

Event Review

Animating the Queer Future: A Review of “Arca and Jesse Kanda: Live at the Roundhouse” (2018)

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The 2018 show “Arca and Jesse Kanda Live at the Roundhouse,” produced by Boiler Room,¹ provides audiences with necessary documentation of one of the most radical queer artists working within the realm of digital media and performance today. The collaboration between Arca and longtime colleague Jesse Kanda is emblematic of the ways in which artists working in new digital animation and contemporary queer dance floor staging have collaborated to develop artworks in which utopian ideas of queer futurity are often explored. Especially as “queer utopian” thinking has gained prominence, and a queer futurist aesthetic has become commonplace in contemporary art, the employment of animation in this particular context becomes useful for analyzing how ideas of a futurist “queer utopia” can be presented through current digital medias. While this particular live show is from 2017, and released on Boiler Room’s YouTube channel in March 2018, its importance in the realm of queer club life and queer scenography at large is still very much current yet it has been largely overlooked. The fact that it was broadcast on Boiler Room also creates an indispensable resource for examining methods of queer staging and animation and breaks the otherwise “temporality of club life” (Muñoz 2009, 103). The documentation of this particular performance then helps reveal animation’s contemporary capacity for staging spaces of queer futurism on the dance floor and in

the club and allows an access point to a world that is otherwise short lived.

This performance as a celebration for the release of Arca’s third, eponymously titled album represents a peak in the artistic relationship between Arca and Jesse Kanda, whose affiliation with one another stretches back to the start of their careers.² Having worked together on music videos, album covers, and live show visualizers, Kanda and Arca have brought a distinctive aesthetic to the dance floor and queer club that incorporates modern uses of animation and digital media to build visions of a queer futurist world. With a shared interest in anime and video games, Arca and Kanda’s work finds inspiration in post- and trans-humanist animation and media, as is present from the start of this particular show. Arca first appears on stage



Figure 1. Arca’s introduction. Source “Arca and Jesse Kanda Live at the Roundhouse,” 2018

dressed like a techno-futurist ringmaster, scantily clad and wielding a large whip. (Figure 1) Her appearance from the outset seems to purposely channel—albeit with her own distinctly queer touch—characters from anime and cartoons like *Æon Flux* or *Nadesico Prince of Darkness*, both of which she regularly posts references to on her Instagram.³ As she momentarily leaves the stage, her song “Vanity” plays accompanied by the first of Kanda’s animated pieces. In it, a crudely animated CG figure, whose face is nearly childlike while its body is overly muscular and beefy, moves awkwardly across the screen in an endless perpetual motion. Like Arca’s own appearance, Kanda’s animation from the outset channels early CG figures and video game characters, alluding to an earlier digital universe.

References and allusions to such earlier animated media is not out of place in the contemporary visual culture of queer clubs and performance. DJ and visual artist Juliana Huxtable, for example, similarly uses digital manipulation and CG in her personal artwork, club promotional material, and party visuals. In a visual text piece titled *Untitled (For Stewart)*, Huxtable (2013) describes her pre-pubescent relationship to video games and anime, referencing (like Arca) shows *Æon Flux* (1991) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), as well as video games *Street Fighter* (1987) and *Mario Kart* (1992). For Huxtable, video games and anime were an early way to explore a queer relationship to her body, with video games giving her a space where she could be transformed and explore another mode of being on screen. These same influences can be seen in Arca and Kanda’s work, forming a new queer aesthetic that utilizes these experiences with such digital media. This is then similar to much of what Jack Halberstam discusses with regard to animation in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), specifically in relationship to his thesis on “Pixarvolt” films. Halberstam sees mainstream animation, particularly early CGI films, as quietly subversive to its audiences, writing that these films “recognize that alternative forms of embodiment and desire are central to the struggle against corporate domination” (2011, 29). While he tends to write about films with underlying Marxist themes, these ideas can be applied to such media as *Æon Flux* or *Ghost in the Shell* and their relationship to the queer body, as these ani-

ated series distort traditional ideas of gender and the body in their own subtle ways. As such, we can read the aesthetics of Arca, Kanda, and Huxtable as relating directly to the influence of the subversion in these works, using animated methods to more directly convey queer futurist thought in their own work.

This subversion of the body and push towards queer futurism is perhaps best seen as the song “Century” begins, and the image of a fetus appears on screen. (Figure 2) At first the fetus is presented somewhat conventionally, inside a neutral, in between space and treated with a sense of reverence. However, as the song begins a circular piano appears around the fetus’ body, and it begins to play along with the tune. This animation, one of the only overtly humorous images in the whole performance, directly creates a visual for an idea which theorists of queer futurity have been discussing for years; that in order to envision a queer “then and there” we must dismantle ideas of reproductive futurity and heteronormative markers of the future. José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia* (2019) that “Futurity can be a problem. Heterosexual culture depends on a notion of the future: as the song goes, ‘the children are our future’” (49). Muñoz then goes on to problematize this by offering a glimpse into the alternative sexual realities of those with deviant sexualities or gender identities, where reproductive futurism is neither immediately achievable nor the point. Kanda’s animated fetus is then representative of such ideas, as it makes a mockery of the “sacred” image of the fetus



Figure 2. “Fetus imagery.” Source, “Arca and Jesse Kanda Live at the Roundhouse,” 2018.

in the space of this queer performance. This gives a physicality then to Muñoz's theory, allowing, within the perimeters of the queer dance floor, a space where the culture of reproductive futurism can be renounced and replaced with alternative, queer views of the future.

However, the futurism Arca and Kanda display not only rejects present alternatives to reproductive futurism but does the same to ideas of the body itself. For example, when Arca's "Sad Bitch" starts playing, an animation appears on screen which Arca syncs her on stage movements to, so that both the figure in the video and her IRL body are performing the same dance. (Figure 3) The animated figure is a silhouette of Arca herself, but with distorted coloring and a back covered in barnacle-like specimen that explode a red coloured debris. The viewer's attention is first drawn to Arca, bathed in a pink light and performing the angelic motions, before turning to the alien presence situated on screen. Arca acts as a guide, using her body in its costuming and movement to display a model of the queer near-future, before directing your attention to the version of herself on screen, which represents the human beyond an obtainable future, envisioning a form so far outside the grasp of our lifetime that it just barely resembles a person as we know it. Arca and Kanda don't set out to create a concrete model of the future queer human, but simply allude to it in this dreamy, nearly subconscious imagery. As such, this kind of animation and performance fits in well with Muñoz's writing that, "Utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in the process, unfinished" (Muñoz 2019, 99). Arca's movements

on stage and the animation which accompany it reflect a sort of utopian futurist aesthetic that is unfinished yet finds power in suggesting this other world of possibility for the body.

This is often the case for animated media which seeks to present a post-human or futurist view of the body. Esther Leslie, writing about the historic use of clouds in animated film, notes that "animation foregrounds narratively the capacity for change", meaning animation allows a space in which radical change, in the body or in the material world, can temporarily come to life on screen (Leslie 2017, 238). Leslie uses clouds to discuss animation's more radical possibilities, yet these ideas can be as easily applied to the animated body. Leslie notes that clouds are, like animation itself, fleeting forms that allow us to envision a world beyond our own to, as the saying goes, "let our imagination run wild." That both forms are fleeting and ephemeral by nature allow the capacity to temporarily envision worlds, bodies, even political realities beyond our own, in a space that is relatively safe and removed from our everyday life. While Arca and Kanda might find inspiration in the underlying subversion of anime and video games, they create more directly a vision of what a future queer body might look like in their on-screen animation. Though these images are transitory by nature, they function as important interpretations of what the queer future body might come to be, and by simply suggesting this possibility they offer the option for an alternative reality to come.

It should not go overlooked that this type of animation is used within the space of the queer dance floor and queer club life. Queer nightlife, as Muñoz again notes, often exists afterwards only as "queer ephemera" in the memories of those who attended certain events. Historically, the underground environment of a queer club or performance created an atmosphere that these things were temporal, worlds that existed only to those who dared for them to be revealed (Muñoz 2019, 74). That this type of animation, which foregrounds itself in a sense of futurity and utopian possibility, is used in the environment of a queer dance floor is then appropriate, as both seek to create worlds which can only be accessed in these short lived, temporary moments. Those fleeting moments of ecstasy one



Figure 3. "Sad Bitch." Source, "Arca and Jesse Kanda Live at the Roundhouse," 2018.

might experience while dancing in a queer club are similar to the feelings stirred by the awe-inspiring imagery generated by this type of futurist utopian animation. Increasingly, artists working within and on the peripheries of queer nightlife, like Björk, Juliana Huxtable, or Hannah Black, are using these types of animation and aesthetics to convey a specific utopian queer futurist vision. That Arca's performance and use of these techniques was broadcast on Boiler Room allows an access point for those of us wishing to examine these modes of animation and futurist thinking further. As such, this official recording of the event can be treated as a necessary and indispensable resource for examining the relationship between contemporary queer club life, animation, and queer utopian futurity.

Notes

1. Video of event: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2BfNQgvf5g>
2. For more on their working relationship see Thomas Gorton, "Jesse Kanda: child's play," <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/20250/1/jesse-kanda-childs-play>.
3. See posts dated March 6 2019 and September 13 2018. "@arca1000000" <https://www.instagram.com/arca1000000/>

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