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Programme of Study: Design Crafts

Module: ADAD4019 Ways of Perceiving

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Word count: 1531

Why is queer art important?

Introduction

This exhibition is designed to show why queer art is important. It looks at this question through a lense of sexuality, gender identity and expression, and political issues surrounding queer issues. As well as this, the exhibition explores the way that art has been used by LGBTQ+ people to express and deal with grief, loss and trauma surrounding the issues and events within their community. The works that I have chosen for the exhibition display 5 artists whose art closely relates to these topics. The artworks range from 6th Century poetry, to modern photography, all of which represent queer people one way or another.

Context

Firstly, it is crucial to point out what fits under the definition of “important” during this essay, especially since the things that people would class as important are highly subjective, as shown by the World Values Survey (Sterbenz, 2014).

One of the main ways we can look at importance is through the impact the art had on people. A way this exhibition looks at this is through grief. More specifically, how LGBTQ+ people use art to make sense of their grief. In this case, the exhibition holds examples of communal grief from events that affected the entire community (such as Stonewall, the Pulse nightclub shooting, and the AIDS epidemic). Marginalised communities, when faced with a hate crime, or traumatic event towards them, often experience that trauma and grief as a community, since they are not only grieving a human life, but also the possibility of a safe place (Forneret, 2021), so it is important for art to be there as a way for these marginalised communities to have an outlet that

lets them tell their stories in the way they see fit, letting them use something other than words to communicate complex topics and emotions (Edwards, 2014).

Another important part queer art is self expression. This includes both the way that the artist wants to be seen and perceived as, but also the visibility of their work, i.e. do other people see them how they want to be seen or do they erase the artist's identity from the piece? All of the factors are important to take into consideration when looking at queer art.

Artists and Artworks

He seems like the gods' equal, that man, who	φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ever he is, who takes his seat so close	ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
across from you, and listens raptly to	ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῃ φωνεῖ-
your lilting voice	σας ὑπακούει
and lovely laughter, which, as it wafts by,	καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
sets the heart in my ribcage fluttering;	καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
as soon as I glance at you a moment, I	ὥς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὥς με φώναι-
can't say a thing,	σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,
and my tongue stiffens into silence, thin	ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλῶσσά <μ'> ἔαγε, λέπτον
flames underneath my skin prickle and spark,	δ' αὐτίκα χροῖ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
a rush of blood booms in my ears, and then	ὀπάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
my eyes go dark,	βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,
and sweat pours coldly over me, and all	καὶ δέ μ' ἵδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
my body shakes, suddenly sallower	παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
than summer grass, and death, I fear and feel,	ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
is very near.	φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐτ[α].

Fig 1. Sappho, *Fragment 31* circa 6 BCE.

Fragment 31 was written by Sappho, an ancient Greek poet, around 6th Century BCE. It is considered one of her most famous pieces of work (Segal, C. 1996) and one of the most translated (Clay, 2011). In many interpretations she is seen as filled with jealousy (Race, 1983), seeing the woman she loves with another man and how intensely she feels those emotions. Her work has often been dismissed as queer art. For example, in the 1920s translation of her poems, titled "Sappho: Vigil of Venus" by A.S. Way, the male translator compared the relationships described in her poems as mere "attachments between girls at school" (Sappho. and Way, 1920). In Fragment 31, Sappho alludes to the idea that her jealousy and not being able to be with the woman she sees is equivalent to death. This over exaggeration of her emotion makes it clear that the feelings weren't those of mere school-girl friendships.

In Ancient Greece, while male homosexuality was often recorded and accepted, female homosexuality was not seen nearly as important to its male counterpart (Basson, 2007). Many women across history have fallen victim to complete erasure of their sexualities, by passing off their relationships as "strong friendships", and Sappho was just one of the earliest examples of this very phenomenon. However, recently, the term "sapphic" has become a lesbian sub-group, once again popularising Sappho's poems, and redeeming her legacy as a woman who was attracted to women. The recent revival of Sappho's poetry has become a undeniably important part of lesbian culture in the west, showing that even centuries later, queer art can still have an impact on present day queer people.



Fig 2. Frieda Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* 1940

This painting by Frieda Kahlo was done in 1940, while she lived in Mexico. The strong imagery of the men's suit and the scissors in her hand can all be looked at through the lense of gender expression and identity. Long hair in the western world has been a sign and stereotype of femininity (Bhattacharya, 2021). With that, the addition of traditionally male clothing, (especially in a self-portrait), points to the idea that Kahlo herself was in some ways embracing the masculine parts of herself as a way to signify her queerness (Zucker, 2021). This piece is particularly an important part of queer art, as since 1940, it has helped with the notion that everyone has feminine and masculine sides and people should express that however they want to.



Fig 3. George Segal, *Gay Liberation Monument* 1980.

The sculptures were made by George Segal in 1980 as a commission for the 10th anniversary of Stonewall. There has been some controversy over whether these statues by George Segal would be considered “queer art”. On one hand, all of the models used for the sculptures were part of the LGBTQ+ community, but on the other hand, Segal himself is a straight man (Boyce, n.d.). As well as this, all of the models are white. Stonewall was led by trans women of colour such as Marsha P. Johnson, Storme DeLarverie and Sylvie Rivera (Lorenzo, 2019). There is nothing suggesting that in the piece. The reason I included this piece in the exhibition is to highlight the importance of diversity in queer art. If it is not present, like in this piece, part of history and people’s efforts can be forgotten about.



Fig 4. Grayson Perry, *Lamentation* 2012.

This is a tapestry by Grayson Perry made from wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester and silk. The imagery is eerily similar to the 1990 Therese Frare's photo of an AIDS victim David Kirby. Two years later the photo was used by and coloured by Benetton.



Fig 5. *AIDS - David Kirby*, photo by Therese Frare.

This piece also has biblical connotations. The book of Lamentations in the Bible is about the suffering of Jerusalem after the destruction of the city (Holy Bible NIV, 2011). The emotions in the piece portray great pain and even links to the grief that the LGBTQ+ community suffered through the AIDS epidemic. This piece shows that queer art is essential in remembering the

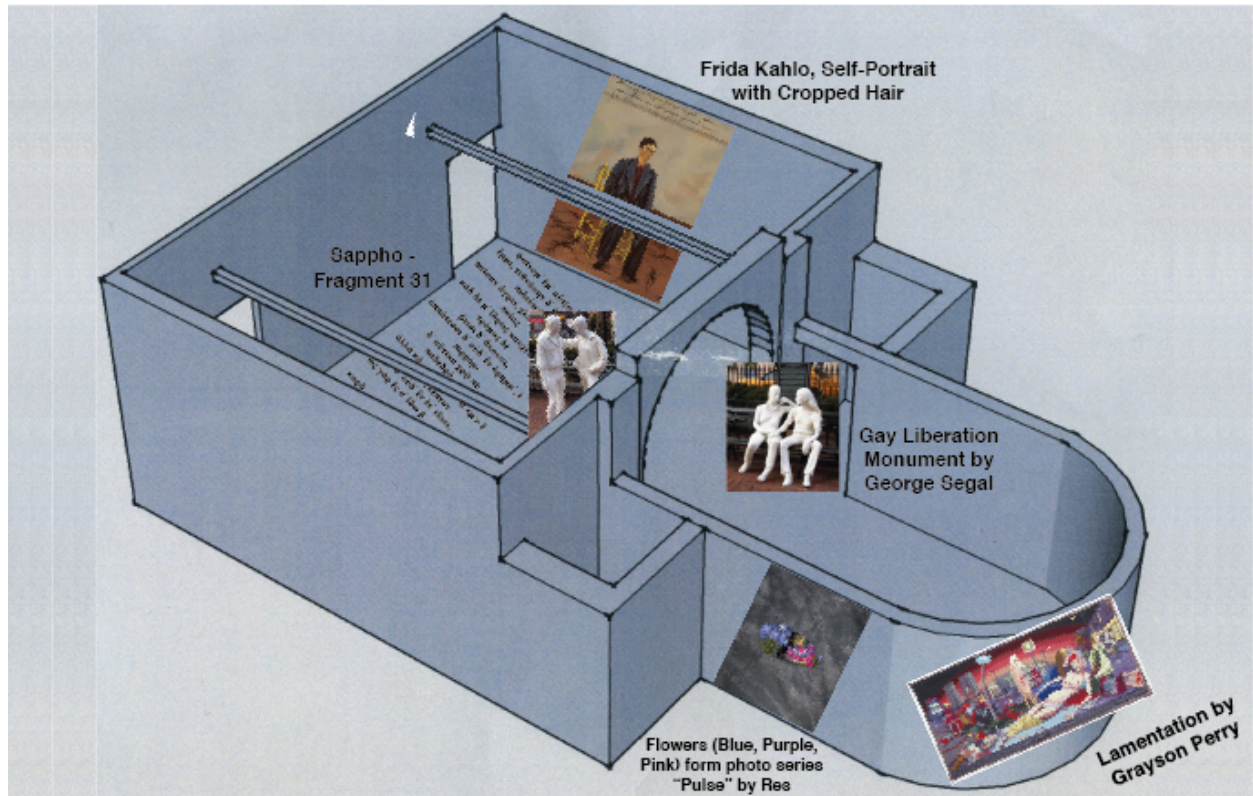
loss that the community has gone through. It also plays a huge role in bringing attention to queer issues, as art has always been a useful tool in putting forward political and human rights issues (Edelman, 1995).



Fig 5. Res, *Flowers (Blue, Purple, Pink)* 2016.

This photograph was done by Res immediately after the Pulse nightclub shooting on 12th June 2015. It is a part of a series of images taken by the fence of the crime scene. While the lives of LGBTQ+ people have improved, art like this is a reminder that society still has a long way to go. It is also through art like this that LGBTQ+ people can grieve and make sense of traumatic events that happen within their community. Art can provide someone a good outlet, and is seen as an effective tool to deal with difficult situations (Appleton, 2001). Furthermore, queer art, such as this one, let queer people take the reign on the narrative about events like the Pulse

nightclub shooting. It's one of the first times in history that queer people get a say about the way the story is told.



For the layout of the exhibition I chose to present the artworks in a chronological order. Starting with Sappho's Fragment 31 which is etched into the floor, the viewer can read it as they approach Frida Kahlo's self portrait. This was done in order to set the direction of the exhibition, while also engaging the viewer in the art. Following on from Frida Kahlo, the viewer is met by the two male figures from the Gay Liberation Monument on one side of the entrance, and the female figures on the other side of the entrance, symbolising the LTBGQ+ right movement coming out of history and into modern times. In the arched room, the two remaining pieces of artwork are hung up, reminding the viewer that the queer community still have a long ways to go in their rights.

While walking through the exhibition, the viewer is taken on a journey of romance, fearless self-expression, and all of a sudden discomfort. All of which are emotions the queer community frequently and rapidly switch out.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that queer art throughout history has played an important role for LGBTQ+ people. Not only with the way they are able to express their sexuality, gender identity and gender expression, but also with how art provides a therapeutic safety valve for that expression to take place.

As well as this, through this exhibition we have seen how vital queer art is when dealing with political issues, like Stonewall, and traumatic events, like the AIDS epidemic and the Pulse nightclub shooting. It sends a message that queer people have always been here, and always will be.

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