Queer Abstraction: Visual Strategies to See New Queer Futures

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Abstract: Uganda's anti-homosexuality laws are infamous. In 2014 and the years preceding it there was a marked intensification in unsatisfactory legal structures, and growing social debate surrounding how queer people can live their lives. When the queer community is under increasing pressure to be silent, what is the contribution of visual culture to the hearing of queer voices? There is currently a heightened and intense aesthetic conversation emerging in Kampala. The quantity of visual culture being produced—both celebrating and condemning queerness—is increasing. This production is being driven by a myriad of sources: artists; media and press houses; religious figures; governments; schools; universities; and medical institutions. This production of culture lies alongside both an intensification and fluctuation in homophobic laws—and social stigmas—regarding queer lives in Uganda. Artists and audiences are dialoguing about queer aesthetics and making art rigorously in response to this social and legal situation. With one artwork, produced in 2014, as a focus, this essay explores abstraction as a visual tactic to communicate through contexts of violence and homophobia. Despite media prominence and academic attention on Uganda's homosexual politics (Sadgrove 2012; Rao 2015; Tamale 2011), the conflict has never been analyzed through a visual lens. In order to apply new insights to this contemporary dilemma, this essay draws from and contributes to the interdisciplinary field of queer visual culture, a discipline that applies queer theoretical scrutiny to readings of contemporary visual culture and the understanding of social change (Sanders 2007). What can we learn from the visual representations of queerness that are being presented to us; if we squint hard enough, are we able to visualize possibilities for new queer futures?

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1. Introduction: An Atmosphere of Violence

I first saw *Chain of Love* (Figure 1) when visiting the studio of Ugandan visual artist, Babirye Leilah. The studio door was open, but the artist was absent. The artwork was hanging on the wall, but the artist had fled to Kenya to seek refuge from the recently passed Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014. In witnessing the work, what struck me was that despite the atmosphere of violence in which the work was made, *Chain of Love* did not visually scream. A looped chain passing through two symmetrical circles is placed and pinned onto a discarded and scarred wooden board. There are different possible readings of the work but, for me, *Chain of Love* holds a

sense of balance, of dignity, yet the use of decayed wood, chains, padlocks, and pins points to a muffled anguish underlying this impression of calm.

Figure 1. Chain of Love, Babirye Leilah, 2014.

2. Law and Life

Uganda's anti-homosexuality laws are infamous. The criminality of homosexuality has its foundations in the British colonial government's Penal Code Act of 1950, prohibiting "same-sex sexual acts as felonies" (The Penal Code Act 1950, pp. 145–147). New laws have since been constructed, created, removed, and debated in Uganda, increasingly so in the last ten years. Marking a climax in these fluctuations, the Anti-Homosexuality Act was signed in parliament by President Museveni on February 24, 2014. The act was termed the "kill the gays bill" by western media for its allowance of those convicted of homosexuality to be subject to the death penalty, although this was later altered to imprisonment for life (Fallon 2014, p. 9). Upon implementation of the act, a collision of celebrations and fear resulted. At a stadium in Kampala, thirty thousand Ugandans gathered to give thanks to president Yoweri Museveni for passing the act. The event, organized by the inter-religious council of Uganda, combined the fanfare of a mass political meeting with the party atmosphere of a cultural festival.[1] Elsewhere, the queer community went into hiding,[2] silenced by anxiety and apprehension for what might happen next. Prior to the Anti-Homosexuality Act, life for queer Ugandans was already restrictive and dangerously precarious. In 2011, prominent LGBT activist David Kato was murdered in his home after having his identity revealed in the Ugandan tabloid, Rolling Stones.[3] The queer community, however, was not destroyed but rather emboldened by the tragedy. In 2012, the first gay pride march took place in Uganda. A few hundred queer Ugandans and their allies gathered in Entebbe,

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[1] See (Hodes 2014).
[2] See (Johnston 2014).
[3] See (Akinyemi 2016).

a town neighboring Uganda's capital, Kampala, to undertake a celebration and as activist Frank Mugisha described it, take a "moment of happiness and peace denied to us the rest of the year" (Mugisha 2017, p. 4). Despite the vicious context for queer lives in Uganda, people were "tired of hearing a story that ignored their nuance[d] experiences of both joy and hardship" (Okeowo 2012, p. 1). The pride event became a place and a moment to visualize the layered nature of the queer struggle. The Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014, therefore, came as a blockade to these glimmers of hope on Uganda's queer horizon.

The terminology within Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act was both ambiguous and all-encompassing, with homosexuality being defined in broad terms, including one who touches another person with the intention of committing an act of homosexuality being liable, upon conviction, to imprisonment for life.[4] Coupled with this elusive definition, the act included legal consequences for both the promotion of homosexuality and for the protection of homosexuals. In a speech on 18 November, 2009 at the Human Rights and Peace Centre, Ugandan academic Dr. Sylvia Tamale presented an argument to Member of Parliament David Bahati, co-author of the Anti-Homosexuality Act (then in draft stage), for the bill not to be passed. Tamale describes how "with homosexuality defined in such a broad fashion as to include touching another person with the intention of committing the act of homosexuality, this is a provision highly prone to abuse and puts all citizens (both hetero and homosexuals) at great risk" (Tamale 2014, pp. 61–66). Tamale stressed that by creating such an ambiguous and expansive legal definition of homosexuality, a context of paranoia, confusion, and violence would be created. In 2016, reflecting on the passing of the act in 2014, artist and lawyer Angelo Kakande confirmed Tamale's concerns and described how the act ensured its own implementation beyond a state-enforced policing of sexual liberties, i.e., through citizen-to-citizen policing. Kakande recalls a fear that lay not with the legal implementation of the act, but with the public interpretation of the law: "We knew no court would enforce this law, except one, the court of public opinion. Here, in this country, killing a gay person in front of the police is ok. There's the law and then there's the public law. I knew a community could be protected in the law, but not in the people's law" (Kakande 2016). Kenyan activist Jane Wothaya Thirikwa highlights how the combination of an escalation and broadening of legal structures built on homophobic foundations with an allowance of public interpretation and implementation of these laws results in "stigmatising and discriminatory attitudes, and radically undermines human rights efforts for sexual minorities" (Thirikwa 2018, p. 307). As one victim of these actions describes, "The police arrest you and parade you, but then they release you because

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4   See (The Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014).

they have nothing to charge you with. Once you go back to the community, you are at the mercy of the people you live with" (ibid., p. 309).

Fear of the application of the law by the public continues. The legal structures against homosexuality in Uganda have fluctuated significantly since 2009, and the legislative context is unpredictable; however, the public's reading of the law has been shown to be growing in conviction.[5] In 2009, Uganda's ruling party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), first introduced Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act; however, the NRM's President Yoweri Museveni refused to sign the bill amid international pressure.[6] Writing in Transition Magazine, Richard Ssebaggala recalled that "The Bahati bill is on life support thanks entirely to the self-preservation instincts of Uganda's president, rather than changing attitudes in Uganda. People are routinely harassed and maligned: a local tabloid published the pictures and contact information of gay activists along with an imperative to 'hang them' and one prominent gay rights activist, David Kato, was killed in early 2011" (Ssebaggala 2011, p. 106). In August 2014, just six months after its signing into law, the Anti-Homosexuality Act was annulled (Harding 2014, p. 1). Importantly, the act was withdrawn on procedural grounds, and not for moral reasons. The annulment was on the grounds that the Parliament of Uganda had passed the law without the requisite quorum as provided for by the country's constitution.[7] Kakande recalls: "The Act was legally nulled, but the public hysteria the Act instigated into everyday lives ensured that street hate, mob justice, and atrocities such as corrective rape still occurred and continue to exist in Uganda today" (Kakande 2016).

3. Queer Abstraction: A Strategy to Speak

"She whispers so one can hear, but not all".

'Angelo Kakande on the artwork of Babirye Leilah, 2016.

It is within this context of fluctuating legal frameworks and tangible violent realities that *Chain of Love* was made. Babirye Leilah describes her artistic practice as abstract sculpture: "Recently my process has been fueled by a need to find a language to respond to the recent passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda. Through the act of burning, nailing and assembling I aim to address the realities of being gay in the context of Uganda" (Leilah 2016, p. 3). Within an atmosphere of violence, visual statements must be carefully considered. Babirye Leilah turns to both physical and metaphorical processes to represent the dangerous pressure being placed upon her as a queer Ugandan. On the strategy of *Chain of Love*, Kakande remarks: "Right now

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[5] See (Uganda Anti-Gay Timeline 2014).
[6] See (Branson 2013).
[7] See (Jjuuko and Mutesi 2018).

she could only make a statement that's abstract and whimsical, she couldn't make it outright and obvious" (Kakande 2016). For Babiyre Leilah, abstraction became a strategy to represent a muted voice and an absent body. The artist was unable to be physically present in Kampala, a chained artwork left behind spoke of love on the artist's behalf. Combined with the abstraction of metal shapes against wooden board, the symbolism of two circles chained and padlocked together, speaks to an impossible and yet irrepressible love. The combination of both chain and love in the title of the work prompts the viewer to question whether an impossible way of life might one day become possible.

This ability of an artwork to speak when the artist cannot is the route through which this essay passes, examining how abstraction is being used as a visual strategy to communicate in contexts of violence and homophobia. By continuing to speak, how are artists and artworks affecting audiences and the way in which we might see queer lives?

3.1. Abstraction: "The Process of Removing Something, Especially Water from a River or Other Source".[8]

Uganda's 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act was overturned, not for ethical reasons but, rather, the decision was made based on legal technicalities. The bodies subjugated to violence were removed from the court's consideration. The abstraction of the human from this process points to the violence embedded within the law. The ability for abstraction to remove, ignore, and erase humans from such processes points to the violence of abstraction itself. Uganda's Act desired queer bodies to be abstracted from society through a 14-year jail sentence, or through the public court of opinion, ostracization, shame, and violence. When such political abstractions are applied to marginalized bodies, critical human rights issues are raised. Nora N. Khan describes that, "The social imaginary of civilization thrives on some bodies being abstracted, and some, real" (Khan 2018, p. 19). In Uganda, the heterosexual body is given permission to remain, the homosexual to disappear. The gathering of crowds to celebrate the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014 in Kampala validates their heterosexual existence. The atmosphere of violence surrounding the queer community forces them to (temporarily) disappear and remove themselves from society.

The violence in abstraction is the violence of removal, the violence of erasure. This abstraction is seen vividly through the work of African-American artist, Sondra Perry, and her exhibition *Typhoon Coming On*, shown in 2018 at the Serpentine Sackler

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8   Each of the next sub-titles drives from the three key Oxford English definitions of Abstraction, see: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/abstraction.

Gallery in London.[9] In 1781, the British slave ship, Zong, sailed from Accra to Jamaica with 442 enslaved Africans on board. Upon experiencing rough waters and becoming low on essential supplies, the ship's crew murdered over 130 African people by throwing them overboard in order to claim insurance money for the loss of 'their property'.[10] Upon discovering the fraudulent claim, the ship owners were sued by the insurance company for a false insurance claim, not for the loss of life. In the gallery, Perry digitally projects an 1840 painting by William Turner titled *The Slave Ship*. Originally titled *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on*, the painting depicts the Zong massacre, bodies are seen in the wake of the ship as it sails forward into the horizon. Perry projects Turner's *The Slave Ship* digitally and in extreme close up against a gallery wall, to the extent that the bodies drowning in the waves of Turner's painting become impossible to see. The bodies are missing, and yet they don't need to be there to feel the violence that is present. Instead, the viewer is immersed in the abyss of Perry's digital installation and within the sea itself, forcing audiences to become entangled in the United Kingdom's complicity in the dehumanization of black people. The absence in Perry's work points to the enormity of violence she so wants us never to forget. Curator Adrienne Edwards attests that "Blackness is the original abstraction; people are living abstractions, meaning [they are] made up, conjured" (Rodney 2017, p. 6). Blackness becomes a space of racial projection, of people's fears and desires, not allowing the human itself to be seen. Black people's humanity is hidden, ignored, like the vanished people of the Zong slave ship.

In parallel, queer people in Uganda are told they do not exist, that they are the imaginings of a Western mode of living, that they are un-African, unaccepted by Uganda's nation-building projects, and unwanted by families.[11] Queer Ugandans are abstracted from society; the very concept of their queerness is denied. In conversation with writer and academic Saidiya Hartman, interviewer Patricia J. Saunders asks, "How do you get to know black bodies when they have been so abstracted?" (Saunders 2008, p. 2). Is it enough to understand slavery by looking to the archives in the absence of objects of memory, bones, and tombstones? How can we see queer bodies when so many attempts have been made to control and erase them from personal and public narratives? The archive becomes unsatisfactory when, for example, one tries to think critically about what it meant to throw "one hundred and fifty human beings overboard a ship in order to collect insurance monies", and yet, all that is in the archive is a two-page legal document (ibid., p. 3). And in remembering the lives of

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9   Sondra Perry, Typhoon Coming On, the Serpentine Gallery: https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/exhibitions-events/sondra-perry-typhoon-coming-on.
10 For a full account see (Perry 2018).
11 See (Tamale 2003).

queer people, do we care more about legal successes or personal triumphs? In these cases, relating such accounts becomes both essential and impossible, and, therefore, perhaps the path to follow is that of Hartman's response to Saunder's question. Hartman admits the impossibility of writing "about a history that is this encounter with nothing; or to write about a past that has been obliterated so that even traces aren't left" (ibid., p. 4), and, therefore, the act of "not telling" (ibid., p. 4) sometimes becomes the only way forward. Within *Chain of Love*, the obscurity of the context for queerness is met with a strategic obscurity of aesthetics. The use of abstraction gives agility to the artist who needed to alter the intensity of her voice when the surrounding social and legal risks were in a dangerous state of flux. Not telling all became a way to continue to speak. Through the strategic aesthetic of removal, a strategic loudness is heard. The abstraction within *Chain of Love* responds to the erasure of queer Ugandan bodies. Abstraction, though, is not just about removing or silencing form, but about a specificity of form. The attempt to eliminate queer lives is met with a strategic erasure of the figurative form. Through an abstraction of herself in the work, the artist creates "an explicit parallel between abstraction in art and the abstraction of people" (Judah 2018, p. 11). No bodies are depicted, the work has been figuratively hushed, and yet, at the same time, the work is clearly rooted in a painful "shout" (Rodney 2017, p. 7).

This essay turns to abstract art as a means to learn more about queer lives in Uganda. This is not just a choice of the researcher, but an observation of the way artists in Uganda are using the specificity of abstraction to control who sees and hears their work and who must not. Abstraction is the purposeful and considered removal of some forms, and the tactical inclusion of others. To simply erase or silence form is not enough; this would leave the artist muted. Instead, abstraction is a malleable tool to both fluctuate between being seen and staying safe. But what does it mean to be focusing on artworks that are abstract rather than realistic during such an intensely social situation? What can the movements of metal over wood tell us, as opposed to those of a body? Does abstraction depoliticize?

3.2. Abstraction: "Freedom from Representational Qualities in Art".[12]

"Abstraction isn't neutral"

Sondra Perry, 2016.

It is widely known but not always acknowledged that Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, considered to be seminal in the early development of both Cubism and modernist art, is the direct result of Picasso's confrontation with African artefacts

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[12] Oxford English definition of Abstract, see: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/abstraction.

(Jafa 2015, p. 244). Arthur Jafa describes in *My Black Death*[13] how, at the time of the creation of the work, Western art was limited by the spatial confinements of the singular perspective of the Renaissance. The artefacts Picasso encountered dramatically shifted his perception of time and space, as the African objects he drew inspiration from were never meant to be viewed from a single vantage point, but rather, to interact with and circulate around bodies. The artefacts Picasso encountered could themselves have agency over the viewer. This was a radical change from Western art which believed it was only the viewing subject that had agency over the viewed object, a highly problematic position when seeing works, for example, about black women created and viewed by white men. In *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Picasso breaks up the image he is portraying and reassembles it into an abstracted form, giving the viewer the possibility of viewing a work from a multitude of perspectives. But beyond artefacts, Picasso also gained access to photographic postcards of West African women (mostly naked) by Edmund Fortier, a French photographer based in Dakar. The photograph's influence in the creation of *Demoiselles d'Avignon* has also been widely discussed. In the painting, there are five naked women's bodies, three of which are of darker complexion than two. The figurative abstraction of the three darker women's bodies in Picasso's painting is critiqued to denote the rejection of the black body by Europeans. The three women's bodies are stylized, with their faces partially masked and all averting their eyes from the viewer, demonstrating a lack of acceptance of the black body in a white space. The lighter bodies have non-abstracted faces, which both confront and confidently gaze back at the viewer of the painting. The acceptance and full portrayal of the black body would undermine the notion of the white European body being the defining model of humanity, and therefore, the abstraction of blackness in this particular work problematically allowed for a distance from this reality. Abstraction of the black body through paintings such as *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and movements such as Cubism, thus, for Jafa, arise from a "simple refusal of, or resistance to, the ontological fact of black being" (ibid., p. 246).

Today, artists are using abstraction to counter this refusal of, and resistance to, blackness. There is an urgent limitation of black representation in visual art, and yet blackness has a "seemingly unlimited usefulness in the history of modern art" (Edwards 2015, p. 9). Black artists have a particularly close relationship to abstraction, not merely through the well-known influences of, for example, the black jazz movement on Jackson Pollock's abstract paintings (or the impact of African artefacts on Picasso's paintings), but through the early abstract creations of artists such as Barbara Chase-Riboud, Melvin Edwards, and Jack Whitten (ibid., p. 3). Curator Lowery Stokes Sims reminds us of abstraction's historical association with

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[13] See (Jafa 2015).

blackness: "If you take the track that abstraction came out of African art, then we are just claiming our birth right" (Rodney 2017, p. 7). Abstraction, thus, is not just an art movement rooted in the aesthetic desires of such European and American artists as Kandinsky and Pollock, but one steeped in black historical and political consequences.

There is a current animated and evolving relationship between abstraction and the representation of blackness, with the choices of when and how artists use abstraction being particularly pertinent. As Adrienne Edwards describes through her 2015 exhibition, *Blackness in Abstraction*,[14] "Blackness in abstraction, shifts analysis away from the black artist as subject and instead emphasizes blackness as material, method and mode, insisting on blackness as a multiplicity" (Edwards 2015, p. 2). This ability of abstraction to go beyond the subject and the biographical allows the artist and viewer to see and show beyond all that is legible and established. An aesthetic emerges that drives the art market beyond the desires of audiences to consume a certain type of black figuration, which, as art critic Seph Rodney notes, although it makes the black body visible, can lead to troubling problematics (Rodney 2017, p. 11). Sondra Perry works with abstraction throughout her Serpentine exhibition, shifting perceptions of abstraction as an apolitical technique to an aesthetic tactic with a "tremendous amount of power" which gives Perry "a type of freedom of expression, an expanding of the visual language" (Coon 2016, p. 10). This expansionist ability within abstraction is also seen within *Chain of Love*, as the work turns away from a figurative, indexical representation of queerness and towards a gestural, emotive response. To directly represent the body in *Chain of Love* leaves the artist vulnerable to unwanted and unsympathetic stares. For the queer body, the representational can further misinform by pointing to binaries of normal and abnormal.[15] Furthermore, a realistic representation leaves the work open to risks of audiences sensationalizing the portrayal of a black queer body by mediating other kinds of violent, intrusive, or unwanted narratives. The artist challenges such assumptive and misinformed narratives through abstraction by carefully calibrating how and under what conditions the body is seen. Instead of a figure, a gesture of a scream created by signifiers of entrapment, i.e., a locked padlock, chain, and the nailing of metal onto wood, ensures the work is heard by those who already share a connection with the artist's struggle whilst tactically keeping others out. Abstraction thus becomes a queer strategy to refuse representative norms.[16] By moving away from the representational, *Chain of Love* receives a freedom to communicate.

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[14] See (Edwards 2015).
[15] See (Halberstam 2018).
[16] See (Reuter 2015).

A second work created in 2014 by Babirye Leilah, *The Game* (Figure 2), represents what might be interpreted as a hand-drawn chessboard painted onto another piece of discarded wood. It was at the point of making this work that the Anti-Homosexuality Act was signed into law and then, months later, overturned. A violent game was taking place with Uganda's queer communities. Both *Chain of Love* and *The Game* are mixed-media assemblages; the choice of everyday materials points to an urgency to find items in the artist's immediate environment in order to rapidly make a statement about the immediate situation. Both works are less than arm's length in size, again pointing to a rapidity and accessibility of both making and viewing. But, despite being produced in a minimal amount of time, Babirye Leilah's specific use and considered combination of abstract forms sensitively and decisively points to the storyline taking place around her. Through careful consideration of materials and their associated visual signals, Babiyre Leilah was able to continue to speak through her work, even when it was too dangerous for her own body to be present. Critics, however, have accused the artist of turning her back on the struggle by choosing abstraction over a more literal narrative of the situation. Angelo Kakande describes his response to one such critique:

> Leilah tries to make a message, a message that is abstract, even too abstract for anyone to understand, this is the strategy. She can't shout, you can't shout in the Uganda Museum. She can't tell anyone what they (the artworks) mean. She'd lose the opportunity to place her statement. Some people say, 'If you're going to make these subdued statements because you fear the sanctions, you better shut up anyway—you're not assisting the struggle.' I don't agree with this—where is David Kato[17]? He is six feet under. (Kakande 2016)

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[17] David Kato was a queer Ugandan activist who was brutally murdered in Kampala in 2011.

Figure 2. The Game, Babirye Leilah, 2014.

Freedom is complicated, and sometimes it can be derived from choosing to remain unseen. As Zachary Small puts it, "That's a nuance of queer aesthetics that can be hard to parse, that some queer artists indeed find bliss in self-erasure" (Small 2017, p. 9). Other queer Ugandan artists have looked and are continuing to look to the self-erasing tactics of abstraction as a way to find this bliss. Ugandan poet, Gloria Kiconco, comments on their abstracted written work: "People like me have found a new space in the guise of non-belonging" (Kiconco 2014, p. 1). Other artists are using abstraction on themselves by turning to the use of pseudonyms as well as to the play and erasure of their family names in order to continue to produce new work without having their identities directly revealed to families and audiences. It is through the purposeful act of erasure of the figurative and literal that, paradoxically, the freedom to make a new statement is created. By controlling one's visibility, and purposefully playing between visibility and invisibility, abstraction can provide artists with a political agency to choose how they want to be seen and by whom. There's a dignity in silence when it's by choice, rather than force. Abstraction can then be thought of as a purposeful and intentional erasure, an intentional failure of communication. It is the purposefulness of the failure that makes abstraction an act of resistance, a strategy of survival.[18] Purposeful erasure becomes an act of defiance

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[18] See (Halberstam 2011).

against the rigid structures of homophobia, and abstraction becomes a powerful tool with which to visualize queer lives without reliance on representation. However, dangers come with any level of visibility in Uganda. The Ugandan media has used extreme tactics to generate a hypervisibility around queer people, the most infamous example perhaps being an article written in 2011 by the Ugandan magazine Rolling Stone revealing the identity and addresses of alleged gay members of Ugandan society.[19] It was this article that led to the murder of activist David Kato. In 2014, a Ugandan transgender woman recalls her experience of being visually degraded: "I became like a cartoon for the police. They would call the press, every five minutes I was in and out of the cell. They would make me sit there and ask me embarrassing questions, some of which were difficult to answer" (Jjuuko and Mutesi 2018, p. 269). South African author Pumla Dineo Gqola explains that it is inaccurate to claim that black queer bodies are invisible, but that through namings and attacks, they are, in fact, highly visible manifestations of the undesirable.[20] As a queer community refuses to remain silent and visualizes itself through strategic aesthetic tactics, a surrounding social context hyper-visualizes that same community, forcing upon them an unsafe level of exposure and an unchosen narrative. The issue then lies in the control of how the queer community is seen. Can abstraction be a means to reclaim an agency over the way in which queerness presents itself? Or are we just pointing to vagueness?

3.3. Abstraction: "the Quality of Dealing with Ideas Rather Than Events".[21]

Abstraction offers the possibility of a diversity and multiplicity of readings. *Chain of Love* and *The Game* purposefully fail to communicate directly and, in so doing, open up a field of questions and meanings. The artist works with an undisciplined knowledge, giving up on the success of realism in order to pose more questions than answers.[22] This openness empowers the audience to decide upon the reading of the work for themselves, and provides the artist with the ability to communicate ideas beyond just the events taking place at the time in which the work was made. Babiyre Leilah's two artworks produced in 2014 live beyond the events taking place in Kampala; rather, they are an ongoing reminder of the lived experience of queerness in contexts of homophobia, both in and beyond Uganda.

Abstraction, then, rather than pointing to vagueness through the absence of a figure, has the ability to point to a specific openness. Through a purposeful entanglement of queerness and abstract aesthetics, definitions and binaries are not

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[19] See (Rice 2011a, 2011b).
[20] See (Gqola 2011).
[21] Oxford English definition of Abstract, see: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/abstraction.
[22] See (Halberstam 2005).

allowed to concretize.[23] Abstraction becomes a method by which to illustrate and pluralize different modes of queerness and queer abstraction, thus creating the ability to reply to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's call to both "pluralize and specify" sexuality and gender (Sedgwick 2008, p. 67). Queer abstraction gives us the tools with which to start to understand new possibilities of sexuality and gender beyond monolithic notions, whilst ensuring that intimate localities, histories, and sensitivities are also heard.[24] There is particular importance of this plurality in Uganda. A widely-used argument to disconnect queerness from nation-building (and to force queerness into invisibility) is the accusation that homosexuality is un-African, i.e., that it is a western import.[25] There is a bitter irony to this argument, as Uganda's Penal Code Act was created by the British colonial administration in 1950, with the criminalization of homosexuality being largely a problem for the Commonwealth.[26] Despite there being many divisions along political, social, and ethnic lines in Uganda, and no overarching consensus on what Ugandan identity looks like, Ugandans from all walks of life have come together to present Uganda as definitively not gay, and not a country for homosexuals.[27] This type of identity formation is paving the ground for what writer Jasbir Puar terms homonationalism, the co-opting of homosexual politics into discourses of nationalism.[28] Homosexual rights (or the lack thereof) become the maker of civil society. There is something dangerous and disingenuous about this way of talking about place, to say that homosexuality comes from one location and not another. With this discourse, homosexual rights become a way to distinguish the "modern geographies from the savage", fixing some countries as free and others as oppressed (depending on a country's outlook) (Rao 2015, p. 32). Paradoxically, in 2014, in Uganda we witnessed the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in February while, just a month later, the United Kingdom (Uganda's former colonizer) legalized same-sex marriage. Despite constructing and implementing what is still the current legal framework for homophobia in Uganda, the United Kingdom was

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23 In their article 'Forging Queer Identity with Abstraction' Abe Ahn comments on the exhibition *Surface of Color*, which brings together work by ten artists who use abstraction as a conduit to examine ideas of personal identity, race and queerness 'The works in the show are not interested in universalising gender or sexuality under a single banner but rather in giving accounts of the multiple ways in which queerness can be embodied' (Ahn 2015).

24 See (Sedgwick 1993).

25 See (Heerden 2018).

26 Of the 2.9 billion who live where same-sex intimacy is a crime, 2.1 billion live in the Commonwealth See: Criminalising Homosexuality: Irreconcilable with Good Governance by the Human Dignity Trust https://www.humandignitytrust.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/1.-Synopsis-and-Recommendations.pdf.

27 References from a presentation by Dr. Aida Holly-Nambi at Stanford University titled: *Against the Order of Nature: Queerness and Ugandanness, now and then*, 2015.

28 See (Puar 2017).

accused of a "bullying mentality" by Ugandan officials for threatening to cut aid to Uganda for its anti-homosexuality laws.[29]

In response to Uganda's homonationalist stance, the queer community in Uganda is constructing legal and social arguments highlighting how it was not homosexuality, but homophobia, that was imported through colonial and missionary activities.[30] Through a plurality of methods including advocacy, legal cases, and the production of visual culture, the queer community is carefully constructing narratives by which to rethink Uganda's attitude to sexuality. Coupled with and adding to this process is a rejection of the terms "gay" and "homosexual" in their most binary form, instead referencing the multiple offerings and understandings queerness can bring. For Thabo Msibi, the term "gay" characterizes a specific group of people and evolved out of a Western "specific cultural history" (Msibi 2011, p. 5), i.e., predominantly a white, middle-class group. Queerness is instead utilized by communities in Uganda to describe the plurality and possibilities of same-sex intimacies and to criticize the binaries of gay and lesbian, homosexual and heterosexual.[31] Perhaps most importantly, it is through queerness that communities are able to visualize a myriad of sexualities that are disconnected from colonial constructions of what is right, what is wrong, what is ahead, and what is behind. Debunking the myth that homosexuality is a western import, artists and academics are highlighting how same-sex practices predate colonialism in Uganda. Sylvia Tamale gives the example of "the Langi of northern Uganda, where the mudoko dako "males" were treated as women and could marry men" (Driberg 1923). Perhaps the most well-known, and yet at the same time hidden, case is that of the Buganda monarchy of the Kabaka (king) Mwanga who engaged in numerous same sex practices (Faupel 1962).[32] By excavating and publishing queer Ugandan histories from a precolonial era, it is clearly revealed that queerness and same-sex intimacies predate the homophobic interventions of the British colonial administration. Alongside these advocacy efforts, East African artists, such as Kenyan filmmaker Jim Chuchu, are producing bodies of work that play with and point to the aesthetics of precolonial queerness. An exhibition produced by Chuchu in 2015, titled *Invocations*, uses abstract signifiers to point to the possibilities of queer lives and to the entanglement of queerness with African spirituality. This spiritual aspect is pertinent, as structures of homophobia in Uganda continue to be fueled and funded by religious (predominantly Christian) institutions.[33] In viewing *Invocations*, the audience is implored to see an aesthetic

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[29] See (Uganda Fury at David Cameron Aid Threat over Gay Rights 2011).
[30] See (Kuloba 2014; Rao 2015).
[31] See (Reuter 2015).
[32] See (Faupel 1962).
[33] See (Lusimbo and Bryan 2018).

of the future that looks to the precolonial in order to create a contemporary queer aesthetic.[34] The expansive possibilities of abstraction allow for such an exploration of queerness. Through queer abstraction, the artist can take the viewer on a journey beyond a specific event and into notions of what a queer future could look like in a space like today's Uganda.

4. Seeing New Queer Futures through Abstraction

Queerness is purposefully slippery; it gives a name to what rigid modes of heterosexuality leave out.[35] Like abstraction, queerness has its own story of anarchy and defiance. In the 1980s, the word queer was reclaimed from a term of abuse to a concept that purposefully celebrates its own oddity and strangeness.[36] It can be argued that in the 1980s, a queer aesthetic was born in the wake of the feminist movement and the AIDS crisis.[37] It can also be argued that these canonical observations rely heavily on a Euro- and North American-centric gaze. However, although queer theory has its theoretical background in the US-American queer movement of the 1990s, it does not mean that the theoretical framework itself is always chained to the concepts used within that context.[38] Scholars such as Stella Nyanzi, Tavia Nyong'o, Jasbir Puar, and (the late) José Esteban Muñoz define their research as queer and continuously challenge Western concepts. Queerness is a critical term owned by communities in Uganda to challenge the binaries of homo- and hetero- sexuality which serves to move away from historical colonial references of sexuality and to open up communities to more plural interpretations of same-sex intimacies. Thus, queerness is a term of expansive possibilities. An umbrella term, not grounded in any geographical region, around which a myriad of possibilities of gender and sexuality can be debated.

Queerness, when viewed through productions of visual culture, becomes a technique of "doing" rather than "being". Queerness becomes a performative of the disruptive, and a disruptive of the norm.[39] It has the radical potential to break down assumptions and break up conventions. Rather than a sexual identity tied to the biography of the artist, the expansive possibilities of a queer aesthetic allow us to see all that is beyond the legible and the established. For José Esteban Muñoz, queerness is such an expansive term that it is not yet even here but can be seen as an ideality. "Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel (queerness) as the warm

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[34] See (Chuchu).
[35] See (Pilcher 2017).
[36] Ibid.
[37] See (Kornak 2015).
[38] See (Gunkel 2010).
[39] See (Lancaster 2017).

illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality (Muñoz 2009, p. 1)". Queerness thus becomes an active place for imaginations. Visualizing queerness, perhaps through the two symmetrical holes of *Chain of Love*, one might envisage other possible ways of being in the world, ways of being where anti-queerness and anti-blackness may not exist. The visualizing of queerness, though, can be complicated; how can you see something that is so elusive, something that is not a thing but rather a way of doing or a potential way of being? Despite its expansive potentialities, queerness is still a difficult and dangerous aesthetic to visualize in Uganda: difficult, due to the impossibility of visualizing a theory that is in constant flux, and dangerous, due to the vehement social, legal, and physical oppression to which queer people are subjected. Abstraction both adds to and carves a path through these challenges.[40] Abstraction can complicate the desire to express oneself visually, by muddling and complicating queerness and the queer aesthetic through its ability to simultaneously mask and signal difference. Abstraction becomes "a subtle mask that gestures to the queer identity hiding beneath it" (Small 2017, p. 10). This complication, however, is no bad thing, especially within Kampala's current climate. Through abstraction, artists are given a choice regarding their own visibility, a choice between how exposed you want to become, including not wanting to be seen at all.[41] Through abstraction, an artist can retain some control of what they communicate, they can open and close the door for an audience, allowing those they want to enter into their refuge to do so, and keeping others safely out. Kenyan fashion stylist, Sunny Dolat describes such tactics of abstraction: "We have coded ways of speaking to each other, we use ambiguity to see what's underneath. We could be violently inappropriate without anyone knowing about it, there's a power in this" (Dolat 2017). This power is critical, especially when anti-homosexual legal and social agendas intensify, putting pressure upon the lives and freedoms of queer people. Muñoz also assures us that it is through the artworks themselves that we see the possibilities of queerness:

> The artist's representational practice helps us see the not-yet conscious, knowable only as a feeling of utopia and experienced through the anticipatory illumination of art. The visual language that emerges is sometimes loud, and sometimes barely seen: indeed, to access queer visuality we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now. (Muñoz 2009, p. 7)

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[40] See (Small 2017).
[41] Whilst curating *FOUND: Queer Archaeology; Queer Abstraction* curator Avram Finkelstein asks "if abstraction might become a refuge, a place of experimentation and nest-making for queer artists". See (Finkelstein 2017).

Visualizing queerness allows us to see new potential for how we might understand ways of being in the world together. The expansive and active nature of queerness ensures that these perspectives are ever changing. But, sometimes, to view these narratives we need tactics and tools, especially in contexts where such visualities are banned. Abstraction, with its plural abilities, becomes such a tool. Through abstraction, the artist and their artwork can hint at the radical possibilities of queerness, urging their audiences to see into their work and to see their illumination of a horizon imbued with queer potentiality.

5. Conclusion

"The thing that they can no longer say is that we do not exist".

Frank Mugisha, Executive Director of Sexual Minorities Uganda, 2016

There is a power and importance of being seen. Speaking of lesbian photography in 1981, Joan E. Biren described the method of defining oneself through the creation of an oral, written, and visual language.[42] Biren noted that "without a visual identity we have no community, no support network, no movement. Making ourselves visible is a political act. Making ourselves visible is a continual process" (Biren 1983, p. 81). It is through visual evidence that queer people are documented to exist, and it is through this visual evidence that others can be held to account. Abstraction provides artists with the aesthetic tools with which to ensure that a queer visual archive both grows and is seen, within and beyond the borders of Uganda. Through this ongoing visualization, coupled with purposeful visual refusals, the queer community in Uganda ensures that it can be acknowledged, safeguarded, and celebrated.

Jane Wothaya Thirikwa explains how the introduction of sexual diversity into public discourse is an extreme challenge for organizations due to the nonexistence of visibility channels.[43] A leading media house in Uganda, the Vision Group, had (and still has) an editorial policy that prevents the publication or broadcasting of content, including advertisements, that "propagates" homosexuality, and can publish only content from the president, parliament, or courts (Jjuuko and Mutesi 2018, p. 32). The production of visual culture in Uganda today is under pressures of censorship; in February, 2019, the Ugandan government announced plans to introduce new regulations restricting artistic freedom of expression (Freemuse 2019, p. 6). This is a dangerous space in which to be. South African visual activist Zanele Muholi tells us: "If there are legal restrictions placed upon the visualisation of queerness, it is not just subjects and materials and texts that are not visible, but also no categories are

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[42] See (Biren 1983).
[43] See (Thirikwa 2018).

produced for the cultural products and the subjectivities of queer subjects" (Muholi 2012, p. 113). Without the visualization of queerness, a community has no chance of survival, there are no reference points with which to create relationships and connections, and the chances for a network and a movement of support to develop are erased. The inclusion of archival visual culture gives us the opportunity to understand not just the way things were, but the way they felt.[44] The erasure of queer visuals means that not only does queerness become invisible, so do the stories of those that suffered most from violence.

Despite restrictions and the current context for queerness in Kampala today, artists are coming together to create communities that support the production of visual culture, pointing and hinting at a queer visuality. The production of artworks such as *Chain of Love* are seeping through the gaps of censorship, ensuring that queer Ugandan stories have a place in the archive. Through the tactic of abstraction, this community is choosing by whom it wants to be heard. By altering a visual language from one that is loud to one that is barely seen, artists are creating codes of visibility that are legible to those they want to keep in, locking out those who do not deserve to see their story.

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[44] See (Velázquez 2015).

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