

Queer Time & Place





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‘What does it mean to make queer art now?’

Paul Clinton asks artists and writers **Catherine Lord, Carlos Motta, Charlotte Prodger, James Richards, Prem Sahib** and **A.L. Steiner** to respond

Everything has changed and nothing has changed. Activists and theorists began using the term ‘queer’ in the early 1990s at a moment of political exhaustion. Representations of AIDS as a specifically gay disease made it necessary to challenge categories of sexual identity. There was also dissent from those who felt excluded from the gay rights movement on the grounds of gender presentation, race or desire. Queer was not simply an indicator of identity but a refusal of being identified, fixed and assimilated. Much art of the time also exchanged flag-waving affirmation for critique – take, for example, Glenn Ligon’s *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93), an appropriation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs of black men, annotated to isolate their troubling racial fetishism.

In 2014, politics once considered radical are now routinely taught on undergraduate arts courses, antiretroviral drugs are available to

the lucky few and gay marriage is recognized in a number of countries. Yet, homophobia and transphobia persist. Though in some ways queer art might seem like something of an anachronism, recent shows and events in London – including ‘Keep Your Timber Limber’ at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, ‘Raspberry Poser’ at Chisenhale Gallery and ‘Charming for the Revolution’ at Tate Modern – as well as ‘Tom of Finland+Bob Mizer’ at LA MOCA, the number of sexually dissident artists in this year’s Whitney Biennial and a forthcoming exhibition on art after identity politics at M_KHA, Antwerp, all attest to a renewed interest in alternative sexualities and subjectivities in art. I asked a range of artists and writers to reflect on the current state of art drawn from queer culture.

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Previous page courtesy: the artist and Deborah Schamoni Gallery, Munich; copyright A.L. Steiner • 1 courtesy: Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon, Instituto de Visión, Bogotá, and Mor Charpentier Gallery, Paris • 2 courtesy: the artists and Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles

CATHERINE LORD

Never mind curatorial premises. (As the fabulously nasty Djuna Barnes once wrote, somewhere, of carpets: 'If there are any, they will have been molested.') Let's accept the Whitney Biennial as an art-world selfie aimed at the market and tempered by good intentions. Or think of it as an expensive but unwieldy dipstick that measures jetsam like women, blacks, Chicagoans, outsiders, gays, lesbians, queers, etc. It's instructive to compare this biennial to the 1993 production, the one that supposedly tipped art so far towards politics that no one could even lipsync the word 'identity' for the next two decades. When you revisit the catalogue essays, however, the 1993 biennial trod surprisingly lightly around the queer question, even though Queer Nation had hit the streets and queer theory the academy, while almost a quarter of a million Americans had already died of AIDS. Other than one short paragraph listing artists who had reclaimed the word 'queer', flagrant defiance was muted in favour of coded talk about 'sexuality', with the occasional invocation of homoerotics or homosexuality.¹

The 2014 biennial, in contrast, is Queer – embedded queer, slacker queer, *flâneur* queer, almost normcore queer. Much of this work is in conversation with previous generations, because if queer art isn't in conversation with the past, whether or not a lesbian or a transgender person fabricated it, it's not queer. Queer is a hashtag, not a destination. 'We have never been queer,' wrote the late José Muñoz, 'yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.'² An ideality by any other name is an archive. And ideality, this year, is where queer occupies space, in works that figure not simply better sex or better bodies but rather the layers of collection, interpretation and negotiation that comprise a culture always in danger of being disappeared.

Queer in the 2014 biennial drags pleasure forward, giving a thick description of both the generations and generating of culture. 'Freedom ...' shivers Ericka Huggins, in a video by A. L. Steiner as she describes Lena Horne's performance at a benefit concert for the Black Panthers, 'the word floated from her mouth right to my body.' The video literally projects Huggins as a formative radical presence upon a rough grid of snapshots of (mostly naked) dyke

and trans bodies. Joseph Grigely's vitrines montage ephemera such as an unread first issue of *October* (from 1976) and tattered copies of *Trylon* and *Perisphere*. Culled from a queer life that was almost exterminated twice – first when critic and painter Gregory Battcock was gay-bashed to death in 1980 and, second, when a storage facility was about to toss out Battcock's archives – Grigely's selections situate Battcock's desires amidst the evanescent flickers of affect that make the art world tick. Julie Ault's artifacts, among them a page from David Wojnarowicz's calendar and a painting by Martin Wong, arranged in 'constellations' whose blank spaces are as powerful as the objects displayed, also situate queer within the operations of friendships both intimate and intellectual. These and other hoardings – including installations by Keith Mayerson and the Zachary Drucker/Rhys Ernst romance – reclaim and create the space in which the intimacies of queer lives can become public.

If queer art has always launched itself upon creative recordings of the past, what compels now – using this biennial as dipstick – is the sense that the impossible future that queer proffers is not an identity but a practice that can be restored to, or fashioned within, lives radically lived. It's hardly that the world has been cured of homophobia, but to insist upon the complexity of both 'queer' and 'public' is to reclaim the privilege of privacy in public space.

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- 1 Lisa Phillips, 'No Man's Land: At the Threshold of the Millenium', *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993, p. 58
- 2 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, New York, 2009, p. 1

JAMES RICHARDS

There's a renewed interest in identity politics at the moment amongst my own generation, born in the early 1980s. In part, this might be attributed to the increasing role of online social networking, through which identity is performed and produced, making intimate material public to a distracted, merely glancing audience. Queer subjects also have an unprecedented level of access to their own history and to the lives of previous generations. I've found myself looking into these histories to find artists and works that I can identify with in an attempt to affirm my feelings and locate a canon.

If I had to summarize, I would say that queer art now is often about identification with, and recognition of, histories and referents, rather than the production of representations, of new images and forms – although this is speaking from the perspective of North American and European queer culture. I'm thinking of works by Untitled Merchandise, Emily Roysdon's *untitled (David Wojnarowicz project)* (2001–07) or Henrik Olesen's work on Alan Turing and Herman Bang. My generation has inherited the aftermath of the culture wars, identity politics and the creation of 'queer' as a political and cultural term. We are only just beginning to digest the legacy of these cultural conflicts. This is particularly the case for the AIDS crisis. I didn't experience it directly but, in the work I love – the film and video of pioneers such as Stuart Marshall or Derek Jarman – and in finding an identity and a background in art history, I see so clearly the absences that AIDS has created. Curator Jon Davies, writing for his 2011 exhibition 'Coming After' at Toronto's Power Plant, refers to this generational concern as 'queer time and the spectre of the recent past'.

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A.L. Steiner, *Untitled (rambuten)*
2013, inkjet print

1
Carlos Motta, *Deviations to Love #1*, 2013, digital projection,
dimensions variable

2
Zachary Drucker and
Rhys Ernst, *Relationship #24*, 2008–13,
c-type print, 40 × 60 cm





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1
Giuseppe Campuzano as
La Virgen de las Guacas, 2007

2
Emily Roysdon
untitled (David Wojnarowicz project)
(detail), 2001–07,
silver gelatin print, 27 × 35 cm

3
Charlotte Prodger holding
Ian White's *Ibiza Black
Flags Democracy*, 2010



3

1 courtesy: The Estate of Giuseppe Campuzano and Visible Project; photograph: Alejandro Gómez de Tuddo • 2 courtesy: the artist • 3 courtesy: Charlotte Prodger

‘The art world’s relationship to sexual politics is problematic: institutions may show works that deal with critiques of sexual politics, but their structures are always at risk of coopting them.’

CARLOS MOTTA

One way to start processing this absence is by setting up a dialogue with queer artists of different generations; the other is to explore one’s relationship to this history by working with archival or found materials. Of course, this emphasis on the past brings up reservations. One has to be mindful that the contemporary art gallery is a tolerant place and sometimes gestures that have their origins in urgent contexts or struggles can feel like they are being used to create a slight frisson, without it being particularly thoughtful.

There are also ongoing changes and crises in the gay community that urgently need to be addressed – the re-emergence of barebacking (unprotected sex), internet hookups, the use of drugs both recreational and antiretroviral, which have coalesced into a complex subculture. When I worked with Steve Reinke, an artist of a different generation, it became apparent that we were both responding in our work to the changes brought about in the last 20 years by these new chemical and technological agents. It felt important to explore these topics together in our video *Disambiguation* (2009). Artists such as Reinke and AA Bronson engage in collaborations with others of different ages and this learning, this intergenerational dialogue, seems a healthy and useful way for queer artists to keep going.

James Richards lives and works in Berlin, Germany, and London, UK. In 2013, he had a solo exhibition at Rodeo, Istanbul, Turkey. His work was also included in ‘The Encyclopedic Palace’, 55th Venice Biennale, Italy, and exhibited at Malmö Konsthall, Sweden; Artist Space, New York, USA; and Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. In 2014, he curated a show at Cabinet, London.

CARLOS MOTTA

Military dictatorships, marxism, christianity, colonialism and other totalizing forms of knowledge have produced societies fraught with repression and conflict in Latin America. Sexual and gender difference have historically been their targets. From the late 1950s, counter-cultural resistance has taken place in clandestine meeting places, on the streets and within artistic circles. But it was throughout the 1980s and ’90s that new forms of protest emerged. Sexual dissidence was urgently expressed by making images, performances and public interventions. Artists responded to the impact of AIDS and the incompetent governmental reactions to the crisis, as well as to institutionalized homophobia in its many forms. Gambas al Ajillo, Yegüas del

Apocalipsis, Batato Barea, Grupo Chacalayo, GANG Collective, Eduardo Kac and Miguel Ángel Rojas are just a few examples. As a Latin American artist, often working in the region, I am aware of these histories and their influence on contemporary art.

The present international visibility of sexual and gender politics has had noticeable effects in Latin America, where LGBTI activism has resulted in significant legislative victories, such the legalization of same-sex marriage in Uruguay and a law recognizing trans identities in Argentina. But how have these changes affected queer art-making that doesn’t take inclusion or same-sex marriage as its goal? Sexually subversive art of previous generations addressed issues such as the intersections of sexuality and racism, HIV discrimination and immigration, using strategies that challenged both society and the art world. What effect has the institutionalization of sexual activism had upon current artistic and political struggles?

Since the 1990s, the Bolivian collective Mujeres Creando has been using street performances and graffiti in La Paz to protest against gender inequality. This kind of practice is less frequent today. As gay and queer struggles have become more visible, the art world has also embraced the aesthetics of sexual resistance opening spaces and offering career opportunities to (a handful of) artists dealing with these topics. Mujeres Creando, for instance, reject being labelled as ‘artists’ but they exhibit their work in gallery exhibitions. Can one use the institution to speak out? My projects *We Who Feel Differently* (2012) and *Gender Talents: A Special Address* (2013, in collaboration with Electra) used the institution as a temporary platform to discuss a history of sexual activism that doesn’t take assimilation as its goal. Other artists, such as Giuseppe Campuzano, Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa, Felipe Rivas San Martín and Elyla Sinvergüenza, work similarly.

Conditions of sexual oppression are currently being masked as progress. The LGBTI movement promotes the message that inclusion is the core of ‘equality’, yet is oblivious to the pressing inequalities faced by racial, ethnic and other minorities. ‘Equality’ applies to those that can afford to comply with existing norms. Similarly, the art world’s relationship to sexual politics is problematic: institutions may *show* works that deal with critiques of sexual politics, but their structures are always at risk of coopting them. Models of institutional display, presentation, funding and commercialization, and even conceptualization and theorization, are fundamentally heteronormative. Is the production of critical discourses, aesthetics and counter knowledges enough? While artists can speak about social change from within art institutions, and sometimes even from the market, we won’t effect social change unless we destabilize or ‘queer’ their structures with solid critiques and actions that resist assimilation – unless we stop *representing* queerness instead of *performing* it.

Carlos Motta lives and works in New York, USA. His work has recently been shown at the International Film Festival, Rotterdam, the Netherlands; the 1st Cartagena Biennial, Spain; and ‘global activism’, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany. In 2014, his work will be exhibited at the 10th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea, and Jeu de Paume, Paris, France.

A.L. STEINER

Categories like ‘woman’, ‘butch’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘transsexual’ are all imperfect, historical, temporary and arbitrary. We use them, and they use us. We use them to construct meaningful lives, and they mould us into historically specific forms of personhood. Instead of fighting for immaculate classifications and impenetrable boundaries, let us strive to maintain a community that understands diversity as a gift, sees anomalies as precious, and treats all basic principles with a hefty dose of skepticism.

– Gayle Rubin, ‘Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender and Boundaries’ (1992)

Patriarchal identity crisis, intersectional race aggregate, transitional normative gender disruption, posthumanist feminist militancy, unarmed rootless radical. Queer theory disrupts marginalization as heteronormativity entrenches itself further, stockpiling heavy equipment, weaponizing, drawing lines, imaging violence. You don’t know why you want what you want, so you can’t know what you don’t want.

Maybe it’s too late to respond to ‘queer’ – or maybe it’s just in time. Queer is empowering, offensive, visible, academic, passé, over, urgent, overused, everything, irrelevant, empty, hurtful, hateful, possible, broad, narrow, nothing, futurity, hope, not enough, too much, just right. Queer are the things that bad things are not.

The earth is ruled by sociopaths and psychopaths; containers lacking empathic tools and suffering acutely from what Guillermo Gómez-Peña terms ‘compassion fatigue and humanitarian impotence’. The relatively recent invention of heterosexuality is not our species’ greatest shining moment. The ‘not-homosexual’, as Jonathan Ned Katz notes. Homosexuality followed this sad senseless path. Bankrupt, absurd, insignificant user-friendly terms both, a long-running bad joke. This couldn’t be what we want. No matter how hard, all bodies are soft. They run in opposition to calcifying gendered impositions. Katz continues:

‘Between 1877 and 1920, Americans were embarked on *The Search for Order*, documented in historian Robert H. Wiebe’s book of that title.

'The trend, which has great currency in the art market just now, of artists who may not identify as queer but are flirting with a 'gay aesthetic', is divorced from the actual lived experience of being a queer person in the world.'

CHARLOTTE PRODGER

Though Wiebe doesn't mention it, this hunt for regularity gave rise in the arena of sex to the new standard model heterosexuality. This paralleled early 20th century moves to standardize railroad track widths, time zones, business and manufacturing procedures [...] as well as to test and regularize intelligence and femininity and masculinity.'

Maybe one day we'll realize we didn't mean to do that.

Intelligence is not a sign of consciousness. Consciousness is bodily; you can feel it in your tears. 'It became increasingly clear that the erasure or repression of emotion was part of the larger repudiation of all aspects of desire and embodiment in modernism,' Jennifer Doyle writes of the marginalization of Ron Athey's work, 'a repudiation that enabled the continuing exclusion of non-mainstream subjects with embarrassingly needy, injured, angry and otherwise politicized bodies/selves from the art world.' Art has established itself as a world. It's not clear what's happening in this world. Any help that you – or others that you may know – can offer in describing it is welcome.

There is violence in this short tract, a printed piece, a magazine, a printing press, paper, ink, glue, poison, soil, jobs, trees, air, lands ravaged, enemies eliminated, desires ignored, exclusion, absence, the object disseminated, borrowed, sold, taken, given, stored, a nugget of hope, the misty rote of inspiration, bloodletting bodies then, now and after, seeking cracks and finding fractures, outside and inside, psychopathologies and faulty logics, living and dying.

This is the queerest thing I can write right now.

A.L. Steiner is an artist ...

1 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'The New Global Culture', *TDR*, vol. 45 no. 1, Spring 2001, p. 22

CHARLOTTE PRODGER

For me, there is no one thing that 'constitutes' queerness. There are temporal moments of things being queer; they are, and then they're not. It can be the smallest gesture. What's key for me in terms of my own queer identity and in my work is that these things are contingent. Collaboration and dialogue are fundamental. It's a process of identification with people living and dead: friends, anonymous YouTube users and historical figures. Aspects of me are liberated by these other bodies as they can be who I can't be, in ways that are mutable and contingent. A lot of my work is about men and, as an extension of that, my masculine identity is an important part of my queer experience. It's admixive, I guess, rather than confessional, a negotiating impulse rather than a curatorial strategy.

Ultimately, queerness is not a category or a style but a lived experience, which I feel is in danger of being colonised, of being sanitised, made digestible, hip, hilarious. The trend, which has great currency in the art market just now, of artists who may not identify as queer but are flirting with a 'gay aesthetic', is divorced from the actual lived experience of being a queer person in the world. This lived experience, although complex and engaging, is also a space of persistent violence, vulnerability and historical oppression. To me, it feels very different to be a queer person outside of the hermetic space of the contemporary art world. Provincial and rural queer narratives feel important to me in this respect, as subjectivities that exist outside the liberal urban context.

In my work, I approach the historical modes of structural film and minimalism in relation to, or in tension with, narrative. Structural film's polemic of 'emptying out' (no camera, no image, no screen) produces leakages rich for projection and reinterpretation. I use forms to think about the ways in which bodies, sex and the dancefloor are political. I don't think, therefore, that a turn towards formalism is necessarily analogous with the apolitical.

Having authority on the subject of 'art and queer culture' is an extremely difficult idea. One can only say there are people in relation to other people, and I feel the weight of speaking here on behalf of others who haven't been invited to contribute. I've been asked to address this topic from the position of my own subjectivity, but this is difficult as my work embodies multiple subjectivities. What I put out into the world requires a conversation. This text is no exception, and includes the words of Casey O'Connell, Irene Revell, Isla Leaver-Yap, as well as ideas explored in a Glasgow-based queer reading group with Jamie Crewe and Emilia Muller-Ginorio. In addition to these conversations, I feel that the late Ian White has been a force and an influence for me and for many people, in ways that will continue to resonate, reconfigure and transmute for a long time.

Charlotte Prodger lives and works in Glasgow, UK. In 2013, her work was exhibited at Kunsthalle Freiburg, Germany; Tramway, Glasgow; and Artists Space, New York, USA. In 2014, her work was included in Glasgow International and she will have a solo exhibition at Chelsea Project Space, London, UK.

PREM SAHIB

I see my artistic engagement with queer culture as one that is inextricably bound to the biographical content of my work. I don't feel like I necessarily take on 'queer culture' as a subject matter, but I do use my own experience of sexuality as a material and, in doing so, it becomes implicit.

There was an urgent political backdrop to the queer art that was being made during the late 1980s and early '90s when queer theory and activism emerged; namely, the AIDS epidemic. I don't think

that these issues have disappeared but, within the UK at least, they have been transformed and queer politics are being addressed with a louder voice outside of art. My generation obviously has a very different relationship to HIV/AIDS than the generation before us. I remember discussing this with a friend who lost 80 percent of those close to him during the 1980s. We were talking about the different types of visual representation associated with HIV for both our generations; whereas he had a very stark physical memory of those around him being ill, my association was perhaps more remote. I recently made the sculpture *Two Dots* (2013), which mimics the positive result of a rapid HIV test. The two dots figure my relationship towards HIV as both a very real worry but also somewhat abstract. My experience of AIDS isn't the experience of those in the 1980s and the current global complexity of this issue leads to its abstraction.

I don't think that the use of queer aesthetic forms necessarily secures any political capacity. In fact, declaring something 'political' can sometimes be problematic in the sense that you are inadvertently defining the parameters for how it can operate. The work I tend to respond to isn't self-conscious about having a queer agenda, but performs a queer politics by taking everyday objects or spaces and mining their sexual connotations. A more expanded and open notion of sexuality means that artists can address these topics without conforming to a particular sexual type or identity – I'm thinking of Eddie Peake's explorations of the body and sex here.

Having said that, I do see my work as engaged in politics, despite not using what you might call an overtly political language. The politics of my work is implicit to its form; it is there for those who can see it, and for those who can't. I identify with the disco movement because I feel that its politics were its pleasure principle. This is true of other artists of my generation, such as George Henry Longly who draws upon nightclub paraphernalia. (He, Eddie and I also run a club night together.) George's work references gay histories through club culture. This kind of work on sexuality is about being part of a tradition. Disco had a social efficacy despite its superficial veneer and that's how I like to think about my own art-making: emerging from the problems and experiences that I encounter. ♦♦

Prem Sahib lives and works in London, UK. In 2013, he had solo exhibitions at Southard Reid, London, and Galleria Lorcan O'Neill, Rome, Italy. His work was included in 'Shape of Thought', The Breeder, Monaco; 'Abstract Cabinet', David Roberts Art Foundation; and 'Days In Lieu', David Zwirner, London. In 2014, he will have an exhibition at Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, India, and a performance at the Fiorucci Art Trust, Stromboli, Italy.

Henrik Olesen, A.T., 2012,
computer collage on cardboard,
48 x 33 cm

