

## William James

### Polari, Camp effect, and Xoán Anleo.

Polari, a type of gay slang in Britain, dates back to the involvement of homosexual culture with the criminal underworld. The homosexual subculture of the eighteenth century mixed with the world of gypsies, prostitutes and thieves to produce a rich cross-fertilization of customs, phrases and traditions. With the industrial revolution at the end of the century, more and more people moved to the cities in search of work and opportunity. In these larger urban locations, the scope for the development of communities of outcasts substantially increased. The appearance of Molly houses (private spaces for men to meet, drink, have sex together and practise communal rituals) encouraged the development of molly identity. A linguistic culture developed, feeding into that profession traditionally associated with poofs and whores: the theatre.

Much of polari is derived from lingua franca although no one really knows how this Mediterranean argot travelled (via sailors, gypsies, the circus?) and it is a rare (unique?) example of lingua franca –which had its heyday in the seventeenth century- surviving into the twentieth. There are also words derived from Eastern European Yiddish, Romani, criminal cant, backwards slang (hair=riah), Cockney rhyming slang. By the nineteen fifties polari had surfaced as a gay dialect and was greatly added to and enriched by ironic, queer humour (the póllice=Betty bracelets – Betty pulseras). It was used as a means of communication which would remain incomprehensible to heterosexual society and to encode an emerging homosexual lifestyle, operating as a tool with which to confuse the naff omes (straight men). Something as innocent sounding as varda the color of his eyes actually meant “check out the size of tis penis” and “nanty curtain” mean tan omee was circumcised!<sup>1</sup>

More importantly, it offered a means of performing a transgressive sexuality through language. Polari was theatrical, outrageous, attention grabbing and ironic –in other words it was camp. The histories of polari and camp are closely connected, marked by the encoding of a submerged subculture in the first half of the twentieth century and then a post-nineteen fifties cross over into mainstream due to the emergence of pop culture which may have killed Polari off: when it became popular it was no longer a secret. Polari was a camp practise in that it provided an opportunity of going public or coming out before the emergence of gay liberationist politics (in which coming out became a key confrontationist tactic). I may be argued that camp still represents a critical political practise for gay men; a White, urban, gay male taste as a form of resistance for that subculture.

Some people have attached the term Kitsch to the objects and representations that appear in Xoán Anleo's work. Kitsch is problematic for artists because it only occurs in Reading, it cannot be produced; the kitsch object is something pretending to be serious but failing dismally; kitsch is produced unconsciously and is therefore naive. Camp, on the other hand, whilst a close relation of kitsch, is altogether knowing and deliberate and has clear objectives. In the work of Xoán Anleo I am made aware of a carefully constructed queer <sup>2</sup> identity underlying what we can see and that an idea of camp performativity may be a key to understanding this work. We can sense the presence of autobiographic content in the work but we are placed in a position akin to the witness of an outburst of polari in that we sense its nature but cannot follow the plot: “While their motives may be clear to the camp, their resultant actions remain marked but mysterious to the observer”<sup>3</sup>. And this may be why Xoán Anleo's work always makes me think of Polari.

Anleo's Works love artifice, style, the appearance, the surface of things, it fixates on the trappings of things, rather than the things themselves, tiny nuances of behaviour, gesture, language. “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’”<sup>4</sup> A ‘shoe’, a pair of ‘shoes’.

We are given collections of objects and images which are mainly of domestic provenance, personal and feminine. As this is a man doing this, this suggests a camp appropriation of femininity. According to Mary Anne Doane, images of femininity can be undermined by a ‘double mimesis’ or parody: “What is needed is a

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<sup>1</sup> Information taken from Polari websites: <http://wp.uwm.edu/People/corre/franca/edition2/polari.html>

<http://members.aol.com/frij/polhis.html>

<sup>2</sup> When I use the term queer I should point out that I do not regard queer as synonymous with gay; the cultural manifestation of any group or individual opposed to or uncomfortable with hetero-normality may be called queer.

<sup>3</sup> Phillip Core: *The lie that tells the truth*. London: Plexus; New York: Delilah, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Susang Sontag. Notes on camp. *Partisan review*, Fall 1964.

means of making these gestures and poses fantastic, literally incredible”<sup>5</sup>. Judith Butler accounts for the cultural construction of gender parody “genders can be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible”<sup>6</sup>. By fixing on the performativity of gender, camp practise is constantly telling us that male-dominated hetero-normality is a culturally produced phenomenon. No wonder its chief protagonists have generally been women<sup>7</sup> and gay men.

“The camp effect occurs at the momento when cultural products (for instance, stars, fashions, genres, and stereotypes) of an earlier momento of production have lost their power to dominate cultural meanings and become available, in the present for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste”<sup>8</sup> Take, for example, the peculiar mood of a magazine like “Hola” in which the characters are famous for having, done something once upon a time, or being married to someone or the offspring of someone, but the way the magazine presents them is removed from whatever it was that they did in order to become popular. Anyone on the way up or really relevant would not appear, nor wish to.

Anleo’s objects are not exactly nostalgic-they may have been expropriated five minutes ago from the here and now, particularly in Works which make use of advertising imagery –but their displacement into a contemporary art context and the artist’s careful aesthetic handling have the effect of removal from time. We are shown a virtual environment with no age, no texture and no decay. If anleo were to take a photo of a motorway (although his work method (so far) would not actually allow this) it would celebrate the motorway as a literal thing, a gorgeous objet. The idea of the motorway is that the end –ease and speed of movement – justifies the means but in this photographed motorway the end and the means would be the same. We would be shown the motorway as divorced from the notion of travel or destination as in pornography we are shown sexual activity removed from social relations.

I wonder if the mediated, virtual spaces in Anleo’s work could be regarded as a kind of parallel space to for example retail space<sup>9</sup>, single use non-places, club space, certain areas of the internet; public (in the sense that they are not in the home or not home made) and yet privately owned, totally cultural and mediated for purposes of profit. A certain style of graphic design in Anleo’s work makes a clear reference to club culture. I also imagine there is a fair bit of shopping involved in production.

As they are mainly domestic objects or images appearing in the work we are given a further feeling of the private sphere intercepted from the public, or the fusing of limits between the two. “As private space no longer exists, we are really talking about private property. Our most intimate desires, fantasies, dreams are regulated and intercepted from the public sphere”.<sup>10</sup>

William James, Valencia, February 2000.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Anne Doane. *The desire to desire.: the woman’s films of the nineteen forties*, Bloomington Indiana UP, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender trouble*. Routledge, New York 1990.

<sup>7</sup> See Pamela Robertson’s excellent *What makes the feminist camp? Guilty pleasures: feminist camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Robertson’s excellent *What makes the feminist camp? Guilty pleasures: feminist camp from Mae West to Madonna*, Durham-London: Duke University Press, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> In Rem Koolhaas’s eagerly awaited Harvard guide to shopping, to be published later this year (but I’ve had a sneak preview) he argues that emblematic (public) space of the contemporary city is retail space and that urban development now depends on the future of shopping.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy sector. Felix González Torres. *Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea*. The Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1995.