

# Hiding in the Lights

Shimmering  
Opacity and the  
Glitter Commons  
in the Work of  
Katrina Daschner

Essay by  
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If you were there at the right time, a shower of rainbow glitter confetti may have fallen onto you as you arrived at Katrina Daschner's exhibition "BURN & GLOOM! GLOW & MOON! Thousand Years of Troubled Genders." For her work *Basic Stage (Collective Energy)* (2022), the artist set up an overhead mechanical contraption at the entrance to Kunststhal Wien, programming it to release a bucket of sparkles every thirty minutes. As with many of the new sculptural installation works in the exhibition, this rain of glitter is something that can be traced back to the artist's films from the last decade or so. *Hiding in the Lights* (2013), for instance—the second of Daschner's eight-part short film series of the same name—opens with metallic silver confetti fluttering in the air as it falls from above. In fact, right throughout Daschner's moving image works, there are things that sparkle and shine: sequins, diamantés, throbbing lights on shimmering makeup, metallic golden piss streaming down legs painted pearlescent in silver and gold, nipples adorned in twinkling jewels, sea creatures with tendrils that pulse and glow, pearls, champagne, lots of gleam, gloss, glamour, glitz, and glitter.

Glitter: it's fabulous, it's cheap, it's vulgar and glamorous, tacky and communal, iridescent and evanescent, sexy and non-linear. It's unmappable; it gets everywhere. It's the surface of the sea in the early morning sun; it's the stars above in the night sky. It's a tiny little galaxy worn on your cheek; and it's deeply queer. Like the rainbow, glitter has long been linked with LGBTQ+ aesthetics and politics. It sparkles through the histories of queer nightlife and performance art, including the intersecting worlds of drag, burlesque, vaudeville, and cabaret (aesthetic legacies with which Daschner's work is entangled). And it flashes up in queer protest tactics—including "glitter bombing," in which activists shower queerphobic politicians and organizations in this sticky substance that stands for the lives they despise.<sup>1</sup>

In 2011, Minnesota activist Nick Espinosa went to an event hosted by an anti-gay organization, where Newt Gingrich (a conservative politician who later became a key Trump ally) was signing copies of his book. When Espinosa got to the front of the line,

he doused Gingrich in a rain of sparkles while shouting, "Feel the rainbow, Newt! Stop the hate! Stop anti-gay politics!" Video documentation of the event shows Gingrich and his wife awkwardly trying to brush the glitter off the table, and off themselves, while continuing to sign books as if nothing has happened; as if they weren't sitting in the middle of this beautiful, unmanageable mess of sparkles; as if it's possible to ignore glitter.<sup>2</sup>

A glitter-based insistence on unapologetic queer visibility can also be traced in *Glitter + Ash*, a campaign by Parity, a New York-based Christian LGBTQ+ organization. Since 2017, Parity has promoted blending purple sparkles with blessed Ash Wednesday ashes so that the crosses on people's foreheads can make queer life within the church fabulously conspicuous. "WE WILL BE SEEN. Glitter is like love. It's irresistible and irrepressible," reads a statement on their website. "Glitter is an inextricable element of queer history. It is how we have displayed our gritty, scandalous hope. We make ourselves fabulously conspicuous, giving offense to the arbiters of respectability that allow coercive power to flourish."<sup>3</sup>

In their shimmering autobiographical essay "The Queer Voice: Reparative Poetry Rituals & Glitter Perversions" (2015), the poet CAConrad writes about being "unexpectedly liberated" in high school when they were outed as "a faggot queer" by the other kids. "I no longer needed to play by the rules of normal people because I had been kicked out of acceptable society," they recall. "I raised my hand to the mirror and vowed to never apologize for my love of glitter. The day after being Outed, purple and orange glitter appeared on my notebooks and eyebrows, glitter was my sacred shield as the other kids referred to me as Faggot so often they seemed to forget my real name." CAConrad advises everyone to "keep it in your shirt pocket in case you walk by a very sad place, then sprinkle a little red and purple with a touch of gold." "Glitter," they write,

"is not enabling denial of the world's pain but instead helps us endure the bleak results of those who are in denial of how we need one another. If you have a scar or bent nose that

has become the center of your life trust me when I say own it and apply glitter blush directly, immediately. Before you die join me in loving our flesh, loving our lives."<sup>4</sup>

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While glitter claims space and demands attention, its relationship to visibility is far from straightforward. It's in your face and over the top, but its effect is always elusive: through its granular scintillation, it takes the light and breaks it up, refracting it out in multiple directions. To look at glitter is to look at tiny points of momentary focus that flash up as quickly as they withdraw. Glitter winks at you. Its visual field is fragmentary and full of movement—you're facing a multiplicity of locations where differentiation is always unstable. Glitter says, "look at me," as it catches the light with bright bursts, but it also says, "what you're looking at cannot be pinned down." Remember that the word "glamour" comes from the Scottish *gramarye*, relating to magic, illusion, enchantment, and sorcery: "to cast the glamour" was to cast a spell that deceived the eyes and made things appear to change into other things—or to disappear completely.<sup>5</sup>

Daschner's work speaks to the politics of queer in/visibility through an aesthetic of glittery opacity. Her *Hiding in the Lights* films are glittery not only in their frequent inclusion of shimmering substances but also in their glittery energy; through their emphasis on change, metamorphosis, and fragmentary imagery that can flutter into the light and then vanish again. In *Plum Circus* (2019), for instance, there's someone in red lipstick taking a bath in a red liquid. She pours the liquid over her face and chest. It's like blood and red wine, and then, all of a sudden, it's red and silver glitter that she's pouring over her tits. In *Parole Rosette* (2012), the first film in the series, someone bends over while a gloved hand ceremonially unzips a "window" at the back of her pants so that her ass cheeks become fully exposed. The camera briefly cuts away to a close-up of the crack between two red velvet seats in a theatre: an ass discovered in the furniture. Then the camera cuts back to the bare human ass, only now it's covered

in shimmering violet glitter, and there's a velvety red rose planted in the crack. The editing constructs an erotics of transformation—with shapeshifting alterations that glitter in and out of each other, with no final resting places.

Glitter looks best at night—as with the stars above, which are invisible in the daytime, its iridescence is given form by darkness. Visitors to “BURN & GLOOM! GLOW & MOON!” entered the main exhibition space through the passageway of a giant vagina dentata with pearlescent silver teeth. On the other side, they found themselves in a space so dim that it took several minutes for the retina to adjust. Throughout the exhibition, there was a constant interplay of light and darkness; sparkly and reflective surfaces would gleam in the flick of light inside this very nocturnal atmosphere. Foiled silver curtains mirroring and mirrored in the pools of high-gloss flooring installed throughout the space; films that glittered with multifaceted shimmers projected above shiny grounds, which reflected their fleeting lights. Many lights, but always the possibility of “hiding in the light.”

In the 1970s, Roland Barthes turned to shimmers as spaces of nuance that outplay the paradigms of dialectical and binary thinking—shimmer as a site of tiny, twinkling gradations and changes, which “substitutes for the idea of opposition that of the slight difference, of the onset, of the effort toward difference.”<sup>6</sup> This read on shimmer has been picked up in more recent years within queer and trans studies, including Eliza Steinbock's work on “shimmering images” and the aesthetics of change in trans cinema.<sup>7</sup> Characterizing trans ontologies as process-oriented rather than object-oriented, Steinbock draws from Barthes's observation that the shimmering object is one “whose aspect, perhaps whose meaning, is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject's gaze.”<sup>8</sup>

The appearance of glitter depends on the viewer's perspective. It's like anamorphosis, where the image that flashes up for a specific vantage point doesn't appear at all when looked at from other angles. Holbein's anamorphic skull shows itself only when you stand in a certain position, and glitter only sparkles when the refracted light fleetingly aligns with your gaze. As you move, it moves; and its movements also move you. There's something very queer in this mode of visuality, if we think about the brilliantly inventive practices of desire that have necessarily circulated through code, subtext and subterfuge—always being attuned to the meaning that emerges from situated context, never needing to aim for a totalized, universalizing field of visibility.

Against the predatory enlightenment regime of the visual that separates the viewing subject from the immobilized object of their gaze, this is an invitation to understand perception and knowledge as embodied, situated, partial, and relational. Glitter emerges in relationality; for this reason, much is lost in the documentation that exists of Daschner's kinetic work *Basic Stage (Collective Energy)*. Lens-based representations of glitter do not themselves sparkle. Rather than partaking in a dynamic relationship of refracted light that is broken up and sent into the scatter of fleeting appearances, documentary photographs flatten the visual field with a unified vantage point and static representational logic.

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At one point in CACConrad's autobiographical essay about their “glitter perversions,” they imagine joining a Glitter Cult devoted to Henry Ruschmann, the farmer who invented modern glitter in New Jersey in 1934. “There would be a very shiny commune for us with edible glitter in every cocktail and plate of food, glitter flowing through us at all times,” they write. “After

<sup>1</sup> For a history of glitter bombing as a queer protest tactic, see Anya M. Galli Robertson, “Mixing glitter and protest to support LGBTQ rights,” *The Conversation*, March 12, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/mixing-glitter-and-protest-to-support-lgbtq-rights-74026> and Anya M. Galli, “How Glitter Bombing Lost Its Sparkle: The Emergence and Decline of a Novel Social Movement Tactic,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (September 2016): 259–81, <https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-20-3-259>.

<sup>2</sup> “Raw Video: Gingrich Hit With Glitter in Minn.,” *Associated Press*, May 17, 2011, video, 1:18, <https://youtu.be/LSb3kTA6vVI>. The impossibility of ignoring glitter was also key in the *revolución diamantina* (“glitter revolution”) that emerged in Mexico City in 2019, with women throwing masses of pink glitter while protesting rape culture and rising femicide in Mexico. The feminist illustrator Mariana “Maremoto” Lorenzo Contreras remarked at the time, “During the march, we threw glitter at people watching us, we threw it everywhere. We wanted to leave a pink stain on the street. We want the violence that we experience as women in this country to be like glitter: impossible to ignore.” See Lauren Cocking, “The History of Using Glitter As a Symbol of Protest,” *Teen Vogue*, August 28, 2019, [www.teenvogue.com/story/mexico-protest-glitter-explainer](http://www.teenvogue.com/story/mexico-protest-glitter-explainer).

<sup>3</sup> “Glitter Ash Wednesday,” Parity, <https://parity.nyc/order-glitter-ash-2021>.

<sup>4</sup> CACConrad, “The Queer Voice: Reparative Poetry Rituals & Glitter Perversions,” *Poetry Foundation*, June 22, 2015, [www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2015/06/the-queer-voice-reparative-poetry-rituals-glitter-perversions](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2015/06/the-queer-voice-reparative-poetry-rituals-glitter-perversions). See also CACConrad's poem “Glitter in My Wounds,” in which they write, “glitter on a queer is not to dazzle but to / unsettle the foundation of this murderous culture.” “Glitter in My Wounds,” *Poetry* (November 2018), [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetry-magazine/poems/148106/glitter-in-my-wounds](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetry-magazine/poems/148106/glitter-in-my-wounds).

<sup>5</sup> *Gramarye* was also related to scholarship and craft—in the occult sense, but also more generally; the word “grammar” is etymologically linked to the word “glamour” in this sense. Reflecting on her time as a

copy editor for *Glamour* magazine, feminist beauty writer Autumn Whitefield-Madrano notes, “Both grammar and glamour function as a set of rules that help people articulate themselves and allow us to understand one another. I understand you are telling me of the future by the use of words like *will* and *going to*; I understand you are telling me about your vision of yourself with red lipstick and a wiggle dress.” Autumn Whitefield-Madrano, “Thoughts on a Word: Glamour (Part I),” *The New Inquiry*, February 8, 2012, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/thoughts-on-a-word-glamour-part-i>.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). See also Vanbasten Noronha de Araújo, “Shimmery Waste: A Queer Critique of the Narrative of Glitter Pollution” (Doctoral diss., Central European University, 2019), [www.etd.ceu.edu/2019/de-araujo\\_vanbasten.pdf](http://www.etd.ceu.edu/2019/de-araujo_vanbasten.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Video call with the author, September 28, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of glitter pollution through queer and environmental lenses, see Vanbasten Noronha de Araújo, “Shimmery Waste: A Queer Critique of the Narrative of Glitter Pollution.”

a night of prodigious glitter ingestion the toilets at The Ruschmann Temple would sparkle like no other toilets; the dirtier they get the more glamorous they become.” Later in the essay, CAC Conrad proposes a new invention: “A product in power bar form or delicious milkshake that turns his semen to glitter jizz, and we coat each other’s faces with it then go to the club. You just know it will be the new rage! The DJ will turn on his black light and everyone will scream with joy as faces glow turquoise, green, pink, and red from glitter jizz!”

In both of these hilarious scenarios, glitter is a technology of transcorporeality; it flows through, out of, and across bodies, sweeping them up into a dazzling form of collectivity. Throughout Daschner’s “BURN & GLOOM! GLOW & MOON!,” there were tributes to the collaborators and friends who have been a part of the artist’s practice for decades. Lining the walls of the Kunsthalle’s foyer space, for instance, was a prominent mural showing a still from Daschner’s film *Flaming Flamingos* (2011) (the third part of her early film trilogy *NOUVELLE BURLESQUE BRUTAL*), in which the artist appears as a body within a group of bodies. The film features an extended silent shot of glittery silver confetti falling against a black background before cutting to this group figuration of intergenerational queer sociality. Everyone is dressed in red and black. We cannot tell who is who. They’re standing very close to each other—some are kissing or caressing—and they’re all wearing long wigs that cover their faces. Deindividualized, they form a writhing mass, an ensemble body where everyone is feeling and holding each other.

“BURN & GLOOM! GLOW & MOON!” brought together works by Daschner from the 1990s up until the present. Her earliest works were experimental photocollage self-portraits that playfully refashioned her identity through various many-gendered expressions and guises. After around 2000, her practice shifted

distinctly, insofar as she stopped working with her own body in isolation and moved towards more collective and collaborative processes. Speaking over the phone in September 2022, I asked the artist what precipitated this shift more than twenty years ago. Her answer was surprisingly succinct. “I came out,” she said.<sup>9</sup> Coming out was not just about revealing or affirming something true about herself; it was an opening up into new forms of friendship and community. This is not a universal experience, but it is one that I—and I think many other queers—can relate to. In Daschner’s case, her coming out coincided with a flourishing of community around queer performance practices; in 2001, Daschner, together with artists Stefanie Seibold and Johanna Kirsch, who was also a former partner, founded Salon Lady Chutney, an independent queer performance art space with an upstairs bar in a former hair salon in Vienna. Many of the artist’s long-term collaborators were originally connected through that space, and the community that formed around the salon would come to redefine her work.

#### *Basic Stage (Collective Energy)*

—Daschner’s glitter shower contraption at the entrance to the exhibition—offers another tribute to her friends, although in this case, it is less figuratively representational. The title of the work holds an affirmation of the energy of collectivity, and the materiality of glitter is something that can stand for unexpected forms of community and alliance. This is the glittery commons: glitter is bad at individualized containment, it exists on an unmanageable scale, and it can remain in circulation by grabbing onto whatever and whomever comes into its orbit.<sup>10</sup> It seeks out cracks and crevices in bodies, objects, and spaces, and it lingers on as a sticky afterimage so that you might find telltale sparkly remnants in your bed-sheets or in your belly button days after the queer party. Flashes of brilliance that hide and light up and withdraw again, hiding within the light.