Daniel James Lewis

1702173

Fine Art: Studio, Site & Context

Research in Practice

ADAD5004

Paul Duerinckx

Assignment title: Proposal

Word Count: 2279

An exploration of Queer Art: Nonconformity, activism & liberation

An independent research proposal

This written piece will explore and dissect some of the main characteristics of what queer art is. In this text, the phrase 'queer' will be used as an umbrella term to cover LGBTQ+ identities, relating to sexuality and/or gender. The three key points that will be explored relate to existence as a queer person in the world, and how art can act as representation and an outlet for queer people. The terms that will be explored are nonconformity, activism, and liberation, each a key aspect to queer lived experience, through researching the works of artists, authors, and philosophers.

Nonconformity

Defined as "behaviour or thinking which is different from that of most people". (Collins, n.d.) Nonconformity has been brought up in connection to the queer community throughout time, even more so in recent years with new research and discovery of 'new' genders. Queer life subverts the conventional notions of gender, sexuality, and identity. Queer art specifically is characterized by is rejection of binary gender roles, forming an exploration of queer desire and identity, and the critique of dominant culture norms and expectations.

Queer art is a response to the marginalization and exclusion of queer individuals form mainstream culture. Historically, LGBTQ+ people have been subject to discrimination, persecution, and violence due to their sexual orientation and/ or gender identity. This marginalization has led to a lack of representation of queer experiences in mainstream media and art, which has perpetuated stereotypes and contributed to the erasure of queer identities. It's reasons such as this which have led to queer individuals building their own subcultures that stem from queer life and interests.

At this current moment in time, the most prevalent form of nonconformity in a queer sense would likely relate to gender, specifically in relation to those on the gender non-binary spectrum. The term non-binary refers to individuals that don't identify with either male or female genders, although there are many variations of what it means to be non-binary. (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2023) Though there's no set rule on how to be non-binary, and expression varies from person to person, many choose to adopt an androgynous lifestyle to coincide with their gender identity. Living an androgynous lifestyle in a heteronormative world defies what is expected in most societies, people are uncomfortable when met with the unfamiliar.

(Bergner, 2019) The underground origins of the gender non-binary spectrum and societal expectations may be traced far back in time, but one iteration appeared in the 1990s, with theorists like Judith Butler writing about gender as a culturally scripted performance, based on social conventions rather than biology, imposing far more than innate traits. (Butler, 1990)

> "*The trouble is, we're living in a world that insists we be one or the other. ... All my life, my nontraditional gender identity had been my biggest secret, my deepest shame.*" - (Bornstein, 1994)

Many living under the queer umbrella uses their art as a method of self-expression, this can be done through any medium, whether through painting and drawing, photography and film, performance, the list of formats for queer expression is endless. An example of an artist that falls somewhere in the middle of the gender spectrum was Claude Cahun, a surrealist photographer and author, self-identified gay person.

Fig. 1, *I am in training, don't kiss me*, 1927, Claude Cahun

Born in France, 1894, long before topics of gender binaries came into general discussion, Lisa Renée Mathilde Schwob, who would go on to adopt the more androgynous pseudonym of Claude Cahun, was breaking the rules of what was considered 'normal' for the time. Considering the lack of knowledge surrounding gender identity at the time, Cahun is now thought to have been gender fluid, within the family of gender non-binary, and would express their gender identity through their art. (DeBrine, 2019) Exploring the traits of hyper masculinity, to ultra-femininity, Cahun would blend these all together into different personae to represent in their work, each an amalgamation of traits that Cahun identified with. This acted as a method of defiance to the heteronormative culture in our society throughout time, a celebration of queer life, of nonconformity.

Whether acting as a form of defiance or simply just self-expression, nonconformity is crucial in queer art. Queer artists contribute to the greater movement for social justice and equity for LGBTQ+ people by challenging prevailing cultural narratives and developing new forms of representation and visibility. They contribute to the development of a more inclusive and diversified cultural landscape in which queer identities are recognised and embraced.

Activism

Queer activist art has played a crucial role in the fight for equality for the queer community, challenging normative societal constructs, and advocating for marginalised voices. The history of queer art and activism is deeply rooted in the struggles of queer people to assert their identity and gain recognition in the heteronormative society. (Landis, 2021)

It was during the 1960s and 1970s that queer art and activism gained prominence with the emergence of the gay rights movement. Artists such as Keith Haring, David Wojnarowicz, and Robert Mapplethorpe used their art to express their sexuality and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Their works were often political and confrontational, addressing issues such as AIDS, homophobia, and discrimination. Haring's "Silence = Death" poster became an iconic symbol of

the AIDS epidemic, while Wojnarowicz's "One Day This Kid" series highlighted the vulnerability and marginalization experienced by queer youth.

In the early 1980s, the AIDS crisis emerged as a devastating threat to the LGBTQ+ community. At the time, the disease was poorly understood and highly stigmatized, with many government officials and medical professionals either denying its existence or dismissing it as a problem that only affected a small, marginalized population, a 'gay disease'. This lack of action and attention led to a rapid spread of the disease, and by the mid-1980s, it had become a full-blown epidemic that was taking thousands of lives each year. (Harper, 2021)

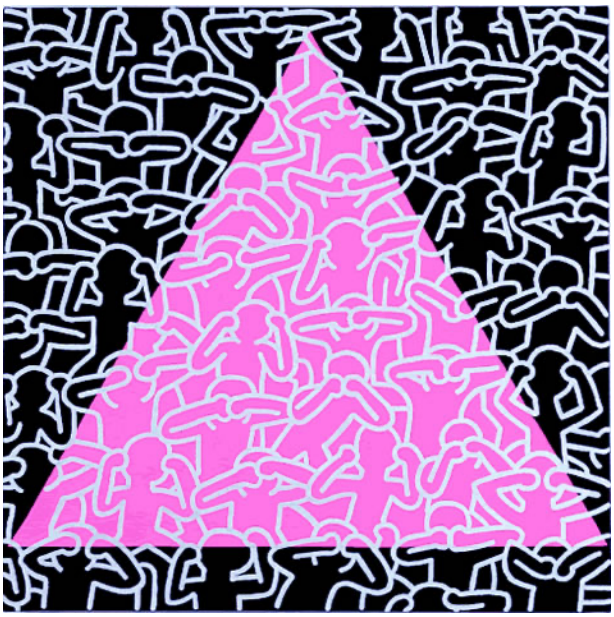

Fig. 2, *Silence = Death*, 1989, Keith Haring

It was in this context that Keith Haring created "Silence = Death" in the final year of his life after being diagnosed with AIDS himself. The piece features a stark black background with a bright pink triangle in the centre. The triangle is

a reference to the pink triangle used by the Nazis to identify gay men in concentration camps during World War II, while the title is a direct call to action, urging viewers to speak out and take a stand against the inaction and ignorance surrounding the AIDS crisis. (Masterworks, n.d.) The piece was significant not only for its powerful message but also for its accessibility and visibility. Haring, who was openly gay and had already gained fame for his graffiti-inspired street art, was well-known in the art world and beyond. By creating a piece that could be reproduced and disseminated widely, he was able to bring the message of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) to a broader audience, including those who might not have been directly impacted by the AIDS crisis. (Smith-Laing, 2019)

Activism for the queer community comes in all formats. Relating back to the idea of nonconformity to gender roles, and the concept that gender is a performance, one of the clearest examples of that statement would be drag artists, who were a key group of individuals that were the trailblazers for the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement, along with transgender and gender nonconforming people of the 1960s and 1970s. (JCFS Chicago, n.d.) A prominent figure in this instance was Marsha P. Johnson, who considered herself a ‘transvestite’ and drag queen, given the lack of understanding and

terminology regarding gender at that time. (Rothberg, 2022). Johnson was one of the many activists who participated in the Stonewall uprising in June 1969, a series of protests against police raids on gay bars in New York City. Johnson was a prominent figure during the riots and played an instrumental role in organizing and leading demonstrations. She was often seen at the forefront of the protests, shouting slogans, and encouraging others to take action, becoming a known figurehead in the gay rights movement. (Boomer, 2022) After decades of activism for LGBTQ+ rights, Johnson was found dead in the Hudson River on July 6, 1992. Her death was initially ruled a suicide, but her friends and fellow activists believed that foul play may have been involved. Her death occurred at a time when violence against LGBTQ+ people, particularly transgender women of colour, was rampant in the United States. Many activists and advocates believe that Johnson's death was a result of this violence and discrimination. (Simon, 2017) This is why activism for LGBTQ+ rights was and still is an urgent necessity, bringing awareness and visibility to the queer community, to promote safety and equality regardless of difference in identity.

Liberation

The literal term liberation is the action of gaining freedom from a form of containment or restraint, it’s a term that resonates deeply with the queer

community in a multitude of ways. The term liberation in correlation to queer life has become more and more prevalent over recent decades, following the beginnings of instances such as the Gay Rights movement, queerness has become something to be celebrated. Living unapologetically queer where possible.

Queer art is a genre of art that emerged in the 20th century as a form of expression for the LGBTQ+ community. It is a way for artists to explore their sexual identities, challenge societal norms, and create a space for liberation. The exploration of sexuality has been a central theme in queer art, and it has helped to contribute to LGBTQ+ rights movement, as well as the sexual liberation movement.

The acceptance and visibility of queerness is evolving to this day. Some of the most notable variations of queer symbolism dates back to 1892, when the green carnation flower became a subtle, secret way of showing you were a man who loved men. (Prager, 2020) This was necessary, given the treatment of queer individuals historically. It wasn't until the 20th century where queer liberation came to the forefront which led to the emergence of the Queer art movement, which coincided with the rise of the LGBTQ+ rights movement in

the 1960s, where queer individuals stepped away from subtle symbolism of the past and moved towards celebrating each aspect of queer life to the fullest. (Burk & Raffel, n.d.)

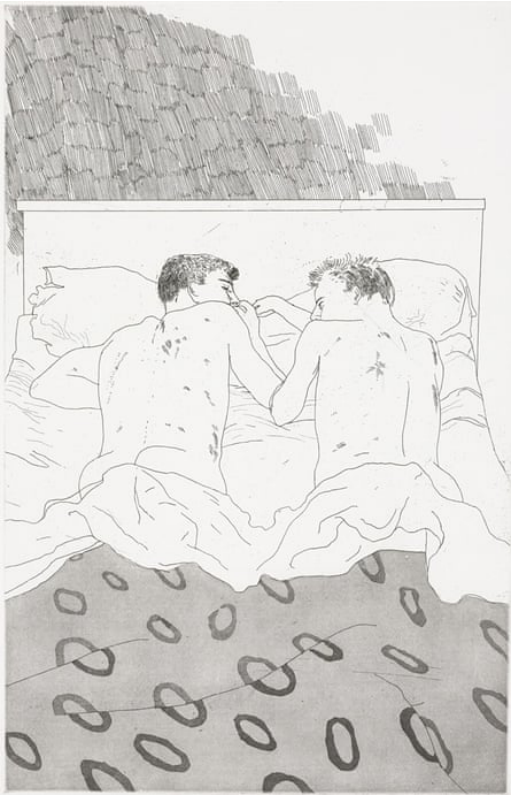

Fig. 3, *Two Boys Aged 23 or 24*, 1966, David Hockney

The rise in queer liberation resulted in the rise of queer visibility, this was evident in the art of the time and moving forward. David Hockney's reflected this, as *Two Boys Ages 23 or 24* (1996) and the related series of etchings depiction of gay love and life. The simple nature of these etchings of two men, with very subtle suggestion is significant for the fact that these scenarios were happening, yet hidden until this point, out of shame and fear. Hockney captured gay life in an intimate moment, but refrained from lewdness, as homosexuality had been viewed in a crude and offensive way, moments like

this not only bring proper visibility to real queer life but offers a sense of expression and representation for queer individuals in a positive light. (Riggs, 1997)

Queer liberation means different things to each individual, one of the main forms of expressing this freedom is through performances of the body, whether on the topic of sex or gender - queer individuals didn't want to continue to hide these aspects.

Fig. 4, *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, 1979, Robert Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe was an artist that wanted to lean into the lewd narrative that had been placed onto the queer community. Contrasting Hockney's expression of gay life, Mapplethorpe wanted to imply the dark, raunchiness of

sexuality. Exploring subcultures of sexuality and gender, Audiences reactions are divided, some sticking with the narrative that this was 'too much, others stating that they saw these as "truthful explorations of the human body, sexuality and desire." (Tate, n.d.) No matter the form of expression, each individual had their own correct, personal method of self, queer liberation.

Upon examining the three key words in the context of queer life and art, and the areas these terms can expand to, further questions for areas to research have arisen. In this context, the terms nonconformity, activism, and liberation had a strong connection, and sometimes overlapped, given these are all key characteristics of queer life. Through the course of researching, one working research question that would lend itself well to a proposed research project working question is, 'How has queer art evolved over the past few decades, and what impact has it had on the LGBTQ+ community?'. A question like this is focused enough to build a good foundational direction of where to research, but leaves a wide range of talking points to explore, allowing opportunity to explore sub-questions such as, 'To what extent has queer art been used as a tool for activism and resistance, and how has it contributed to the struggle for liberation of LGBTQ+ people?', 'How have queer artists used their work to create visibility for marginalized communities and reclaim their narratives?', 'How has queer art evolved over time, and what challenges and opportunities

does it face in the present day?', 'To what extent has queer art been influenced by intersectional identities, such as race, class, and disability?'. Questions like these allow a range of topics to be explored, regarding effects on specific communities in the LGBTQ+ collective, gender, sex, performance, intersectionality of varying communities, history, are all areas that have potential when moving forward with the proposed working question.

List of figures

Fig. 1, *I am in training, don't kiss me*, 1927, Claude Cahun. Accessed via: https://www.artsy.net/artwork/claude-cahun-i-am-in-training-dont-kiss-me-1927

Fig. 2, *Silence = Death*, 1989, Keith Haring. Accessed via: https://www.haring.com/!/art-work/25

Fig. 3, *Two Boys Aged 23 or 24*, 1966, David Hockney. Accessed via: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/12/david-hockney-two-boys-aged-23-or-24

Fig. 4, *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*, 1979, Robert Mapplethorpe. Accessed via: https://www.mapplethorpe.org/portfolios/portfolio/selected-works/leather?view=slider#12

References

Newspapers

Bergner, D. (2019) 'The Struggles of Rejecting the Gender Binary', The New York Times Magazine, 4 June. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/magazine/gender-nonbinary.html (Accessed online: May 2023).

Books

Bornstein, K. (1994) Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us. 1st edn. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1990) Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity. London: Routledge.

Websites

Boomer, L. (2022) Life story: Marsha P. Johnson, Women & the American Story. Available at: https://wams.nyhistory.org/growth-and-turmoil/growing-tensions/marsha-p-johnson/ (Accessed: May 2023).

Burk, T. (no date) Queer Art: 1960s to the Present. Art History Teaching Resources. Edited by A. Raffel. Available at: https://arthistoryteachingresources.org/lessons/queer-art-1960s-to-the-present/ (Accessed: May 2023).

Collins (no date) Nonconformity definition and meaning: Collins english dictionary, Nonconformity definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary. Available at: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/nonconformity (Accessed: May 2023).

Harper, T. (2021) An epidemic of presidential ignorance: The AIDS crisis and the US presidency, U.S. Studies Online. Available at: https://usso.uk/2021/04/21/an-epidemic-of-presidential-ignorance-the-aids-crisis-and-the-us-presidency/ (Accessed: May 2023).

JCFS Chicago (no date) The History of Pride Part 2: Don't forget the leaders of the Movement. Available at: https://www.jcfs.org/response/blog/history-pride-part2 (Accessed: May 2023).

Landis, S. (2021) Creating the change they wish to see: LGBTQ artists & their activism, National Center for Civil and Human Rights. Available at: https://www.civilandhumanrights.org/creating-the-change-they-wish-to-see-lgbtq-artists-their-activism/ (Accessed: May 2023).

Masterworks (no date) Keith Haring, silence equals death, 1989, Screen Print, Masterworks Fine Art Gallery. Available at: https://www.masterworksfineart.com/artists/keith-haring/screen-print/silence-equals-death-1989-2/id/W-7980 (Accessed: May 2023).

National Center for Transgender Equality. (2023) Understanding nonbinary people: How to be respectful and supportive. National Center for Transgender Equality. Available at: https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-nonbinary-people-how-to-be-respectful-and-supportive (Accessed: May 2023).

Pollitt, A.M. et al. (2021) Heteronormativity in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and Queer Young People, Taylor & Francis. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00918369.2019.1656032 (Accessed: May 2023).

Prager, S. (2020) Four flowering plants that have been decidedly queered, JSTOR Daily. Available at: https://daily.jstor.org/four-flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/ (Accessed: May 2023).

Riggs, T. (1997) 'two boys aged 23 or 24', David Hockney, 1966, Tate. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hockney-two-boys-aged-23-or-24-p77564#:~:text=Hockney%20creates%20scenes%20of%20touching,and%20unapologetically%20about%20gay%20relationships. (Accessed: May 2023).

Rothberg, E. (2022) Marsha P. Johnson, National Women's History Museum. Available at: https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/marsha-p-johnson (Accessed: May 2023).

Simon, C. (2017) The cold case of an LGBTQ pioneer, Human Rights Campaign. Available at: https://www.hrc.org/news/the-cold-case-of-an-lgbtq-pioneer-marsha-p-johnson (Accessed: May 2023).

Smith-Laing, T. (2019) How Keith Haring's art forced us to talk about aids, The Economist. Available at: https://www.economist.com/1843/2019/06/13/how-keith-harings-art-forced-us-to-talk-about-aids (Accessed: May 2023).

Tate (no date) The photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, Tate. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/robert-mapplethorpe-11413/photographs-robert-mapplethorpe (Accessed: May 2023).

Academic Documents

DeBrine, M. (2019) The Exploration of a Nonbinary Gender Identity in the Visual work of Claude Cahun. thesis. Available at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses/617/ (Accessed: May 2023).