short Stories* publications from 2011 and 2013, which feature wonderful, idiosyncratic fan fiction about various artists and their work; in lieu of traditional art criticism, here writers can fantasize a diversity of scenarios.**

To return to González-Torres, it seems that his oeuvre is particularly susceptible to the kinds of amorous attachments that you describe, which made me think of three case studies. The first would be the curator Elena Filipovic's ambitious multi-part 2010–2011 González-Torres exhibition *Specific Objects Without Specific Form* at WIELS (Brussels), Fondation Beyeler (Basel), and MMK (Frankfurt). Each venue presented not only her own curated exhibition of Gonzalez-Torres's work, but a different version curated by one of three artists: Danh Vo in Brussels, Carol Bove in Basel, and Tino Sehgal in Frankfurt. Sehgal's was perhaps the most radical as it was constantly in a state of movement, following a choreography that saw individual works being taken down and re-installed in various forms and locations every day that the gallery was open, thereby exposing the labour behind the production of an exhibition as well as highlighting any installation's ephemerality and provisionality.

The second would be Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa's *Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial)* in 2011, which I found to be one of the most compelling large-scale exhibitions I have ever seen. The entire exhibition centered on the figure of González-Torres, and included five concise thematic exhibitions inspired by specific iconic works by the artist, as well as dozens of intimately scaled solo exhibitions by artists arguably working in González-Torres's legacy. I found it quite moving to look at the vast output or artistic production today through the lens of a single artist, especially as it effectively marginalized all of the cynical and crass spectacles that characterize much biennial art, and re-centered practices that are more humanly scaled to the forefront of the conversation about global art practices. While sprawling, and contained within a regimented, grid-like gallery design by Ryue Nishizawa, the exhibition was thoughtfully committed in every detail to González-Torres's ethos, and more importantly, to his deft touch in giving this aesthetic form.

The third would be artist Vincent Chevalier's collection of selfies found on online image platforms like Tumblr and Instagram of young gay men posing next to

**González-Torres light bulb strings, gathered in the zine #fgt (2014). This project is part of Chevalier's broader interest in what gets lost in translation across queer generations, and the potential for dehistoricization when consuming iconic images of AIDS and AIDS activism from the ACT-UP era, for example: 'the gentrification of our memories.' He is interested in how a Silence = Death poster or a González-Torres artwork can become decontextualized in a way that narrates AIDS as firmly in the distant past. He implores, 'Allow the history to be real and tethered to a time and place and reason such that the output is responding to today and is ready for tomorrow.' Social media universalizes the curatorial impulse, as these platforms give everyone the opportunity to declare and proselytize their interests and affiliations publicly. Sites like Tumblr make it easy to post images of artwork without captions and arguably without history; gay boys' selfies with González-Torres's light bulb strings reintroduce living, camera-ready figures into artworks about loss and mourning, which questions how we look at and interact with art at the moment.**



MC: I am both wary of and thrilled by the possibilities for González-Torres's work to be abducted for new ideological and performative uses, both by curators and visitors to exhibitions. For instance, several of González-Torres's poster stacks were exhibited in the United States pavilion of the 2007 Venice Biennale, and a group of activists repurposed individual posters by handwriting their own political slogans on them in ballpoint pen. One of these palimpsest texts even critiqued the artwork itself as being a waste of paper. These revised González-Torres posters were then posted throughout Venice. Their critique of this artist's practice was intensified by the abundance of discarded González-Torres posters littering streets, alleyways and canals of the city. I am fascinated by the activists' decision to adapt his practice to their own purposes – and this decision seems to me in accord with the parameters that González-Torres set up for users (such as curators,

collectors and his audience) of his practice. Chevalier's project in turn raises for discussion the photographic abduction of González-Torres's pieces by a community that the artist, I suspect, would have wanted to be in dialogue with today: young gay men. However, I would not assume the men depicted in Chevalier's project have a superficial relationship with González-Torres's work simply because they are taking selfies with the works.

When I saw *Specific Objects Without Specific Form* at WIELS, while walking around the city I was struck by frequent sightings of discarded candy wrappers matching those from González-Torres's spills, which appeared in gutters and on sidewalks as far away as Brussels' major public square, Grand Place. In this way the exhibition unexpectedly spread into the city streets, offering a type of record of where and when each visitor consumed these edible fragments of the artwork. It is tempting to consider these stray wrappers as continually 're-installed' after the fashion of Sehgal, if unintentionally and haphazardly, by wandering gallery visitors who have extended the intentional malleability of González-Torres's objects even further. It is noteworthy, however, that this type of audience was of secondary interest to the artist; he often said that he made his work primarily for an audience of one: for his lover Ross. This is quite a brazen statement – but also one that you and I can learn from. What core social circles and networks do we fashion our projects for, and how do those relations shape what we produce?

**JD: Regarding González-Torres, even if the young gay men posing for selfies with his works *do* have a kind of pedestrian relationship to them, that is one of the inevitably multivalent, idiosyncratic consequences of art becoming public, especially a body of work that was as open to dispersion and diffusion (which in French translates as 'broadcast') as his. Your use of the term 'users' for those that interact with his work – rather than words like 'visitors' or 'viewers,' which I often use in my curatorial practice – is telling. Posing with one of his works on social media could be a means for the author to broadcast a sense of fraternity with the work, directing their followers' attention to something of value in the world, and the depth of the photographer's engagement can't ever be divined from a single image. The contrast is quite profound between the 'audience of one,' and the (poetic) image you conjure of a city blanketed by candy wrappers and discarded posters that evidence a topography that has been effectively altered by the fruition of a dead artist's work.**

**Perhaps it is simply my own orientation toward such work, but I find the collaborative ethos that drives much queer work now demands a curatorial impulse in artists as they make the decisions about what participants are involved and to what degree, and how projects are authored. In writing about the queer feminist collective LTTR, scholar Julia Bryan-Wilson described their critical and curatorial 'promiscuity,' a term she borrows from Douglas Crimp's usage that nicely articulates the interrelationships of desire, kinship, collaboration, and labour in a way that does not predetermine specific identities or positions: 'Promiscuity,**



**whether sexual or – in the case of LTTR as an organization – curatorial, generates all-important moments of unexpected connection.’ For Bryan-Wilson, it is vital that LTTR’s project spanned race, gender and generation, and that they followed an open editorial and curatorial platform to ensure that the core group expanded to embrace hitherto unknown-to-them participants. Maybe to close with an open question: how can we account for the feelings provoked by experiences of being outside and being inside, and how do artistic and curatorial projects negotiate that? Can any degree of ‘promiscuity’ actually make everyone feel like insiders, and is this even desirable?**

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## **Image Credits:**

Pauline Boudry / Renate Lorenz, *Contagious!* (2010), still from an HD video installation. Courtesy of the artists.

Vincent Chevalier, *#fgt* (2014), photo spread from a zine. Courtesy of the artist.

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*Mark Clintberg is an artist who works in the field of art history, and curates exhibitions. He is an Assistant Professor in the School of Critical and Creative Studies at the Alberta College of Art + Design, Calgary. He earned his Ph.D. in Art History at Concordia*



University in 2013, where he was also an Assistant Professor, LTA. In 2010 he conducted Ph.D. research at Oxford University, St Peter's College, with the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. He completed his M.A. at Concordia University (2008), his B.F.A. at the Alberta College of Art & Design (2001), and was an exchange student at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design (1999–2000). He was Shortlisted for the 2013 Sobey Art Award for the region Prairies and the North. His doctoral dissertation was nominated for the 2013 Governor-General's Gold Medal. Public and private collections across Canada and in the United States – including the National Gallery of Canada, the Edmonton Arts Council and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts – have acquired his work. His work has recently been shown at the Dunlop Art Gallery (Regina), Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (Halifax), Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton), Illingworth Kerr Gallery (Calgary), AXENÉ07 (Gatineau), and Trapdoor (Lethbridge). Other exhibitions featuring his work have taken place at Locust Projects (Miami), National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), The Banff Centre, Centre des arts actuels Skol (Montreal), Harbourfront Centre (Toronto), and Eastern Edge (St. John's).

**Jon Davies** is a Montreal-born curator and writer currently based in Toronto. He received his M.A. in Film and Video, Critical and Historical Studies, from York University (2004). He has written for publications such as *American Quarterly*, *Border Crossings*, *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *Cinema Scope*, *Criticism*, *Fillip*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *Little Joe*, and *Randy*, as well as numerous catalogue essays and book chapters. He wrote a book on Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's film *Trash* for the *Queer Film Classics* series (2009) and co-edited (with Sam Ashby) issue 5 of *Little Joe* magazine (2016). His curated exhibitions include *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (2010, co-curator), *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?* (2011) and *Coming After* (2011–12) for *The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery*, where he was Assistant Curator, as well as the touring retrospective *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008–12) and the exhibitions *Kelly Jazvac: PARK* (2013), *Sonny Assu: Possession* (2013–14), *Shary Boyle & Emily Vey Duke: The Illuminations Project* (2014), *Depth of Perception* (2015), *Roula Partheniou: House & Home & Garden* (2015), *Out of Line* (2015, co-curator), *Derek Sullivan: The Missing Novella* (2015–16), and *Sky Glabush: What Is a Self?* (2016) for *Oakville Galleries*, where he was Associate Curator. He was most recently Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art, at the Art Gallery of Ontario. He received the inaugural Hnatyshyn Foundation and TD Bank Group Emerging Curator of Contemporary Canadian Art Award in 2013.

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