



Project Space

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Eli Nolet and Ardyn Gibbs

persistent desires

January 17 - March 15, 2025

Something jumps in my stomach when our eyes meet. The bass vibrates my sternum, and my eyes scan the walls for a shadow-draped doorframe. When I see it, I see it as a portal, a threshold – I cross the dance floor, brushing against other bodies, smelling of leather and sweat. I move propelled by desire.

To get here I had to take the subway to a bus, to the end of the line – the address is on Queen Street but it's around a corner, through an alley. On my way to the venue, I am thinking about the queer spaces lost – police raids on bathhouses and bars, rising rents, public health crises. Queerness is a movement *towards*, a community tethered together by a mutual wanting¹. We pass through something to get to queerness – an internal reckoning, a coming-out process, a bodymind transformation.

You cannot enter *persistent desires* without passing through an elsewhere.

Ardyn Gibbs and Eli Nolet's collaborative exhibition *persistent desires* envisions the Project Space as a queer backroom/darkroom – a site of hidden pleasure, anonymity, and connection. You cannot enter directly into the Project Space – you must first pass

¹ Drawing on ideas of queerness as horizon, as something not-yet-here, expounded upon by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*

through the main gallery, past the bathrooms and the office door, seeking out a room with no windows and only one door. It is by reaching towards, seeking out, *desiring*, that one may be granted access into the space created by Gibbs & Nolet's work.

Inside the project space, the exhibition flickers into existence. Monitors glow in soft colors, light bounces off metal. Shadows soften the room's edges, offering spaces to hide, to be seen only in snippets; the work illuminates and obscures, reflecting the artists' musings on queer & trans visibility and selfhood.

Gibbs and Nolet both make heavy use of text in their work, dwelling on single words and short phrases that highlight tensions of shame and wanting, calling on bodily sensation and ways of seeing/being seen. Animated words shift and morph and turn, bodies unable (unwilling) to be defined or restrained. Yet the artists play with fetishistic restraint: Gibbs's monitors become body-analogues tied in rope bondage, traces of their intimacy with their own work lingering in the angles formed by the fibers. Nolet's chainmail functions as both fetish signifier and protective garb, altering, reflecting and obscuring the light emitting from the objects it drapes around.

As queers, our relationship to sexuality is already labeled deviant by a majoritarian narrative; we cannot follow the scripts laid out by cis-heterosexual romance for sexual encounters, relationship formations, the building of a family. Even a turn towards "respectable" queerness requires an assimilation that disconnects us from the possibilities deviancy has to offer. We forge our own path, make our own language – signalling each other with glances, bandanas, nail polish. Shame springs out of our supposed deviancy, so we embrace it, play with it. If we are already unacceptable, we are free to explore sensation, difference, power.

Within this exploration, Nolet and Gibbs grapple with the fetishism of queer – and particularly trans – bodies: as the popularity of trans porn rises seemingly in concert with the rise of anti-trans legislation in the US and Canada² trans relationships to queer cruising and backroom spaces shift by necessity. I think of Paul B. Preciado's description

² James Factora for *Them*, <https://www.them.us/story/trans-porns-pornhub-popularity>

of his first sexual encounter with a lover – he is unknowable, shadows and light and testosterone rendering his naked form unpredictable. *Being reduced to one fixed image frightens me*, he writes³. Schrodinger’s cock. Gibbs and Nolet’s use of darkness, flickering light, movement, and covered surfaces recalls this unknowability; they suggest a reflection of the desire that surrounds them, playing their own cards close to the chest.

At the core of *persistent desires*, I find a synthesis between the artists’ process, the resulting work, and my own experience of it. In this amalgam, t4t – a category borne out of a miscategorization⁴, meant to silo trans individuals away from cis spaces – becomes a powerful site of community care and praxis. Nolet and Gibbs’s work resonates with Hil Malatino’s description of t4t as “being with and bearing with”⁵, acknowledging difference and difficulty to reach towards a collective future. They leave us with plenty of shadows to hide in, refusing to define or flatten the spaces they occupy. Instead, they open towards new ways of being, of hiding and revealing and reflecting, offering us entry into their world – if you know where to look for the door.

- Casper Sutton-Fosman

³ *Testo Junkie* (2013), page 88

⁴ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity* (2008)

⁵ *Future Fatigue* (2019), page 656