

Read My QR: Quilla Constance and the Conceptualist Promise of Intelligibility¹

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This paper contributes to the ongoing questioning of the definitions and boundaries of conceptualism from intersectional feminist psychoanalytic perspectives, and specifically through the practice of Quilla Constance, aka QC or #QC, the post-punk, neo-glam, gender-questioning performance persona of Jennifer Allen. A songwriter and musician, painter and visual performer in costumes designed and made by Jennifer Allen, #QC's performance practice occasionally incorporates fragments of musical performances on cello and always includes some crypto-linguistic vocal improvisation, a verbal automatism that references trance states and 'speaking in tongues' as well as scat singing in jazz.

Conceptualism has been approached as not merely a diverse and contested field but one that has historically enjoyed a centrifugal elasticity, and that even offers some in-built resistance to hegemonic dominance. In the words of Stephen Bann (1999, p. 3), 'Global conceptualism may be the visible proof that the Western hegemony in ways of seeing, ushered in by the perspectival science of the Renaissance, no longer holds sway'. Others, like Jörg Heiser, introduced intentionally eccentric approaches to conceptualism that questioned its rationalist sheen. Although Romanticism could be considered as the 'antithesis of conceptualism', Heiser (2007, p. 135) proposed that preoccupations with beauty and its opposite, the unconscious, or the



‘sociological, [the] psychological, [and the] personal’ can and do enrich the conceptualist canon. Thinking back on his formulation of ‘Romantic Conceptualism’, the central concept of a 2007 exhibition at BAWAG P.S.K. Contemporary, Heiser (2011, p. 1) adds that conceptualism could be understood as dialectical, ‘as much about what it doesn’t say as what it does, as much about “pure” information as the ‘impure’’. Considered retrospectively and inclusively, the promise of intelligibility that conceptualism typically offered has always been somewhat impure in so far as it was critical of codes and systems of signification, particularly from feminist points of view. In the *Post-Partum Document* (1974–8), for example, Mary Kelly (1999) not only proposed an intervention in Jacques Lacan’s incomplete formulation of the maternal subject, but did so through the comingling and staged confrontations of a variety of signifying systems and collections of signs and symbols, each of which was proven insightful as well as inadequate in its own unique way. From another perspective and evoking Dada experimentation, Ewa Partum’s poems were cut up and scattered in public places, to be collected by passers-by: *Active Poetry* (1971) simultaneously relies on and targets the assumed intelligibility of language, teasing out its contingency.

In #QC’s work there is little evidence of an investment in debates around conceptualism. There is, however, an intense exploration of the boundaries between sense, nonsense and different kinds of sensibility and intelligibility, acknowledging the inflection through power relations of knowledge and its systems. As the risk-taking trickster that she is, she performatively revisits signs and symbols of social class and racial difference, such as afro combs and the Burberry plaid, including classist and racist ones, like the golliwog, while mobilising feminist psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity that foreground its contingency, fragility and implication in systems of signification.

Since 2015, Allen has developed a way of operating in which each exhibition of her work is supplemented by paid commissions to art writers and theorists to respond to her developing practice; this key component of her practice is planned for and costed in her funding applications. Spending valuable resources on stimulating the generation of critical discourse about an art practice that purports to dismantle or transcend discourse may seem contradictory. But this is #QC’s way: having her cake and eating it; or wearing both a platform and a flip flop, as she did for part of her performance at the launch of the exhibition *Transcending the Signified* (2017), MOCA London (fig. 1). As well as signalling split loyalties, the platform and the flip-flop create a calculated imbalance: wearing them, #QC performs ambivalence as well as, literally, instability. In this performance, #QC stopped in the middle of changing her footwear into something more comfortable, in a real or simulated moment of hesitation, while revealing something fundamental in both her aesthetics and ethics. It is ironic and revealing that #QC makes work *on* unintelligibility while making hard work *of* communicating with her audience, human and non-human. Significantly, it is the signified (the idea being carried by the signifier), and not the signifier itself (the carrier of meaning) that is being allegedly transcended in this body of work. Lack of understanding is framed by an intense, almost tortuous effort to put herself across, to utter what cannot be said. To quote Heiser again, #QC’s work tests “‘the public” (...) as a terrain for intimacy, precisely because intimacy is no longer protected by a strict sense of “the private””. The stakes of togetherness between artist and audience are at once underlined by the artist’s vulnerability and framed by her enthusiastic determination to relate without conversation. Words devolve or evolve into noise and stick in #QC’s throat: she coughs and retches (fig. 2); she writhes on the floor. But she also plays the cello and knowingly charms her sometimes disconcerted audience (fig. 3). Another, even more fundamental





Fig. 1 - Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.

Fig. 3 - Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.



Fig. 2 - Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.



tension is set up here, mirroring the first, between denying and inviting the production of discourse: this tension is between a studied performance of competence in codes (music, body language, branding and other cultural systems of signification such as food) and a visceral demonstration of the painful awareness of their inadequacy. If ‘signifieds’ are indeed transcended, it is by painstakingly emptying out their ‘signifiers’; and this emptying out is achieved not by their avoidance but through their excessive, accelerated and improper circulation, until they stop making sense: ‘If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought’, wrote the Martinican author and philosopher Édouard Glissant (1997, pp. 189–90), ‘we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.’

Signifiers abound and overwhelm, until in the 2016 video, #QC_001, #QC’s eyes turn into QR codes, indecipherable by the viewer’s own eyes and yet pregnant with withheld meaning. ‘The piece sees Allen channel a guttural, sub-linguistic vocal performance (as #QC) – invoking a spirit of conviction reminiscent of the “holy fool” (Constance 2016). QR (i.e., Quick Response) codes make for irresistible targets in #QC’s attack on intelligibility: these hyper-signifiers condense and store disproportionately large amounts of signifieds, although their reading cannot be directly performed by human eyes and requires technological mediation. The excess of QR codes is mirrored and further magnified and spoofed in #QC’s costumes, which feature laminated QR code fragments strung together and looped around #QC’s body. The signifying connotation of a QR code is so pronounced and so excessive that it threatens to recede back into purely visual form. #QC’s necklace of DIY laminates (figs. 2

and 3) merely mimics QR codes, itself consisting of QR code-resembling fragments. Seen this way, #QC’s QR embellishments may be approached as Suprematist riffs. Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) was also arguably an attempt to transcend the signified: ‘To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling’ (Malevich 2003, p. 67). Interestingly, Suprematism has been revisited by other black artists who test the limits and borders of conceptualism, including Rasheed Araeen. In his series of paintings, *Opus* (2016), and painted wooden lattice, *Red Square (After Malevich)* (2015), Araeen revisits the spiritual and political aspirations of European Modernism to assimilate them into his own universalist project, tracing a fine but strong line ‘between the representation of universality as idealisation, the elevation of a god or ideal, and structural, or better, infrastructural equality’ (Newman 2017, p. 71). To the strings of tensions, contrasts and contradictions evoked by #QC, Suprematism adds a utopianism that is open to decolonial revisions towards radical democracy, as well as another pressing preoccupation: is meaning antithetical to feeling? In her aptly titled book *Read My Desire*, Joan Copjec rises in defence of the intelligibility of power as well as the intelligibility of affect, summarising her aims as follows: ‘to urge analysts of culture to become literate in desire, to learn how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements’ (Copjec 1994, p. 14).

In an earlier work, #QC stages situations of pronounced affect that present themselves to be read as well as, to a degree, empathetically experienced, however disturbing this might be. In the two-channel digital video installation *Happy Christmas Mom & Dad* (2006) (figs. 4 and 5), she offers her parents (played expertly by Allen’s own parents, neither of whom have an acting background) an exotic dance to the tune of a popular Christmas song. Predictably, this Freudian nightmare of a Christmas present provokes her parents’



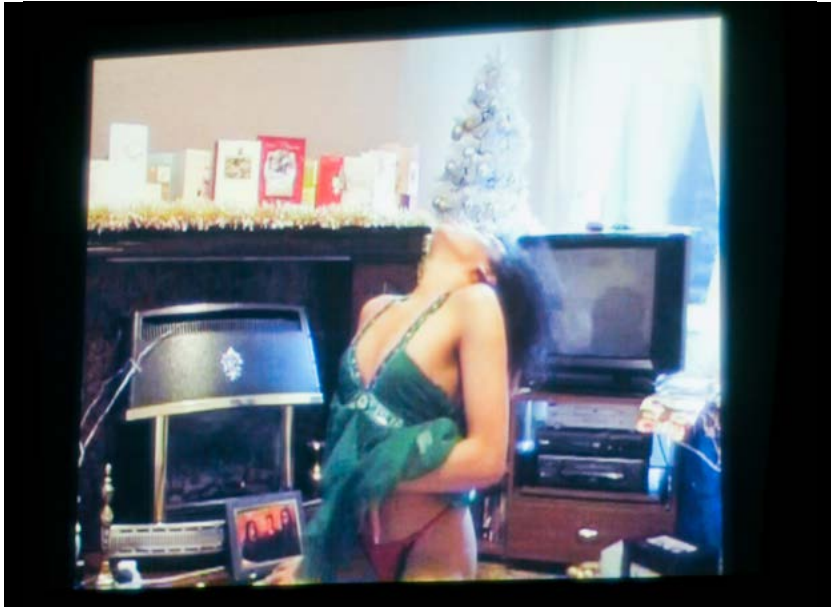


Fig. 4 - Quilla Constance (aka Jennifer Allen), Happy Christmas Mom and Dad, 2006, digital video installation. Photograph by Andrew Crowe.

Fig. 5 - Quilla Constance (aka Jennifer Allen), Happy Christmas Mom and Dad, 2006, digital video installation. Photograph by Andrew Crowe.



Fig. 6 - Quilla Constance, Pukijam, 2015, digital video still.

Fig. 7 - Quilla Constance, Pukijam, 2015, digital video still.



mortification: (for dad) repressed anger with a hint of incestuous desire, and (for mum) devastation and worry over the father's reaction. Allen has remarked how no other work of hers, including some of the more intense performances, has generated as strong emotional reactions as this video in her audiences. 'How could you do this to your parents?' some have reportedly asked her in disbelief, while others walked away in disgust. To an attentive viewer, it is easy to see that the dance and the reactions were filmed separately and subsequently synced together to create the illusion of #QC stripping in front of the parents. The use of North American spelling for 'mom' suggests the context for this devastating undoing of the family romance: this isn't just any Christmas but a schmaltzy, over-produced and tele-visually mediated Christmas, an ideological instrument for hyper-normative social reproduction and seasonal consumerism in one sanitised package. Revisiting the incest taboo in a later song video, *Snow Daddy* (2010), #QC restages her family-busting striptease in the large living room of an opulent country house, this time with professional actors. *Snow Daddy*, Allen noted in an e-mail exchange with the author in November 2017, 'operates as a semblance of pop [...] the video occupies a [...] liminal space through its refusal to fully commit and conform to the requirements of pop'. *Snow Daddy*, in other words, ups the ante not only in terms of production values but as full-blown 'genre-fuck', a term obviously modelled on 'gender-fuck', which not only blurs the boundaries between established genres but also questions the separation between fiction and experience, reading and living (Kokoli 2016, pp. 70–1).

According to her website, 'QC over-identifies with an "exotic" militant punk persona to interrogate category-driven capitalist networks'. One of the most controversial manifestations of that persona is a punk gender-critical subversion of the repugnantly racist caricature of the golliwog in *Pukijam* (2015), a single and video that became the centrepiece of her solo

show of the same name at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, London curated by Maria Kheirhah. The golliwog originates in a children's story by Florence Kate Upton, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls* (1895), which was hugely popular at the time of its original publication. 'The story begins with two Dutch dolls, Peg and Sara Jane, on the loose in a toy shop, encountering "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome." He was a caricature of American black-faced minstrels – in effect, the caricature of a caricature' (Pilgrim 2000). In *Pukijam*, this caricature of a caricature is caricatured anew into an athletic androgynous version of the Joker from the DC Comics universe, while at one point deep-fried drumsticks appear to stand in for the two Dutch dolls (fig. 6). The drumsticks get eaten soon after. The complex links between food, a fascinatingly rich cultural signifier, and intersectionally framed identity have been explored by many artists, from Mike Leigh in *Abigail's Party* (1977) to Jo Spence's phototherapy sessions with Rosy Martin and others. Fine china tea cups and cardboard buckets of fried chicken stand for opposed and oppositional British subjectivities and social positions, with #QC boldly and repeatedly crossing the boundary between them. In *Pukijam*, we see her daintily sipping tea and in the next moment gnawing on a drum stick, making a mockery of associated stereotypes. She preciously dabs paint on a canvas while drinking Jamaican Red Stripe lager ('Jamaican Pride in a Bottle', as the brand's slogan announces), a subversive allusion to Jackson Pollock's 'macho propensity for whiskey drinking' as she wrote me in a 2018 e-mail (fig. 7). In #QC's mediatised universe, fresh vegetables lose their innocence. Among the revolving objects and foods in *Pukijam* is a fennel root, chosen, as I was told, for its shape and colour, and also because of its absurdity. I was reminded that 'finnochio' is a homophobic slur in Italian, and realised that #QC does not merely highlight the capacity of objects to signify, but encourages an almost paranoid reader position, squeezing hidden meanings out of stones, or fennel roots.





Fig. 8 - Quilla Constance, Vjazzled single cover artwork, 2013.

Fig. 10 - Quilla Constance (aka Jennifer Allen), Happy Christmas Mom and Dad, 2006, cropped screen capture. Photograph by Alexandra Kokoli.

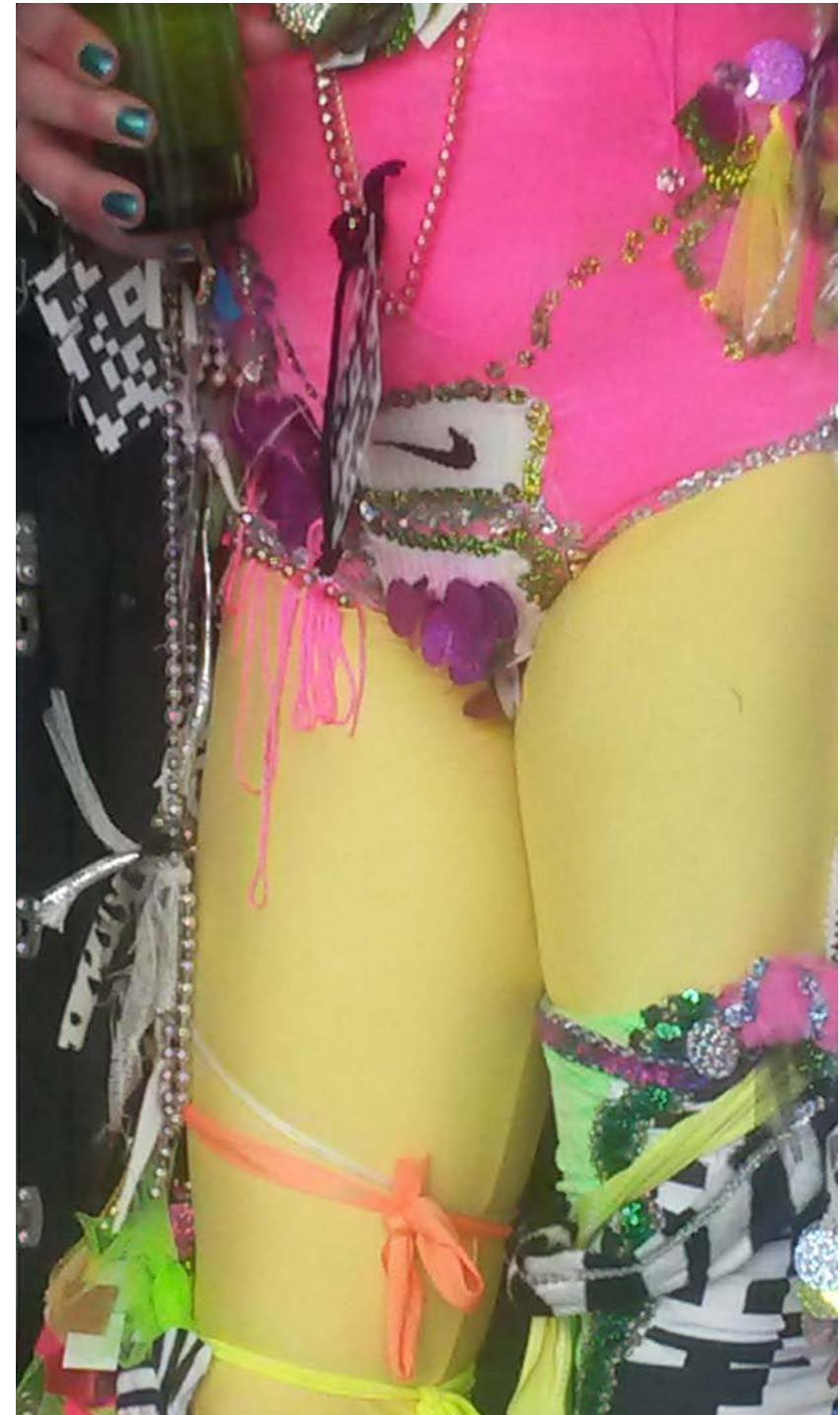


Fig. 9 - Quilla Constance, Celsnakar Performance, Transcending the Signified, 2017, MOCA London, 11 June.



In the single *Vjazzled* (2014), #QC appropriates the design of the Coca-Cola logo as a humorously illicit brand mash-up (fig. 8). Quilla Constance as Coca-Cola forces a daringly ambitious association in the self-branding stakes. The title *Vjazzled*, condenses references to jazz, vajazzling, namely, as the Collins English Dictionary has it, ‘the practice of decorating the region around the female genital organs with jewellery’, while also mobilising the associations of the capital ‘V’ in British popular culture. V is for ‘victory’, as in Winston Churchill’s famous photographs celebrating the end of the Second World War; but its reverse, with the back of the hand facing outwards, forms the British equivalent of the raised middle finger, a typically punk gesture of contemptuous exasperation and dismissal. In *Vjazzled*, this keen attention to how things signify and how malleable and unreliable such processes might be, is turned to the famous Burberry plaid, to foreground an edgier kind of appropriation. The iconic Burberry plaid design had so successfully and for so long been a purely visual signifier for the brand and all it stood for (sober fitness for purpose, outdoorsiness, a timeless and uniquely British understated luxury), until it became a symbol of misappropriation, thanks to its embrace by nouveaux riche working-class celebrities and, subsequently, the readers of the gossip magazines in which they featured (Sauers 2009).

Logos and trademarks are found in high circulation in #QC’s work, for similar reasons as QR codes: as privileged hyper-signifiers of denotation, dragging with them complex chains of connotation. #QC’s latest vajazzling involved a flipped Nike swish in crochet (fig. 9), resonating with Rosemarie Trockel’s machine-knitted Playboy bunnies and other logos, commercial and political. The flipped swish may be decoded as a deliberate subversion of a hugely successful logo: it appears backwards; it is knitted in sweaty yarn, rather than appearing in a high-tech, sport-friendly smart textile. Succumbing to the temptation to follow the

logo, I discovered that this Nike swish is the exact negative of the one worn by #QC’s seething (and/or turned on) father in *Happy Christmas Mom & Dad* (fig. 10). The undoing of the family romance is woven through #QC’s entire oeuvre, signalling the radical ambition of her project: if ‘the Oedipal complex is a machine which fashions the appropriate forms of sexual individuals’ (Rubin 1997, p. 51), #QC’s breach of the incest taboo sabotages patriarchal social reproduction by interrupting both structures of kinship and of language, as Claude Lévi-Strauss outlined and Jacques Lacan elaborated.

‘Plurisignation’, meaning, literally, signs or marks in great number, was originally ‘used by [American philosopher Phillip Ellis] Wheelwright in *The Burning Fountain* (1954) to indicate that a word, a passage or a whole work may have various levels and meanings of what is described as “semantic thrust”’ (Cuddon 2013). Rather than polysemy or ambiguity of meaning, ‘plurisignation’ suggests an uncomfortable crowding of potential threads of interpretation demanding to be picked up and sometimes leading in radically different directions. The term has been redeployed by Karla Holloway in reference to African-American women’s fiction, where it marks a kind of ‘internal displacement’ or ‘dissonance’ (Ahern, 2014). In #QC, internal displacements are multiplied and externalised, worn literally on her sleeve; dissonance is performed loud if not clear, in an ‘impure’ voice of ‘strident insistency’, as in the first generation of punk women (Frith & McRobbie 1990; Nehring 1997, p. 158). As well as being proudly unladylike, screaming and ‘cacophony in music’ has been interpreted as ‘an attempt to get a grip on the way the whole culture sounds’ (Nehring 1997, p. 155).

To return to Joan Copjec, a key psychoanalytic cultural project has been to dismantle the pervasive romantic notion of the inscrutable – unreadable – subject, by demonstrating instead that the subject holds no



unfathomable secret. More accurately, ‘the subject is subject to the equivocations of the signifier’ (1994, p. 68). #QC performs herself into an unruly and disruptive subjectivity by subjecting herself to a deluge of the most polluted, ambiguous, contested and controversial forces of signifying equivocation. She falters and stammers, she stumbles and hesitates, but weathers the waves of plurisignation by shouting out and thrusting back.

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NOTES

- 1 This text is an expanded and revised version of my contribution to the symposium ‘Transcending the Signified’, Camberwell College of the Arts, University of the Arts London, 23 June 2017 coinciding with #QC’s exhibition of the same name at MOCA London; a more developed version was presented at the conference ‘Conceptualism — Intersectional Readings, International Framings: “Black Artists & Modernism” in Europe After 1968’, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 7–9 December 2017. I am grateful to Quilla Constance for her insightful feedback and stimulating conversation, and also to the conference organisers and participants for their encouragement and expert input.

