Aesthetics from the Closet

Wesley D. Cray, Texas Christian University

This article originated as an unasked question during a conference presentation of Jeremy Fried’s “Ally Aesthetics.” As his title suggests, Fried discusses how we should approach the norms of ally aesthetics—that is, artistic contributions toward the causes of marginalized groups from artists who are not themselves members of those groups. Fried motivates certain important distinctions between the creation and evaluation of artworks by group members and that of relevant works of allies. Beyond familiar considerations of appropriation and authenticity, there is also the (likely defeasible) prescription that allies yield potentially scarce or otherwise limited platforms and positions of influence to marginalized artists themselves. Allies and their works of allyship, that is, ought to remain in supporting roles, rather than taking over center stage.

I agree with these aspects of Fried’s discussion and conclusions. I refrained from asking my question, though, in part because I was not publicly “out” at the time, and was worried that in asking it, I would indeed “out” myself. Speaking within the framework offered by Robin Dembroff and Catharine Saint-Croix, I self-identified as a transgender person and was a member of the social group transgender persons, but I did not yet have an agential identity as a transgender person. To say that I lacked such an agential identity is to say, roughly, that I had not yet publicly signaled the unity of my self-identification and social group membership, a signaling that would contribute to (or constitute) movement through public spaces in accordance with a particular, identity-relevant social “blueprint.” In less technical terms: I was in the closet, still socially operating as a cisgender person, and was worried that my question would invariably lead to all of the perils associated with “coming out,” of which there are many. In this way, my unasked question ended up embodying the question itself.

The content of the question can be unpacked as follows. Fried’s discussion focuses mostly, though not entirely, on issues of race. One important difference between racial identities and gender or sexual identities, however, is that it is much less common and potentially more difficult to remain “closeted” about the former. For a variety of reasons—perhaps chief among them being frequent transphobic social contexts, including those involving senses of internalized transphobia—trans persons might invest a good deal of effort in being publicly read instead as cisgender persons. A trans artist who has not adopted an agential identity as a trans person might, then, choose to retain an agential identity as a cisgender person and, accordingly, create trans-liberatory artworks within the confines of ally aesthetics. Despite their social group membership and self-identity, they would thereby take on a normative commitment to avoiding (seemingly) noxious appropriation, eschewing a false projection of authenticity, and, again, yielding potentially scarce or otherwise limited platforms and positions of influence to those with marginalized agential identities.

Such artists—not just trans artists, but LGBTQIA+ artists across various spectra—face an unfortunate dilemma. On the first horn, they can carefully constrain or otherwise withhold the full expressive and politically liberatory potential of their work while publicly presenting as a mere ally, which would result in their work being engaged with and evaluated under the banner of ally aesthetics. On the other, they can “out” themselves publicly so as to fully express themselves as a self-identified member of their community, and thereby circumvent the need for such constraint. The first horn requires artistic (and perhaps political) compromise while the second requires a shift.
in agential identity. Acknowledging this dilemma, then, results in acknowledging further that LGBTQIA+ artists might have to put themselves in danger in order to earn their full artistic voice. This dilemma extends beyond artists. Following Fried, an allied artist—\textit{qua} ally—ought to be particularly sensitive and responsive to criticism by members of the communities they take themselves to be supporting through their work. This isn’t to say that such artists are licensed to ignore the criticism of members outside of the relevant communities, but instead that the criticisms offered by community members take on special significance. Without being able to safely assume certain agential identities, community members are left to choose between sacrificing their voices as community members or potentially jeopardizing their well-being in any number of ways.

As an extension of the above consideration, consider the account of cultural appropriation recently offered by Thi Nguyen and Matt Strohl, according to which an act of appropriation is morally problematic to the extent that it violates the intimacy of the group within which the appropriated practice originates.\textsuperscript{5} One form of such appropriation is as follows: when presented with an in-group dispute about which among the group’s practices ought not be appropriated by non-members, a non-group member takes it upon themselves to either “settle” the dispute or to lend decisive weight to one side or the other. Either way, the non-group member is appropriating the authority of group members to set their own group’s boundaries. In speaking for the group, that is, the non-group member appropriates the group’s agency and voice.

The situation is complicated further when we remember, as Dembroff and Saint-Croix emphasize, that group membership and agential identity can and often do come apart, especially in the case of “closeted” members of LGBTQIA+ communities.\textsuperscript{6} A group member lacking the corresponding agential identity would, in many instances, be socially indistinguishable from a non-group member, and hence, appear equally culpable for illicitly appropriating a group’s agency when, in actuality, they are legitimately and non-appropriatively contributing to the discourse as a group member. In this, LGBTQIA+ group members who lack LGBTQIA+ agential identities would be left to choose between sacrificing their ability to contribute to socially significant in-group discourse as a group member, or, again, potentially jeopardizing their well-being in any number of ways.

What is to be done in response to this dilemma? Considering potential solutions leads us into a second dilemma: we either accept the aforementioned, unfortunate consequences or we instead proceed with hopeful caution and relax norms for allies of the LGBTQIA+ community under the assumption that they might actually be closeted members of that very community. The first option leaves LGBTQIA+ artists and critics with often unduly difficult decisions, and the second effectively eliminates Fried’s valuable distinctions between in-group works and works of allyship, at least in this context. Clearly, neither is ideal: either LGBTQIA+ artists have to incur the risk of personal harm to speak and create authentically or we compromise the primacy of LGBTQIA+ artists in the very context of LGBTQIA+ art.

To borrow some technical, ethico-aesthetic vocabulary from Nick Riggle, these dilemmas both \textit{suck}. On Riggle’s analysis, something \textit{sucks} when it prohibits or otherwise frustrates individuals from healthily pursuing their own individuality.\textsuperscript{7} Insofar as our artistic institutions (along with our philosophical institutions and others) operate within a strongly cisheteronormative atmosphere (one conducive to the development of internalized cisheteronormativity even among LGBTQIA+ persons), they complicate the lives of LGBTQIA+ persons by prompting them to choose between either sacrificing full expressive agency or facing cisheteronormative censure and pushback, which all too often turns violent. An \textit{awesome} institution, on the other hand, is one which encourages and
facilitates individuals pursuing their own individuality. Such an institution would encourage and facilitate the formation and expression of agential identities, excepting those which cause harm (such as that of the “noble white supremacist,” to borrow Dembroff and Saint-Croix’s example). Insofar as it would not stigmatize LGBTQIA+ agential identities and would reject cis heteronormativity, an awesome institution would work toward the dissolution of both of the aforementioned dilemmas through creating social contexts in which their formation is resisted in the first place.

Some artistic (and philosophical and other) institutions are indeed awesome in just this way. But many still suck, in Riggle’s sense, and especially for LGBTQIA+ persons. And this institutional suckiness can persist even despite institutions being populated by awesome individuals (such as Fried and others at Fried’s aforementioned presentation). How, then, do we rehabilitate our currently sucky artistic (and philosophical and other) institutions? First and foremost, we collectively commit to collectively finding answers to that very question, with an intentionally cultivated and sustained atmosphere that not only trusts and embraces those who bravely venture out of the closet, but also pre-emptively normalizes—and recognizes the inherent dignity of—the many agential identities of those who, for now or always, remain inside.


6 Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019: 582.


8 Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019: 589-592.

9 Thanks to Anne Eaton for encouraging me to write this article, as well as to Sam Cowling and Jeremy Fried for helpful feedback.