

# Queer Curating



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# Editorial: Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating

## Jonathan Katz and Anne Söll

Queer is a term that sets out to question normative, and especially heteronormative, systems and relations within society. Queer Theory understands gender and sexuality as relational constructs, subject to historical and cultural variation. Because the idea of “queer” tries to go beyond the idea of a permanent and stable identity, it works to connect sexual orientation to other forms of identity rooted in the unstable ideological quagmire of “orientation,” such as race, age, or ethnicity. In this way, it incorporates the idea of intersectionality, showing how multiple modes of identification cross-pollinate.

From Dan Cameron’s very early *Extended Sensibilities* in 1982—a queer exhibition that strenuously avoided using any queer nomenclature in its title—to Jonathan Katz’s 2010 Smithsonian exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (that notably did the same), the question of nomenclature has been a defining problem in queer exhibition making. In part this is because of fears of a prejudicial response, but it also reflects the rapid mutation of language referencing same-sex desire, and more to the point, its shifting ontological/ideological ground. Whereas gay and lesbian, for example, accepted a binary, totalizing structure for sexuality, one so complete that the few individuals who fell out of it earned their own sobriquet “bisexual,” with the advent of queer the very notion that human sexuality could be parceled out among different people as an essential difference has come increasingly under fire. Queer theory instead held that rather than reify a concept of sexuality as inherent, sexual differences were mere constructs, of no greater import than other questions of human taste, and like other such tastes, capable of change in a non-binaristic way.

Moreover, in distinct contrast to most minority politics, where representation and demographics are the key terms of contestation, in the art world, queer presence is hardly either marginal or something new. In fact, queer artists crowd our museums, and queer staff are central to the provision of modern exhibitions. The question here, in short, isn’t about literal presence; it’s about discursive presence, about how often, or not often, queerness is named, defined, or referenced.

“Queer” presents a challenge to the museum as a normalizing, meaning-making entity and asks how these concerns can be addressed in museum-practices, that have, for the most part, silently and unknowingly reproduced and solidified heteronormative structures and desires. How have queer issues, queer curators, and queer exhibitions shaken this up? How can queer desire continue doing so? What does queer change in the museum look like? Three main points emerged during the conference, on which this volume of “On Curating” is based. First: Queer exhibitions and queer curating interrogate the passive position of the viewer and demand active engagement, honest investment, and frank questioning, while also leaving room for unanswered questions, gaps, and fissures. Secondly, queer curating addresses the productive role of the body and its (queer) desires, even if the terms of that address are non-representational, and even utterly abstract. Third, queer curating must necessarily question and challenge the normative structures of the museum itself by addressing questions of the archive, collecting, and education as well as acknowledging and addressing a “queer” audience. Queer exhibitions disrupt any notion of a singular, unified, homogeneous audience, in

favor of a plurality of audiences with a plurality of interests, experiences, and competencies. When conceived as multiple, audiences can register and produce very different kinds of knowledges. Queer curating starts with such simple things as the re-labeling of objects or changing a database but can graduate to innovative curatorial conceits, groundbreaking research, and unprecedented cultural programming and events.

Still, even the basic notion of a queer exhibition papers over significant distinctions. Queer exhibitions can range from an openness in auditioning queer biography on the part of individual artists, to an acknowledgement of queer themes in their work, to full scale exhibitions that make sexual difference their governing theoretical or socio-historical frame. The development of sexuality-themed art museum exhibitions is a relatively recent phenomenon, traceable only to the early 1980s. Even today, queer exhibitions are quite rare—there have been a total of under 50 across the world—and in many nations they are still contentious. Queer exhibitions tend to cluster around certain individuals and institutions, and are notably unevenly distributed across the globe and even among different regions of the same nation. In part, their advent can be said to track socio-political advances in queer civil rights, and as such are a function of regional and national politics. But even a cursory look at exhibition histories reveals that such macro phenomena as queer civil rights are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the making of queer museum exhibits. Equally important are a range of factors from the style of art in question to its periodization, market valuation, funding stream, patronage class, scholarship, activist personalities, and the museum's own culture and structure. In addition, contemporary critical fashions, theoretical paradigms and the perceived beliefs and wishes of the artists in question all govern the prospect of queer exhibitions as well. In short, with the emergence of a queer curating we have a delimited and highly specific lens through which to examine the many diverging forces that animate and structure the contemporary museum exhibition.

We thank Isabel Hufschmidt and the whole staff at the Museum Folkwang for their support, help, and encouragement in realizing the conference which took place there on the 19th and 20th of May 2017. Our thanks also goes out to the assistants at the Ruhr Universität Yvonne Schmied and Lena Dunker who helped to set this conference up. Without their support, it would not have happened.

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**Änne Söll** is Full Professor for modern art history at Ruhr Universität in Bochum, Germany. She studied art history at Middlesex University, London, as well as at Frankfurt University and Rutgers University. She holds a PhD in art history and her thesis was published in 2003 under the title: “Arbeit am Körper. Pipilotti Rists Videos und Videoinstallationen.” An editor for the magazine *kritische berichte* since 2011, she has published on the topics of New Objectivity, fashion and art, and masculinity in art. Her book on men's portraits in New Objectivity painting was published in 2016 by Fink Verlag. Currently she is working on the history and appropriations of period rooms.

**Jonathan D. Katz** directs the doctoral program in Visual Studies at the University at Buffalo. He co-curated (with David Ward) *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, the first queer art exhibition ever mounted at a major US museum, which opened at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, then traveled to The Brooklyn and Tacoma Museums, winning the Best National Museum Exhibition award from the International Association of Art

Critics and the best LGBT non-fiction book award from the American Library Association. His next major exhibition, entitled *Art AIDS America*, co-curated with Rock Hushka, traveled to 5 museums across the US, accompanied by a substantial eponymous new book. A pioneering figure at the intersection of art history and queer studies, Katz was the first full-time American academic to be tenured in what was then known as Gay and Lesbian Studies and chaired the first department in the field in the US, at City College of San Francisco. At Yale University, Katz was founding director of its Lesbian and Gay Studies program, known as the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies, the first in the Ivy League. An activist academic, he founded the Queer Caucus for Art of the College Art Association, the professional association of artists and art historians, co-founded Queer Nation, San Francisco, and co-founded the Gay and Lesbian Town Meeting, the organization that successfully lobbied for queer anti-discrimination statutes in the city of Chicago. After many years as President of the Board, he is now the president emeritus of the new Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City, where he curated numerous exhibitions.

Katz is now completing two new books, *Art, Eros and the Sixties*, and *The Silent Camp: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and the Cold War*. He remains an active curator, and a major new exhibition will be announced shortly.

# How Could This Have Happened? Reflexions on Current Programming Strategies of Schwules Museum Berlin

Birgit Bosold (text)  
and Vera Hofmann (visuals)

I.

For more than 30 years now, New York's Guerrilla Girls have been decrying this scandalous fact: "Women have to be naked to get into museums!" With numerous interventions, they have highlighted massive gender and ethnic biases in museums around the world. The Girls still have every reason to rage. In their intervention into the 40th anniversary of the Museum Ludwig Cologne in 2015, only 11% of the museum's collection were works by women,\* (the asterisk is intended to suggest the insufficiency of an identity term we must nonetheless use) only 3% were from women of color, only 20% of the solo shows since 1989 were dedicated to female\* artists, and only 1% to nonwhite female artists. Despite the fact that 14% of Cologne's population has a "migrant background," only 1% of the collection of the city's most important art museum contains works from such artists. The Guerrilla Girls' campaign in Cologne also addressed the spike in funding of museums worldwide by private collectors. They exposed this as a smart business model, as the collectors themselves get control of prices and hence their profits within the art business while simultaneously being acclaimed as generous philanthropists. Art historian Kathryn Brown calls this "philanthrocapitalism."

In December 2017, the biggest-ever empirical survey of gender discrimination in the European and US-American art worlds was published.<sup>1</sup> According to its database, which contains 2.7 million transactions in the period from 2000 to 2017 submitted by over 1,000 galleries representing 100,000 artists, only 5% of the documented artists were female,\* only 5% of the documented sales involved works of art by women,\* only 13.7% of the artists represented by European and US galleries are female, and the sales revenue from the top two artists, Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol, far outstripped the combined revenue of all the women\* artists put together. To this day, not a single woman\* has made it into international art's so-called top league, despite the fact that the proportion of female\* students in art schools has been a steady 50% since 1983.

Looking for someone to blame? Of course it is not the sole fault of collectors, galleries, and museums that these ugly truths persist. Their decisions mirror prevailing social norms, actively contributing to the perpetuation of dominant oppressive structures such as misogyny and sexism. In fact, in this particular context the invalidation of women's\* perspectives and positions, creativity, work, and reputations is even quantifiable. Since Linda Nochlin asked, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in her famous 1971 essay, little has changed.<sup>2</sup> The notion of the single male genius is as predominant as ever, a conclusion shared by the authors of the survey.<sup>3</sup>

## II.

Nothing new. All these facts and figures are well-known and well-documented. But maybe there is something else which is rarely addressed. In order to get acquainted with this issue, please participate in a small test: name, just on the fly, the ten most important queer artists in your personal view. For the moment it doesn't matter what "queer" really means, nor if they are contemporary, classical modernists, or old masters. It also doesn't matter why they are "important." I assume a list will form immediately in your mind. Perhaps you can guess what this test is about: How many of the artists on your list are female,\* how many POC, how many are both of these, how many are disabled persons? Would the list have been different if we had asked you to name the 10 most important queer male artists and the 10 most important female ones? How much time would it have taken to prepare the list of the female artists, how much in comparison the male list? How big would you estimate is the difference in income between both of the lists, or the difference in the prices their works attract? And why is this?

## III.

While every reasonably well-informed person can easily name a line-up of artists who made an international career while employing "gay" motifs in their work—such as Wolfgang Tillmans, Elmgreen & Dragset, Henrik Olesen, David Hockney, Francis Bacon, or Felix Gonzales-Torres, to name only a few—it is very challenging to identify internationally renowned artists who refer to lesbian\* longing, lifeworlds, and experiences. It's perfectly obvious: the "invisibility" of lesbian\* desire within the art world is primarily the result of the marginalization of female\* artists. But also within discourses and exhibitions on so-called "women's art" or "feminist" art, lesbian positions and even biographical information are very often swept under the carpet. Is this sort of erasure a move made by the curators, calculated or otherwise? Or is labeling their work "lesbian" so stigmatizing that hardly any artists stress their personal life in their work or discuss their sexuality in biographical documents?

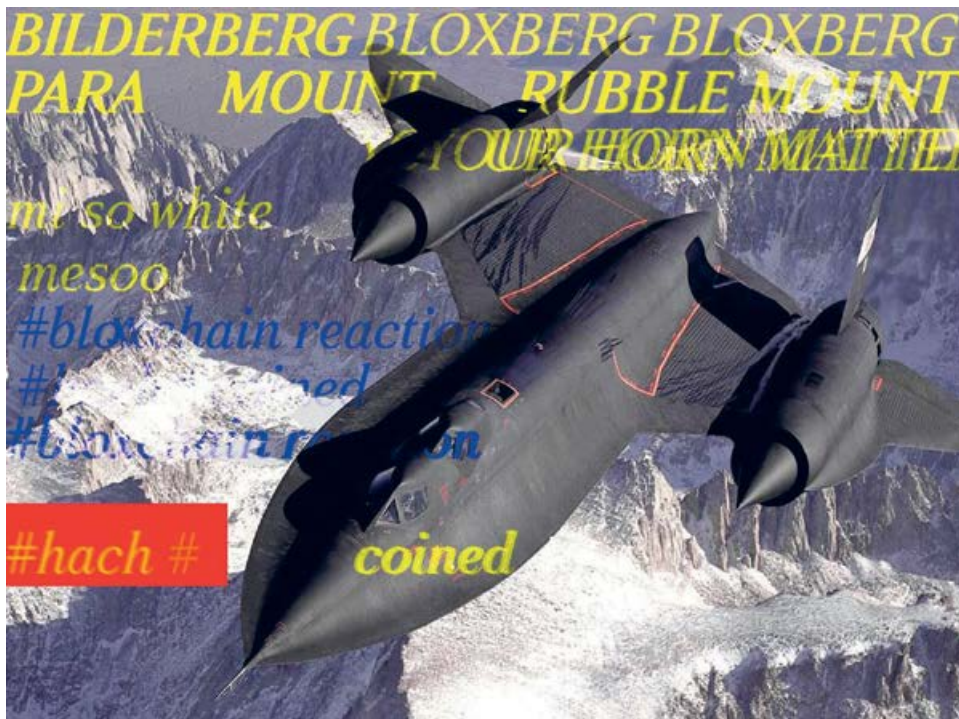
Since homosexuality is generally tolerated today throughout the western world, gay (white, cis) men can obviously profit from a "queer dividend" within the art world. In addition to Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon is part of the top 25 artists (the top 0.03%) mentioned in the survey above, whereas other queers, non-cis, POC, disabled, as well as lesbian artists are prevented from achieving the same status. The top league of female artists indeed contains some "queers" such as Georgia O'Keefe, Cindy Sherman, Tamara de Lempicka, or Agnes Martin. But without thorough research, we assume that most of these works are focused on feminist or general queer perspectives rather than specifically referring to something you could name "lesbian." Whereas gay men profit from the "glitter premium," dyke aesthetics and issues are still considered unhip, less charming, unsexy, less appealing, or in any case something which contains "un-" or "-less." In fact, there are many reasons to react with "un-" or "-less." Dykes are possibly widely regarded as "humorless," just because they are simply much less likely to smile away the outrageous impositions of misogyny and sexism women\* are confronted with all the time.

But it gets even worse. This fundamental attitude is still found in queer culture, art and curating, making the essential position of dykes, lesbian feminists, and queer women\* "invisible" and erasing the constitutive role they have had within women's liberation, gay liberation, and queer politics. It's well-known that major "queer" art shows overwhelmingly feature gay male artists. Take, for example, "Queer British Art" (2017, Tate London), "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" (National



Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian, Tacoma Art Museum, Brooklyn Museum, 2011/12) or “The Eighth Square” (Museum Ludwig Köln, 2006). Apart from reflecting prevailing social norms within the “malestream” world, these curatorial strategies enable such norms to pervade queer or LGBTIQ culture, politics, and communities.

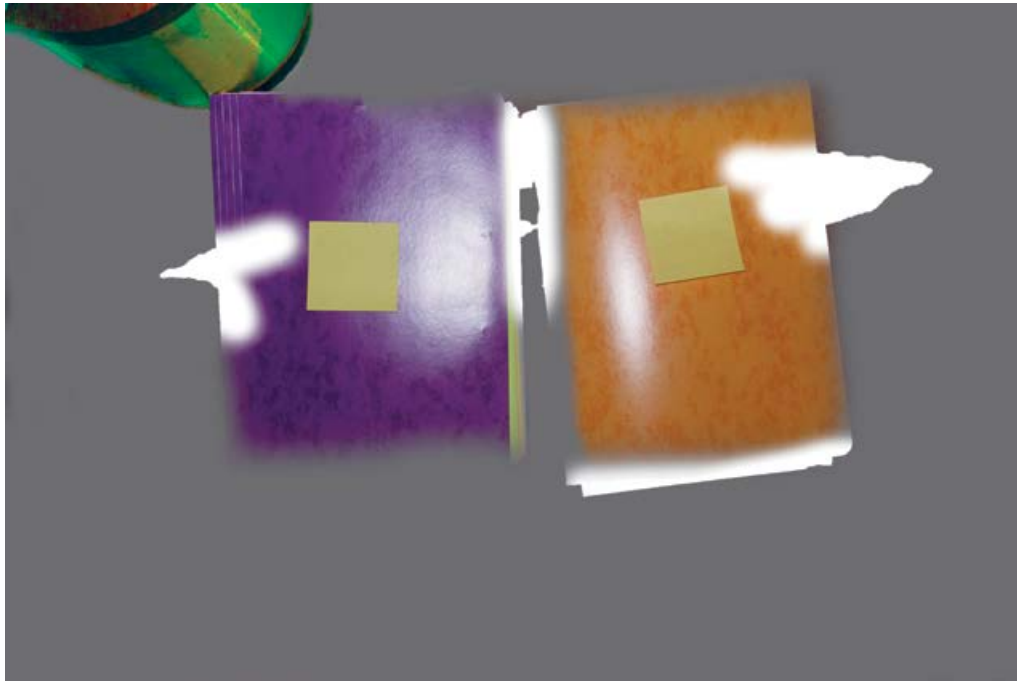
The major historical show *Homosexuality\_ies* (curated by Birgit Bosold, Dorothee Brill and Detlef Weitz), which Schwules Museum put on in cooperation with Deutsches Historisches Museum (the National Historical Museum of the Federal Republic of Germany) in 2015, tried to at least disrupt the persistent gender gap, despite falling short in realizing a fully intersectional practice: “*Homosexuality\_ies* undermines the usual perception that equates homosexuals with gay men, emphasizing the vital roles lesbian activists have played in all these developments.”<sup>4</sup> The predominantly enthusiastic feedback from the lesbian community, and occasional openly articulated negative reviews of gay men who judged the show to be too “lesbian,” might indicate that we rocked it somehow. The show wasn’t overwhelmingly “lesbian” at all: Visibility and accentuation were just divided fairly. Apart from highlighting female and trans\* artists this means, for example, within the curatorial narrative we featured the importance of feminist issues such as the critical questioning of the sexual revolution, more than might have been expected within a show on the history of gay liberation.



Vera Hofmann, *bloxberg*, 2018.



Vera Hofmann, *cube*, 2018.



Vera Hofmann, *split*, 2018.



Vera Hofmann, *ose*, 2018.



Vera Hofmann, *caring for conflict*, 2018.

## IV.

Sadly, these findings don't only describe conditions within the cultural sphere but rather reflect massive gender and ethnic biases within queer communities in general, where the allocation of resources, impact, and visibility is severely unequal. Don't we deserve something better within "our" communities than the game which is going on in the malestream world? Wasn't there once a radical alternative vision of what "queer" could mean? How could it happen, that the "queer dividend" coming out from the hard—and in some regards successful—struggles of many generations of queer activists was divided so unjustly?

AIDS fundamentally changed the way in which homosexuality was socially negotiated in the global north. It not only altered western societies in general, specifically in terms of public health policies, but also the communities themselves. Confronted with a political climate which was shaped by severe homophobia and defamation of sexual outsiders, activists formed new improbable coalitions. Gay men, lesbians, transgender people, sex-positive feminists, sex workers, drug users, and members of the BDSM community united in the struggle against HIV/AIDS, a struggle they increasingly understood as fighting for their sexual freedom and culture, their lifestyles, and against discrimination and marginalization caused by societal hostility to sexual and gender nonconformity. Drawing on the practices of the feminist activists, who created the Women's Health Centers in the 1970s, HIV/AIDS activists utilized their own knowledge and experiences to address the AIDS crises through creating innovative public health strategies. They managed to establish more than just a functioning infrastructure over a short period of time. AIDS also became the catalyst for policies of solidarity and acknowledgement beyond boundaries of identification, establishing non-normative possibilities which we today call "queer."

This is the conventional narrative around the birth of "queer" communities. Could it be possible that the AIDS crisis wasn't at all the catalyst for fabulous, subversive new alliances, but rather caused the hijacking of the radical queer resistance by white, cis-male players? This was a hotly contested point put forward in Dean Spade's recent project *Queer Dreams and Nonprofit Blues*.<sup>5</sup> Boosted by significant amounts of funding for the professionalization of self-controlled infrastructure, male gay advocacy took over queer movements to push through "bourgeois" civil rights projects such as gay marriage. Looking at the history of lesbian-gay coalitions back in the nineties in Germany, we can in fact find numerous indications that something like this occurred. In any case, feminist positions, and along with them, any critical questioning of masculinity, generally vanished from the political agenda of the main lesbian-gay civil rights organizations. The AIDS crisis massively increased the acceptance of gay men, who gained broad support within the liberal section of society. Considering the developments within the art world, it is obvious that the AIDS crisis also was the main catalyst for visibility and acknowledgement of "gay" art.

## V.

To begin addressing the current situation, the Schwules Museum has designated the 2018 program to be YEAR OF THE WOMEN.\*

"Exhibitions, lectures, controversial debates, and riveting readings are in store, just as you'd expect from a museum; but also some surprises, such as healing rituals and actions—for the year will be feminist not only in content, but also in form. We see the program currently launching at the Schwules Museum as an

experimental field with transformative potential, the goal of which is a more future-oriented and participative (museum) practice. As a grassroots organization (i.e. one lead and organized by activists), the Schwules Museum has always fostered and thrived on frank communication with its visitors and the communities it represents. We want to continue that tradition this year with even more transparency, so as to collectively develop resilient concepts for queer/feminist cooperation, and anchor them for the long-term in the Museum's practice."<sup>6</sup>

The year began with a bang. In our January newsletter I addressed the critique of the Schwules Museum program, which still reflects the "visual and conceptual hegemony of (white, cis) gay masculinity more than focusing on marginalized and discriminated positions. As this estimation is not shared by everyone within the Museum itself, there are many reasons to open up a critical debate on hostility against lesbians, women\* and womanhood within the queer community."

Of course a fraught debate escalated rapidly within social media as well as in the real world. In Berlin's queer magazine "Siegessäule" for example it was criticized that Schwules Museum "is abandoning its fundamentals" and setting up an "olympics of discrimination," weakening the community in the presence of the enemy from the right-wing populist gang, which has just entered the German Parliament.<sup>7</sup> Voicing mechanisms of marginalization and discrimination within "the family" seems to be inviting the skeletons out of the closet. Expressing this is obviously just as taboo as it is in any other family. We don't know how this intense experiment of self-critique will go and where we will stand at the end of the year. We will see. We hope during the course of the year that the recognition that misogyny and sexism damage not only women\* but men\* as well, especially gay men, will spread.

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## Notes

**1** Fabian Bocart, Marina Gertsberg, and Rachel Pownall, "Glass Ceilings in the Art Market," November 30 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3079017>. Accessed 26.01.2018.

**2** Linda Nochlin. 1988. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Accessed 27.01.2018. [http://deyoung.famsf.org/files/whynogreatwomenartists\\_4.pdf](http://deyoung.famsf.org/files/whynogreatwomenartists_4.pdf).

**3** Bocart, Gertsberg, and Pownall.

**4** Schwules Museum. 2015. "Homosexuality\_ies." Accessed 26.01.2018. [https://www.schwulesmuseum.de/ausstellung/homosexualitaet\\_en/?lang=en](https://www.schwulesmuseum.de/ausstellung/homosexualitaet_en/?lang=en).

**5** Dean Spade et. al. 2016. "Queer Dreams and Nonprofit Blues: Understanding the Nonprofit Industrial Complex." Accessed 26.01.2018. <http://www.deanspade.net/2016/02/28/queer-dreams-and-nonprofit-blues/>.

**6** Schwules Museum. 2018. "YEAR OF THE WOMEN\*." Accessed 26.01.2018. <http://www.schwulesmuseum.de/en/news/view/year-of-the-women-the-whole-caboodle-2018/>.

**7** Till Amelung. 2018. "Zu weiss zu männlich zu schwul." Siegessäule. Accessed 26.01.2018. [https://www.siegessaule.de/no\\_cache/newscomments/article/3715-zu-weiss-zu-maennlich-zu-schwul-wie-das-schwule-museum-sein-fundament-entsorgt.html](https://www.siegessaule.de/no_cache/newscomments/article/3715-zu-weiss-zu-maennlich-zu-schwul-wie-das-schwule-museum-sein-fundament-entsorgt.html).

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**Birgit Bosold** is member of the Board of Directors at Schwules Museum, Berlin's Gay Museum. In this role, which she has held since 2006, she is responsible for the organization's finances and plays an important part in changing the Museum's strategic focus. She curated exhibitions such as *On the other Hand* (2011), a show featuring artistic positions on the FIFA Women's

World Cup. She also conceptualized exhibitions outlining the work of various photographers: Petra Gall, whose extensive feminist archive she succeeded in acquiring for Schwules Museum (2012), (with Wolfgang Theis) Zanele Muholi, as part of a cooperation agreement with Amnesty International (2014), and (with Claudia Reiche) Krista Beinstein, an icon of sex-positive feminism (2016). Recently, she initiated and supervised the exhibition *Odarodle - An imaginary their\_story of naturepeoples, 1535-2017* (curated by Ashkan Sepahvand, 2017) as well as (with Anna Hájková) the international conference *Sexuality, Holocaust, Stigma: Taking Stock* (2017). Her current project, together with Vera Hofmann, is the co-curation of the program *Year of the women\**. Bosold was project leader and co-curator of the major exhibition *Homosexuality\_ies* initiated by Schwules Museum in collaboration with Deutsches Historisches Museum in 2015, taken over by The LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur in 2016. In 2016, she was awarded the *Kompassnadel* for her engagement by Schwules Netzwerk NRW, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia's self-help network for gay people. Bosold actually comes from the field of private banking; after completing her studies and receiving a doctorate in literature she spent many years with various renowned banks and currently works as a freelance consultant in the field of portfolio management, advising companies, foundations and private individuals. She is also a writer and lecturer in her specialist field.

**Vera Hofmann** (born 1979 in Gießen) is a Berlin based artist and member of the Board of Directors of Schwules Museum. She holds degrees in Business Administration (BA, BA Mannheim), Photography (BA, Lette Verein Berlin) and Fine Arts (MA, Sandberg Institute/Gerrit Rietveld Academy). Her work has been awarded and displayed internationally for example at De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam, Benaki Museum, Athens, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, and Pori Art Museum, Finland. She conceived and works in the artist collective BENTEN CLAY. Until 2006 she worked in established creative advertisement agencies consulting well-known corporations such as DAX-Companies and cultural institutions. Her projects are often particularly designed to specific temporalities and locations facing complex socio-political issues like the financial crises, atomic waste, ecological destruction, cancer, loss as well as healing and empowerment. As a core topic her works address how to deal with crises, whether political or personal. In her practice, Hofmann outlines artistic and curatorial formats and settings to reclaim intra- as well as interpersonal connections.



# The Terms of Visibility: Between Queer and LGBT in Curating Art in “Asia”

## Brian Curtin

### Abstract

2017 saw two major institutional exhibitions of LGBT- and Queer-related art: *Queer British Art 1861–1967* at Tate Britain and *Spectrosynthesis-Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Taipei. Both arguably exchanged a more precise use of each other’s mantles: the former mounted a historical survey of subcultural interests and functioned as representation; while the latter avowed a diverse selection of themes for a broad context (“Asia”) where terms such as LGBT and “queer” remain rhetorically and politically insecure. And thus provocative. Indeed, *Queer British Art* was one of a number of events organized to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the decriminalization of male homosexuality in the UK, while Taiwan’s recent recognition of a ban on same-sex marriage as unconstitutional was but one touchstone for *Spectrosynthesis*.

This article considers a range of queer-related contemporary art exhibitions and curated events in Asia—dating from the early 1990s—in relation to examples of LGBT organizing and linked to theorizations of what has been termed Asia’s “disjunctive modernities.” That is, models of modernity that are non-linear and non-teleological. Inquiring into how these curatorial projects may be read in terms of the localized conditions of their production, issues of identity politics *per se* are examined for distinct queer lineages and contexts. And queer is elaborated as not definitively imbricated with LGBT and an essential politics of recognition, assimilation and rights.

### Introduction

Surely, critically resisting what Ara Wilson has termed an “import-export calculus” for considering Queer Theory and/or ideas of queerness for Asia—or indeed, any site outside “the West”—is by now moot. That is, acknowledging the limitations, distortions and political problems of understanding “queer” in Asia—or the Global South—through a Western-centric lens should be by this point a given. In the first instance, Asia as a subject for queer studies shares a temporal relationship with the emergence of Queer Theory as an academic discipline in North America in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, certain facts belie the origin of Queer interests in “the West.” Peter A. Jackson, for example, discovered the first public use of the word “gay” in Thailand, in a newspaper, in 1965, before Stonewall and the modern gay liberation movement.<sup>2</sup> Here Jackson identified a local genealogy for the meaning of gay as masculine-identified, thus bucking universalizing assumptions about language and identity.<sup>3</sup>

However, as recently as 2013, Michael O’Rourke called out the dominance and geographic myopia of prominent Anglophone queer theorists. Examining a moment in debates about the possible faltering significance of Queer Theory as an unacknowledged North American concern, O’Rourke highlighted the differential uses of “Queer” internationally, across theory, activism and institutionalization.<sup>4</sup> Such a splintering is testament to Queer Theory’s continuing vitality, and affirms that any implication of its singular significance needs to be guarded against. But how to theorize such multiplic-

ity? Beyond O’Rourke’s speculative call for disciplinary disobedience—a refusal of loyalty to schools of thought—Wilson shaped ideas of critical regionalism, the significance of, for example, intra-Asian networks of exchange that, to paraphrase Dipesh Chakrabarty’s famous term, provincializes the West.<sup>5</sup> Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong have brought critical regionalism to bear on queer studies in transnationalism—queers-of-color and queer diaspora critiques—and the intersection of Queer Theory and Asian Studies, arguing for case-studies grounded in locality beyond theoretical speculation about “Queer Asia[n]” in and of itself.<sup>6</sup>

In this article I want to consider a case-study approach to examples of curatorial practices in contemporary art in Asia that allow us insight into the localized contexts and genealogies of “queer.” The title of this article—*Between Queer and LGBT*—points to the relative instabilities of both terms for the contexts I elaborate; and instability is a productive point of departure for localized genealogies against the pervasiveness of Euro-American theories and paradigms. Moreover, if we can acknowledge that dialogues between Queer Theory and studies in visual and material cultures and art history generally remain under-written and somewhat isolated from the main threads of their respective fields, we have Asia as an important point of departure for theorizations from the interdisciplinary practice entailed, as both visual culture[s] and its mediations can be foregrounded.

The problem of generalizing “Asia” is, of course, acknowledged and the scattered examples of curatorial projects I discuss can lay claim to a speculative inquiry in terms of region; and also an invitation to further research. Following convention from Asian Studies, “Asia” is already acknowledged as fictive, but a fiction with material realities. In this respect, the article grounds my discussion of curatorial endeavours through correspondences with public organizing around LGBT issues, loosely related to “gay pride,” and substantiates the former as, if not always rooted in, profoundly relevant to broad social and political contexts specific to locality and region.



Fig. 1: Installation view of papercuts by Xiyadie, *Spectrosynthesis-Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Taipei, 2017. Courtesy of the Sunpride Foundation.

### Between Queer and LGBT in Curating Art in Asia

2017 saw two major institutional exhibitions of LGBT- and/or Queer- related art: *Queer British Art 1861-1967* at Tate Britain and *Spectrosynthesis-Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Taipei (fig. 1). The former arguably avows a homonationalism–neoliberal co-optation of the homosexuality—that the latter throws into relief by addressing fractured and uneven interests for Asia. Organized as an anniversary celebration of the partial decriminalization of male homosexuality in England in 1967, Tate Britain presented a matter-of-fact survey that foregrounded mages of queer desire and the human body as subcultural interest; and



therefore, as one reviewer remarked, “queer” could have been comfortably exchanged with socially familiar ideas of “gay.”<sup>7</sup> *Spectrosynthesis*, on the other hand, was a dizzying selection of artworks which explored ideas of identity *per se* and sometimes unpalatable representations of queer experience, such as Su Hui-Yu’s hyper-aestheticized video installation that elegiacally re-creates an infamous incident salaciously reported by the Taiwanese press when one participant in a S+M relationship died. Crossing national lines in the choice of artists, an introductory timeline also inserted queer moments in the history of Taiwan into world history. Further, while the country is on path to legalizing same-sex marriage, this liberalism wasn’t exceptionally emphasized amidst the curatorial interests. Provocative and performative, *Spectrosynthesis* usurped neat categories of “queer” with a refusal to settle on any particular understanding of desire, the body and identity.

While, again, Taiwan is currently the most liberal country in Asia for LGBT rights—witness the current potential for same-sex marriage and a move in 2018 to introduce a third gender on official identification documents—to treat *Spectrosynthesis* as a symptom of this, in any celebratory way, is to miss a number of points. The comparison with *Queer British Art* allows for questions of why and when such exhibitions open in major venues, and how ideas of representation dovetail with other functions. MOCA Taipei is a public museum directly under the Department of Cultural Affairs of Taipei City Government but *Spectrosynthesis* was co-organized with the Sunpride Foundation, a private and grassroots organization that collects LGBT-themed art. The exhibition could not be reduced to tropes of visibility and celebration as it too readily spoke to a fraught contemporaneity: from age-limit restrictions imposed on a couple of video installations to the pan-Chinese selection of artists, including diasporic, which pointed to multiple social and legal contexts. Here the multiple contexts of a “national” identity can only be compared through difference. In this respect, a comparison among the various localities where the artists are based (Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada) is suggested but hardly affirmed as questions of ethnicity and national identities come together only to fall apart, so to speak, on the spectrum of critical interests suggested by the artists. These include self-identity and the human body, race and media culture and vernacular aesthetics; all, of course, under the rubric of “queer.”

### Queer Asia

The multiple interests of *Spectrosynthesis* is borne out by the different historical contexts of LGBT organizing in Asia and to briefly examine such is to introduce the variety and idiosyncrasies of these organizations; indeed, the very idea of organization and its conditions. Moreover, we can note, further to Simon Soon’s insights on critical regionalism, that variety and idiosyncrasies can index the temporal and geographic as a means of challenging grand narratives, “returning” us to case-studies and recognition of multiplicity and non-coeval parallels.<sup>8</sup>

Visible, self-identified, queer and LGBT cultural organizing in Asia has existed since 1989 with the *Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*. The *Tokyo International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival* began in 1992, and more have since followed, including *Q! Film Festival* in Indonesia in 2002 & *Proud Yangon Queer Film Festival* in Myanmar in 2014. In 1994 the Philippines and Japan held the first gay pride marches in Asia. In Thailand, marches and festivals were held annually from 1999-2006, with comparable events in Phuket and Pattaya, and an event for 2017 was postponed due to the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 2016 and an official year-long mourning period for the nation. South Korea began the annual *Korea Queer Culture Festival* in 2000, a public march and festival. Cambodia held the first Gay Pride in 2003. Taiwan Pride began in 2003 after a

comparable event in 1996 and has become the biggest in East Asia. Vietnam held the first LGBT Viet Pride in 2012.

The temporally and geographically scattered and highly variegated contexts in which these projects occur shape a spectrum of functions: from broad questions of visibility and community, assertions of regionalism and the very idea of “gay Asia” to specific objectives such as commercial party promotion, tourism; contemporaneous political issues, and platforms for art and film. The background contexts of these events are too detailed to examine in depth here but idiosyncrasies would include, for example, that Gay Pride in Cambodia was initially led by the artist Chath Piersath funded by private donations. Taiwan Pride is generally considered the most socially conscious—responding to current issues such as a law on censorship in 2005 with the inclusion of publishers and sex workers, and agitating for equal rights to marriage in 2012—and it has been funded by city government. Thailand’s early event—the Bangkok Gay Festival—were supported by an awkward alliance between businesses and NGOs and included the participation of the sex industry in apolitical terms.<sup>9</sup> And related events include, for example, *&Proud’s* photography exhibitions that travel across major cities.

To try and trace these events against a “western” narrative of progressive agitation for liberalization and rights is, of course, to miss these variegated contexts. Here, ideas of community are formed by different interests, through different means and in uneven relations to identity politics. Jackson’s insight that the regular, and unpredictable, changes of government in Thailand has encouraged local LGBT groups to lobby for changes in media representation rather than overarching constitutional change is an illustration of this point.<sup>10</sup> Further, practices of “coming out” don’t necessarily apply where queer and LGBT interests more typically negotiate repressive legislation. Here we should also consider the historic absence of prohibitions on same-sex sexuality in certain countries against the particulars of types of legislation they have proposed: from Thailand’s famed “tolerant but unaccepting” attitudes to what has been described as Vietnam’s reification of queer invisibility.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, differential stigma to different identities and variable understandings of relations of gender to sexuality give to meanings and forms of discrimination a variable texture. . This is a straightforward point to make but belies the complexity at stake, for this is where queer curatorial work reveals its significance in allowing considerations of what it means to visibly negotiate localized terms and understandings, without any *a priori* understanding of identity, its political contexts and its potential ambitions.

The examples sketched above substantiate a context for more recent curatorial endeavours, which remain scattered examples.

A discussion of curatorial work in Singapore, useful in highlighting specific conditions, then allows me to move outwards to other examples of curatorial frameworks that address precisely the variegations of “queer.” Due to space, Singapore is singularly elaborated contextually as a case-study, while my other examples focus on the implications of the curated project in and of itself.

### Queer Curating

Urban queer culture in Singapore is a case study in what Audrey Lue and Helen Hok-Sze Leung characterize as “disjunctive modernity,” spaces shaped by interlocking and contiguous forces that are non-evolutionary and non-teleological, unlike the archetypal modern “western” city.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, queer culture isn’t, or cannot be, shaped by a progressive logic of recognition and rights through processes of main-



Fig. 2: Installation view of papercuts by Xiyadie, *Spectrosynthesis-Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now*, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Taipei, 2017. Courtesy of the Sunpride Foundation.

streaming and homonationalism. Male homosexuality is illegal in Singapore, LGBT persons are not protected by anti-discrimination laws and are also governed by heteronormative logic, such that, for example, post-operative transgenders can legally marry the opposite sex. However, the city-state boasts any number of gay venues and, as Yue and Leung trace, government investments in a “creative economy” have inadvertently allowed for representations of homosexuality to circulate. Moreover, the models for gay venues have often been comparable venues in Bangkok, thus further deflecting “western” comparisons for localized contexts.

The artist Loo Zihan’s multi-platform event *Cane* in Singapore in 2012 can be situated as a response to non-linear and temporal contexts with unpredictable futures, and what Yue and Leung elaborated as an ambivalent and contradictory logic of liberalism and non-liberalism (fig. 2). Zihan re-created the infamous performance *Brother Cane* by Josef Ng from 1994. The title references the national corporal punishment of caning and *Brother Cane* was conceived in reaction to the police entrapment of gay men in a public cruising area. Ng had cut his pubic hair and presented it to a small audience. The performance proved a scandal in the press and led to a banning of public funding for performance art for ten years as well as provoking a law that requires the prior submission of fixed scripts for approval. Ng himself was banned from performing again in the country.

Zihan’s re-staging engaged different accounts of the original performance, including both media and eyewitness, and he mounted an exhibition where research materials and other artifacts were displayed. The Media Development Authority of Singapore restricted attendance to visitors over the age of 21. Zihan responded by copying the ID cards of all visitors and including them in the display, as well as adding them to the cover of a folio of texts that each received. For Singapore, times may change and move but progressivism cannot be assumed and amidst the censorious climate Zihan visualized evidence of state regulation as critically ambiguous icons of conformity. Thus audiences were invited to ponder what normally functions most effectively when invisible.

*Fault-lines: Disparate and Desperate Intimacies* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) Singapore in 2016 was a group exhibition, curated by Wong Binghao, that

explored queer diasporic experience and relations of desire to locality, particularly in regard to estrangement and new and alternative forms of kinship. Two sex toys were preemptively removed, before the opening night, from an installation by Zihan entitled *Queer Objects: An Archive For The Future*. Zihan noted their absence with black vinyl stickers that resembled the shapes of the original items and the incident also prompted the artist to insist on a dialogue about definitions of obscenity under the purview of Singapore’s Penal Code. Like *Cane*, the explicit recognition of conformity might reveal absurdity, or, at least, allow consideration of the effectiveness of conformity when transgression cannot be fully hidden.

The exhibition, however, explored ideas of space and queer experience across personal, theoretical and interactive contexts and thus the narrating or affirmation of identities was less at issue than a tentative exploration of the forms of distinctly contemporary relationships. The censorship of the representation of certain sexual practices was incorporated into an inevitable consideration of social boundaries between public and private, and of the patina of relationships within contemporary media and technology cultures.

Through these examples, we can note incremental and adaptive curatorial strategies rather than an explicitly oppositional or “liberatory” approach to queer and/or LGBT politics, as Yue and Leung map in other terms, testified to in the diversity of *Spectrosynthesis*, as well. In acknowledging such, a localized recognition of identity, community, provocation, and the politics of the pursuit of rights comes to light.



Fig. 3: Installation view, *Radiation: Art and Queer Ideas from Bangkok and Manila, Un-Compared*, Art Center of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2014. Courtesy of the author.

The use of “queer” in titles for exhibitions of contemporary or current art in Asia was first deployed as introductory and theoretical, as opposed to directly emerging from LGBT public organizing. Among these exhibitions are *Queer Manila*, curated by Eva McGovern, and my own *Radiation: Art and Queer Ideas from Bangkok and Manila, Un-Compared* (fig. 3), both in 2012 at spaces in Manila, with a second version of *Radiation* subsequently mounted at a university gallery in Bangkok in 2014. Pursuing a theoretical view, loosely reflecting Zihan’s concerns with queer-ing rather than identity politics, the exhibitions included an amorphous array of artists that explored the explosion of strict categories of form, foregrounding a variety of responses and challenges that would demonstrate “queer” as active in twisting forms and highlighting questions of subversion, contradiction, desire and the regulated and/or repressed. The curatorial conceit of “un-comparing” was precisely to challenge academic orthodoxy and allow for multiple points of difference as well as connection while activating the subjectivity of audiences.



Fig. 4: Installation view, Lyno Vuth, *Thoamada*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

The group exhibition *In Search of Miss Ruthless*, curated by Hera Chan and David Xu Borgonjon, at Para Site in Hong Kong in 2017 was premised on the simultaneous rise of Chinese beauty pageants—diasporic and national—and televisual media in the 1970s, taking the theatrics of pageantry as a departure for considerations of types of identification and what the political significance of the “queen” might mean for queer life. Artists examined ideals of personhood across the specters of both orientalism and Chinese national politics, and the exhibition included archival documents about the media’s framing of beauty pageants, thus surfacing a variety of ideas about class and ethnicity.

The range of exhibits discussed here not only brings us away from “western” perspectives, but also breaks down any essentialist view of “Asia” itself. Exhibitions by the Cambodian artist Lyno Vuth entitled *Thoamada* and *Thoamada II*, both at SA SA BASACC in Phnom Penh in 2011 and 2013 respectively, were collaborative projects that explored self-identity and the meanings of community and family. The former was a photographic installation that resulted from a workshop where men who have sex with men discussed and exchanged their experiences; the latter was also photographic portraits, of LGBT families juxtaposed with the recreation of a collective memory.

The title-*thoamada*-is a Khmer word meaning “normal” or “common.” *Thoamada* (fig. 4) was curated as a suspended circle of portraits of the men who had been invited to paint their faces with personalized masks and the patterns ranged from nationalist to imaginatively mythological references. Viewers could move between the exterior and the interior of the installation as the men became either objects or subjects of their gaze; and the highly expressive features foregrounded questions of decoding communication and personality in terms of individual experience, rather than the passive attribution of meanings to bodies. That is, an inter-dialogical construction of identity was foregrounded. The family portraits of *Thoamada II* are curiously unremarkable in their depiction of non-normative identities and also compelling in the evocation of oblique narratives. Given the collaborative, relational means of both projects, we can be reminded of the root of curating in care. And whether “*thoamada*” or not, the particular stakes in recognition and kinship are acknowledged.

## Conclusion

To bring queer-themed curatorial practices in contemporary art to bear on the questions and methods sketched at the beginning of this article is to pursue the relevance of such curatorial work to Queer Asian Studies (and vice-versa), extending objects and interests for both avenues of inquiry. This contributes critical terms for the historicizing of LGBT and Queer organizing in Asia through the exploration of questions of local contexts and genealogies, thereby provincializing "western" comparisons, and/or, in the words of Soon, seeking affinities beyond purported national centers.<sup>13</sup> Here again we can note the particular queer interest in the contingent and the temporal, especially in the fractured uses of and between "LGBT" and "queer."

Curatorial practices must address the complexities of representation within varied legal contexts; the theoretical purchase of "queer" as it is foregrounded as a subject; and accounts of queer relations, kinship and collectivity. In broad terms, exhibitions must explore the contextual vicissitudes of identity, expression, concealment, revelation, experience and memory.

The significance of these examples is not, of course, exclusive to "Asia" nor are they incomparable. But as case studies, they begin to announce interests that account for the promises of "queer" through manifold strictures and toward different horizons, absent the limitations of universalizing tendencies.

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## Notes

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- 4 O'Rourke, Michael, preface to *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism and the Political*, Ashgate Publishing, Surrey, 2013, n.p. Curtin, Brian. 2015. "But what can ever happen to Queer Theory?: An introduction to 'Queer theory and visual cultures in Southeast Asia.'" *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*. Accessed 2.1.2018. [http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue38/curtin\\_intro.html](http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue38/curtin_intro.html).
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closet to pride in two decades,” *Palgrave Communications*, April 2016, pp. 1-10.

**12** Yue, Audrey and Leung, Helen Hok-Sze, “Notes towards the queer Asian city: Singapore and Hong Kong,” *Urban Studies* No. 4, 2017, pp. 747-764.

**13** Soon, Simon, “When was East and Southeast Asia’s Modernism in Art?” in Stephen Ross and Allana C. Lindgren eds., *The Modernist World*, London and New York, 2015.

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# The Eighth Square: In Memory of Frank Wagner

## Julia Friedrich

Unlike the rest of the writers here, I'm not an expert on queer art. I just happened to be at the right time and place when Kasper König was planning a show on queer art. The mastermind of this show, Frank Wagner, sadly died exactly one year ago, on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, only 58 years old. So all I can do is offer an insight into the design, the realization, and the dimensions of our 2006 exhibition, "The Eighth Square," the many problems it had, and how beautifully it came out, in all senses of the word—simultaneously a very serious statement and a big celebration.

"The Eighth Square" became the first large exhibition on this topic in a major German museum. As I've already noted, the initial idea for our show came from a very straight man, Kasper König, director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne from 2000 to 2012. In the year 2001, König read an issue of the German art magazine *Kunstforum International* on the topic of "the homoerotic gaze" (*Der homoreotische Blick*).<sup>1</sup> He immediately recognized the fantastic possibilities this subject could have. After talking with the editor of the issue, Heinz-Norbert Jocks, König decided to commission Frank to prepare an exhibition on homosexuality in the arts. König had already collaborated with Frank when he was director of the Portikus in Frankfurt in the 90s, thus they had known each other for a while.

Frank accepted the offer under the condition that he could broaden the scope. He not only wanted to reflect homosexuality, but all varieties of desire and transformations. He also stressed the political aspect, being interested in "the so-called side aspects involved in change and transformation: the sexuality of man and woman, man and man, and woman and woman, and gender per se." In his view, the exhibition should recall "things hidden or off the tracks," it should question "the centre," which itself could be on the periphery, and define "a territory of differentiation and change."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Frank redefined the subject of the show from gay and lesbian to queer, meaning also "that patchwork of street culture, art, preciousity and vulgarity which formed the complex tissue of a mode of appre-

hending the world without dullness and common sense,"<sup>3</sup> as a pioneer of queer thinking, Guy Hocquenghem, once put it. Frank left the chronological and even the logical path aside, going astray. This was a revolutionary step, and he knew he could dare to take the plunge, even in such a leading museum, because he could be sure König would always stand beside him. Frank remembered much later: "Still today, I am convinced that only Kasper König could have made possible such an exhibition in Germany."<sup>4</sup> But without Frank it wouldn't have been possible either. In those days there were only very few curators in Germany who had the knowledge and experience he had. For more than 30 years he was a curator of the New Society for Visual Arts (nGbK) in Berlin and showed, as early as 1988, a group exhibition on AIDS in the arts, "Full-Blown Aids" (*Vollbild Aids*), and again in 2013 with "LOVE AIDS RIOTS SEX." He created a memorial room for his friend David Wojnarowicz in 1993 and curated a retrospective on Félix González-Torres in 2006 simultaneously with our show. He also curated solo exhibitions on Marlene Dumas, Valie Export, Alfredo Jaar, Yoko Ono, and Hannah Wilke. More than anyone else, Frank had explored queerness in the arts, which he always saw from a social and political perspective, often promoting young and controversial artists and always finding new paths and new methods. That's why he called the "Eighth Square" an "exhibition experiment."

Prior to this experiment, König had commissioned guest curators to organize exhibitions in the museum, for instance Dorothea von Hantelman with "I promise it's political" in 2002, Hans-Christian Dany with "Economies of Time" in the same year, and Andreas Siekmann and Alice Creischer with "Ex-Argentina" in 2004. He never interfered much, although he reserved a "veto right" for himself. And it was his wish that a member of the staff should support the guest curator, not as a watchdog, but as a "co-pilot." The co-pilot in this case was me, by then still a trainee. It was a pleasure for me to work with the two old hands, even when we had some stormy times.





Fig. 1: *The Eighth Square*, 2006: Installation exhibition space, Museum Ludwig, exhibition design by Eran Schaerf. Photograph by: Rheinisches Bildarchiv.

König himself remembered that this was an exhibition that everybody believed was a sure-fire success. He said, “People thought that with this topic one kicks at an open door. The media suggested we only wanted to put on airs. They obviously didn’t assume a serious examination of gender relations, they assumed some tomfoolery.”<sup>5</sup> But, as König was already aware, the contrary happened: the show had many opponents even long before it opened, and the first major blow came from the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes). It’s the aim of this institution to invest “in projects which develop new methods of fostering cultural heritage and tap into the cultural and artistic potential of knowledge required for addressing social issues.”<sup>6</sup> As I see it, our show would have been the perfect match for this noble endeavor, and the jury of the Foundation had already agreed to provide a large sum. But the board of directors, chaired by Wolfgang Thierse—a social democrat and Catholic who, back then, was the president of the German Bundestag—refused the money. This could have been the end of our story. But thanks to others, it wasn’t.

Not only did the Art Foundation of North Rhine-Westphalia, die Kunststiftung NRW, step in, but so too did the

Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which normally doesn’t support projects abroad. But the president of the Warhol Foundation, Joel Wachs, pushed it through. This was a triumph: an American foundation helping a German museum to produce a nonconformist show.

The first title Frank had found for our exhibition was “Normal,” referring to his questioning of “the centre.” König wasn’t so fond of it, so Frank looked for a new one, and he remembered a cheap thriller he once read. The backdrop to its crude story is the heterosexual BDSM scene, but there is also a gay bar, and its name is “The Eighth Square.” Frank liked this strange name a lot. “It is taken from a rule in chess: if a pawn manages to reach the eighth square it can transform into a queen.”<sup>7</sup> Frank was more interested in change and transformation than in identity, and he avowedly loved naming a major show in a major museum after a “shady little place.”<sup>8</sup>

So, change and transformation as queerness is at the heart of the exhibition, not identity, not history, not gay liberation, even when there was a section called “Identity and Portrait.” But the artists involved in that section, like Zoe Leonard, Sheryl Dunye, Nan Goldin, or



Fig. 2: *The Eighth Square*, 2006: Installation central staircase, Museum Ludwig, exhibition design by Eran Schaerf. Photograph by: Rheinisches Bildarchiv.

Jack Smith, invented identities, changed them—they surely didn't want to be just themselves, whatever that meant. And even in a section called "Outsiders, Discrimination, AIDS," again, there was no straight (ahem) story from "the closet" to the Stonewall riots and beyond. On the contrary, there were subversive, shocking, and often poetic explorations of these bitter topics by David Wojnarowicz or Paul Thek.

The starting point for this exhibition about "Gender, Life, and Desire in the Arts," 1960, seemed arbitrary, as Frank freely admitted. The year 1960 is neither linked with the history of queerness, which is centuries old, nor with the new women's movement or the gay liberation movement, both of which started a few years later. Rather, simply and banally, the date was chosen because of the Ludwigs' collection. Because "The Eighth Square" featured Pop Art—the early focus of Peter and Irene Ludwig's collection—it exhibited a fundamental connection to the Museum that housed it.<sup>9</sup> Right from the beginning, our objective was to combine the vast collection of the museum with new artists. Pop Art, with its multifaceted queer implications by gay artists like Gilbert & George, David Hockney, Jasper Johns,

Ferdinand Kriwet, Robert Rauschenberg and, of course, Andy Warhol, was fundamental in this respect, and the Ludwigs' collection was easily available.

The museum owns a large photo collection, and the exhibition lavishly made use of it, including works by Valie Export, Jürgen Klauke, and Cindy Sherman. We wanted to show known artists in a different, queer light, like Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, Jeff Wall, Katharina Sieverding, or Cy Twombly. Frank brought into the museum many, many artists, starting with his all-time favorites such as Wojnarowicz—whose series "Rimbaud in New York" the museum purchased on this occasion—and González-Torres. Also available were portraits by Del LaGrace Volcano, Catherine Opie, and Annette Frick, videos and video installations by Aurora Reinhard, Marcel Odenbach, or Bjørn Melhus, drawings by Jochen Flinzer, or Marc Brandenburg, and appropriations by Susi Pop.

There was so much that the traditional museum visitor would have scarcely ever seen. And in no time, we had over 80 artists and 250 works to show. This posed real problems.



Fig. 3: *The Eighth Square*, 2006: Installation divided staircase, Museum Ludwig, exhibition design by Eran Schaerf. Photograph by: Rheinisches Bildarchiv.

First, where was the space to exhibit all this? We decided to put this marginalized art in the very centre of the museum, and to not only use the special exhibition area, but also the broad staircase (figs. 1-2). The show could now be very big, and occupy the very heart at the center of the building. Our second problem concerned how to structure all this. Frank tried to do it with his thematic sections, such as the aforementioned sections on “Identity” and “Discrimination and AIDS.” He had also conceived of sections on “Establishing Identity through De-sign,” “Sexy Machismo,” “Accursed Worlds,” “Female to Male to Female,” “Transsexuality,” and “Places of Desire—Cruising.” While Frank’s sections gave the whole exhibition a deeper dimension, they neither could nor would untangle the knots: rather, they tied new knots. For the visitor who didn’t know what “cruising” meant or couldn’t understand the distinction between “female to male” and transsexual, not to mention all these other labels, confusion was likely. So we came to our third and biggest problem, namely how to present all this *visually*, to make it a whole, a web, or a tissue?

That’s the moment when artist Eran Schaerf stepped in as our exhibition designer, and not only solved our problem brilliantly, but gave the exhibition a “face.”<sup>10</sup>

As I understand it, Eran recognized the difference between “the logic of the darkroom” and the logic of the white cube, between the outside of the museum and the inside, between the marginalized and the hegemonic, between invisibility and visibility. He didn’t want to make the invisible visible, its humdrum reality exposed to the light within the usual presentation modes, thus submitting it to normality and normativity. Exactly the other way around! He wanted to force the visitor to experience the marginal situation, so he created protected spaces for the subtle and often intimate works of the show. He wanted to construct “a stage as a reversed image of the order of visibility, that shows what this order has excluded. I call this process ‘reversed assimilation.’ What wasn’t visible until now, remains probably invisible, to make tangible the space politics of its invisibility.”<sup>11</sup> Eran’s thinking is a reflection of the politics of visibility and a rejection of the all-visible.





Fig. 4: Hans Peter Feldmann, *David*, 2006. Photograph by: Christian Altengarten. Bildarchiv.

He began to separate the space with white fabric and colored walls. On the staircase, the fabric took over the ridges of the building's saw-tooth roof; the walls gave the color and material of the floor an upward trend. In some spaces, he created a feeling of constriction that could be claustrophobic. He divided a staircase (fig. 3). And in the middle of another staircase he put a wall, so the visitors found themselves before an obstacle that, however, they could overcome. The visitors were forced to move around, but were always rewarded for their efforts. At the same time, this design fulfilled very practical requirements. We could show sensitive works, like Paul Thek's drawings on newsprint paper, in the staircase area and protect them from light. In the exhibition space, fabric cones were folded around the light-diffusing ceiling. The elegance resulted from the simplicity and the application. Without Eran, everything could have fallen to bits and pieces.

It was Frank's explicit wish that the boundaries between museum space and outside world should be crossed. There was the *Go-Go Dancing Platform* by González-Torres that was to act once a day "as a stage for a dancer dressed only in silver shorts and shoes. The 'perform-

mance act' is done wearing headphones and an iPod—to become a hallucinatory event done in silence. And since it lasts only a short while, it remains a fleeting occurrence that is easily missed."<sup>12</sup> For König, this daily happening remains an unforgettable transgression: "Félix González-Torres' Go-Go dancer really was good. As if it were the most natural thing, this handsome, well-built man came into the museum, put on his silver shorts, made his show, changed clothes again and left. That seemed strange to everyone, because the sacred halls of the museum seemed under attack. All of a sudden everybody realized how society is constructed. (...) There were moments when everyone thought: That really *is* impossible, this is a museum after all, isn't it?"<sup>13</sup>

Another crossing of the borders was the installation of the "David" sculpture by Hans-Peter Feldmann (fig. 4) directly in front of the museum. This six-meter-high work made of steel and styrofoam is not, as it seems at first glance, a kitschy appropriation of Michelangelo's "David," but rather a souvenir replica of this famous work. It's a replica of a replica, so to speak, and—with its yellow hair and pink skin—a fine piece of low camp. It's also a depiction of a young man in the nude, and, after



Fig. 5: (Banned) Exhibition Poster, *The Eighth Square*, 2006: Design by Detlev Pusch.

all, the original work was created by an artist who was, if we believe Pietro Aretino's hints, a closeted homosexual.<sup>14</sup> Therefore we uncovered Feldmann's sculpture on Christopher Street Day 2006, thus connecting the exhibition with the gay, lesbian, and transgender movement. The work became something like the figurehead of the "Eighth Square."

Frank had many other ideas on how to cross borders, including genre borders. He invited Thomas Meinecke, a renowned writer, to reflect on some motifs that came up during our research. I quote König's gloss: "Meinecke has given literary portraits of, for instance, the deeds and trial of the criminal homophobe who prompted Donald Moffett's series of drawings 'Mr. Gay in the USA,' the partnership between Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith, and Robert Rauschenberg's magnificent happening 'Open Score.' Central to all of these pieces is the way Meinecke investigates a story from the subculture that has fed on gossip and scandal, rumours, articles in papers and magazines and what others say, and in this way contradicts the official version."<sup>15</sup> A copy of the book that resulted of this, *Feldforschung* (literally "field research," meaning also the research on this

particular square, the square of transformation), was given for free to every visitor.

The catalogue of the exhibition was meant to be more than an illustration or a guide, thus it served as a survey of the subject as a whole, with a theoretical essay by Judith Butler on "Transgender and the Spirit of Revolt," a very personal contribution by Douglas Crimp, and essays on queer performance, cinema, and music. The latter included a contribution by Harald Fricke, who died a few months later. In fact, the catalogue, complete with a track list pulled out of Meinecke's record collection and a bibliography, can still be used today, long after the show has ended, as a kind of introduction to the field, even though of course that changed quite a lot during the last decade.

Frank's concept had an holistic approach to it that included film screenings, an audio guide with queer music, talks by Drag Kings, and many other events. Such a celebration always begets envy, critique, even hate. I've told you that the German Federal Cultural Foundation didn't want to pay for so much flamboyant subculture. When we decided to use a photograph by

Wolfgang Tillmans for our advertisement, the trouble broke loose.

Tillmans' picture (fig. 5) is a view up the skirt of a man with no underwear—a funny picture, no harm at all. But the local company for outdoor advertising refused to hang the posters. Eventually the city's head of cultural affairs, Georg Quander, prohibited the use of the photograph for the outdoor advertising because he and his legal consultants firmly believed it to be “pornographic.” This really was a cold shower. We were flabbergasted and realized where we lived. In fact, it wasn't the only ban on posters, and when a year later there was a panel discussion in the Schauspielhaus, a local theatre, on the question “How far can art go?” König exclaimed: “In this fucking town nobody's defending culture.” Quander responded that he declared these prohibitions *because* he was defending culture. Interestingly, he added that in Berlin, controversial posters would pose no problem at all, but the mental horizon would be much narrower in Cologne, and this he would have to take into account.<sup>16</sup>

But *we* wouldn't take it into account and used Tillmans' photograph nonetheless for the catalogue cover, the tickets, the brochures, and so on. Paradoxically, if there is no headwind, you're sailing in the wrong direction.

## Notes

- 1 Heinz-Norbert Jocks, ed., “Der homoerotische Blick,” *Kunstforum International* 154, 2001.
- 2 Frank Wagner, “The Eighth Square. Observations on an Exhibition Experiment,” in Frank Wagner, Kasper König, Julia Friedrich eds., *The Eighth Square: Gender, Life, and Desire in the Arts since 1960*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Ostfildern, 2006, p. 21.
- 3 Guy Hocquenghem, *La Dérive homosexuelle*, Paris, 1977, p. 140, quoted in Bill Marshall, *Guy Hocquenghem. Beyond Gay Identity*, Duke University Press Books, Durham, 1997, p. 12.
- 4 Frank Wagner, “Lipstick on the Rim. Das achte Feld – ein gelungenes Experiment queere Kunst repräsentativ im Museum zu präsentieren,” in Anna Brohm, Valeska Schneider eds., *Ein Wunsch bleibt immer übrig. 12 Jahre Museum Ludwig. Eine Auswahl*, Cologne 2012, p. 136.
- 5 Kasper König, “Das achte Feld,” in Brohm, Schneider eds., *Ein Wunsch bleibt immer übrig. 12 Jahre Museum Ludwig. Eine Auswahl*, Cologne 2012, p. 127.
- 6 “About the Foundation.” Kulturstiftung des Bundes. Accessed 13.05.2017. <http://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/cms/en/stiftung/>.

- 7 Kasper König, “Foreword,” Wagner, König, Friedrich eds., *The Eighth Square: Gender, Life, and Desire in the Arts since 1960*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Ostfildern, 2006, p. 11.
- 8 Wagner, “Lipstick on the Rim,” p. 136.
- 9 Wagner, “The Eighth Square,” p. 21.
- 10 Wagner, “Lipstick on the Rim,” p. 136.
- 11 Eran Schaerf, “Umgekehrte Assimilation. Das bis dahin und weiterhin nicht Gesehene,” in Brohm, Schneider eds., *Ein Wunsch bleibt immer übrig. 12 Jahre Museum Ludwig. Eine Auswahl*, Cologne 2012, p. 132.
- 12 Wagner, “The Eighth Square,” p. 39.
- 13 König, “Das achte Feld,” p. 127.
- 14 See Creighton E. Gilbert's introduction to John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Based on studies in the archives of the Buonarroti family at Florence* Volume 1, Philadelphia, 1911, p. XXXIII.
- 15 König, “Foreword,” p. 13.
- 16 Christian Bos. 2007. “Wir sind keine doofe Stadt: Kulturdezernent Quander löst in der Debatte um Kunstfreiheit Proteste aus.” *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, June 11.

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# The Queer Institutional, Or How to Inspire Queer Curating

## Isabel Hufschmidt

*“The mixture of morality, politics, and bodily fluids [...] form a tantalizing cocktail.”*

Karen Barad<sup>1</sup>

Essen and its Museum Folkwang, an international institution, is more associated with normative traditions than gendered or *queer* ones. When Karl Ernst Osthaus brought together a stunning collection of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century European painting and sculpture featuring Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Signac, George Minne, Constantin Meunier, Aristide Maillol, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner et al., leavened by African, Japanese and Oceanic artifacts, it was all about the contemporary—being linked to one own’s time, public, society, art, culture. Folkwang is in fact a contraction of the Germanic Folkvangar: the people’s hall.

Museum Folkwang as we imagine it nowadays was actually founded in 1922. Today, 4 years before its centenary, and 8 years after the inauguration of the new building designed by Chipperfield Architects, following a row of so-called blockbuster shows, a question arose within our ranks. Is Museum Folkwang and its curation capable of *queer* or is it—if already *queer*—*queer* enough to really serve the experience of the contemporary; is it actually aware and capable of handling the challenges of contemporary art, and the culture it addresses? This meant that an institution considered one of the most important German museums, known from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for its progressive art collection—a museum receiving kudos still today in the cultural scene of the Ruhr region—sought to test itself with queerness.

The opportunity to *queer* ourselves occurred when Bochum’s Ruhr University (RUB), in the person of respectively Anne Söll and Jonathan D. Katz, The Marie Jahoda Visiting Chair in International Gender Studies, approached the museum in late 2016 to organize a symposium on “Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating.” I had just started as research curator in December of that same year and “profiling” the department—that had been vacant for two years—was a first priority. In order

to not float idly in the mainstream discourse, a museum such as the Folkwang has to participate actively in understanding how society, culture and art combine and construct one another. The symposium was the perfect cause to do this, a “mind turn” the museum had to go through in order to stay credible within contemporary discourse and societal reality.

But if we name some sort of curating “queer,” what are the other categories of curatorial practice then? If we talk *queer curating*, is there straight curating? Regular and irregular curating, etc.? It is about practice, without doubt, perhaps even about some method if we may be said to apply a sort of methodology to curation. As the *parole de queer* was quite new to the institution, first we had to negotiate the relationship between our innate sense of quality curating and this new approach. The museum had no choice but to question itself: What kind of curators are we, and is *queer* curating something missing from our practice? Why have we not thought about this until now?

As the local authority in curating, Museum Folkwang seemed to be the best partner to turn to in order to explore these issues. Our first task, however, was to understand what was meant by *queer* and how that notion applies to curating. The term itself had of course considerable academic and cultural traction, despite its relative invisibility in the museum sphere. In fact, Jonathan D. Katz, the guest professor at RUB from Buffalo, U.S., and the initiator of the symposium, revealed frankly that he had to come to Germany in order to realize a symposium about *Queer Curating*. He felt it would simply not have been feasible in the U.S. Since in Europe, and especially in Germany, we imagine the United States to be some kind of freely *queer* utopia, this was a stunning revelation.

Of course, developing fundraising and co-sponsorship for a *queer* curation conference wasn’t easy. First we had to define the terms. What does *queer* signify, that is, is it gay and/or lesbian? Of course, we found it suggested something very different. While it’s likely that the term *queer* presents no difficulties in the U.S.,

it's a different story in the Ruhr region. With the exception of the gender studies degree course at RUB, the term had very little appeal within both the museum and the research community that feeds it. No wonder the press repeatedly called the museum's public relations department in order to ask what *queer* meant before deciding to write anything about it. By contrast, an interview that the radio station Deutschlandfunk requested was crucial support for our project. Ironically, while *queer* was much better known in the U.S., it fell to a museum in Essen to mount the conference. When outside funding proved unavailable, as a last resort, Museum Folkwang decided to fully fund it from its own budget.

The international field of *queer* visual studies and theory proved most supportive. It's a small, but close network and surprisingly active. In short order, visitors gathered in Essen from all over Europe and engaged in a lively discussion with the international roster of speakers.

As a curator, cultural worker and art historian, *queer* had not yet figured in my research agenda. Although still very rare in university curriculum, *queer* is nonetheless there and proves, as even a non-specialist in the field can testify, to be not just about sexuality, but more broadly a social aesthetics through which we might rethink society. If one is to avoid both terminological sloppiness and thin ice, this rethinking needs exemplification. This text has not enough space to fully define what's meant but we can offer some useful hints. *Queer* is not all rainbow colours and pink, nor about one's sexual practice, nor being libertine, but how and why sexuality has served as a classificatory, and policing, tool in our culture. It mirrors perfectly the complex operations of knowledge and acknowledgment, inclusion and exclusion at different layers of the social. That means that *queer* should not be understood merely as a credible practice for museums that are officially labeled "gay" such as the Schwules Museum\* in Berlin. This is just the old practice of demarcation and segregation within an even older form of social domination. Still, it is not really surprising how profoundly normative poses and rules have cornered the gay community into a very specific politics of profession and display, such that this "community" is somehow made other to, even the obverse of, dominant culture. "Community" is in itself already a very problematic term here as it reveals those motors of normative channeling that create "membership" and allocate authority in our society. We have to go even farther and erase that ineffable, naturalized notion that *queer* is about "minorities;" on the contrary,

since it's about the construction of sexual categories writ large, it's clearly pan-social. *Queer* thinking thus, despite the misperceptions, trends away from the specific and the niche towards the large macro-structures in our society.

The crux of *queer* thought in society and in queer studies—and I am quite bold now as an outsider of that particular research—is its own history of struggle. First it was about sexual freedom and equality and the fight against intolerance and violence, then it was about widening the societal horizon, with *queer* suggesting a state beyond the melee of straight and gay. But the notion of "community" maintained, unwittingly, the very structures of difference and commonality that the term *queer* sought to put under pressure. Society is structure and thus draws support from labels and definitions according to extant hierarchies. Abandoning this delimited idea of community is thus like trying to take a soup can from the bottom of the pyramid.

What does that mean in terms of the arts? The art scene is insistent that it's completely free and open—because we, who work with art, cannot be by definition reactionary. But for those of us who work in museums, or the institutional side of the art scene in general, there is a nasty surprise: the selection process in the arts constitutes one of the most hyper-Darwinistic competitions in any cultural reality. Infrastructure, values and contexts, display, critique, and discourse are carefully layered, checked, and categorized. Worse, if a work or an exhibition tries to be *queer*, it is quickly tagged as merely sexual, an instance of an embarrassingly libertine exhibitionism seeking to reify its own "free-thinkerism." And *queer* itself is no less often stuck as the epitome of the sexual.

Alas exhibitions that seek to explore queerness collapse too readily into merely explorations of sexual difference, leaving the whole apparatus of *queer*—its defining refusal to accept dominant culture's denomination of a single majority and minority sexuality—unspoken. Gay relationships and gay sex, so powerful precisely because they are so rarely seen in a museum context, kick every other nuance off the stage and a *queer* exhibition ends up reinforcing the very majority/minority characterization of sexuality that *queer* sought to dismantle. This is the great irony of *queer* exhibitions few can evade.

The danger is that *queer* discourse thus becomes misleading and rather more hermetic, even illegible within a broader social radius. For artists, collectors,



dealers, curators, art critics, writers, and art historians, *queer* seems to generate a contradictory cluster of self-referential codes. So how can we seriously apply *queer* to our curating practice, in a way that does not make it merely a synonym of *gay*? Abstracting it into a form of aesthetic practice, a societal aesthetics, which comes closest to its defining “multiness,” *queer* encompasses a decentered way of thinking social and cultural processes. What happens if we substitute *queer* for the usual meta-cultural, meta-sexual, meta-historical interpretive context; not as some artificial autopoiesis, but as a real proposal and possibility, a mode at our disposal that might enrich the quality of cultural work of any sort. *Queer* here becomes a very particular kind of de-encrypting hermeneutics, of “reading society,” a participatory sociological vehicle if you will. In fact, the idea of *queer* curating, of labeling curating as being *queer* has evidently not been intensively studied thus far. Too often, when it does get mentioned, it’s rather sloppily defined as a mere synonym of LGBTQ, thus missing the larger social pay off of accepting sexuality as a non-binary, a true *queer* revolution. We are still quite loathe to accept *queer*’s self-conscious explosion of biological rules and heteronormativity. Amoebas are, in

that light, even more progressive than we have ever been; they are truly *queer* as they propagate without any of our constructions of gender or sexuality. As Karen Barad wittily remarks: “What is or isn’t an ‘individual’ is not a clear and distinct matter, and that seems to be precisely the scientific sticking point [...] Social amoebas *queer* the nature of identity, calling into question the individual/group binary. In fact, when it comes to queering identity, the social amoeba enjoys multiple indeterminacies, and has managed to hoodwink scientists’ ongoing attempts to nail down its taxonomy, its species-being defying not only classification by phylum but also by kingdom.”<sup>2</sup>

*Queer* is well beyond mere biology. Within this ideology lies its proposal for a progressive, constantly shifting society, whose proper sphere, in cultural as well as artistic terms, is resolutely, the global. The problem, unfortunately, is that most of us still define ourselves according to an essentializing mythopoetics, one in which biology matters, nationality matters, skin tone matters, religion matters, age matters, sex matters. But *queer*’s challenge is not just the evasion of these reified biologisms; it must also avoid becoming merely chic,



Queer Curating give-aways at Museum Folkwang during the conference. © Museum Folkwang 2017, photo: Tanja Lamers

the new flavor in the international art scene. It cannot become, as we put it in German, merely the next sow being chased through the village. There is no handbook for *queer* as its application is a product of an unpredictable confluence of social and historical factors.

Whether in curating or culture or artistic work, *queer* is also fragile, an idea in struggle with itself. Malleable, oscillating between particularity and generality, utopianism and *realpolitik*—*queer* still faces genuine impasses, not least the curator's.

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## Notes

**1** Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," in KVINDER, KØN & FORSKNING No 1-2, 2012, p. 25.

**2** Ibid., 26.

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# Queer Curating and Covert Censorship

## Jonathan D. Katz

Acts of overt censorship are the most effective inoculations against the recognition of how policed our museum world really is. Every time authorities are imprudent enough to censor something, the rest of the museum world breathes a collective sigh of relief. The censorious museum, almost universally reviled, serves a purpose not lost on other museums: it's the negative pole, the bad example against which other museums can now stand bathed in the light, ennobled in contrast to their compromised brethren. Notably, these newly virtuous museums generally position themselves in principled solidarity with the censored, not the institutions doing the censoring, all amidst high flying rhetoric about artistic freedom and respecting artistic choices. Dutifully, we, the art world public, routinely swallow this rancid bait, vowing to protest, to resist, to hold that lonely, outlaw, offending museum accountable for its actions. And once again, in short order, the image of the museum as an open market for dangerous ideas and dissident artwork is burnished to a high sheen, its social and political progressiveness reified. And we return to the world of fiction we prefer to inhabit, blithely unaware how baldly we've been used.

The fact is that only reckless museums censor. Savvy ones, and they are in the vast majority, censor art vastly more often, but they do so long *before* that art ever gets mounted onto walls, made into shows, given an institutional life. In fact, this covert censorship is the lifeblood of the museum world, the immune system that works to keep its entire body politic free of difference—which is itself the disease. But because this covert censorship occurs in boardrooms, Director's offices and other sites shielded from public view, we never hear about it, and can pretend it simply doesn't exist. In what follows, I'm going to plead that we shift our attention from overt censorship, which we've almost exclusively taken to be *the* defining political issue, to covert censorship. Covert censorship, namely the restrictive palette through which nearly every large museum in the US adjudicates artwork, interpretive texts, and ideas, is the real enemy. In saying this, I am mostly referencing our large, well-funded museums, the ones so famous, so grand, so well-endowed with private funding that they can weather any sudden conflict. And yet it is precisely these large museums that are often the most covertly censorious, leaving it to small and/or university museums to take the risks they eschew.

Change has come so very slowly to the large American museum that it generally feels as if it hasn't changed at all—especially regarding a frank discussion of queer art and artists. I'm attending to queerness in particular here because the artwork in question is already in the museums. Unlike the politics of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and ability, wherein active diversification must be premised on aggressive acquisitions, fixing the queer problem is fast, easy, and cheap. All you need to do is change a wall label, and yet that's apparently an insurmountable problem. When was the last time The National Gallery Of Art in Washington, DC, or the Museum of Modern Art even mentioned sexuality, much less allowed it to do active art historical work?<sup>1</sup> You're much more likely to see a discussion or representation of sexual difference in popular, commercial mediums such as TV or film, than in any of the large, partially taxpayer-funded, non-profit educational institutions we call art museums. So clearly, this pervasive silencing isn't what audiences are demanding. On the contrary, queer shows

are almost always popular with all audiences regardless of their self-identification. So why are they so rare?

When my co-curated, queer-themed 2010 Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* was attacked by Republicans in Congress, I got to witness the relative weight of overt and covert censorship first hand. The Republicans were of course simply looking for a wedge issue in the hopes of reigniting culture war, and with it, the lavish ideological and fiscal payoffs that have historically followed in its wake. In turn, we knew that the exhibition was going to be attacked—it was, after all, the first-ever queer show at a national museum in the US—and we prepared for it. Expecting that the assault would replicate previous attempts to censor, my co-curator David Ward and I deliberately crafted a relatively restrained exhibition, one not out of keeping with the Smithsonian's usual fare. We made sure that, with one exception, all the nudes were by straight artists, so we could undercut any criticism of homoeroticism with the satisfyingly sharp retort that the artists were in fact straight. The Smithsonian even videotaped training interviews in which they asked me offensive and homophobic questions. We then reviewed the tapes together so I could learn how to respond on that cool medium, TV, and avoid such traps as repeating the question.<sup>2</sup> In concert with the director of The National Portrait Gallery, we thought we were being as deliberate and thoughtful as we could be, anticipating various kinds of responses to what we suspected would be the inevitable backlash against exhibiting queer art at a national museum.

Unfortunately, we underestimated the political savvy of our enemies on the Right and their capacity for a certain kind of basic political evolution. Unlike, say, the brouhaha over the Mapplethorpe retrospective *The Perfect Moment*, censored at the Corcoran museum in 1989—where all they had to do was name the artist a promiscuous homosexual, as if that alone sufficed as an argument—our enemies had come to understand that naked homophobia was by 2010 a politics of diminishing returns. So they camouflaged their old school homophobia in the guise of religious offense and improbably claimed that in fact *our* exhibition was an attack on *them*, on the Catholic Church, and on Christianity in general. The vehicle for that attack was the Right's favorite whipping boy, David Wojnarowicz, who even 18 years after his death could still rile our culture police into a mad lather. Ripping a page from our own playbook and using it against us, they made themselves over into a discriminated against and endangered minority, leveraging the fact that we had finally, for the first time, secured queer representation in the Smithsonian to cast themselves as the underdogs. A work of art that was arguably the most traditionally Catholic in the exhibition, Wojnarowicz's unfinished film *Fire in the Belly*, was their evidence. In that film, Wojnarowicz, shooting at a Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico, saw and quickly seized upon the metaphor of ants crawling on a crucifix to allegorize our generalized human indifference to suffering. Deliberately misreading the work's intent, professional provocateurs on the Right such as the Catholic League then claimed that the inclusion of the films was a deliberate insult to Christianity, as if the tortured figure of Christ as an allegory for human suffering wasn't a Catholic trope dating back nearly two millennia. They even argued that the exhibition was part of a larger attack on Christmas, though the exhibition opened in October. When the Catholic League, classed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a right wing hate group, published all my personal contact information—including my home address—I received a truly shocking wave of anti-Semitic hate mail, including one note saying that “we had our chance to rid ourselves of Jews at Auschwitz—and we won't make the same mistake again.”

The Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution caved in to this homophobic critique as rapidly as he did thoughtlessly. Without even consulting us and our contingency plans, and ignoring his own Museum's director, he ordered the Wojnarowicz removed from the exhibition and an immediate dust up ensued. In solidarity with the censored art, a number of institutions bought and screened the Wojnarowicz film, thereby publicly allying themselves with an artist they never showed, hosted, nor screened when he was alive. Many of the museums so quick to attack the Smithsonian were privately endowed behemoths, unlike the publicly funded Smithsonian, and thus insulated from some of the more egregious forms of fiscal blackmail the Right threatened. But, even more galling, I knew that many of these protesting large museums had utterly refused to cooperate with *Hide/Seek* before the censorship battle, denying all loan requests, not to mention the prospect of hosting the exhibition on tour—they even, in some instances, attacked the queer premise of the exhibition itself. Although the exhibition was called *Hide/Seek* after a celebrated eponymous 1948 painting by Pavel Tchelitchew in MOMA's collection, MOMA refused to lend the titular painting, and indeed refused all loan requests; nonetheless, it bought and screened the Wojnarowicz film and earned positive press for so doing. I am in no way excusing the Smithsonian's cravenness and cupidity in censoring their own exhibition, but I am at the same time interested in calling attention to the way a censorship crisis can serve other museums so well, turning complicity into resistance, despite the lack of any genuine institutional social or political commitment. What got lost in the brouhaha was that it was the Smithsonian Institution, the museum perhaps more directly in national political crosshairs than any other in the US, that agreed to present this queer exhibition, despite its almost guaranteed controversy. Many of the museums that attacked the Smithsonian could have hosted the exhibition with much less severe political consequences—and yet they did not.

The unfortunate result of the Smithsonian censorship controversy was not only that, yet again, queer art provoked scandal and pushback, it was that museums that wouldn't be caught dead doing a queer show could now "protest" the Smithsonian's censorship and win on both counts—underscoring their progressive credentials even as they continued to justify engaging in covert censorship to ensure that such a scandal would never rock their own institutions. And since covert censorship is by definition invisible, there is never a public relations problem to work out. But while we can almost never point to covert censorship and directly call it out, the narrow range of acceptable exhibition frames underscores its nefarious workings. On the few occasions when I have had a chance to sit at the table and watch covert censorship in action, rarely do I hear anything even approaching the actual rationale for turning down an exhibition. Instead of coping to the political complexities, directors and curators tend to make off the cuff claims about what audiences want and their fear that a queer-themed exhibition will appeal only to a small, invested queer audience. History tells a different story, however, and, as but one example, *Hide/Seek* was one of the most popular exhibitions ever mounted at the National Portrait Gallery.<sup>3</sup> To argue that only queer people would be interested in a queer show is of course yet another variant of homophobic essentializing, one that phantasmatically projects a clear and knowable divide between queer and straight culture when in fact what queer exhibitions do is precisely blur that boundary.

In any case, as anyone who has worked in a large museum can testify, attendance fees are a fraction of a museum's operating budget. Trustees provide the lion's share of the support, and Directors are therefore loath to do anything that might displease the 1% that is their true fiscal base. Covert censorship is therefore generally a preemptive

move to eschew any difference of opinion that might threaten a trustee's largesse. Whether the Board of Trustees is actually politically conservative (and of course, composed of people who sit at the very top of the social hierarchy, many are invested in conserving that hierarchy as it now stands) or simply treated as such as a precaution, the net effect is the same: most large museums will go out of their way to avoid anything that smacks of the now-infamous Corcoran ruckus of 1989, in which Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*, was preemptively pulled from the schedule so as to "protect" the museum from the threat of censorship—apparently by doing the censoring themselves. Needless to add, that act of overt censorship didn't work, constituting an object lesson for museum directors in the US that openly censoring your own shows won't protect your museum from controversy. The answer was to censor them covertly, out of the public spotlight.

Of course, covert censorship is never understood or framed as censorship, even in private. As one famous museum curator told me in covertly censoring acknowledgment of Robert Rauschenberg's long term and significant relationships with his former partners Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns, while at the same time including a label that Rauschenberg was married (and *not* noting that he quickly divorced), "we just prefer to let the art speak for itself." Among more sophisticated museum staff, acts of covert censorship are instead couched in a language of scholarly disagreement and dismissal. As Susan Davidson writes in her essay on the early Rauschenberg painting *Mother of God* for the SFMOMA website, "Other art historians may read the 'traveling' theme as a coded homosexual trope for 'coming out'. While it is true that Rauschenberg's personal life was undergoing significant and life-altering changes at the time *Mother of God* was created (i.e., meeting and partnering with Cy Twombly (1928–2011); the birth of Rauschenberg's son Christopher; and the subsequent dissolution of his marriage to Weil), this author cautions against a queer studies interpretation. More likely, the artist was of a mind to celebrate birth and rebirth—thus the centrality of a circular form alluding to pregnancy."<sup>4</sup> There are two problems with this. First, while the work has been read in queer terms, it's certainly not with reference to the ahistorical category of "coming out." Secondly, this blatant attempt to reinscribe Rauschenberg in line with dominant heteronormative ideology is, of course, a familiar form of policing. Note that Davidson simply throws out a different reading, without either arguing *for* her interpretation or *against* the careful massing of evidence by those with whom she disagrees. Furthermore, the attempt to disallow certain kinds of readings, "to caution against," as opposed to allowing a plurality of significations to flourish, smacks of the censorial. I disagree with Susan Davidson, but I would never seek to indict her entire methodology without argument.

Another recent development that only seems more progressive is to frankly address an artist's sexuality as a biographical fact, but allow it no purchase on the meaning of the resulting work. In this way sexuality becomes the functional equivalent of being born in Poughkeepsie, a fact that while true, lacks any substantive interpretive merit. Because the museum seems so comfortable acknowledging LGBTQ identity, these kinds of statements distract the audience from recognizing the reality of covert censorship. But to substitute declarative biography for art historical argument is a kind of sleight of hand, serving to carefully sever high-value commodities from the taint of sexual politics. Because an artist's sexuality can now be addressed as a matter of biographical fact does not translate into any necessary revision of what the artworks themselves may mean. And that's the rub, for a queer art history isn't interested in the sexual lives of artists per se, but rather in how a socially sanctioned selfhood inflected their artworks' communicative means and purposes.

A new tactic is on the rise that is perhaps even more effective in misleading public opinion. We are beginning to see museums actively cultivate niche audiences, and I have been struck recently by how often the LGBTQ community is now finding itself targeted. But only very rarely does this cultivation of a queer audience translate into an account of the art on display. Rather, most often it's done in the form of ancillary programming and events, as audience development and a fundraising tool. The Metropolitan Museum in New York, for example, hosts receptions cultivating a queer public in its Great Hall, even as it studiously avoids any mention of sexuality in its Classical Halls, where homosexuality is plainly on display. The Art Institute of Chicago has announced the advent of drag queen tours, and other museums hold queer nights. But all this ancillary programming, while cultivating the appearance of a progressive and queer-friendly endeavor, actually serves the interests of covert censorship in keeping questions of sexual difference as far as possible from the works of art on display. When sexual difference is now an acceptable category of audience development, it takes the pressure off the curatorial, and we witness a strange reality wherein art audiences may be queer, and recognized as such, but apparently not works of art.

But perhaps the newest, and I would argue most insidious, means of naturalizing covert censorship in museums is to allow that very rare, carefully vetted exhibition of one or more contemporary artists whose work is unavoidably engaged with queerness. This permits the museum to point to its progressive programming. But in truth, such discursively queer exhibitions are not only extremely infrequent, they are deceptive in that they serve as a stand-in for an active engagement with queer studies scholarship across the vast bulk of art history on display. These isolated queer exhibitions, always of contemporary artists whose work is, by our contemporary standards, self-evidently queer, challenges, and thus changes, no dominant account. Rather, it isolates and pinions queerness only within the most contemporary of framings, as if there can be no history, however complicated, of sexual differences in the past. Because these artists are of our own time, they merely naturalize our extant binary narrative that sees sexuality as inherently divided between a heterosexual majority and a queer minority. A truly queer art history doesn't construct sexuality in terms of a settled binary, but instead allows for a much more complicated account of slippages, eruptions, and repressions that restores to sexuality the force of the psychological. Sexuality is a powerful animator of human behavior precisely because it so often resists legibility and transparency according to our accepted definitions. And if that is the case today, it is ever more powerfully true for the art of different historical eras with different sexual schema and self-understandings. We cannot allow an occasional LGBTQ exhibition to license avoiding any of the more fraught or complicated (but far richer) questions that queer studies in art history has struggled to understand over the past few decades. These questions not only turn on the masking, or elision, of queerness in the historical record (addressing the sexuality of artists who, either because of personal preference or the context of their times, were not open about their sexuality), but equally about what a non-binary account of sexuality—a queer sexuality, in short—would look like and how we might know it when we see it. At the same time, we should not leave hanging questions of audience and interpretation, patronage and a host of other art historical questions that, in this relentless focus on the contemporary, are left on the table, questions that point to the problem of how we might reinterpret historical images alive to frames of reference regarding sexuality that are distinctly not our own.

This means that a truly queer art history may surprise us with its active dissent from our assumptions and naturalized meanings, that it may assume forms and modes of representation we as yet don't understand. So I want to be very clear that in seeking

more queer exhibitions, I am not asking that they take a form I can recognize. On the contrary, I would hope to have my definitions and naturalized understandings challenged and redirected. Because acts of *overt* censorship necessarily catalyze an opposition, the act of protesting that censorship, while politically necessary, is at the same time a reification of the very definitional boundaries a queer art history is struggling to erase, for in protesting the existence of these boundaries, we must necessarily mention and thus reinscribe them. Still, the most pernicious aspect of *covert* censorship is that it also leaves unchallenged our exceedingly familiar, binary models of sexual definition. Ironically, it is only in actively addressing sexuality that we might be able to move beyond or through it, towards a new horizon that understands our sexuality, as with so many other human differences, neutrally, not dissimilar from the way we confess to adoring a favorite food or color. After all, the fact that I like red need not entail disliking blue, and people who like broccoli are not deemed fundamentally distinct from those who hate it. On the field of taste, differences can happily cohabitate. And the more we can now forthrightly address our differences, the less these differences will come to signify and the less we will need to address them. Censorship, overt and covert, thus only catalyzes and reinforces what it would prefer to erase. Paradoxically, censors would be wiser to throw open a conversation that will, in the end, perish of its own irrelevance.

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## Notes

**1** In the case of the National Gallery of Art on the Mall, the answer is not once, never in all of its exhibitions, a scandal that is curiously invisible precisely because they have also never actively censored an exhibition once it was up in public.

**2** As they explained, if they ask you about “the homosexual agenda,” and you use that phrase even mockingly, the lead on Fox News could have you confessing your “homosexual agenda” in your own voice.

**3** The Smithsonian worked to gather extensive demographic audience data for *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* and by and large non-queers audiences were equally enthusiastic about the exhibition.

**4** See Susan Davidson. 2013. “Mother of God.” San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Accessed 04.02.2018. <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.299/essay/mother-of-god/>.



# Mediating Queerness: Recent Exhibitions at Pallant House Gallery

## Simon Martin

Much of the discussion concerning queer exhibitions and curating inevitably focuses on historically significant, politically and socially engaged projects, most often in organizations in major urban centers. The present case study does not necessarily fit this model. Instead, it considers whether 'queer curating' can exist 'within plain sight' in the mainstream of museum exhibitions, in what might—outwardly—seem like a more traditional institution.

Although Pallant House Gallery ( figs. 1-2) is situated in the small and picturesque English cathedral city of Chichester, with a population of just 26,000 people, its program and collection are, perhaps surprisingly, metropolitan and international. Housed in a unique combination of an eighteenth-century Queen Anne townhouse and a contemporary gallery, designed by Long & Kentish, in association with the architect of the British Library, Colin St John Wilson, the museum houses one of the best public collections of modern and contemporary British art, together with international works by artists including Edgar Degas, Picasso, Paul Klee, Gino Severini, and Fernand Léger. The atmosphere and program is characterized by the creative tension between modern and historic—with contemporary installations in paneled



Fig. 1: Pallant House Gallery exterior. © Peter Durant.



Fig. 2: Pallant House Gallery exterior. © Peter Durant.

interiors; but is also known for its substantial collection of British Pop art, including celebrated works such as Richard Hamilton's *Hers is a a Lush Situation* (1958), Peter Blake's *The Beatles* (1962-68), and Patrick Caulfield's *Portrait of Juan Gris* (1963). Although the city has a university, the population is largely older and socially conservative; there is no significant LGBTQ community or social scene. However, it is located just under an hour from Brighton, which has one of the largest LGBTQ communities in Britain, and one and a half hours from London, with about a quarter of its visitors coming from the capital. The Gallery's program therefore aims to attract and communicate with a wide demographic of visitors, often with the aim of what might be described as '*programming by stealth*' with progressive themes and installations presented alongside familiar artists that will draw more traditional audiences. Through combined tickets, by default this strategy exposes audiences to ideas and works they might not otherwise encounter. In many ways, our stealth programming enables the Gallery to be quietly radical in its thinking: for example, its award-winning Learning and Community program seeks to avoid *labeling* individuals since we aim for something other than ticking boxes and really encourage people to seek out the Gallery as somewhere to go to be creative, whatever their life circumstances, on a sustained basis. The Gallery is an independent charitable museum, with a Board of Trustees. Only 14% of Pallant House Gallery's funding comes from public sources, and the rest comes from ticket sales, endowment funds, commercial activities, and support from patrons, friends, and trusts and foundations, which means the programming needs to be distinctive from other museums in order to attract funding and visitors.

Pallant House Gallery has what might be described as 'a collection of collections' and seeks to explore the motivations of how and why particular individuals developed the collections they subsequently donated or bequeathed. The museum's founding collection, bequeathed by Walter Hussey, the Dean of Chichester Cathedral, is largely comprised of modern religious art by artists including Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, and John Piper, as well as Old Master drawings, and paintings and sculptures by the likes of Barbara Hepworth, Frank Auerbach, and others. But there are some surprisingly bold inclusions for a man of the cloth, such as a strikingly homoerotic male bathing scene by the Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant, which has been a staple in books on homosexuality in art, including the recent Tate Britain exhibition, *Queer British Art*. Some institutions might treat this, and other works such as a male nude drawing by Annibale Carracci, as 'problem works' that run against the dominant public narrative being told of the great patron of religious art. Currently, the Duncan Grant is shown alongside works by Cézanne, Jean Metzinger and Manet in a display exploring the influence of Post-Impressionism on British art, but the homoerotic content is clearly acknowledged and articulated in the picture label. In fact, it is the very first picture that a visitor encounters in the galleries, thus immediately unsettling any preconceptions about the collection they are about to view. This *visibility* of artworks that might be deemed 'queer' in amongst the wider collection is important. Whereas some museums might leave such works in their stores, rather than include them within wider narratives, the Gallery has simply presented them as part of the collection, and it often receives gifts of works because collectors know they will be displayed and rotated more frequently than in other, larger institutions. Over fifteen years, the Gallery has formed a collection of over 350 contemporary prints through the generosity of a couple, Mark Golder and Brian Thompson, two school teachers who gave £225 per month towards acquisitions. Through discussion with them about their interests, possible acquisitions were selected, including many female artists (to address historic gender imbalances in the collection), but also sometimes reflecting their own sexuality, such as David Hockney's etching *Peter* (1969) of his then-partner

Peter Schlesinger. Through gifts such as these, and a recent bequest of paintings by Keith Vaughan from the playwright Sir Peter Schaffer, displays of nudes at the Gallery can question the standard art historical trope of the male gaze on the female body, and consider either the female gaze on female or male subjects, or the male gaze on other males, raising valid questions about desire and representation, while challenging widely-held cultural assumptions. Several male couples have donated works to the Gallery, or intend to do so, and perhaps the fact that two Directors in recent years have been openly gay (Stefan van Raay and myself) has created an atmosphere of acceptance. For long-term relationships with donors it is important that they feel welcome, that they feel part of the organization and their voice is heard. For example, although not making it the focus of interpretation, the Gallery has never shied away from discussing the Golder-Thompson Gift in relation to them as a male couple in press and marketing.

Whilst exhibitions exploring collecting often deal with the question of familial inheritance, *The Radev Collection: Bloomsbury and Beyond*, in 2011, instead considered how one collection of Post-Impressionist and modern British artworks had passed through a group of homosexual males during the twentieth-century, from the 5th Lord Sackville Eddy Sackville-West and his one-time lover Eardley Knowles, to a Bulgarian picture-framer, and lover of the Bloomsbury artist E.M. Forster, called Mattei Radev. The largely-female corps of voluntary Gallery Guides relished talking about the unconventional aspects of the collectors' lives and their connections, but this perhaps also reflects an English fascination with class and transgressing boundaries.

All of this is context for understanding aspects of the program of exhibitions that may be recognized as 'queer' by some visitors, but not necessarily by many others. Part of Pallant House Gallery's rationale in presenting a distinctive program has been to hold exhibitions of deserving, but overlooked British artists, who have often not been shown for several decades by major institutions in London and other centers, with the aim of shining new light on their life and work. To me, personally, it is important that, when it is relevant to the work, we approach aspects of an artists' biography differently from how they might have been tackled in the past. A lot of this comes down, firstly, to the honest presentation of information: not shying away from discussing an artist's personal relationships, whether with men or women, and avoiding polite euphemisms such as 'friend,' when what we actually mean is 'lover,' 'boyfriend,' 'girlfriend,' or 'partner.' (Of course, sometimes we simply do not know the nature of someone's relationships.) Secondly, in the curatorial process we must maintain an objective selection of works, not leaving out those that may be deemed controversial or expressive of an artist's sexuality, but actually understanding these as providing insights into what makes them human.

The Gallery, as a public institution, is, of course, necessarily sensitive to artists and their estates. This approach reflects a wider stance in our Learning and Community programs towards *normalizing difference*; including the excluded and overlooked and as in our flagship project *Outside In*, a now-independent program championing marginalized artists, and celebrating what is traditionally termed 'Art Brut' or 'Outsider Art.' Instilled in this ethos is the core belief that our work as a museum must be about the intrinsic value of the art, enabling the artist's voice to come to the fore regardless of the background of the maker.

Several exhibitions in recent years have focused on reappraising overlooked modern British artists, including Edward Burra, Keith Vaughan, Christopher Wood and John

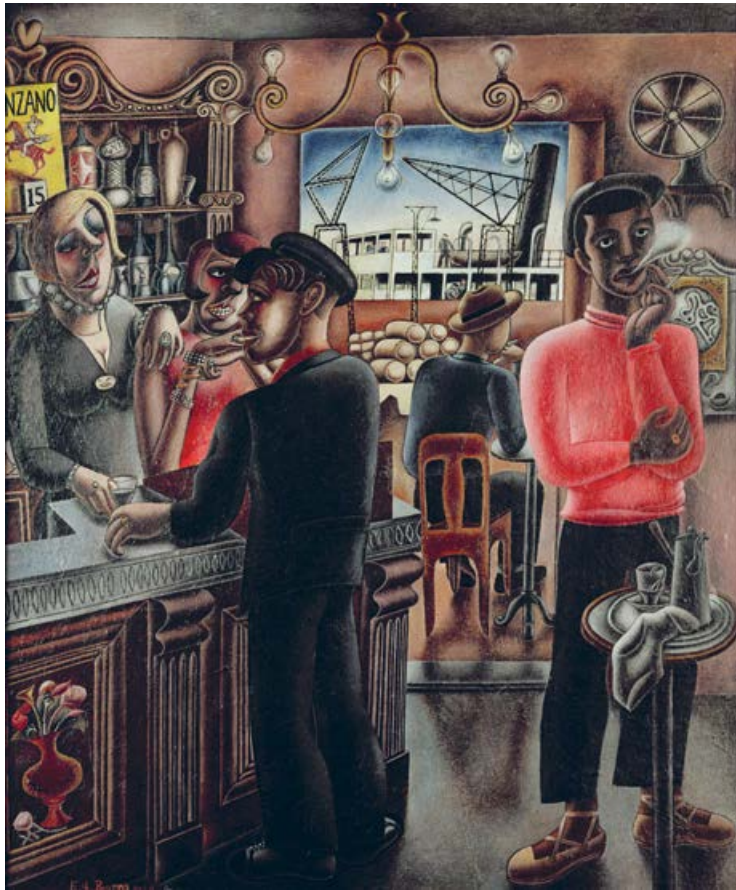


Fig. 3: Edward Burra, *Docksides Café, Marseilles*, 1929, oil on canvas. Private collection © Estate of the Artist, c/o Lefevre Fine Art Ltd., London.

Minton. These artists are all represented in the Gallery's collections, but in selecting them, there were other programming rationales: some were regional connections (Burra lived in Sussex; Vaughan was born nearby); some were anniversaries (the centenary of Vaughan's birth was in 2012; Minton's in 2017); and each of these artists could also be considered 'queer' subjects. *Edward Burra* in 2011-12, which toured to the Djanogly Gallery at the University of Nottingham, was the first museum exhibition of the artist's work for 25 years and the first to discuss in any depth the artist's queerness and his interest in drag and gender fluidity, through works such as *Docksides Café, Marseilles* (1930) (fig. 3).<sup>1</sup> In this painting, Burra depicted a young black male wearing espadrilles, whilst smoking in an identifiably 'camp' manner, whilst the figures behind the bar appear to be men in drag. The humor in his work can be an important vehicle for allowing people 'a way in.' Humor as a strategy for acceptance is, of course, a much wider phenomenon within the gay community, and in Burra's case his 'camp sensibility' was expressed through depictions of Mae West, visual puns on erect penises, exotic costume designs, men in drag, and characters on the margins of society, such as prostitutes. Burra was part of an artistic and literary community of homosexual men and lesbians in the 1920s and 30s, whom he would send up in paintings and letters—he even had an alter-ego named 'Lady Aimee Bureaux.' Significantly, *Edward Burra* was one of the Gallery's most successful exhibitions, surpassing even an international exhibition of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.

The exhibition *Keith Vaughan: From Romanticism to Abstraction* (2012) focused on the artistic journey of one of Britain's most significant modern painters from ambiguous





Fig. 4: Keith Vaughan, *Musicians at Marrakesh*, 1966-70, oil on canvas.  
© 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London.

depictions of figures embracing during the Second World War, to abstract landscapes, as well as addressing the theme of the male nude in his work, not only in relation to Vaughan's homosexuality, but also as an expression of post-war Humanism (fig. 4). It explored how certain subjects such as *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian* might be read in one way by informed audiences, and differently by others. Alongside this exhibition was a smaller Print Room show of Robin Ironside, whose centenary also fell in 2012. This was the first museum exhibition of the artist's work, even though in the 1950s he had exhibited in a two-man exhibition with Francis Bacon. Ironside had originally trained as an art historian at the Courtauld Institute and worked as a Curator at the Tate Gallery, but produced watercolors with an overwrought Baroque exuberance that arguably encode his homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> In Summer 2017, the Gallery held the first museum exhibition in almost 25 years of Vaughan's friend John Minton. In addition to marking the centenary of his birth, it marked the 50th anniversary of the partial legalization of male homosexuality in England and Wales.<sup>3</sup> For many visitors the exhibition provided a long-overdue opportunity to see examples of Minton's remarkable draftsmanship and his celebrated book illustrations, but it also featured his sensitive portrayal of his boyfriends and lovers, male nudes, and illustrations for novels dealing with 'gay themes' in the 1950s (fig. 5). In 1950, prior to the Wolfenden Report and subsequent legalization of homosexuality, Minton had written to *The Listener* calling out bigotry and asserting the cultural contribution of homosexuals, an action that was discussed in exhibition interpretation.



Fig. 5: John Minton, *Corsican Fisherman*, 1948, oil on canvas. © Royal College of Art.



Fig. 6: John Kavanagh, *Classical Male Athletes*, c. 1930, plaster. Private collection.

*The Mythic Method: Classicism in British Art 1920-1950* (2017-18) explored the 'return to order' in British art following the First World War, which paralleled the '*rappel a l'ordre*' in the work of Picasso, De Chirico, Andre Dérain, and others. Central to this was a discussion of the crisis of masculinity following the First World War, how war memorials idealized the complete body as artists sought a sense of security in the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome manifest in works such as *Relief* (c.1930) (fig. 6) by John Kavanagh.<sup>4</sup> Alongside consideration of idealized beauty in the 1920s and 30s, the exhibition also considered how artists such as Glyn Philpot had used the veil of classicism to explore Freudian readings of homosexuality in works such as his sculpture *Echo and Narcissus* (c.1931), or William Roberts' witty depiction of an



Fig. 7: Leonard Rosoman, *The Drag Ball, No. 2*, 1968, acrylic on canvas. © The Estate of Leonard Rosoman.

all-male bathing site *Parson's Pleasure* (c.1944). In spring 2018, Pallant House Gallery presents Leonard Rosoman's series of paintings based on the controversial 1965 play by John Osborne *A Patriot for Me* at the Royal Court Theatre. Due to a plot that included a drag ball and male kiss, it was deemed too sexually transgressive by the Royal Chamberlain's Office and denied a license, leading the Theatre to turn itself into a private member's club for the duration of the run.<sup>5</sup> Rosoman's paintings of the play, including depictions of the curtain rising on the drag ball (fig. 7), were exhibited at the Lincoln Centre in New York in 1969, but have never had a showing in a British institution until the presentation at Pallant House Gallery. They are shown as part of a season exploring how art reflected changes in 1960s society, and thus provide an alternative to the predominance of Pop imagery reflecting the objectification of the female body in advertising as seen in the major exhibition *POP! Art in a Changing Britain*, featuring works by the likes of Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, Jann Haworth, RB Kitaj, Gerald Laing, and Eduardo Paolozzi.<sup>6</sup> A kindred redress to female objectification can be found in the subsequent exhibition, from Tate St Ives, *Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition informed by her Writings*, that frames around 80 women artists through Woolf's ideas, including iconic works such as Gluck's *Medallion (YouWe)*, a self portrait also featuring the artist's lesbian partner.<sup>7</sup>

None of these exhibitions at Pallant House Gallery could be described as politically radical, but perhaps this is all a matter of context. Arguably, many people would not even recognize them as 'queer,' but that is perhaps where their power to inform lies. With their focus on the art, rather than any overt agenda, perhaps such exhibitions can reach audiences that might never consider attending more politically forward exhibitions, and thus change opinions, rather than serving to merely reinforce extant

opinions. Crucially, at the heart of each project is an attempt to be honest and straightforward about the complexities of human sexuality and identity, and to include alternative voices within a wider mainstream narrative. In their own right each of these exhibitions may subtly help to shift public attitudes towards one of acceptance and understanding.

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### Notes

- 1 See Simon Martin ed., *Edward Burra*, Lund Humphries, London, 2011.
  - 2 See Peter Boughton, Virginia Ironside, and Simon Martin, *Robin Ironside: Neo-Romantic Visionary*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2017.
  - 3 See Simon Martin and Frances Spalding, *John Minton: A Centenary*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2017.
  - 4 See Simon Martin, *The Mythic Method: Classicism in British Art 1920-1950*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2016.
  - 5 See Tanya Harrod, *Leonard Rosoman*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2017.
  - 6 See Claudia Milburn and Louise Weller, *POP! Art in a Changing Britain*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2018. With a Foreword by Simon Martin.
  - 7 See Laura Smith ed., *Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by her Writings*, London Tate Publishing, London, 2018. The present author has also contributed the chapter 'The Individualist Artist: Gluck and Modern British Art' to a recent book: see Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel eds., *Gluck: Art and Identity*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2017.
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# From “Transformer” to “Odardodle:” A brief history of exhibiting queer art in the German-speaking world

## Fiona McGovern

Exhibitions are formats of public display. They thematize the selection of objects, making them visible and accessible to a wider audience according to specific criteria. Exhibitions referring to or containing queer content therefore can be seen as an indicator of recent developments and changes in society in general, with notable aftershocks in the arts, in institutional politics and curatorial approaches. In the following text I will point out how history, visibility, theory, and public discourse about sexuality are inseparably intertwined by briefly sketching a—far from complete—history of queer-themed art exhibitions in the German-speaking world. This is a history that is still rather hidden, and that owes a lot to the developments in the US—both in regards to its gender and queer discourses and the artistic and curatorial reactions towards it. In 1995, the curator of *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* at Berkeley Art Museum, Lawrence Rinder, for example, notes his co-curator Nayland Blake’s belief that “there had already been enough surveys of contemporary art by gay men and lesbians”—including his own show “Situation” in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Similar tendencies can actually be observed in Germany. But while Rinder and Blake in the catalogue for *In a Different Light* make an attempt to provide an historical overview of gay or queer-themed exhibitions, the writing of queer exhibition histories in Germany so far is mostly a product of curatorial revisions of single exhibition projects. With this in mind, I will focus on a selection of exhibitions from Austria, Germany and Switzerland that appear significant for their time, several of them having circulated among those countries.

### Queer before “queer”

“Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie” [*Transformer: Aspects of Travesty*] (fig. 1), curated by Jean-Christophe Amman at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in Switzerland in spring 1974 (and later shown in Graz and Bochum), today appears as one of the queer exhibitions *avant la lettre*.<sup>2</sup> Its title referred to the second solo album by Lou Reed from 1972, and indeed the then-current gender-

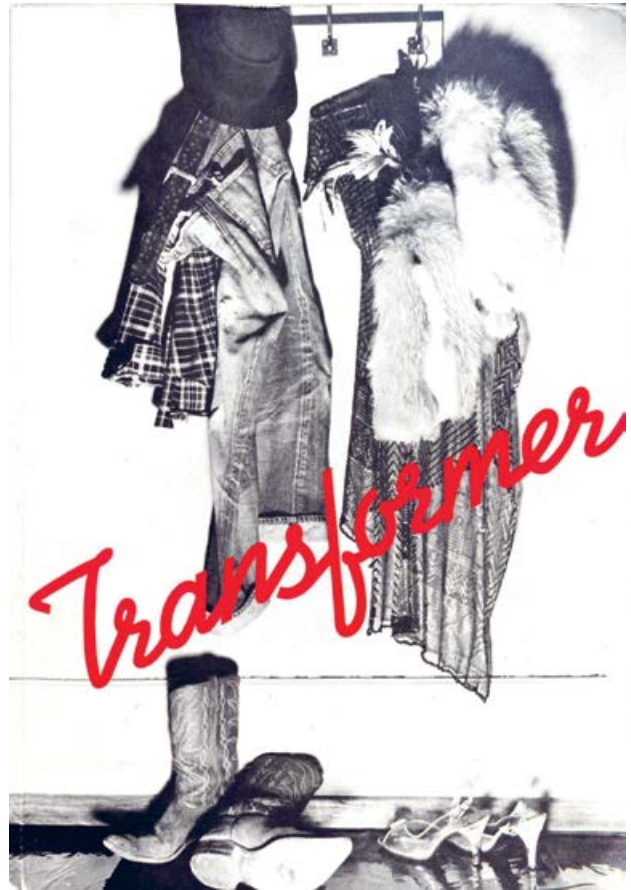


Fig. 1: *Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1974, exhibition catalogue.

bending trend in music (David Bowie, Brian Eno, Mick Jagger, New York Dolls) and experimental theatre (The Cockettes) from New York was the key influence for this show. Its main focus was the Swiss photographer Urs Lüthi, whose self-portraits in drag were placed in context with works by Jürgen Klauke, Pierre Molinier, Walter Pfeiffer, and Luigi Ontani, among others. Katharina Sieverding was the only woman included in the show. “Travesty,” here defined as the in-between of male and female, therefore was mainly considered from a cis-male perspective. According to Peter Gorsen, who had previously published extensively on women and sexuality in the arts and contributed an extensive essay

to the catalogue, “travesty,” rather than transgender, was particularly “interesting for the arts,” because gender here is primarily understood superficially as a matter of appearance—it’s not about actually becoming the other gender.<sup>3</sup> It would take about another forty years until transgender eventually became “interesting for the arts,” but more on that later.

Whereas “Transformer” is not very well-known nor was it broadly commented upon by critics in its time, the exhibition “Eldorado. Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950. Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur” [*Eldorado: Homosexual Women and Men in Berlin 1850-1950. History, Everyday Life and Culture*] at the Berlin Museum in 1984 made headlines across Europe.<sup>4</sup> One reason why this show was so remarkable is that it included both a lesbian and a gay section, at a time when both groups were at odds. Its goal was to represent queer life as an essential part of the city’s history, therefore making “visibility” one of its major issues. Not an art exhibition in the strict sense, “Eldorado” rather aimed for an overall depiction of gay and lesbian lives in Berlin, not shying away from what a current perspective might understand as mere cliché

(the lesbian café, the gay cruising area). As it ended in the year 1950, it maintained a historical distance, but nonetheless caused protests even before its opening.<sup>5</sup> Today it is considered the founding exhibition of the Schwules Museum\*, which came into being in 1985 and over the years has established itself as a unique place for the display of queer lives and art production until this date.<sup>6</sup>

### The AIDS-Pandemic: Exhibitions as Public Education

Not long after those early exhibitions, the climate changed. Especially in the US, HIV and AIDS had already become a major issue, and consequently also the topic of several art exhibitions. Due to the lack of direct action by the government, artists and curators alike felt the urge to think about appropriate representations of people infected, of mourning, and of straightforward activism. In 1987, activist groups like ACT UP and its art branch Gran Fury were formed, and in 1988 Nan Goldin curated her show “Witnesses: Against our Vanishing” that included a group of artist friends from New York’s Lower East side that in one way or the other were directly affected by HIV/AIDS.<sup>7</sup> The same year, the late

Thomas Bayrie	General Idea	Marcel Odenbach	Leben mit AIDS
Rolf von Bergmann	Gran Fury	Martin von Ostrowski	Arbeiten mit AIDS
Gabi Boll	Group Material	Marcel Otto	
Hajo Corsten	Rinaldo Hopf	Salomé	15 Selbstdarstellungen von
Juan Davila	Peter Hujar	Jan-Michael Sobottka	Gruppen, Vereinen und
Lynn Davis	Astrid Klein	Sage Sohier	Institutionen, die mit AIDS
Frank Dornseif	Attila Richard Lukacs	Ingo Taubhorn	zu tun haben oder
		David Wojnarowicz	von AIDS betroffen sind

MOR

vom  
16.12.88  
bis  
13.2.89

Di – So  
11 – 18 Uhr

im Künstlerbahnhof  
Westend

AIDS

Eine Kunst-Ausstellung über Leben und Sterben

Eine Ausstellung des Realismusstudios der Neuen Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK) in Zusammenarbeit mit der Deutschen AIDS-Hilfe e.V., Berlin, und der Deutschen AIDS-Stiftung »Positiv leben«, Köln, mit Unterstützung des Senators für Gesundheit und Soziales, des Senators für Kulturelle Angelegenheiten, Berlin, der Karl Hofer Gesellschaft sowie der Berliner AIDS-Hilfe, der Selbsthilfegruppe Mann-O-Meter, der Kanadischen Botschaft, Bonn, der Alternativen Liste und vielen anderen mehr.

Fig. 2: *Vollbild AIDS. Eine Kunstausstellung über Leben und Sterben*, neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin, 1988, exhibition flyer. © neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst / RealismusStudio.

Frank Wagner put together “Vollbild AIDS. Eine Kunstausstellung über Leben und Sterben,” [*Complete Clinical Picture AIDS: An Art Exhibition about Life and Death*] (fig. 2) at Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst Berlin e.V., the first exhibition that tackled the issue in Germany (it was later presented in Bern and Belmont-sur-Lausanne). By taking a medical term for the title of the show, Wagner indicated that even though the epidemic hadn’t reached its peak in Germany, this might happen soon. Since at this point there was no effective treatment available, he decided to combine both art works and documentation, framing the epidemic as a social as well as political crisis. American artists/activists like the ACT UP affiliate Gran Fury and David Wojnarowicz participated in the show next to other international and Berlin-based artists such as Marcel Odenbach, Astrid Klein, Salomé, and Juan Davila. The exhibit also included homage to the photographers Peter Hujar and Rolf von Bergmann, who had died of AIDS in 1987 and 1988, respectively. The catalogue contained a German translation of Douglas Crimp’s now canonical essay “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” as well as German AIDS public service ads, fictional texts, and factual reports.

Because of this educational approach and implicit warning, this show differed quite a bit from Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen’s “Gegendarstellung, Ethik und Ästhetik im Zeitalter von Aids” [*Contra-depiction: Ethics and Aesthetics in Times of AIDS*] that came into being at the Kunstverein Hamburg four years later (and then travelled to Luzern). As the title already implies, this exhibit concentrated on the question of a “new ethic and a new aesthetic that came into being under the pressure of AIDS.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, it indirectly referred to a debate that started around 1988, following the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition of the photographer Nicholas Nixon, and subsequent protests against the exhibit organized by Crimp and other AIDS activists. For them, Nixon’s infantilizing depiction of infected people—and utter avoidance of the political context of AIDS—was unethical, at least in the first major American museum exhibition on AIDS, and turned the people portrayed into doomed victims. In Schmidt-Wulffen’s exhibit, the list of mostly US-based artists, working at the intersection of art and activism, included such key figures as Wojnarowicz, Goldin, Félix Gonzáles-Torres, and Robert Gober, as well as collectives such as Gran Fury and Fierce Pussy, but also lesser-known artists such as Diane Neumaier and Brian Well. Tellingly, both exhibitions were originally held at a Kunstverein, the German model of a non-profit art space that is to a large



Fig. 3: *Oh Boy, it's a girl!*, Kunstverein München e.V., 1994, installation view. © Kunstverein München e.V.

extent funded through its members and is thus not at a publicly-funded museum.

### Third Wave Feminism and Identity Politics

Once again, it was at a Kunstverein, this time in Munich in 1994 (and then later in Vienna) that hosted a key exhibition of the then newly established field of queer theory: “Oh boy, it’s a girl! Feminismen in der Kunst” [*Oh boy, it’s a girl! Feminisms in Art*] (fig. 3), curated by Hedwig Saxenhuber and Astrid Wege. Its original conception was a response to to, as they put it, “the disinterest in feminism in the German-speaking countries.”<sup>9</sup> However, the situation had changed by the time of the exhibition, and the discourse around gender had become a “hot topic” (“one gender exhibition is hunting the next, one symposium the other” as they write).<sup>10</sup> Saxenhuber and Wege therefore didn’t even try to give a comprehensive overview, but focused instead on the connections between queer theory and feminism, e.g. breaking away from binary thinking and drawing heavily on the theories of Judith Butler and Leo Bersani (both *Gender Trouble* and *Culture of Redemption* were published in 1990). They therefore decided to go for a cross-generational approach and included established feminist artists such as VALIE EXPORT and Carolee Schneemann as well as younger figures such as Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, Julian Goethe and Lukas Duwenhöger, Dorit Margreiter and G.B. Jones, most of them coming either from the U.S., Canada, or a German-speaking country. Not all of the partaking artists were necessarily queer or women themselves, an aspect that reflects the non-binary thinking and proved typical for this type of a more reflective, discourse-oriented exhibition in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>





Fig. 4: *Oh... Jakob Lena Knebl und die mumok Sammlung / Oh... Jakob Lena Knebl and the mumok Collection*, mumok Wien, 17.3.–22.10.2017. Photograph by: Lisa Rastl. © mumok

### Arriving in the Mainstream

When, ten years later, a show at Museum Ludwig in Cologne self-consciously claimed to be “the first queer art exhibition,”<sup>12</sup> the focus again lay somewhere else. “The Eighth Square: Gender, Life, and Desire in the Arts since 1960” was guest-curated by Frank Wagner in association with Julia Friedrich and was mostly meant to celebrate work dealing with queer issues. As Friedrich discusses this exhibition in-depth in her article in this volume,<sup>13</sup> I will here only mention a few key points. One is that they took an issue of the German art magazine *Kunstforum international* dedicated to “the homoerotic gaze” as their starting point—an issue that as far as I know still marks the only issue of a German art magazine solely dedicated to this perspective on art history.<sup>14</sup> Second, “The Eighth Square,” which “stands for recognition and the still utopian idea of unlimited equality,” as Wagner put it in his catalogue text, included work that in one way or the other dealt with gender issues by over eighty artists.<sup>15</sup> Historically, this large-scale exhibition can be seen as a major achievement and its celebratory tone clearly marked a new momentum. At the same time, not all of the reviews were positive: Martin Büsser, for example, criticized the show

for not being critical and activist enough.<sup>16</sup> “It,” as he put it, “just lacked the potential of being scandalous.”<sup>17</sup> Reaching for the mainstream and gaining acceptability clearly helped to canonize the art works on display and make queerness an accepted field within art history—but at the cost of losing some of the political power it once had.

### Artists’ Interventions

That not everything had been said—or rather shown—on this topic becomes particularly apparent in view of artists who have come up with their own exhibitions of a queer art history. One of the most ambitious works in this regard is Henrik Olesen’s installation *Some Faggy Gestures. Some gay-lesbian artists and/or artists relevant to homo-social culture born between c. 1300-1870*, which, among others, was shown at the Migros museum in Zurich in 2007.<sup>18</sup> On seven panels, the Berlin-based artist showed various examples from art history with more or less obvious queer connotations, under headlines like “Männerfreundschaft,” “Baths,” or “American Dykes in Rome,” assembled in a style that resembled Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne*. The artist-turned-curator hereby provided an alternative reading

of canonical art history, while at times humorously pointing at the blank spots within the usual heteronormative narratives. The public display of this work was preceded by a two-year research period, part of which also ended up in Olesen’s essay “Pre Post: Speaking Backwards,” first published in the anthology *Art after Conceptual Art* (2006), and later reprinted in the catalogue accompanying Olesen’s show in Zurich.<sup>19</sup>

In 2016, transgender artist Jakob Lena Knebl went for a very different approach and aesthetic. When invited by the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna to curate a show with works from the collection, she turned two floors of the museum into campy experiences of art, obviously breaking with the museum’s usual display modes. The exhibition entitled “Oh...” for example included a Giacometti dressed in a glittery red evening gown as well as a copy of an Ellsworth Kelly painting turned upside down so that it looks like a big blue breast, and re-appropriated by the artist her/himself (fig. 4). The only Picasso in the collection was hung behind a wall and could only be seen through a mirror. All this happened in direct exchange with the curators Barbara Rüdiger and Susanne Neuberger and, therefore, with the full support of the museum. In a slightly twisted way, it now put a transgender artist into focus with an exhibition that was relatively easy to digest and fun to look at.

### Time for Revision

One could say that even if art by queer and trans people or exhibitions thematically related to queer and trans issues have reached the mainstream (and perhaps being a “queer artist” can even be an advantage today), the fight isn’t over but rather beginning all over again. As with any form of labeling, terms like “queer” today face the risk of a narrowed, even normative and stereotypical definition—something that the term itself, once it was re-appropriated by queer people, obviously worked against. When it comes to a queer exhibition history in the German-speaking world, it is particularly remarkable that at least three of the aforementioned shows underwent subsequent revision. “Oh girl, it’s a boy!” at Kunstverein Munich in 2007 played with the title of “Oh boy, it’s a girl!” from fifteen years earlier and attempted to “reconsider, question and re-evaluate the central aspects of the then underlying debates on ‘gender politics’ and ‘gender studies’ in the face of a changed and changing political present.”<sup>20</sup> The three curators, Stefan Kalmár, Daniel Pies (both directors), and the previously-mentioned Henrik Olesen, saw the conflict between “the fight for recognition and integration, on one hand, and the protection of ‘identity difference’ on the other” as central to their argument.<sup>21</sup> In 2013/14, Frank Wagner, together with a team of four other curators, took up his own show to reflect on the history as well as current state of art dealing with the topic of HIV/AIDS



Fig. 5: Vika Kirchenbauer, *Welcome Address*, single-channel video, 2017, installation view. Photograph by: Alex Giegold, 2017. © schwules museum\*/ Vika Kirchenbauer.

in a two-part exhibition, “LOVE AIDS RIOT SEX. Kunst Aids Aktivismus 1987-1995” and “LOVE AIDS RIOT SEX. Kunst Aids 1995 bis heute” [*LOVE AIDS RIOT SEX: Art Aids Activism 1987-1995/ 1995 till today*],<sup>22</sup> again at nGbK. And last but not least, in 2017, the Schwules Museum\* hired a curator—Ashkan Sepahvand—to look at their exhibition history and archive from a postcolonial perspective. The outcome was “Odarodle - Sittengeschichte eines Naturmysteriums, 1535-2017” [*Odarodle - An imaginary story of naturepeoples, 1535-2017*], a group exhibition including sixteen international artists and a symposium that looked back at their founding exhibition “Eldorado” (the new title is “Eldorado” backwards) (fig. 5). As Birgit Bosold mentions in her article in this issue, Sepahvand’s publicly-funded position was solely for this show. After adding an asterisk to its name in 2004, the Schwules Museum\* embarked on an extended conception of inclusivity. Clearly these revisions came out of a need to engage with queer (exhibition) history as well as the need to push forward in new directions, or to put it differently, for the museum to adjust itself to the current discourse.<sup>23</sup> As these examples imply, we can only move forward by first acknowledging our past.

## Notes

- 1** Lawrence Rinder, “An Introduction to In a Different Light,” in *In a Different Light. Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Light Books, San Francisco, 1995, p. 2. Exhibition catalogue.
- 2** See Bruce Hainley, “‘Transformer,’” *Artforum*, October 2004, pp. 73-76.
- 3** Peter Gorsen, “Die Geschlechterentspannung als Formprinzip und ästhetisches Verhalten. Versuch einer Standortbestimmung der Travestie im Kapitalismus,” in *Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie*, Luzern, 1974, unpag. Exhibition catalogue.
- 4** For an in-depth analysis of the exhibition, see unpublished research paper by Andrea Rottmann, University of Michigan, 2015.
- 5** See Rolf Bothe, “Einleitung,” in Berlin Museum ed., *Eldorado. Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950. Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur*, Berlin, 1984, p. 6. Exhibition catalogue.
- 6** For more on the history and politics of Schwules Museum\* see Birgit Bosold’s article in this issue, p. 5.
- 7** For more on this show see Maura Reilly’s article in this issue, p. 54.
- 8** Stefan Schmidt-Wulffen and Martin Schwander, “‘Gendarstellung’, 1992” in *Gendarstellung. Ethik und Ästhetik im Zeitalter von Aids*, Kunstverein, Hamburg,

- 1992, pp. 10-11. Exhibition catalogue. [author translation]
- 9** Hedwig Saxenhuber and Astrid Wege, “Editorial,” in *Oh boy, it’s a girl! Feminismen in der Kunst*, Kunstverein, Munich, 1994, pp. 5-6. Exhibition catalogue. [author translation]
- 10** Ibid. [my own translation]
- 11** The already-mentioned exhibition “In a different Light” at Berkeley Art Museum, 1995, for example, chose a similar approach, so did “From the Corner of the Eye” at Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, 1998.
- 12** Christiane Erharter, “A Collection of Key Queer Moments, 2006-2015,” in Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, and Hans Scheirl eds., *Pink Labor on Golden Streets. Queer Art Practices*, Sternberg, Berlin, 2015, p. 19.
- 13** See Julia Friedrich’s article in this issue, p. 22.
- 14** “Der homoerotische Blick,” *Kunstforum International* Vol. 164, May 2001.
- 15** Frank Wagner, “The Eighth Square. Observations on an Exhibition Experiment,” in *Das Achte Feld. Geschlechter, Leben und Begehren in der Kunst seit 1960/ The Eighth Square. Gender, Life, and Desire in the Arts since 1960*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, and Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2006, p. 21. Exhibition catalogue.
- 16** Martin Büsser, “Das Achte Feld,” *Intro* No. 143, October 2006, trans. Christiane Erharter. Accessed 03.02.2018. <http://www.intro.de/kultur/das-achte-feld>. See also Erharter, “A Collection of Key Queer Moments, 2006-2015.”
- 17** Büsser.
- 18** Previous to that there this piece respectively predecessors of it were shown at Buchholz Gallery, Cologne (2005) and MD 72, Berlin (2007).
- 19** See Heike Munder, “Some Faggy Gestures,” in *Henrik Olesen. Some Faggy Gestures*, Migros Museum, Zurich, 2008, pp. 166-171.
- 20** “Oh Girl, It’s a Boy!” 2007. Kunstverein Muenchen. Accessed 03.01.2017. <http://www.kunstverein-muenchen.de/en/program/exhibitions/archive/2007/oh-girl-its-a-boy>.
- 21** Ibid.
- 22** In the meantime, nGbK held other shows dealing with the topic like e.g. “Africa apart. Afrikanische Künstlerinnen und Künstler konfrontieren Aids” [*Africa apart. African artists confront Aids*] in 2002.
- 23** The same year, the German art magazine *Texte zur Kunst* published an issue entitled “Identity Politics now” with Donald Trump on its cover. While the “now” in its title implies a revision, there never was an issue titled “Identity Politics” in the first place (nonetheless it was a topic that has been present in the magazine throughout its existence).

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# Challenging Hetero-centrism and Lesbo-/Homo-phobia: A History of LGBTQ exhibitions in the U.S.

Maura Reily

In this essay, I trace the historiography of LGBTQ exhibitions in the U.S. from the late 1970s to the present. Some of the key issues explored will include the concept of an artistic “sensibility” specific to sexual orientation, the curatorial “outing” of closeted artists or objects, the prevalence of lesbo- and trans-phobia, and the importance of museological interventions as “curatorial correctives.” The material outlined here is much more extensively analyzed in my book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson), which is both an examination of mainstream contemporary curatorial practice—understood at its core as a sexist, racist and Eurocentric practice—as well as a historiography of paradigm-shifting exhibitions that have countered that discrimination, such as *Magiciens de la terre*, *Elles*, *Global Feminisms*, *Ars Homo Erotica*, *En Todas Partes*, *Hide/Seek*, *Documenta 11*, among many others.

I begin my analysis in 1978, when the US artist and writer Harmony Hammond organized an exhibition entitled *A Lesbian Show* at 112 Greene Street Workshop in New York, which featured the work of eighteen artists. Hammond’s aim in the exhibition was not to discover or define a lesbian sensibility, but to present works with a broad range of aesthetic and shared thematic concerns, including “issues of anger, guilt, hiding, secrecy, coming out, personal violence and political trust, [and] self-empowerment.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, according to Hammond, only a few of the works referenced lesbian sexuality, and the majority of them did not engage directly with lesbian identity or experience. The only unifying factor was that the artists were willing to be “out” in this context. This was a courageous act in 1978, since most lesbians did not want to be identified solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. As a result, most of the works dealt with “notions of camouflage or hiding,” and none was erotic in content because, as Hammond explained, the “artists were wary of the ever-present male gaze.”<sup>2</sup>

The case of *A Lesbian Show* raises some key issues that are in need of addressing in the context of LGBTQ exhibitions. First is the concept of a “sensibility” specific to sexual orientation. As with “women’s art” or “Latino art,” what is “lesbian art”? What is “gay art”? Does the art look different from that produced by non-LGBTQ artists? And, if there is a “sensibility,” how does it manifest itself in the work? The question of a gay or lesbian “sensibility” is one that has continually arisen in the historiography of LGBTQ exhibitions, from *GALAS* (1980) and *Extended Sensibilities* (1982) to *In A Different Light* (1993)—just as the idea of a “feminine sensibility” dominated women’s art production and exhibitions in the 1970s-80s.

Another issue raised by Hammond’s *A Lesbian Show* in 1978 was the artists’ willingness to “come out” publicly. Since sexuality is not generally physically manifest—as is usually the case with sex and race—it requires disclosure, a self-outing. For many this is liberating; for others, terrifying. Fear of being “outed” can be so intense that some artists have resorted to coded iconographies, as in the work of Jasper Johns, Robert



Rauschenberg, and Marsden Hartley. The gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s certainly changed that for some. As gays and lesbians became increasingly public, less closeted, they gained confidence and self-outing became less of an issue.

But what if artists are not “out” publicly, as was the case with Johns and Rauschenberg: should a curator “out” an artist, even if the artist had intended not to “out” him- or herself? In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented an exhibition of the work of Johns and Rauschenberg from the mid to late 1950s that made no mention of the fact that the two artists were lovers for six years during this period of artistic triumph, when they were moving away from Abstract Expressionism toward Pop art. Instead, the introductory placard described them as “friends” who were “in dialogue with one another” during this period. (MoMA’s profile of gay icon Andy Warhol also fails to mention he was homosexual.) Given that Johns and Rauschenberg were closeted, does this represent homophobia and/or censorship on the part of the museum? Mark Joseph Stern, writing for *Slate* believes so, arguing that, “museums have a responsibility to acknowledge and consider the sexuality of artists in their collections when it is relevant to the work they are displaying...In the case of Johns and Rauschenberg, ignoring orientation amounts to curatorial malpractice.”<sup>3</sup> For Stern, then, the museum’s actions were censorious. The oversight was particularly egregious, he argued, because Pop art, the genre the two artists founded, was “built upon rejection of societal norms, including hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity. Its gay dimension was present from its genesis, yet a casual visitor to Johns and Rauschenberg might think Pop art merely sprung out of two buddies’ wacky experiments.”<sup>4</sup> MoMA’s censorship—or “curatorial malpractice”—also called into question how thoroughly the curators Ann Temkin and Christophe Cherix had researched the abundant academic writing on the subject, including the now-canonical essay by Ken Silver, “Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art” (1992), which argued convincingly that the artists’ homosexuality, however coded, was evident in many of their works from the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> It was also a grave oversight given that three year’s prior, in 2010, the exhibition *Hide/Seek* at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, broke the silence on Johns and Rauschenberg, openly exploring the artists’ sexuality as it intersected with their work.

Related to the issue of censorship is the fact that many exhibitions that claim to examine LGBTQ issues and histories often omit transgender artists (and also lesbian artists, who are more often than not excluded from *group* shows, particularly those curated by men). With the exception of rare shows like *neoqueer* (2004) at the Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, and *Citizen Queer* (2004) at the Shedhalle in Zurich, queer exhibitions generally feature far more images *of* transgendered individuals than works *by* transgendered artists. This trend is evident in the majority of the exhibitions I am presenting in this essay. A kind of transgender tokenism forms around the popularization of Nan Goldin’s images of drag queens, Andy Warhol’s famed images of himself in drag, or portraits of the US filmmaker Jack Smith. In this context, works by transgender artists, like Del LaGrace Volcano, Juliana Huxtable, Vaginal Davis, Zachary Drucker, Patrick Staff, Loren Cameron, among many others, are sidelined even within self-consciously queer curatorial projects.

Despite the latent transphobia that continues to exclude transgender artists from exhibitions, gay and lesbian artists have made significant progress in terms of visibility in the art world since the late 1970s. Art history books and curricula, many incorporating the latest queer theory, have begun to explore and incorporate sexuality. But, as was the case with MoMA’s recent Rauschenberg/Johns retrospective, in mainstream

museums the acknowledgement of sexual orientation remains strikingly absent. Thus activist exhibitions such as *Hide/Seek* have attempted to rectify this tendency by re-investigating (and occasionally “outing”) queer artistic subjects, and specifically LGBTQ-oriented art museums have formed to combat historical “sins of omission,” including the Schwules Museum in Berlin (founded in 1985) and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York (founded in 1987).

Despite these gains, many mainstream (non-LGBTQ) art-world professionals are dismissive of exhibitions with selection criteria based on sexual orientation—they are considered tokenist and essentialist, and therefore no longer necessary in a post-identity world. But, as this paper reiterates, there is still a pressing need for further curatorial activism that focuses exclusively on work by artists who are not white, heterosexual, Western males. What is more, curators of queer exhibitions would also do well to strive for greater inclusivity, for as I have discussed, the majority of these exhibitions suffer from a demonstrable lack of women artists, artists of color, and non-Western artists. Sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and even lesbo- and transphobia continue to taint curatorial practices within the LGBTQ art community itself.

### **Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS) (Woman’s Building, Los Angeles, 1980)**

In Spring 1980, a collective of artists associated with the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles organized the *Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS)*, an initiative that sought to increase visibility for lesbian artists nationwide. As Terry Wolverton has explained, “The milieu that gave rise to GALAS was lesbian feminist, separatist, essentialist. Lesbians in general, and lesbian art in particular, existed almost entirely outside the boundaries of mainstream culture...When lesbian artists began, in the mid 70s, to seek out predecessors, they did not seem to exist.”<sup>6</sup> In a brochure from the exhibition, the organizers defined lesbian art as “art made by lesbians; art which explores lesbian content; art which is woman-identified. There’s no strict definition—if you feel your creative work is lesbian in form or content, please join us!”<sup>7</sup> In addition to an “Invitational” exhibition at the Woman’s Building, the GALAS project included more than two-hundred “sister” events and exhibitions in different parts of the USA and Canada, as well as the establishment of the GALAS archives.

The “Invitational,” curated by Bia Lowe, was an exhibition featuring works by ten “out” lesbian artists. The artists included a variety of work, ranging from abstract to figurative. Artists’ statements on wall panels accompanied each of the works. Some of the exhibition’s highlights included Harmony Hammond’s wall sculpture, *Adelphi* (1979), Tee Corinne’s series of solarized photographs of nude women (fig. 1), Kate Millett’s series of photographic diptychs of models (her lovers), Lili Lakich’s neon drawings of her heroines, like Djuna Barnes, and an abstract painting entitled *Ashkenazi* (1978) by Louise Fishman, which referenced her Jewish heritage. At the opening reception, to an audience of five hundred, Betsy Damon organized a performance entitled *What do you think about knives?* (1980). (Interestingly, heterosexual women were welcomed at the Invitational exhibition, while men—whether gay or straight—were excluded at certain times so that the art could be viewed in a woman-only environment.)

The GALAS Invitational received mainstream recognition in the press—a first for a lesbian art show in the USA. The *Los Angeles Times* critic applauded the exhibition as one that “blasted myths and provided models,” while the *Gay Community News* placed the exhibition in the context of lesbian invisibility and praised it as a statement of

pride and self-affirmation.<sup>8</sup> In all cases, the critics objected to the selection of artists on the basis of their sexuality and commitment to lesbian visibility, rather than to the quality of their work.

***Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*  
(New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1982)**

Curator Dan Cameron's *Extended Sensibilities* was the first exhibition in a US museum to bring together work by gay and lesbian artists: eleven men and eight women were chosen as "carriers," to use the curator's term, of a "homosexual sensibility."<sup>9</sup> In his catalogue essay, "Sensibility as Content," Cameron explained how he had attempted to expand the concept of "gay art" by showcasing "sensibility content"—works that he believed emerged from "the personal experience of homosexuality, which need not have anything to do with sexuality or even lifestyle."<sup>10</sup> Cameron's underlying assumption was that if an artist identified as gay/lesbian, then this would symbolically, metaphorically, or explicitly be manifest in the work. This "sensibility content" may or may not come across as "homosexual" to those who view the art, he asserted. Cameron noted that many of the artists in the exhibition had been reluctant to



Fig. 1: Tee Corinne, *Yantra #41, Yantras of Womanlove*, 1982, gelatin silver prints joined with tape, 18.7x23.5cm.

participate, not having “come out” yet, and were fearful of repercussions to their careers, so the “homosexual content” in the work was often repressed, not overt.

Rather than including predictable contributors—such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Keith Haring—Cameron thought it more interesting to exhibit a mix of well- and lesser-known artists, and to spotlight those “whose sexuality had not been discussed in relation to their work.”<sup>11</sup> Highlights of the exhibition included: John Henninger’s *Lying Man* (1978–82), Charley Brown’s cardboard glamorizations of his transvestite friend, Gilbert & George’s *Four Feelings* (1980), Harmony Hammond’s *Grasping Affection* (1981–82), Carla Tardi’s *Spring Again* (1981), Fran Winant’s *Cindy* (1976), and Arch Connelly’s *Lens* (1982), among many others.

*Extended Sensibilities* received mostly negative reviews—although it was consistently praised for legitimizing homosexuality as a subject of aesthetic inquiry and for generating a much-needed debate about gay and lesbian representation in art. Most commentators criticized the exhibition as too “apolitical, asexual, and safe;”<sup>12</sup> others considered the quality of the works on view as “embarrassingly amateur,”<sup>13</sup> “generally uninspiring,”<sup>14</sup> and “second-rate.”<sup>15</sup> *The Village Voice* critic dismissed the exhibition as lacking in liberationist politics but acknowledged it as an important crossover show because it had attracted an audience of gays and lesbians from outside the art world.<sup>16</sup> (Indeed, *Extended Sensibilities* became the best-attended show to that date at the New Museum.)

### **Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing (Artists Space, New York, 1989)**

In the fall of 1989, artist Nan Goldin organized a highly controversial exhibition at Artists Space in New York entitled *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, which focused on the response of New York artists to the AIDS crisis. Goldin selected twenty-two of her artist-friends—some already dead, some HIV-positive, many in mourning—who were then living and working on the Lower East Side of the city, and whose work addressed the AIDS epidemic in a variety of ways. In her catalogue essay, “In the Valley of the Shadow,” Goldin said she did not consider the exhibition to be a definitive statement about the state of art in the era of AIDS but “a vehicle to explore the effects of the plague on one group of artists...”<sup>17</sup>

However, even before the exhibition opened in November, it was catapulted into the national spotlight by a controversy surrounding a David Wojnarowicz essay in the exhibition catalogue, titled “Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell,” which denounced Senator Jesse Helms, the Catholic church, and other right-wing policymakers for their support of legislation that, Wojnarowicz argued, would further the spread of AIDS by discouraging education on safe-sex practices. The essay was so incendiary that the government withdrew its funding of the show. After much debate, and amid anti-government protests, the grant was partially restored. Goldin reported that there were, “15,000 people at the opening because of the anger at the government’s response.”<sup>18</sup>

The exhibition included works conveying both the rage of those suffering from AIDS and the psychic pain of those who care for them during their agonizing physical decline. Some of the highlights of the exhibition included Philip-Lorca diCorcia’s photographic portrait of *Vittorio Scarpatti* (1989), Greer Lankton’s life-sized sculptural work, *Freddy and Ellen* (1985), James Nares’s *Heartbeats* (1988), and Peter Hujar’s *Self-Portrait, Lying Down* (1976). A photographic installation by Dorit Cypis, *Yield (The*

*Body*) (1989), works from Wojnarowicz's *The Sex Series* (1988–89), and Kiki Smith's *All Our Sisters* (1989), a banner covered with silk-screened images of women and children, emphasized that no one is exempt from the ravages of AIDS. (Smith's sister, Bibi, died of AIDS in 1988.)

*Witnesses* received broad attention in the national press, although most of it focused on the pre-opening censorship debate, with sensationalist titles such as “Offensive Art Exhibit” and “Art for AIDS sake has feds trying to yank gallery's grant.” *The New York Times* and *New York* magazine critics agreed that the exhibition was worthy of attention and was more of a “melancholy memorial” than an “inflammatory broad-side.”<sup>19</sup>

### **In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice (University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive at the University of California, Berkeley, 1995)**

*In a Different Light*, curated by Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder, explored the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in 20th-century American art and featured over two-hundred objects by more than one-hundred artists (mostly US-based, mostly male), as well as ephemera such as 'zines, magazines, and record covers. (Notably, of the works displayed, eighty-two were by male artists, fifty were by women artists, and less than ten were by non-white artists.)

It did not claim to be a definitive survey of gay and lesbian art, but “a gathering of images and objects which shed new light on our collective history,” with a selection of works that conveyed gay and lesbian views of the world rather than one that “represented gay and lesbian lives.”<sup>20</sup> Instead of asking “What does gay art look like?” the curators asked, “What do queer artists do?” In so doing, they attempted to steer away from “the identification of queer as a noun or adjective and towards using it as a verb.”<sup>21</sup> The show's curators chose to use the word “queer” rather than “gay” and “lesbian” because they believed that it was fast “becoming a term that subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it...queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political.” Moreover, the decision to use the word “queer” rather than gay and lesbian allowed the curators to include heterosexual artists, in addition to gay and lesbian artists, arguing that straight artists also create artworks that “contribute to the cultural dialogue of both the gay and lesbian communities and of the culture as a whole.”<sup>22</sup> They hoped that viewers would begin to view gay and lesbian culture as being less “tied to sexual behavior and more as a mutable cultural phenomenon with issues that can be taken up by anyone.”<sup>23</sup> For example, they argued that drag is not exclusive to gay culture, citing cases of heterosexual cross-dressing by artists such as Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis, Cindy Sherman, and Marcel Duchamp. By including heterosexual artists and a wide array of works with no single theme and little overtly “gay” content (which Blake dubbed as “retrograde”), the curators rejected the essentialist notion of a gay or lesbian “sensibility” (unlike Dan Cameron, who had argued for “Sensibility as Content”). In sum, *In a Different Light* was not a show of gay and lesbian images, but instead a mapping of a queer practice in the visual arts over the past thirty years, with some historical precedents sprinkled throughout.

The exhibition was organized into nine sections. Included in the “Void” section were images by artists who had developed personal iconographies to describe emotional states, particularly feelings of mournful emptiness in the wake of AIDS, like Michael Jenkins' *Snowflakes* (1990), in which white felt dots refer both to snow and to lesions caused by the cancer Kaposi sarcoma. The section entitled “Self” presented a series of

self-portraits: one of Arch Connelly from 1982, Catherine Opie's photograph *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1994) (fig. 2), and Mapplethorpe's photograph *Self-Portrait with Whip* (1978), were examples. The "Drag" section included works like Acconci's *Conversions Part III* (1971) and Deb Kass's *Altered Image* (1994), in which the artist cross-dresses as Warhol in drag. In the "Other" section, artists expressed the longing of unrequited love: featured here were Romaine Brooks' painting *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923–24) and Donald Moffett's *You, you, you* (1990). The section "Couple" included pairings of same-sex couples, as in *Two Friends at Home, N.Y.C.*, by Diane Arbus (1965), and other romantic pairings. The "Family" group presented works by queer artists exploring homosexuality in relation to the heterosexual nuclear family, as in General Idea's *Baby Makes Three* (1984–89). The works in the "Orgy" section explored sexual pleasure and freedom, such as a series of erotic photographs by Tee Corinne from her *Yantras of Womanlove* series (1982). The final section presented works of utopian musings—like Jack Pierson's wall sculpture *Heaven* (1992).

The exhibition received mixed reviews. Writing for *New Art Examiner*, artist Cecilia Dougherty deemed the exhibition "horribly flawed" in that it presented artists and artworks out of context, situating them into a "queer" setting, one based on style and suggestion rather than on histories, intentions, or dialogues.<sup>24</sup> She was particularly critical of the fact that "work by women, especially by lesbians, was the most misrepresented, under-represented, and misinterpreted in the exhibit," and that when work by lesbians was shown, it was only "in gay male terms."<sup>25</sup> For example, she cited specific works by lesbian artists Amy Adler and Monica Majoli, who contributed a drawing of a nude male torso (*After Sherrie Levine*, 1994), and a painting of a gay male sex scene (*Untitled*, 1990). The *Los Angeles Times* critic considered the show a resounding success, principally because it presented gay identity as "a living, open-ended question, rather than a deadened, proscribed answer," which meant "you find yourself looking at art in ways you otherwise wouldn't."<sup>26</sup> (He asked, for example, whether Jasper Johns intended his *Ale Cans*, 1964, to be a sublimated queer couple.) David Bonetti of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was equally impressed, calling the show "ground-breaking" and commending it for its capturing of a "queer sensibility" at a moment of profound change, with the advent of the AIDS epidemic and the rise of a newly politicized generation of queer artists.<sup>27</sup>

***Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*  
(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC;  
Brooklyn Museum, New York; Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington,  
2011-12)**

*Hide/Seek* was the first major exhibition in the US to trace both the impact of same-sex desire and the defining presence of gay and lesbian artists in the making of modern portraiture. It examined more than a century of art and a variety of sexual identities, bringing together over one-hundred works in a wide array of media. The exhibition highlighted the contributions of gay and lesbian artists, many of whom developed strategies to code and disguise their own as well as their subjects' sexual identities. It included gay and straight artists depicting gay and straight subjects, and its focus on famous artists demonstrated how thoroughly sexuality permeated the 20th-century and early 21st-century canon of art.

The exhibition was divided into seven sections. "Before Difference, 1870–1918" included works produced before the division of sexes into "normal" and "deviant" via implementation of the legal codification "homosexual." Examples included Thomas Eakins' painting, *Salutat* (1898) and George Bellows's lithograph *The Shower-Bath*





Fig. 2: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait /Cutting*, 1993, C-print, 40 x 30 inches (101.6 x 76.2 cm).  
© Catherine Opie, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

(1917). The “Modernism” section focused on the gay subcultures in cities such as New York, predominantly during World War I (1914–18), and included Marsden Hartley’s *Painting No. 47, Berlin* (1914–15), for example, and Charles Demuth’s *Dancing Sailors* (1917). The section “1930s and After” explored the many contributions gay and lesbian artists made to US Modernism of the 1930s, including Hartley’s *Eight Bells Folly: Memorial for Hart Crane* (1933) and Grant Wood’s painting *Arnold Comes of Age* (1930). The section “Consensus and Conflict” examined work produced in the fifties and early sixties, a time of social and cultural conflict, as well as one in which the US government was obsessed with “subversion” (also known as the “Lavender Scare”), prompting artists to suppress or code gay and lesbian content for fear of exposure: Robert Rauschenberg’s lithograph *Canto XIV* (1959–60) and Jasper Johns’ *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara* (1961) were used as prime examples. The section “Stonewall and After” focused on work produced from the 1960s to the early 21st century, which grew out of the gay liberation movement sparked by the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Hujar’s portrait of Susan Sontag (1975) and Warhol’s *Camouflage Self-Portrait* (1986) were included in this section. In the “AIDS” section, viewers encountered works that dealt directly with the AIDS crisis in the USA (or the “gay plague,” as it was also called).

Artistic responses to the crisis featured elegiac, moving works and memorials, including Félix González-Torres's candy spill, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), and AA Bronson's lacquer on vinyl portrait of Felix Partz on his deathbed. The final section, "New Beginnings," covered the postmodern period, from the 1990s to the early 21st century, with key examples including Cass Bird's *I Look Just Like My Daddy* (2003) and a series of images from Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* (1991).

*Hide/Seek* ignited a public controversy during its run at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC, when the Catholic League and conservative congressmen publicized their objections to an edited version of a film by David Wojnarowicz, *A Fire in My Belly*, from 1987, and specifically to the sequence of ants crawling over a crucifix (fig. 3). Congress demanded the removal of the video, and the Smithsonian yielded to political pressure. It didn't stop there. That same month, Georgia congressman Jack Kingston railed against the gallery's depictions of male nudity and of US TV star Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, and called for a congressional review of the Smithsonian's funding.

The exhibition received mostly positive reviews. *The New York Times* hailed it as an historic event. Critic Holland Cotter was less generous, calling it a "let-down," and its emphasis on art stars "an exercise in Hall of Fame building."<sup>28</sup> Ariella Budick, writing for *The Financial Times*, claimed that "Not everything in the exhibition shines, but the collective impact is stunning."<sup>29</sup>

### **Art AIDS America**

**(Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, New York; Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, Georgia; Alphawood Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, 2015–17)**

The main premise of *Art AIDS America* was that since the early 1980s, AIDS has been the great, albeit repressed influence shaping art, politics, medicine, and popular culture in the USA. With some 125 objects by around 100 artists (mostly white males),



Fig. 3: David Wojnarowicz, Photo still from *A Fire in My Belly*, 1986–1987, super 8mm film transferred to video, 13:06 minutes and 7:00 minutes. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P•P•O•W, New York © David Wojnarowicz.



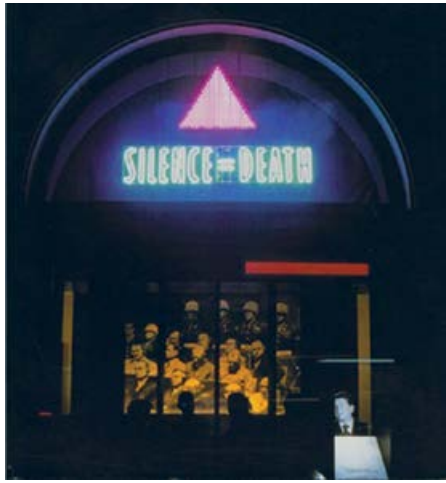


Fig. 4: Gran Fury (New York, active 1987-1994), *Let the Record Show*, 1987, window installation. Artists' Collection and New Museum, NY.

the exhibition introduced and explored a wide spectrum of artistic responses to AIDS, from the politically outspoken and covert to the quietly mournful. (Of the artists featured in the exhibition—76 male, 21 female, and 1 trans—33 self-identified as HIV-positive, while 23 had died of HIV-related causes.) By way of its inclusion of recent works by artists living with AIDS, the show also demonstrated that HIV is by no means over: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2015 that 1.2 million Americans are HIV-positive, with some 50,000 new cases reported each year.

One of the principal aims of the exhibition, curator Jonathan Katz explained, was to ask, “why so much art about AIDS doesn’t look like art about AIDS,” and, in response, to present the myriad ways AIDS can figure in visual art, from literal to abstract, from explicit to interpreted. AIDS art should not be considered synonymous with AIDS activist art, the curators argued. Many artists responded to the crisis by “carefully and strategically” positioning their works within the art world “in order to operate, as it were, at a subterranean level, so as to avoid censure.”<sup>30</sup> Katz is referring here to the fact that during the 1980s and 1990s, any US museum that received federal funding was forbidden to display work that made explicit reference to homosexuality or AIDS due to a legal statute authored by then-North Carolina Republican senator Jesse Helms. The desire to express one’s politics covertly also related to what Katz described as the policing coming from “postmodernist criticism at the moment, which decried authorial or expressive work.”<sup>31</sup>

The exhibition was divided into four categories, which were a nod to the disease’s physical, emotional, and spiritual effects on the people diagnosed, as well as to the impact on lovers, friends, and families of those living with HIV/AIDS, or of those who have simply had to navigate the world and the possibility of infection.

The first section, “Body,” concentrated on the physical ravages of AIDS on the human body, presenting works such as Ross Bleckner’s painting *Brain Rust* (2013), and Keith Haring’s bronze sculpture, *Altarpiece* (1990)—the artist’s last work before succumbing to AIDS. “Spirit,” the show’s second section, featured the first AIDS work—a painting by Izhar Patkin, entitled *Unveiling of a Modern Chastity* (1981), a large yellow canvas with huge, gaping rust-colored “wounds” referring to AIDS-related Kaposi sarcoma lesions. Also included, among others, in this section was Tino Rodriguez’s *Eternal Lovers* (2010). The largest and strongest section of the exhibition, “Activism,” denoted

works that were overtly political—including the ACT UP/Gran Fury collective’s famous 1987 window installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, *Let the Record Show* (fig. 4), which was re-created in the exhibition with the same pink triangle and the words “Silence = Death” in neon; also featured in this section were Kiki Smith’s *Red Spill* (1996), a memorial to her sister who died of AIDS, a suite of self-portraits by Kia Labeija, the only female HIV-positive artist of color in the show, and Charles LeDray’s *Untitled* (1991) teddy bear. The “Camouflage” section featured artists who “bury references to AIDS or sexuality” in their work, as in Wojnarowicz’s *Untitled (Buffalo)* (1988–89), a diorama of buffalo being herded off a cliff. On the surface, it does not appear to be about AIDS. But for the artist, who succumbed to the disease in 1992, the image served as “a chilling metaphor of the politics of AIDS in the U.S. in the late 1980s” and as an expression of his “rage, desperation and helplessness.”<sup>32</sup>

*Art AIDS America* garnered both praise and criticism. *The Seattle Times* called the Tacoma Art Museum’s version of the exhibition “a moving new show,” and Seattle’s alternative arts and culture newspaper *The Stranger* designated it “an epic and a national treasure”—a “masterpiece,” albeit “messy” and “not perfect.”<sup>33</sup> However, the Tacoma edition also sparked public protests about the lack of racial diversity in the exhibition (of the 107 artists on display, only five were African American). While subsequent presentations of the exhibition attempted to address this omission by featuring additional black artists, the controversy continued throughout the show’s run. Protests persisted in Atlanta—in this instance, however, it related to the exhibition’s content, when State Representative Earl Ehrhart claimed, for example, that “a fully loaded porta-potty would be better artistic expression,” and State Senator Lindsey Tippins called the art “trash.”<sup>34</sup> Deborah Solomon of WNYC radio called the Bronx Museum’s version of *Art AIDS America* “a landmark show...a big, bold courageous show [that] deserves enormous attention,” and one that “alters art history.”<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I will end with an anecdote and a bit of humor. In 2004 Christian Rattemeyer, then a curator at Artists Space (an avant-garde institution in New York that has traditionally supported work from the margins), rejected a show on LGBTQ art (entitled “Living Legacy: Queer Art Now”) because, according to him, “it is no longer the time to make such limiting judgments for selection,” and “we should shy away from exhibitions of works by Women artists, Black artists, or, as in the most recent example, African artists, selected solely on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or nationality.”<sup>36</sup> He also argued that there is no longer a need for exhibitions on so-called marginalized groups because they have now been included in contemporary art shows.

On hearing of Rattemeyer’s response, the art activists, the Guerrilla Girls, sent him the following letter:

Dear Sir,

We were privileged recently to see a letter that you sent to Harmony Hammond and Ernesto Pujol declining an exhibition proposal they had submitted to your institution. We are writing to say that we couldn’t agree more with the views you expressed in your letter!!!! You are right that in this post-ethnic era there should no longer be exhibitions of works by “Women artists,” “Black artists,” “African artists,” or, as in the co-curator’s proposal, “Queer Artists,” or any shows selected solely on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or nationality.

But we feel you didn't go far enough. Let's get real, here! In this post-studio era, how can you justify shows of "video artists," "painters," "sculptors" or "photographers?" In fact, since, any curatorial intervention limits the reading of artists' work, by pushing it into some thesis or other, we propose there should be no more exhibitions at all!

Sincerely,  
Käthe Kollwitz for the Guerrilla Girls

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## Notes

- 1** Harmony Hammond, "A Lesbian Show at 112 Greene Street Workshop, January 21 - February 11, 1978," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 45.
- 2** Ibid., p. 44.
- 3** Mark Joseph Stern. 2013. "Is MoMA Putting Artists Back in the Closet?" *Slade*, February 26.
- 4** Ibid.
- 5** Ken Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," *Hand Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955-62*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992, pp. 179-203.
- 6** Terry Wolverton, "Great American Lesbian Art Show," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Light Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 50.
- 7** From the *GALAS Brochure*, 1980, unpagued.
- 8** Diane Elvenstar. 1980. "Art from Closet to Gallery." *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, pp. G1-G2; "National network honors lesbian artists." *Gay Community News* 7.38, April 12, 1980, p. 2. [No author.]
- 9** The 19 artists were Charley Brown, Scott Burton, Craig Carver, Arch Connelly, Janet Cooling, Betsy Damon, Nancy Fried, Jedd Garet, Gilbert & George, Lee Gordon, Harmony Hammond, John Henninger, Jerry Janosco, Lili Lakich, Les Petites Bonbons, Ross Paxton, Jody Pinto, Carla Tardi, and Fran Winant.
- 10** Dan Cameron, "Sensibility as Content," in *Extended Sensibilities*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1982, pp. 7-8. The "sensibility content" category was further sub-divided into three types: "the homosexual self," the "homosexual other," and "the world transformed."
- 11** Ibid., p. 54.
- 12** Hammond, p. 57.
- 13** James Saslow, "New York's 'Extended Sensibilities,'" *The Advocate*, Dec 9, 1982, p. 48.
- 14** Ibid.
- 15** Richard Flood, "Review: Extended Sensibilities," *Artforum*, March 1983, p. 72.
- 16** Jeff Weinstein. 1982. "Gay or Not." *Village Voice*, November 2, p. 10.
- 17** Nan Goldin, "In the Valley of the Shadow," *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, Artists Space, New York, 1989, pp. 4-5.
- 18** Nan Goldin. The Digital Journalist. [http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0106/voices\\_goldin.htm](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0106/voices_goldin.htm).
- 19** Kay Larson. 1989. "Days of Rage." *New York Magazine*, November 27, p. 79.
- 20** Lawrence Rinder, "An Introduction to *In a Different Light*," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 1.
- 21** Nayland Blake, "Curating *In a Different Light*," *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, City Lights Publishers, San Francisco, 1995, p. 11.
- 22** Rinder, p. 6.
- 23** Kevin Killian, "The Secret Histories," *Artforum International* 33.6, February 1995, p. 23.

- 24** Cecilia Dougherty. 1995. "Identity Crisis." *New Art Examiner*, September, p. 29+.
- 25** Ibid.
- 26** Christopher Knight. 1995. "Shining a 'Different Light' on both artist and viewer." *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, F1.
- 27** David Bonetti. 1995. "Looking at art 'In a Different Light'." *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 11.
- 28** Roberta Smith. 2011. "This Gay American Life, In Code or in Your Face." *New York Times*, November 18, C.23; Holland Cotter. 2010. "Sexuality in Modernism: The (Partial) History." *The New York Times*, December 10.
- 29** Ariella Budick. 2011. "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture, Brooklyn Museum, New York." *The Financial Times*, December 7 (online).
- 30** Katz, quoted in Sarah Douglas. 2015. "Is this the first AIDS artwork?" *ArtNews*, September 18.
- 31** Ibid.
- 32** Exhibition wall text, *Art AIDS America*.
- 33** Michael Upchurch. 2015. "How AIDS changed American art: Tacoma Art Museum show charts responses to the HIV crisis." *The Seattle Times*, October 19; Jen Graves. 2015. "Tacoma Art Museum's *Art AIDS America* Is a Messy Masterpiece That Reframes the Past 40 Years of American Art." *The Stranger*, October 7.
- 34** On the controversy around the exhibition, see Stan Ziv. 2016. "Exhibit at Bronx Museum Explores the Influence of HIV/AIDS On American Art." *Newsweek*, July 16.
- 35** Deborah Solomon. 2016. "Review: A Brave Show on Art and AIDS." *WNYC-Radio*, July 29.
- 36** This comes from a letter from Rattemeyer that is in the author's possession.

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**Maura Reilly** is Executive Director of the National Academy of Design in New York, which is a membership organization of 420 contemporary American artists and architects, who represent the leading practitioners in the country. She is the Founding Curator of the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the first exhibition and public programming space in the U.S. devoted exclusively to feminist art, where she organized multiple acclaimed exhibitions, including the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* and the blockbuster *Global Feminisms*. Her most recent publications include *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson, 2018) and *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (Thames & Hudson, 2015). In 2015, she was voted one of the 50 most influential people in the art world by both *Blouin Art Info* and *Art & Auction*. She received her MA and PhD from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

# The Art of Looking at Naked Men: Queering Art History in Scandinavia

## Patrik Steorn

In the summer of 2008, when Stockholm hosted Euro Pride, the term “queer” and the acronym “HBT” (Swedish for LGBT) appeared all over the Stockholm museum world. Several museums gave “queer tours” of their permanent collections, some museums presented queer “interventions” in their general exhibitions using temporary information panels, and a few institutions organized temporary exhibitions on queer themes. National media reported on these initiatives, the audience came in large numbers, the press reported on their success, and it seemed like queer perspectives made a successful entrance into the Stockholm museum world.<sup>1</sup>

Gender studies scholar Vanja Hermele pointed out that through temporary exhibitions and collaborations with feminist and queer artists and curators, Swedish art institutions tend to see themselves as much more radical than they actually are.<sup>2</sup> With a critical eye towards the museum world’s queer ventures in Stockholm 2008, my impression is that the exhibitions, tours, and interventions did not offer the necessary critical analysis of norms, tending to engage with queer perspectives only at a superficial level. The museum’s own role in producing and upholding normative interpretations had still not been dealt with, nor had the museums’ collection policies been evaluated with respect to sexualities. Subsequently, these issues were taken seriously by state institutions, and the National Exhibition Agency published two reports—one on museums and diversity (2014), one on museums and LGBTQ issues (2015).<sup>3</sup> These documents sought to support museums that wanted to engage with the issues, offering an international outlook. It seemed a consensus was being established around the importance of including these perspectives, but this was not actually the case.

In the fall 2016, writers in the culture pages debated Swedish museum priorities—is there too much ideology, what should actually be communicated, and how should collections be shown? Are museums favoring diversity and identity politics over conservation and traditional knowledge about objects? On one hand,

the situation can certainly be interpreted as a backlash against progressive trends in the institutions, but on the other, it can also be seen as a resistance against state agencies setting agendas for cultural life. In my opinion, the intersection of these trajectories is where truly creative museum work occurs, when we can move beyond the seeming opposition between objects and stories, aesthetics and context, historical artifacts and contemporary perspectives. The challenge for museums lies in taking critical perspectives very seriously while at the same time striving to truly represent an object’s ability to reflect both its past and our present, while drawing connections between the two.

Against this statement of creed, I will focus on an exhibition that I curated in the summer of 2015, exploring the queer potential of a specific artwork at the art museum Thielska Galleriet in Stockholm, Sweden. The theme was men by water, and the rooms were filled with male nudity. The Swedish-Finnish artist Jan Hietala has since long devoted himself to exploring the artistic tradition of the male body through various media: painting, films, texts and installations. As the recently appointed director of the museum, I invited Hietala to show a selection of his works in order to evoke a contemporary perspective on one of the museum’s most eye-catching paintings: *The Navy Bathhouse* (1907) by Swedish painter Eugène Jansson (1862-1915) (fig. 1).

Eugène Jansson belonged to the close circle of artist friends around the art collector and banker Ernest Thiel, who founded the collection that would become the Thielska Galleriet art museum in the 1920s. The museum is devoted to Scandinavian art from the decades around 1900, installed in a purpose-built villa with interiors from the period. Jansson’s paintings had a dedicated wall in the gallery layout. Since the 1970s, however, the *Navy Bathhouse* had been stored in the museum’s vaults, displayed only during temporary exhibitions. With the exhibition “Men at water. Jan Hietala and Eugene Jansson in dialogue” (June 13-September 20, 2015), I wanted to underscore that naked men would again have a permanent place at the museum.<sup>4</sup>

During my own research as a PhD student around 15 years ago, I had been denied access to the painting and museum archives. The male nude in Swedish art was my topic, studying how images of naked men became icons of masculinity in art and popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century, from a queer perspective.<sup>5</sup> My project apparently wasn't deemed worthy of support from the museum. As the newly appointed Director I had the opportunity to open the storage, let in fresh air, and demonstrate that a variety of gazes and interpretations were welcome at Thielska Galleriet—a kind of art historical activism with a professional and personal significance both for myself and for Hietala.

It turned out that Hietala had engaged in an artistic dialogue with Jansson's work for 15 years, which opened up Jansson's work for consideration with new eyes. Many of Hietala's works had not been shown before in Sweden, and some of them were actually executed on the Thielska Galleriet's premises. The exhibition texts were written by the artist, furthering the personal perspective. Given Jansson's and Hietala's common interests in naked men and creative processes, the exhibition came to be an exploration of a complex artistic affinity over time.

### The Artistic Attractions of the Bath

Male nudity in art has since antiquity been associated with divine and heroic beauty—paintings and sculp-

tures filled with idealized and exquisite bodies. As the bathing nude alternates between social and private situations, its motion and rest provides new opportunities to observe and depict the naked body. As a motif, men who bathe have the capacity to make nudity at once more noticeable and less formal. Jan Hietala enters an historic tradition across the entire history of art that has consistently drawn his attention.

The versatile environment of the bathhouse can already be found in Albrecht Dürer's woodcut from 1496. Here, the naked men are remarkably well-trained, with chiseled bodies and wearing only thin cloths artfully draped and tied over their hips, although some also have stylish headgear that cover their heads. A few of the men are playing instruments and drinking beer while a man on the left throws ambiguous glances at the others. The water tap at his crotch seems to indicate a certain erotic interest. In the background, a younger man is looking in over the fence observing the motley, undressed group. This lively motif situates the idealized, classic body amidst everyday life in a German city with a jesting eye.

Nude bathing out of doors has long attracted artists, interested both in the hygienic effects of the bath and the liberated playfulness and erotic attraction it entailed. French artist Frédéric Bazille's summer scenes in monumental format with young men in striped



Fig. 1: Eugène Jansson, *The Navy Bathhouse*, 1907, oil on canvas, 301 x 197 cm. Photo: Thielska Galleriet/Tord Lund.

swimwear or a tall, completely naked fisherman throwing his net conform to this ideal, while in a more abstract mode, Paul Cézanne's bathers seek to break with the classic ideal. Both artists were exploring a new, modern beauty in the male body, situated in nature and often in the company of other men. The intimacy of an indoor bath is represented by Gustave Caillebotte, with a bather having just left his zinc and copper tub, drying himself with a linen towel, his back turned to the viewer.

Naked men also crowd the scene in Eugène Jansson's painting *Navy Bathhouse* (1907). One of the men makes an acrobatic dive before other young men who stand, sit, or lean in different poses, grouped around a central pool. Their eyes are directed at the diver, but the figure is indistinctly painted, occupying more or less the background. The naked, sunlit male bodies and their shameless watching are the real focus of the painting. The men's poses express no physical exertion, but rather warm, sun-lit relaxation and the mental focus of observation. We, the painting's viewers, are intimately placed under the sun roof together with the gazing men—and they are our visual focus, not the diver. Our observation of their gazing turns into a kind of double voyeurism.

The collector Ernest Thiel bought the painting directly from Jansson when it was completed in 1907. Thiel himself enjoyed swimming in the Stockholm archipelago: "The pure salty baths in the summer refreshed both physically and spiritually."<sup>6</sup> He always wanted to swim alone, so one of his grandchildren reported, and the bath could be understood as an intimate meeting between body and nature, at least to Thiel, it seems. It was probably a similar vitalist ideal that inspired Thiel to place the painting in the prestigious Munch Room at the Thielska Galleriet—where the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's portrait of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche held the most prominent place. The combination of powerful sunlight, strong bodies, and an unconventional, straightforward perspective lends the work the immediacy of the *elan vital*. But when the museum wanted to modernize its displays in the 1970s, the aesthetic qualities of the painting were considered too weak, and it was sent off to the storage. Not coincidentally, it had also become more widely acknowledged that Eugene Jansson was homosexual, a development coinciding with the growth of the gay liberation movement.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the painting's homoerotic subtext probably became more apparent to the audience, and it became controversial.

### The Methodology of the Desiring Look

In art history, nudity has generally been associated with female models and it is only recently that naked men have been the subject of museum exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> It is apparently difficult for a male body to even be perceived as erotic in art. Art historian Anthea Callen exemplified the problem when she interpreted Caillebotte's bather as an utterly masculine, self-sufficient, autonomous figure, making his body inaccessible for other more intimate and sensual perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Callen mentions in a subordinate clause that only a homoerotic look could possibly challenge the authority of his male strength.

In contrast, Jan Hietala's focus is on men who look at other men with erotic desire, one of his defining artistic themes. This perspective becomes a tool that opens the subject for all sorts of viewers, regardless of gender or erotic interests, who can then devote themselves to unrestrained visual exploration of a naked man's body. By taking a pronounced position where desire can lead the viewer to a position outside norms and conventions, Hietala invites his audience to shape their own position, rooted in their own interests and desires.

As part of his artistic research, Hietala has developed a method for searching for lost, unknown, or enigmatic fragments in historical documents.<sup>10</sup> When he turns his eye to art history, he selects and recodes images in light of his own desires: the antique Barberini Faun, the Faun by Swedish artist Johan Tobias Sergel, and British artist Frederic Leighton's sculpture *The Sluggard* are all caught in the web of his indiscreet looks. Embedded within lines and color fields, the bodies become more abstract, less palpable, but they seem to echo a complicated network of personal glances, gazes, and perspectives, filled with the energy of saturated color.

Even more conventional genres of art open up through this artistic method. The opening scene of the film *Tall Grass* (2004/2015), showing a lonely but strong, lush tree in an open field, can reflect both the open-air painting of Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Hill and the national romantic motifs by Swedish artists Nils Kreuger or Karl Nordström. But the landscape in Hietala's work also proves to be a playground for men looking through the high grass, seeking contact and cruising for casual sexual meetings out in the open.

### With Eugène in the Bath House

Eugène Jansson used the *Navy Bathhouse* at Skeppsholmen in Stockholm both as a sports venue, a source of creative inspiration, and a place for social and erotic





Fig. 2: Unknown, *Knut Nyman, Eugène Jansson and two unknown men at the Navy Bathhouse at Skeppsholmen, Stockholm, c. 1905*, photograph. Photo: The National Library, Stockholm.

meetings.<sup>11</sup> Archived photographs show him in the role of a trained and tanned athlete along with the other sunbathers. About 30 photographs from the Navy Bathhouse are preserved at the Royal Library, Stockholm, in the archive of Nils Santesson, a decorator who was convicted for homosexual acts in the early 1900s. Jansson appears himself in about 20 of the pictures (fig. 2).

A similarly lustful search for visual pleasure seems to have directed Jan Hietala's work in his series of watercolors *After Eugène* (2002) (fig. 3). The starting point was that series of photographs from the Navy Bathhouse, filled with naked men in every imaginable pose. Hietala has made a selection of these figures and focuses on their genitals, chest, and thighs, reproducing these motifs with a tender hand and voluptuous brush strokes. The rich contours give these works an intimate sensualism, and Hietala paints the caressing glances that we suspect were exchanged not only between the men in the photographs, but between these images and some of their audience even today.



Fig. 3: Jan Hietala, *After Eugène No. 4*, 2002, watercolor on paper. Photo: Jan Hietala.

The photographs have continued to serve as a creative archive for Hietala in his quest to come closer to Jansson, through time and space. Historic accounts concerning Jansson often emphasize how eagerly and enthusiastically he indulged in the bathhouses of Stockholm.<sup>12</sup> In his *Self Portrait* (1910), Jansson appears fully clothed as an artist who is paying a visit to the Navy Bathhouse, as if a guest from the outside. The photographs on the other hand tell a different story, showing the artist naked, posing for the camera. In several of the pictures he seems very much like one of the regular customers, a man who loves to swim and sunbathe in the nude with other men.

Eugene Jansson's *Back* (2014) (fig. 4) is a flowing watercolor by Hietala, which may be interpreted as an attempt to peak behind the facade that Jansson erects in his pictures. The monumental triptych *Eugène* (2015) is an image of the artist posing, his body formed by a variety of supporting lines. At the same time these strokes distort the figure on the canvas. These lines seem to

connote Hietala's own gaze, characterized by both scrutiny and admiration. In front of the finished work, we can see the similarities between Jansson's profile and Hietala's own appearance. The identification may have worked on an unconscious level, but it also served as one kind of artistic method, enabling structured forms and personal recognitions to convey a sensual life of feelings, desires, and sexuality beyond the social norms.

There are many accounts testifying to Eugène Jansson's close relationships with his male models. They are referred to as companions in restaurants, on vacations, at dinners, and they also served as caretakers at the end of his life.<sup>13</sup> His studio at Glasbruksgatan in Stockholm did double duty as a gym. A photograph from Jansson's studio shows three athletes posing naked with barbells at their feet and the artist's paintings in the background. Besides this photograph, there are pencil drawings and oil sketches that appear to have been executed during these sessions. The sketch materials in different techniques gives the impression of his careful work, where the process, the observation, the drawing, and his eyes studying poses and bodily expressions had a value in and of itself. It is as if each sketch bears evidence of the artist's own visual pleasure—aesthetic and erotic at one and the same time.

The final meeting between Hietala and Jansson took place where Hietala's own work desk was situated in the middle of the room, in front of the Navy Bathhouse painting. The table's surface was covered with letters written by Hietala, addressed to Jansson. Before the exhibition we had the opportunity to offer Hietala an apartment in an adjacent building, next to the Thielska Galleriet main building. In fear that it would be revealed that Eugène Jansson had committed homosexual acts at a time when it was prohibited by Swedish law, his brother Adrian, who was gay himself, carefully destroyed the bulk of letters, photographs, newspapers, and other material after the artist's death in 1915.<sup>14</sup>

When it comes to queer historical writing, it is especially important to think about what can actually be considered an archive, says queer American literature historian Ann Cvetkovich. Normative source material will often confirm a normative narrative. Instead, she theorizes the idea of an emotional archive: "The archive of feelings lives not just in museums, libraries, and other institutions, but in other more personal and intimate spaces ..."<sup>15</sup> Alternative archives, such as an Hietala's intergenerational address, may even be able to contain emotional experiences that conventional documents

and objects refuse or deny. With a queer feeling as its method, the exhibition restored a kind of archive of lost emotions—social stigmas as well as forbidden desires and bodily pleasures.

As a curator and museum director, the artwork made clear to me that the most important reason for letting an artist take on historical material was to capture aspects of this alternative, emotional archive. This is not necessarily because the artist, by virtue of their perspective, can see something completely differently than the museum professional, but because the artistic approach has a different set of objectives. Hietala has formulated this as follows: "An artist is inclined to strive for a certain amount of opaqueness in his or her work."<sup>16</sup> By introducing an obverse principle than the transparency that often governs museal and academic work, Hietala explores the capacity of artistic research to enhance, dramatize, and intensify experience by letting unpredictable, emotional, aesthetic, bodily, and social aspects of objects and documents take on artistic form.



Fig. 4: Jan Hietala, *Eugène Jansson's Backside*, 2015, watercolor and pen on paper. Photo: Jan Hietala.

Museums with ambitions to be queer need to reflect on their role as institutions and as producers and reproducers of both power and normative meaning. They should allow for queer presences to occur on their own terms rather than co-opt LGBT culture into their favored structures and forms of exposition. Museums should instead facilitate the production of queer meaning in their collections through innovative display, groundbreaking research, and by encouraging subversive social events on their grounds. This will not only communicate with LGBT and queer audiences, but to all individuals who seek online and on-site museum encounters that can mobilize pluralistic passions and dissident, embarrassing emotions too often foreclosed in the standard picture gallery.

### Notes

- 1 See Patrik Steorn, "Queering the museum. Methodological reflections on doing queer in museum collections," *Lambda Nordica: Queer Methodologies* No. 3-4, 2010, pp. 119-143; and Steorn, "Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice," *Curator: The Museum Journal* Vol. 55, No. 3/2012, pp. 355-365.
- 2 Vanja Hermele, *Konsten – så funkade det (inte)*, KRO/KIF, Stockholm, 2009, p. 31.
- 3 *Museerna och mångfalden – En analys av hur den svenska museisektorn kan stödja och ta vara på utvecklingspotentialen i det mångkulturella Sverige*, Riksställningar, Visby, 2014; *Museerna och hbtq*, Riksställningar, Visby, 2015.
- 4 Jan Hietala ed., *Män vid vatten/Jan Hietala*, Appell förlag, Stockholm, 2017.
- 5 Patrik Steorn, *Nakna män. Maskulinitet och kreativitet i svensk bildkultur 1900-1915*, Norstedts Akademiska Förlag, Stockholm, 2006; and Steorn, "Staging masculinity and identity. Visual culture of naked men ca. 1900," *Contemporary Feminist Studies and its relation to Art History and Visual Studies. Proceedings from a conference in Gothenburg, March 28-19, 2007*, Bia Mankell & Alexandra Reiff eds., Gothenburg Studies in Art and Architecture 28, Acta universitatis Gothoburgensis, Göteborg, 2010, pp. 91-111.
- 6 Ernest Thiel, *Vara eller synas vara. Minnen och anteckningar avslutade 1946*, Carlssons förlag, Stockholm, 1990, p. 179.
- 7 The first article to mention Jansson's homosexuality was GRAND, "Blåmålaren i den röda tegelborgen," *Dagens Nyheter*, October 14, 1965, p. 57. More on the historiographic reception of Jansson's art: Patrik Steorn, "Eugène Jansson och den svenska konsthistoriens sexualitet," *Lambda Nordica* No. 3, 2007, pp. 61-71.

- 8 *Masculin Masculin: l'homme nu dans l'art de 1800 à nos jours*, Musée d'Orsay/Flammarion, Paris, 2013. Exhibition catalogue; Tobis G. Natter and Elisabeth Leopold eds., *Nude men. From 1800 to the present day*, Leopold Museum/Hirmer, Vienna, 2012. Exhibition catalogue.
- 9 Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body. Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1995, pp. 145-147.
- 10 Jan Hietala, *Inconclusive Evidence. Spatial gender politics at Strawberry Hill 1747-58*, Spurbuchverlag, Baunach, 2011, pp. 13-14.
- 11 Patrik Steorn, "Stadens män och modeller. Eugène Janssons figurmåleri," in *Eugène Jansson: blå stämning och nakna atleter*, Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde/Carlssons, Stockholm, 2012, pp. 85-125. Exhibition catalogue.
- 12 Tor Hedberg, *Minnesgestalter*, Stockholm, 1927, pp. 128-129; Prins Eugen, "Konstnärstörbundet män," *Ord & Bild*, 1936, p. 467.
- 13 Greger Eman, "Bröderna Jansson," *Sympatiens hemlighetsfulla makt. Stockholms homosexuella 1860-1960*, Göran Söderström ed., Borås, 1999, pp. 229-235.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 237-240.
- 15 Ann Cvetkovich, "In the archives of lesbian feelings: Documentary and popular culture," *Camera Obscura* Vol. 17, No. 1, 2002, p. 112.
- 16 Hietala, *Inconclusive Evidence*, p. 180.

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# Swishing: Queer Curating in the Heart of Europe

## Ladislav Zikmund-Lender

In 1903, there was quite a scandal associated with a large painting exhibited at the annual show of a Czech artistic organization, Mánes—the leading organization promoting modernism in the early 1900s. This painting was submitted along with four other paintings of landscapes by a Czech painter Miloš Jiránek and he entitled the work *Showers in the Sokol, Prague*. Inspired by the Edgar Degas' then forty-year-old painting *Young Spartans Exercising*, which depicts a group of Spartan gymnasts, nude. Jiránek, unaware of any possible homoerotic meanings,<sup>2</sup> offered an almost one-to-one scaled view into a mens shower of a contemporary gymnast organization. In the center of the painting there is the exposed buttocks of a bent-over man. In the first version of the painting from 1901, Jiránek even planned to paint two of the buttocks right in front of the viewer's eyes. The Sokol organization served as an environment for young homoerotically inclined men to seek a “homoerotic ideal of beauty” and “gentle male friendships” at that time.<sup>3</sup> When the painting was shown in the Mánes exhibit, it caused a major controversy and the painting was banished from public sight. The committee acceded to the wishes of Prague bourgeoisie taste and only the other four Jiránek landscapes were left on display. *The Showers* either got negative reviews or it was completely neglected by the contemporary press. The only two positive responses were by a liberal woman, female-painter Klára Heyrovská, and a gay critic William Ritter, who used to be Jiránek's roommate.

More than one hundred years later, in 2008 the public Gallery of the City of Prague opened a retrospective of then thirty-year-old artist Mark Ther. Among his older videos, he also presented his latest works: *I will get you out and chop you in the midair* (2007), *Hanes* (2007) and *Was für Material (What a material)* (2008). The first video shows a young man covered with blood slowly moving through the grass and an older man reading a letter which turns out to be a love letter between two men struggling with their sexuality. The second video presents sequences from a police investigation into a brutal murder of two men in a hotel room, allegedly with a sexual subtext. Their phone conversation, which probably happened sometimes before the violent act, accompanies the scene. And the third video shows two young men in Hitler Youth uniforms, dress code of the Nazi youth organization. In short scenes they spend an intimate afternoon playing around in the countryside making fun of Nazi gestures and salutes. The video alludes to Nazism's homoerotic culture and fetishization of a muscular male body, including the fact that homosexual men collaborated with the Nazis in the 1930s. As Jack Halberstam points out, there is nothing “sexy” about Nazi imagery,<sup>4</sup> and this is exactly what the video tries to address. As the artist later testified, the curator Olga Malá from the Gallery didn't seem to know much about his work and after a week, the Gallery closed the exhibition with the curator explaining that this unprecedented move was “due to homosexual and Nazi propaganda”<sup>5</sup> allegedly present in the videos. Unfortunately, the curator did not offer wall labels or other means to interpret the complicated narratives, nor did she write about them in any way.<sup>6</sup>

What do these two stories tell us about queer curating? In the earlier case, a painting was understood as “queer” without the author's nor the curator's intent. In the second



Fig. 1: *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition view, June 1 – September 5, 2010: National Museum in Warsaw. Photo © Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 2018.

case, an intentional, queer content, was completely ignored and the work misunderstood. Together, these two examples underscore that queer curating can't simply rely on placing work in a comprehensive queer context and hoping viewers with open minds will try to understand what's queer about them. In the following paper, I want to show through examples from the Czech Republic and Poland how queer curating, or to be more exact, curating queerly, is inevitably a function of sexual politics more than anything else, its ideological potential evident whether or not it includes a single male or female nude. As the American architect Mark Wigley noted in his essay in *Space and Sexuality*, even the act of ignoring or refusing reference to gender and sexuality is itself an ideological act.<sup>7</sup>

### Queer Beauty vs. Queer Archive

In 2009, a leading art historian in the Central-East European area, Piotr Piotrowski became the director of the National Museum in Warsaw. Piotrowski pursued an agenda in line with “critical museum studies” wherein all the actions of public museums are inherently politicized due to their institutional status and power to affect social change. In his posthumous book, Piotrowski states: “Critical museum studies show an interplay of various political, ideological and economic forces hidden under an apparently apolitical surface of aesthetics, contemplation and experience of the work of art.”<sup>8</sup> The first exhibit he put together with the intention of raising awareness of the institution's social responsibility was *Ars Homo Erotica*, which took place in the monumental 1930s main building of the National Museum, between June 11-September 5, 2010 (fig. 1). In Piotrowski's obituary, the show was mentioned as his pioneering project in pursuit of a critical museum: “He devised the concept of the “critical museum”—a museum that would engage its collections and space in the debates on current global and local issues. The large *Ars Homo Erotica* exhibition, staged on his initiative in 2010, led to a shake-up far beyond the corridors of Polish museums.”<sup>9</sup> The *Ars Homo Erotica* show became Piotrowski's only attempt to turn the National Museum into a critical museum not just in Poland but throughout the entire



Central-East European area.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the exhibition, which was curated by Paweł Leszkowicz, remains a major project that shook up traditional institutional structures. Leszkowicz was an LGBT+ activist and art historian and his two preoccupations were joined in his 2006 show *Love and Democracy* for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

In his review in *Artforum* magazine, Marek Bartelik addressed a central problem with the exhibition: “*Ars Homo Erotica* turned out to be two shows in one. The aim of the first was a curatorial outing of works in the museum’s collection with homoerotic subjects—works, many of them deposited in storage rooms, whose sexual content, when exhibited, has been left to our imagination. [...] The second show consisted of contemporary works with homoerotic subjects, which were scattered around the galleries.”<sup>12</sup> While the historical art of the show was organized in accordance with traditional homoerotic themes such as Hyacinth and Apollo, Achilles and Patroclus, David and Goliath, Zeus and Ganymede or Saint Sebastian, the exhibition failed to question the historical role and relevance of these ancient myths and iconographies in a specifically Polish context and with regard to queer communities in this part of Europe. The other part of the exhibition was tightly structured around the visualization of LGBT+ activism in Poland. To connect these two parts, Leszkowicz employed the vague implications of general male nudes in Polish contemporary painting and photography or he acquired particular works just for the show that fit into these historical themes. The strongest work that connected the aesthetic and activist parts of the exhibition together was Karol Radziszewski’s 2010 video *Sebastian* commissioned by the museum especially for the show (fig. 2). According to Leszkowicz’s text in the catalogue, the video “highlights the soldiers’ violence in dealing with St. Sebastian and the homo-military aura of martyrdom. The artist brings the story of the Roman saint closer to us by dressing the characters in contemporary uniforms of Polish soldiers, and the drama takes place in local scenery.”<sup>13</sup>

Radziszewski’s work, however, is much more than merely updating traditional queer imagery in addressing more vital issues of the queer past. In 2005, Radziszewski published the first issue of a magazine titled *DIK Fagazine*.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, he started to work with Ryszard Kisiel, activist, artist and founder of the 1980s magazine *Filo* which along with a Czech magazine called *Lambda* was one of the first LGBT+



Fig. 2: Karol Radziszewski, *Sebastian*, 2010, film still. Courtesy of Karol Radziszewski.





Fig. 3: *The Heritage* exhibition view, September 29 – October 1, 2017: Czesław Miłosz's Room, Palace of Culture and Science, POMADA 7 Queer Festival Warsaw, curated by Michał Grzegorzek, Karol Radziszewski, and Wojciech Szymanski. Courtesy of Karol Radziszewski.

magazines after 1945 in Central-East Europe. In 1980s Kisiel also organized performances and mapped all the major gay scenes in European Soviet-dominated countries back then. Radziszewski started to work with Kisiel's archive and recreated some of the performances, while highlighting *Filo* magazine and other homophile pamphlets and anti-AIDS brochures with new videos, documentaries and installations. Since 2009 he has continued documenting Kisiel's personal archive and made a video documentary entitled *Kisieland*. In 2014, Radziszewski picked up on another episode from Polish queer history: in 1969, a Polish experimental theatre production visited New York and presented the play *The Constant Prince* (it premiered in 1966)<sup>15</sup> directed by Jerzy Grotowski. The actor Ryszard Cieślak, who played the leading character, the Prince, visited Warhol's Factory. In his fictional installation, Radziszewski poses the question: what if Cieślak had become a pop sex icon and a fixture of the New York scene?

After all these projects, Radziszewski started a new endeavor: his Queer Archives Institute is more of an artistic project, updating, documenting, re-inventing and representing Polish queer history through the memory and personal archives of living figures (fig. 3). In focusing on particular events, actions and works that were by definition ephemeral, Radziszewski tries to answer the question as to how the visual arts (and magazines and performances in particular) played a significant role in queer socializing under oppressive socialist regimes in 1970s and 1980s in this part of Europe. By mixing his own experience of growing up as a gay man in the 1990s and 2000s—a period distinguished by the lack of continuity in the memory of LGBT+ communities—with archival practices aimed at reconstructing these past experiences, he offers an original, comprehensive interpretation of what queer history means to contemporary lives and queer identities in Central-East Europe. Unlike the *Ars Homo Erotica* show, where Leszkowicz tried to assemble the Polish visual arts around traditional Western iconographic categories, the Queer Archives Institute maintains an obverse approach: to collect, highlight and celebrate the distinguished and specific historical features and practices shared by local communities.

As it turns out, we can relate these two very different approaches to Piotr Piotrowski's own concepts of vertical and horizontal art histories, despite the fact that Radziszewski's work is more of an artistic survey than a theoretical text. Vertical art history is based on terms like "influence" and perceiving Western centers as the origin of the artistic ideas and peripheries as their followers, but horizontal art history proposes multivalent and parallel artistic canons, stories, and iconographic systems. On the relationship between the West's favored narrative norms and the East-Central European periphery, Piotrowski is sharp: "The art of the center determines a specific paradigm, while the art of the periphery is supposed to adopt the models established in the centers. The center provides canons, hierarchy of values, and stylistic norms—it is the role of the periphery to adopt them in a process of reception. [...] The consequence of such a move will be a reversal of the traditional view of the relationship between the art history of the margins and that of 'our' art history (read: of the West)."<sup>16</sup> Exactly the same can be said about adopting and appropriating the Western iconographic schemes in *Ars Homo Erotica* such as Ganymede, Saint Sebastian, or vague female friendships on one hand and on the other a long-term pursuit to rediscover and reimagine local roots of the recent queer past, as in focused probes of the art of the 1960s to 1980s.

### Bohemian Queer

In 2011, impressed by the success of the *Ars Homo Erotica* show and yet dissatisfied with its lack of social historical context, I put together an exhibition proposal for a *Queer Codes (Příčné kódy)* exhibit to address the relevance of the visual arts and media for shaping and maintaining queer sociability in The Czech Republic and Slovakia. The Moravian Gallery in Brno agreed to execute the project. Together with art historians Milena Bartlová and Kateřina Štroblová, we worked on the show for two years. However, in 2013 a new gallery director was appointed. Despite his statement that he wanted to pursue all the shows in progress, he decided to cancel the *Queer Codes* project immediately—as to whether that was due to the fact that he was formerly the project manager of the Catholic Episcopate and Diocese in Brno I leave to the reader to decide. The only output of this effort was *What a Material: Queer Art from Central Europe* which was presented during 2012 Amsterdam Gay Pride and organized by the Czech government's cultural institution Czech Center.<sup>17</sup> Notably, four major exhibition projects, presented by public institutions on three queer artists and collectors since 2000 have not been able to address their non-heterosexual identity. The 2000 show of inter-war artist Toyen in the Gallery of the City of Prague explained her cross-dressing performativity as an artistic way to resist tradition instead of framing her as probably the first relatively open and proud lesbian.<sup>18</sup> Two shows of the art collection of a queer poet, publisher and social life organizer Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic done by the Memorial of National Literature in 2001 and 2012 intentionally disguised his homoerotic collection of arts and books and put them into different contexts. The 2007 exhibition of a painter Jan Zrzavý ignored his homosexuality and the campy playfulness of his work as well.

As it turns out, public institutions have totally failed to address issues of LGBT+ emancipation, experience, history, and visibility, nor apparently can they acknowledge the presence of queer figures in narratives of either contemporary art or the history of art. In 2011 when the first Prague Pride event occurred, two curators, Lukáš Houdek and Michelle Siml, organized the first volume of a show *Transgender Me* in the independent gallery space Roxy/NoD in Prague. Despite the fact that it was exceedingly open to addressing transgender issues and probably the first art show to step out of the exclusive normative categories of "gay" and "lesbian," the show did not primarily engage the transgender life experience and visibility. The word "Transgender" in the

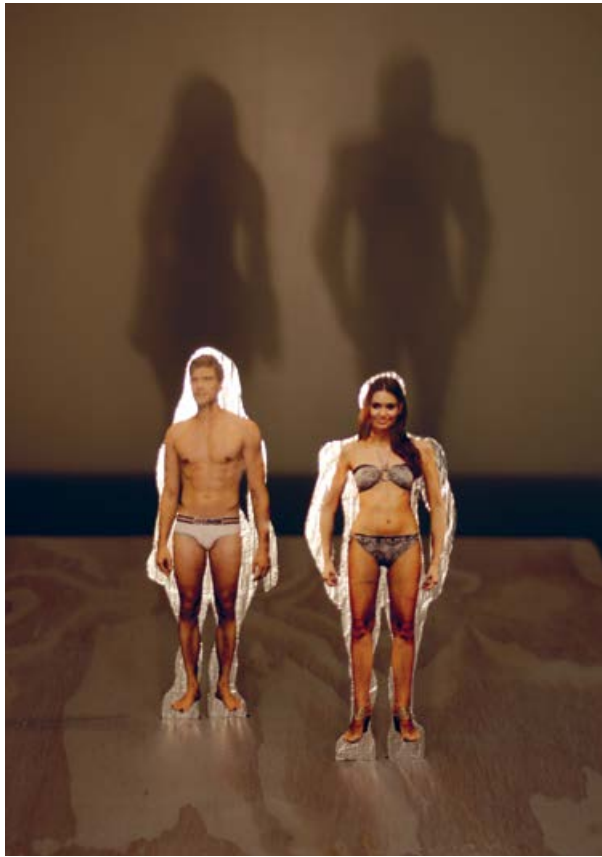


Fig. 4: Lenka Klodová, *Say it with a shadow*, installation: from the exhibition *Transgender Me*, August 16 – September 17, 2012, DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, curated by Lukáš Houdek and Michelle Siml. Photo © Lukáš Houdek, 2018.

title of the show was misused in a wider sense of transgression of gender roles rather than addressing the contemporary sense. The show was repeated in 2012 in the private DOX Center of Contemporary Art in Prague and in 2013 in the Gallery of the National Technical Library thanks to the personal commitment of the curator of the gallery, artist Milan Mikuláščík. Although all three iterations were based on an open call, the curators did a great job in their selection. Artists who engage issues of gender, race, body, and sexuality such as Lenka Klodová ( fig. 4), Darina Alster, Mark Ther, Jozef Rabara, Tamara Moyzes, and both the curators were included. While Siml presented photographs and installations addressing the personal experience of transgender transitions both male to female and female to male and stereotypes of gender performativity with sometimes more, sometimes less irony and levity ( figs. 5-6), Houdek showed his photographic surveys among Indian hegiras or portraits of transgender people from countries with oppressive regimes photographed via webcams, because the virtual space is usually the only safe space where they can be who they are.

In 2014 the independent gallery Karlin Studios organized a show *Prague Pride: East Side Story* as a supporting program to the Prague Pride event ( figs. 7-8). The curators were Michal Novotný, Serena Fanara, and Giulia Gueci. As a low budget project, they decided to present only videos from artists all around the Western world (U.K., U.S., South Africa, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Finland, Russia, Czechia). Despite the show's title, which could imply questioning Western dominance of queer art in terms of Piotrowski's criticism, any critique was more implicit than explicit, and the curators' awareness of queer critical theory seemed fairly rudimentary. In the curatorial introduction, they



Fig. 5: Michelle Siml, *Untouched*, 2011, photograph on aluminium, series of two, 70 x 110 cm each: from the exhibition *Transgender Me*, July 29 – August 16, 2013, curated by Lukáš Houdek and Michelle Siml. Photo © Lukáš Houdek, 2018.



Fig. 6: Michelle Siml, *I mustn't cry*, 2013, installation: from the exhibition *Transgender Me*, July 29 – August 16, 2013, Gallery of The National Technical Library, curated by Lukáš Houdek and Michelle Siml. Photo © Lukáš Houdek, 2018.



Fig. 7: Eugenio Percossi, *Azione naturale/After Gina Pane*, 2013, installation and a video, 4 min 41 sec: from the exhibition 2014: *PRAGUE PRIDE: EAST SIDE STORY*, August 13 – September 7, 2014, Karlin Studios Gallery. Photo © Michal Novotný, Katlin Studios, 2014.



Fig. 8: Zanele Muholi, *Being Scene (explicit)*, 2012, video, 2 min 51 sec: from the exhibition 2014: *PRAGUE PRIDE: EAST SIDE STORY*, August 13 – September 7, 2014, Karlin Studios Gallery. Photo © Michal Novotný, Katlin Studios, 2014.

noted that “maintaining stereotypes is important,” because they help us to “understand the world.”<sup>19</sup> The statement that “LGBT, queer, gay, lesbian or homosexual art undoubtedly doesn’t exist. [...] Until we create a definition for it,”<sup>20</sup> seems almost like ignorance towards the past thirty-year discourse.

Projects that can seem marginal on first glance, and that are not extensive or striking, can have a powerful voice. This is the case with the Artwall Gallery, a series of posters or photographs displayed on a wall next to a major road in Prague that can be viewed mostly during car rides. In 2013 the Gallery presented a series of photographs of



same-sex parents made by Jana Štěpánová as a part of the Prague Pride festival. In 2016 they presented Slava Mogutin's series *Lost Boys*<sup>21</sup> as a supporting program of the same event. The Artwall Gallery is a leading dissident platform that addresses issues of social injustice, race, sexuality, sexual violence, gender, or politics of history through the visual arts.

In 2016 two major exhibitions on sexuality and space were presented in Europe. While the *1000 m<sup>2</sup> of Desire*, which took place in Centre de Cultura Contemporània in Barcelona, addressed just the spatial characteristics of darkrooms, cruising spaces, pornography, and cybersex, the exhibition *Spaces of Desire* at the semi-public Jaroslav Fragner Gallery in Prague was focused on the spaces of queer sociability, the creativity of queer architects and designers, and their access to a profession stereotypically dominated by heterosexual men.<sup>22</sup> Each of these topics was presented in a cabin resembling a changing room where the viewer had to peek in. As a placeholder for each space, we selected original chairs that represented each space or a design (figs. 9-10). Based on historical research, we presented Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair, which was used in the radical interior of the Glass House, designed by gay architect Philip Johnson, or we traced an original chair from Hotel Europa, the center of both gay and lesbian socialization in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Prague for decades.

### The Importance of Exhibiting Queer Junk

Although the professional activities mentioned above show various kinds of approaches towards addressing queer issues in a gallery space, we need to consider a much more important set of visual material. When Karol Radziszewski works with old magazines, brochures, posters, or home performances whose main goal was entertainment (and maybe a bit of homoerotic excitement), we understand the documentary



Fig. 9: *Queer Architects*, a box dedicated to queer architects and designers at the exhibit *Spaces of Desire*, August 5 – September 25 2016, Jaroslav Fragner Gallery, main curator: Ladislav Zikmund-Lender. Photo © Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, 2018.



Fig. 10: *Queer Spaces*, a box dedicated to places queer sociability in Prague at the exhibit *Spaces of Desire*, August 5 – September 25 2016, Jaroslav Fragner Gallery, main curator: Ladislav Zikmund-Lender. Photo © Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, 2018.



value but we fail to see them as aesthetic objects. When it comes to the same images and prints that are produced and circulated among queer communities today, we tend to see them as a sort of “queer junk.” These non-professional paintings and erotic photographs hanging in gay clubs and cafés are usually stereotypical in their depiction of bodies, especially those that target the male gaze. As LGBTQ+ popular culture, they do not seek to join the art world, nor do they offer any social subversion or transgression. But in terms of making visible queer visual arts, we shouldn't forget this type of production. Although it does not really fit in the white cubes of public, private, or independent galleries, queer popular imagery nonetheless constitutes a significant force that holds the community together. Photographer Robert Vano's show *Love You From Prague* in the Radost Club in Prague in 1991 exhibited for the first time the tacky black-and-white male nudes that circulated in Prague bars and clubs as a gay sign long before the rainbow flags were ubiquitous.<sup>23</sup> In 1998, the first free gay art show called *Swishing (Vítězí)* was put together to support the first ever gay pride in both the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic. Taking place in Karlovy Vary, the show was hosted by a private gallery called *Golden Key (Zlatý klíč)*. These exhibits raise the question as to whether art, addressing queer issues and curated queerly in galleries, has the genuine subversive potential to really bring social change in Central Europe; or if instead, a queer art only surfaces after LGBT+ activism (and the visual “queer junk” that goes with it) does all the work and makes it safe? Either way, in curating queerly, instead of trying to define or reconstruct some aesthetic queer canons, forms, or iconographic schemes, we should ask ourselves, what is the social potential and meaning? What queer curating means the most, at least in Central-East Europe, is the social responsibility of critical reflection and subversion of both a heteronormative past and present.

## Notes

- 1** See Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, “Mladík sedící na břehu českého vkusu” in Martin C. Putna ed., *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury*, Academia, Prague, 2011, pp. 379–392, see pp. 385 and 389–390.
- 2** Lacking any historical documentation on that subject, we can only surmise that Jiránek was straight, and relatively clueless. Even before the painting *Showers in the Sokol, Prague*, in 1899 he allegedly had a fight with a homosexual critic William Ritter about sexuality, so he might even have been homophobic, whatever his actual sexuality. Regarding their relationship, see Milena Lenderová, “Má se svými ženskými peklo: Tak trochu jiná láska v secesní Praze,” *Dějiny a současnost*. Accessed 02.02.2018. <http://dejinyasoucasnost.cz/archiv/2007/12/-ma-se-svymi-zenskymi-peklo-/>.
- 3** As referred by poets such as Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic or Karel Hlaváček. See Tomáš Winter, *Miloš Jiránek: zápas o moderní malbu: 1875-1911*, Galerie výtvarného umění, Cheb, 2012, pp. 53 et al.
- 4** See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011.
- 5** Ladislav Zikmund-Lender. 2013. “Mark Ther.” Center for Contemporary Art, Prague. Accessed 31.01.2018. <http://www.artlist.cz/mark-ther-1486/>.
- 6** However, in 2017, the Gallery of the City of Prague acquired the video *I will get you out and chop you in the midair* from 2007 into their collections.
- 7** Mark Wigley, “Untitled: The Housing of Gender,” in Betariz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality & Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, 1997, pp. 327–389.
- 8** Piotr Piotrowski and Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius eds., *From museum critique to the critical museum*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2015, p. 3.
- 9** Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius. 2015. “Piotr Piotrowski obituary.” *The Guardian*, June 9. Accessed 01.02.2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jun/09/piotr-piotrowski-obituary>.

**10** Only the Moravian Gallery in Brno which is the second most major public art museum in the Czech Republic can be perceived as a critical museum thanks to a few shows that took place between 2004 and 2012, as well as the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava thanks to a few shows that have been done since 2016.

**11** Paweł Leszkowicz, *Love and democracy*, Centrum sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, Gdańsk, 2006.

**12** Marek Bartelik, "Ars Homo Erotica," *Art Forum International* Vol. 49, No. 2, October 2010, pp. 294–295.

**13** Paweł Leszkowicz, *Ars Homo Erotica*, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 2010.

**14** Karol Radziszewski. 2005–2018. "DIK Fagazine." Accessed 01.02.2018. <http://www.dikfagazine.com/>.

**15** Jerzy Grotowski, "The Constant Prince," 1967. Accessed 01.02.2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvYNCgWWgWk>.

**16** Piotr Piotrowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde" in Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls eds., *European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies*, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, Berlin, 2009, pp. 51–54.

**17** Thanks to the support of the Czech Ministry of Culture a catalogue was published. It remains the only openly queer art show supported and organized exclusively by the governmental institutions in the Czech Republic since 1990. Ladislav Zikmund-Lender ed., *What a Material: Queer Art from Central Europe*, Pravý úhel, Prague, 2012.

**18** Karla Huebner, "Fire Smoulders in the Veins: Toyen's Queer Desire and its Roots in Prague Surrealism," *Papers of Surrealism* No. 8, Spring 2010. Accessed 31.01.2018. [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/63517392/surrealism\\_issue\\_8.pdf](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/63517392/surrealism_issue_8.pdf).

**19** Michal Novotný. 2014. "Prague Pride: East Side Story." Accessed 01.02.2018. <http://www.futuraproject.cz/karlin-studios/event/106-prague-pride-east-side-story>.

**20** Ibid.

**21** The original series, which was published as a book in 2007, is displayed on Mogutin's websire. Slava Mogutin. 2004. "Lost Boys." Accessed 01.02.2018.

<http://slavamogutin.com/lost-boys/>.

**22** See Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, Beatriz Colomina, Aaron Betsky et al., *Spaces of Desire: Is Architecture Sexy?*, ARCHITECTURA, Prague, 2016.

**23** Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, "Exhibition Love You From Prague, 1991," in Jan Seidl ed., *Queer Prague*, Černá pole, Brno, 2013, p. 132.

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Queer Theory understands gender and sexuality as relational constructs, subject to significant historical and cultural variation. Refusing to stabilize these variations into any singular norm, queer curating thus presents a challenge to the museum as a normalizing, meaning-making entity and asks how these concerns can be addressed in museum-practices, that have, for the most part, silently and unknowingly reproduced and solidified contemporary heteronormative structures and desires. How have queer issues, queer curators, and queer exhibitions at one and the same time both shaken the foundations of traditional curatorial practice, and found their potential for intervention papered over or silenced? How can queer desires continue to force the museum to evolve? What does queer change in the museum look like? This issue is an attempt to foster a dialogue about queer curating in a transnational frame.