



# ***The Cesspool of Rapture***

Joseph Noonan-Ganley

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homosexuality

word

the

in

believe

don't

I

know

I

yes

Video still demonstrating how a sentence is read in reverse in the moving image artwork:  
Joseph Noonan-Ganley, *The Cesspool of Rapture*, 2018, 17min 21sec.

Joseph Noonan-Ganley *The Cesspool of Rapture*

## STATEMENT

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*The Cesspool of Rapture* is a body of exploratory research produced between 2016 and 2019. The research was disseminated through gallery exhibitions of fabric artworks, screenings of a moving image work, a book, and a series of events involving discussions and performances drawing on the book's content.

*The Cesspool of Rapture* examines the life and work of the British-American couturier Charles James (1906-1978), addressing the lack of discourse on James's innovative use of the zipper which he popularised in the 1920s and 1930s, and his complex sexuality. Drawing on the literary genre of biofiction as a way to create new queer methodologies in a fine art context, in this work Noonan-Ganley developed innovative visual and textual editing techniques in response to a range of source materials on James: museum archives, personal collections and published literature. This allowed him to create new queer narratives on James's design work with the zipper and his personal life, to expand and complexify contemporary narratives of male sexuality. The zipper is the central subject and device in this project. As

well as being under-researched in studies of James, in a fine art context it operated as a compelling design, drawing erotic analogies between clothes and art. The zipper features across the output, in the exhibition and the publication and is the backbone of the experimental structuring and editing techniques. In this sense, each component of the project engages with techniques of assemblage to inform the overall ambition of exploring the zipper as a queer method of biographical, visual and textual study.

## OUTPUTS

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- 1. A series of fabric artworks reconstructing James's 1932 *Taxi Street Dress*, 2017 (pp. 6-7).**
- 2. A moving image artwork, *The Cesspool of Rapture*, 2018, 17min 21sec. (pp. 8-11).**
- 3. An artist's book, *The Cesspool of Rapture*, 2019, edition of 50, ISBN 978-1-910055-54-0 (pp. 12-13).**

These were developed and disseminated across national and international publicly funded institutions including three gallery exhibitions, public screenings, and a series of events involving discussions and performances from the book. Full details p.18.

## STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

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Throughout the research, Noonan-Ganley adapted the postmodern experimental literary genre biofiction as a method for contemporary art practice. He developed new editing techniques applying biographical criticism and fiction in response to primary and secondary materials he collected on James, including voice recordings, moving image studies, texts, and photographs.

One of the editing techniques Noonan-Ganley developed with sound engineer Paul Maguire produced new video editing software. Influenced by the structure of the zipper, it joined or sutured the separate audio and video materials together. This allowed Noonan-Ganley to re-think linearity in biographical literary practice, in relation to conflicting material, such as accounts, testimonies, or obscured and deteriorated documents or artefacts.

The project reworks previously un-published materials, texts and objects by James, accessed by Noonan-Ganley in specialist archives, collections, and through discussing these materials with associates of James. Noonan-Ganley made new artworks based on his comparison of these sources. He produced new meanings through extensively reworking James' objects, exploring the queer experience of James, in his time, through his surrounding culture and contexts. The

techniques aim to challenge singularly constructed, coherent authorship in biography, instead re-distributing conflicted and multi-authored material relating to James's desire, labour and works.

These works set out to speak to an audience with personal or specialist interest in queer studies; literature - in particular experimental approaches to biography; artist's video – in particular those interested in experimental methods of biographic video art, and 'structuralist' film and video – renegotiating the relationship between sound and image in innovative moving image work.

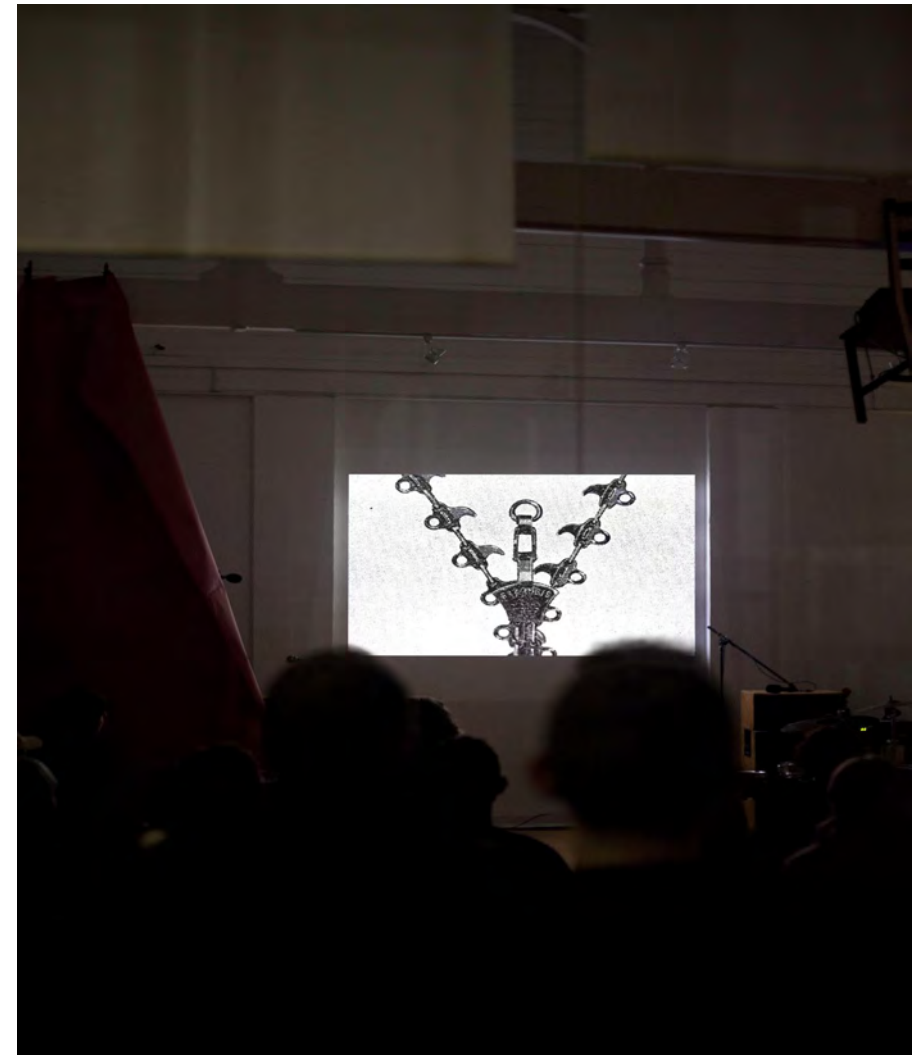
The project was discussed at specialist artists' film venues (such as no.w.here, London) and through the publication within Ma Bibliotheque's *The Good Reader Series* - dedicated to developing experimental literary approaches that challenge singular readings of past figures and events.

The work was also presented and developed within the ongoing international collaborative exhibition and event series *Something To Be Scared Of* (2015-present), that researches links between writing, materialist and identity-based practices in a fine art context.

Biofiction (see Lacey 2016) offers tools that allow for exploratory and process-based work with the texts, images and materials that make up a person's biography. These experiments insist that new meanings are found, which do not necessarily prioritise the intentions or the established representations of the stories of a person's life. Biofiction prioritises the space of interpretation as an ever changing, context based and inter-relational form of meaning making. Due to the legacy of the rich literary genre of biography and its critical deconstruction in biofiction, these discourses offer appropriate tools for contemporary art that deals with biographical materials.

In the context of contemporary art this project builds upon biofiction used by artists such as Katrina Palmer in *The Time Travelling Circus* (2017). Noonan-Ganley builds on recent queer literary work, for example Clare Hemmings book *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive* (2017).

Noonan-Ganley builds on this through his exploration of James's ambivalence toward his contemporaries' championing of homosexuality as a basis for understanding queer experience. These historical political ambivalences expand current vocabularies of queer experience, through understanding dissonant historical motivations to represent and practice politics and sex in different ways.



Installation shot of moving image artwork: Joseph Noonan-Ganley *The Cesspool of Rapture. Going Along Without a Body, Commentary on the Sound-Track Ritual*, Iklectic, London, 2017.

## The Zipper as Methodology

Building upon his research into the relationship between textiles and sexuality, Noonan-Ganley was drawn to Charles James as both an underexplored historically-important innovator and a queer man, who had a wife and children, as well as many male sexual relationships.

Research for this project drew on national (Victoria and Albert Museum's dressmakers' collection) and international (Brooklyn Museum, Met Museum, New York) collections which provided photographic, video and textual materials on Charles James's use of zippers.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, James was at the forefront of the fashion industry celebrating this new fastening device, his 1932 *Taxi Street Dress* demonstrates his most radical use of the zipper. It was composed of one single strip of fabric with a spiraling zipper that, when zipped up composed the form of the dress.

There are no surviving examples of this design. It is documented only in the photo featured in the advertisement opposite.

Above: Installation shot: Joseph Noonan-Ganley's *Charles James's seamless Taxi Street Dress, complete with unzipped spiraling zippers and unseen seams undone, linen, RIRI zippers, dressmaker's pins.* (2017) *Something I Be Scared Of*, Syndicate Gallery, Cologne, 2017. Below: Advertisement for Lightning Fasteners featuring Charles James's 1932 *Taxi Street Dress* (zipper version).





## The Zipper as Methodology

Noonan-Ganley remade James's 1932 *Taxi Street Dress* from the historical advertisement and unpicked all the seams which were not captured in the photo. He exhibited it flattened out, pinned to the wall, demonstrating the full and singular length of fabric and the surprising abstraction of the design.

The majority of literature, exhibitions and commentary on James are focused on his innovative work on the bias, approach to weight, placement of waists, and use of darts. His work with zippers and his complex sexual life and ideologies have not had attention, nor been explored with artistic methods.

The zipper is an interesting device because of its mechanical qualities and its initial autonomy from the garment: a zipper is a readymade device that is designed into clothes. Noonan-Ganley developed editing techniques influenced and guided by the design, movement, use and sound of the zipper.

A zipper's teeth interlock or unlock when the pull tab moves across them. There is a direct correlation to moving image where a frame and corresponding audio (on separate but parallel tracks) play when they are activated at the same time, whether by a play head in editing software or by the audio-visual apparatus.



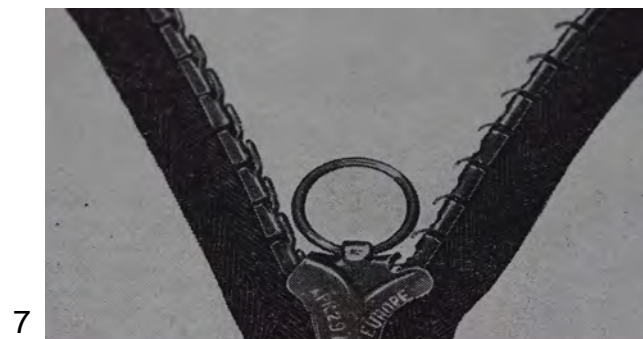
Installation shot: Joseph Noonan-Ganley's *Charles James's seamless Taxi Street Dress, complete with unzipped spiraling zippers and unseen seams undone, linen, RIRI zippers, dressmaker's pins.* (2017). *Something I Be Scared Of*, Syndicate Gallery, Cologne, 2017.

## The Zipper as Methodology

*The Cesspool of Rapture*, 2018,  
HD digital video 17min 21sec.

View full video on vimeo.com:

<https://vimeo.com/305936637/d5f29446f4>



A sequence of eight stills from the beginning of the video demonstrating the analogy between the movement of a zipper with the movement of images in sequence.



### Video editing techniques derived from archival processes of accrual and decomposition

Noonan-Ganley developed an editing technique that responded to the material qualities and volume of appearance of archival materials in the Brooklyn Museum's collections.

These two source photos opposite (originals taken by the Brooklyn Museum curatorial staff) document the damage to one of James's dresses during an exhibition of his work in 1982-1983.

The original in gloss (1), proliferates in poor copies (2) throughout the filing systems of different departments of the museum. The video follows and documents these images as they migrate, accumulate and degrade.

This technique keyed into an important musicological term: inherent vice, which is a technical term is used to describe an object that has a material composition causing it to decompose or self destruct. Museum and archive staff often produce vast quantities of material in the process of studying and documenting inherent vice.

1



2



## Experimenting with biographical archival material

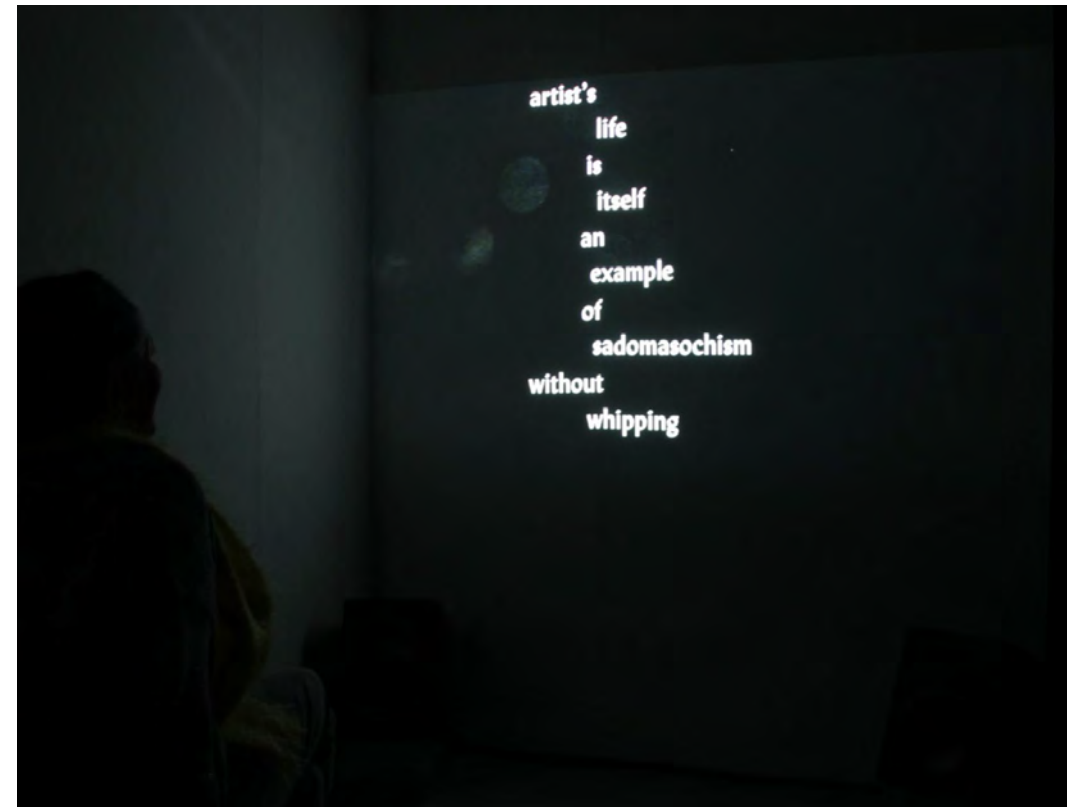
The voice and text in this video are edited snippets from thirty-two hours of previously unpublished home camcorder interviews with Charles James.

The editing process for his speech started by finding and grouping every sentence that dealt with the topic of sexuality. Instead of 'illustrating his point', the final composition found new meanings and associations between his words.

The video, using James' voice alters both his own representations of his sexuality, and disrupts established narratives on his personal life. It does this through serially exposing and accruing anecdotes and examples of his theories on homosexuality and their relationships with dressmaking.

This complex web shows James to be allergic to any naming of queer experience, he talks about his disbelief in the word homosexuality for example.

It also showed James to have developed many theories about the time a dressmaker spends with women as a practice that, if done well, can provide the opportunity for homoerotic and social encounter.

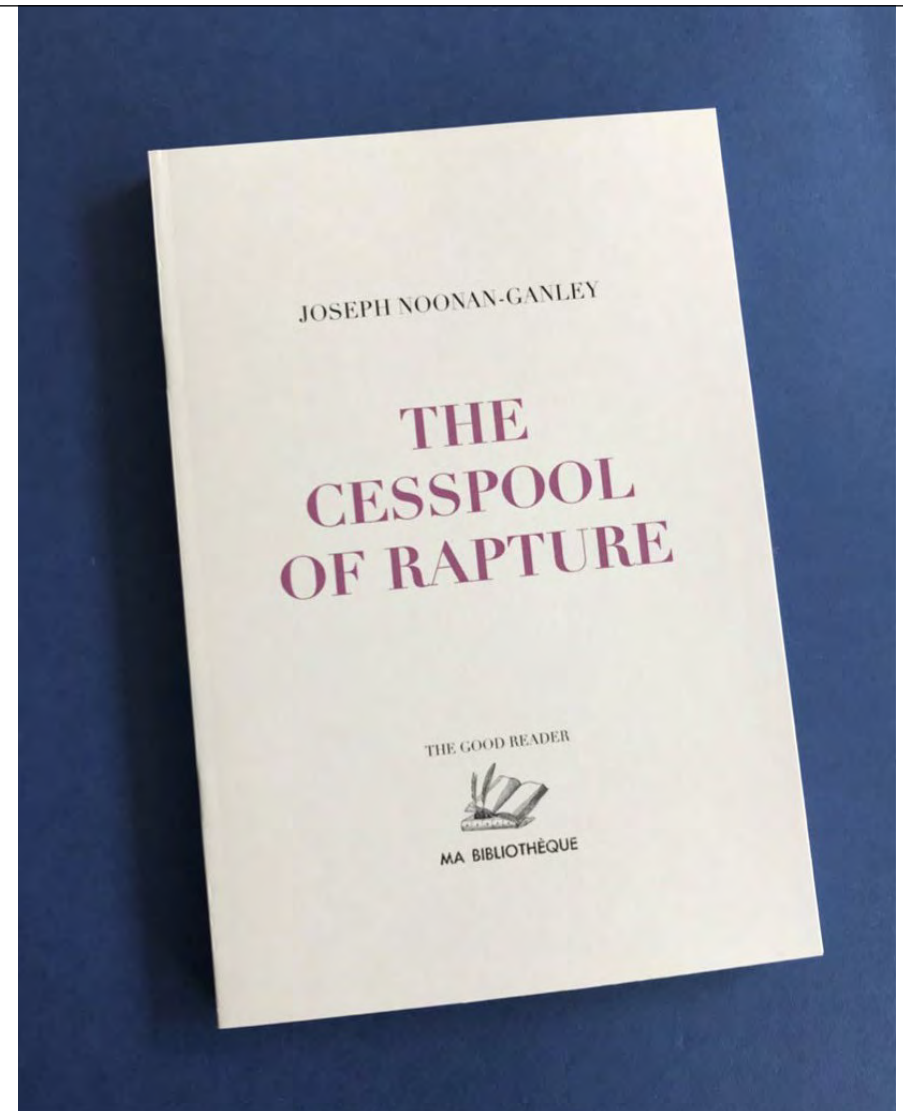


### Publication for reading and for performance

This book shows the interaction of two bodies of language, formally arranged on the page like teeth in a zipper. The column registered to the left margin logs James's public speech, lectures, and theories of the stripper and burlesque dancer Gypsy Rose Lee (1911–70), while the column registered to the right logs transcripts of his private arguments and correspondence with her. Spacing, repetition, colour, and italics emphasise and shift James's intended meaning. Readers can pull the text together as they make their way through, undertaking a similar labour of composition to the work of a zipper's slider.

These texts were created by drawing together and rewriting original sources and fragments alongside writing speculative fictional additions, that allowed each column to be elaborated.

Noonan-Ganley developed this text through a series of public performances (at venues including the Henry Moore Institute), where he worked with specific readers to read aloud specific colour-coded parts of the text in a chronological fashion. The effect of this is that the voice of the text passes through and over the readers rather than attempting to be aligned with the spoken sounds of any one reader's voice.



Through the displacement and manipulation of original source material in the reading experience, Noonan-Ganley's book builds upon other publications by Ma Bibliotheque such as Sharon Kivland's *Reading Nana* (2017). Kivland's protagonist is a reader of Emile Zola's 1880 novel *Nana*, whose approach prioritises her immediate associations and attachments to the material and visual qualities of the protagonist of the original book (rather than taking an objective position).

The book builds on these experimental methods of association and identification in other works of biofiction such as *Jane, A Murder* by Maggie Nelson (2005). This book follows Nelson's identification with a range of materials and experiences during the process of uncovering her aunt's murder. Here again the result is both biographical and fictional when understood as a representation of her aunt.

Noonan-Ganley was invited to publish material from this body of research in Ma Bibliotheque's *The Good Reader Series*, because the series is dedicated to artistic writing that addresses themes of "reading and re-reading" – themes central to the methods he used to alter established narratives on James. Important international artists published in the series include Sam Keogh, Annabel Frearson and Jamie Crewe.



**Exhibitions, screenings, performances and events  
2017-2019**

Stories from the Sculpture City, Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds, 8th February, 2017 (performance).

Something I Be Scared Of, Syndicate gallery, Cologne, 27th April -27th May, 2017 (exhibition).

Going Along Without a Body, Iklectic, London, 4th November 2017 (screening/event).

Amended Plastics, PuntWG, Amsterdam, 25th November – 17th December 2017 (exhibition).

Something 3 Be Scared Of, no.w.here, London, February 16th 2018 (screening/event).

Sad Mirror, Xero, Kline & Coma gallery, London, 6th October -28th October 2018 (exhibition).

Miss Read, Hopskotch, Berlin, 4th May, 2019 (performance).

South London Gallery, London, 8th May 2019 (performance).  
These performances (based on my book) were an important demonstration and test of the research – I used two readers who each read out the different text alignments (see slide15).



### **Specialist archives used through the research**

Noonan-Ganley developed many of the artistic research methods explained above in response to the material specificity of a number of institutional collections and archives during research visits in 2016-2017:

- Victoria & Albert Clothworkers Centre, London, UK.
- London College of Fashion Library, University of the Arts, London, UK.
- The British Library, London, UK.
- Brooklyn Museum Libraries and Archives, New York, USA.
- Metropolitan Museum Watson Library and Archives, New York, USA.
- New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, USA.