

cut to the feeling: examining queer practices of pleasure within the curatorial

Siavash Minoukadeh

Student number: 10002230

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abstract

Whilst recent years have seen a rise in major curatorial projects about LGBT+ people, most have continued to adhere to straight curatorial conventions which may represent LGBT+ people but do not act queerly. This dissertation will examine queer practices of pleasure as a source from which an alternative framework can be drawn. A continuing need to seek out and find pleasure accompanied by a somewhat increased tolerance for discussions of queerness and sex has enabled acts such as cruising to be studied seriously as acts of alternative worldbuilding. This dissertation will draw on these studies to identify the principles which underpin a range of queer practices, applying them to the curatorial to show how they can overcome conventional regimes of representation.

Primarily using an analysis of the exhibition *Out and About! Archiving LGBTQ+ history at Bishopsgate Institute* which took place at London's Barbican Centre in the spring of 2022, I will examine how queer pleasure can be achieved through an alternative understanding of existing curatorial strategies. Where existing practice has not fully articulated the potential of queer pleasure and new strategies are called for, I will build upon, and in some instances away from, the example of *Out and About!* to envisage a model of queer, pleasurable curating, bringing in other examples where relevant.

Each chapter will focus on a specific queer practice, outlining how it operates, what the principles behind it are and how these principles can be applied to the curatorial with practical analysis. Through setting out the euphoric ability of poppers to prefigure a better future, the performativity of camp's resignification of cultural value and the paradoxical fluid permanence of cruising spaces, I will seek to articulate what an understanding of the curatorial that is oriented around queer pleasure could look like and be able to achieve.

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‘I don’t want to be in a situation for even an
hour where I’m not enjoying myself’

Kim Cattrall

‘The Future Starts Now’: Introductions¹

In recent years, a number of major British exhibitions and curatorial institutions have been launched featuring works by LGBT+ artists. These have included exhibitions such as *Queer British Art 1861-1967* at Tate Britain, *Kiss my Genders* at the Hayward Gallery alongside the establishment of new institutions, both in brick-and-mortar like Queer Britain, and in less tangible forms like the Otherness Archive.

While I suppose the increase in representation is welcome, the extent to which these projects have gone beyond representing LGBT+ people and actually acted in a queer way needs questioning. Indeed, in many instances these projects, through their adherence to the straight regime of representation, can be argued to have been detrimental in our efforts to create a world that contains queerness.

This stems from the fact that these projects have sought to mimic existing straight practices, creating an assimilationist atmosphere that may bring more prestige and status for (a very select subset of) the LGBT+ community within the mainstream, without questioning whether such a mainstream is worth assimilating into, and at what cost. The result ranges from prominent, permanent spaces, funded by corporate sponsors such as M&C Saatchi (the architects of Thatcher’s election campaigns) in the case of Queer Britain to arguing that LGBT people made art as ‘Great’ as their cishet counterparts without asking whether the cishet definition of ‘great art’ was one that we should want to accept as in Tate’s *Queer British Art*.

This homonormative approach is evident within the projects themselves, not just their institutional contexts. A common trend has been to use progress as a framing device with projects often spanning a set period of time or commemorating an anniversary such as ‘the 50th anniversary of the UK’s first Pride March.’² This proves problematic for a range of reasons. Implicit in the ‘look how far we’ve come’ presentation of LGBT+ work is the idea that the present situation should be celebrated, that it is in some sense the culmination of queer progress. This serves to stifle further action (if we have reached a climax, what more could you want to fight for?) and fails to address the future – what comes next?

Such temporal approaches also tie into another issue with these representational projects, namely the relational approach with which they define LGBT+ people and our history. The

¹ Kim Petras, *The Future Starts Now* (Santa Monica: Republic Records, 2021) <<https://open.spotify.com/album/0mhiYBnL1wLGc0CgMhvBe2>> [accessed 18 August 2022].

² Queer Britain, ‘Queer Britain’, *Queer Britain*, 2022, <<https://queerbritain.org.uk>> [accessed 29 January 2023].

history of LGBT+ people becomes marked by how we are treated by others. Not only does such an approach self-other ourselves, it also can often define LGBT+ people through a history of pain, indignity and oppression, be it the centring of the death penalty (and the removal thereof) or the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The aim of this dissertation is to set out an alternative to this representational regime and the problematics outlined above. In lieu of seeking to fit within straight conventions and institutions, I will draw upon our own lives and the practices we have used to move away from a straight world in which we are always 'other' to construct moments and places where alternatives are possible and (even if briefly) realised and apply them to the curatorial. By drawing on the acts that we have done rather than the representations of ourselves we have made, I hope to provide a synthesis between queerness-as-identity and queerness-as-practice that elaborates upon Jack Halberstam's concept of 'interestedness' between the two.³ In a Butlerian sense, for a curatorial project to be queer, it must *do* queer, perform queer, rather than just being achieved through representational 'museums that are officially labelled "gay"'.⁴

This project does not necessarily require entire new curatorial strategies, but rather I will analyse how existing curatorial technologies, when brought together and understood differently, can create the queer framework that is required. Building upon the work of earlier queer thinkers such as Elizabeth Freeman who has asked 'why is it that even in queer theory, only pain seems so socially and theoretically generative?'⁵ I will outline a methodology that expands upon queer practices of pleasure-seeking and the recent theoretical interest in them.

To take a phrase from the field of contemporary art, it can be said that a pleasurable 'turn' is taking place in queer discourse, with examinations of specific pop cultural trends, in Daisy Jones' *All The Things She Said*⁶ to accounts of queer sites in Jeremy Atherton Lin's *Gay Bar* all being published in recent years.⁷ Other such texts include Adam Zmith's *Deep Sniff*⁸ and Alex Espinoza's *Cruising*⁹, both of which will be discussed in later chapters.

³ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p.200.

⁴ Isabel Hufschmidt, 'The Queer Institutional, or How to Inspire Queer Curating', *OnCurating* 37 (2018), pp.29-32.

⁵ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.12.

⁶ Daisy Jones, *All the Things she Said: Everything I Know about Modern Lesbian and Bi Culture* (London: Coronet, 2021).

⁷ Jeremy Atherton Lin, *Gay Bar: Why We Went Out* (London: Granta, 2021).

⁸ Adam Zmith, *Deep Sniff: A History of Poppers and Queer Futures* (London: Repeater, 2021).

⁹ Alex Espinoza, *Cruising: an intimate history of a radical pastime* (Los Angeles: Unnamed Press 2019).

This current turn has provided an examination of how many practices of queer pleasure operate as ‘subversive bodily acts’ becoming an apparatus of defiant worldbuilding.¹⁰ As the philosopher Amia Srinivasan wryly observes, even the most privileged, socially-accepted queers understand the subversion their pleasure holds writing, ‘gay men – even the beautiful, white, rich, able-bodied ones – know that who we have sex with, and how, is a political question’.¹¹ More bluntly, ‘even if you fuck me all vanilla ... we are still dangerous faggots’.¹²

Directing the potential of this ‘dangerous faggotry’ towards the curatorial, I will argue that pleasure can be how the curatorial can reject ‘museum-practices, that have, for the most part, silently and unknowingly reproduced and solidified heteronormative structures and desires’¹³ and instead ‘use our historically and presently quite creative work with pleasure, sex, and bodies to jam whatever looks like the inevitable’¹⁴

By proposing such a provocation, I hope to expand what the field of the curatorial can encompass and what it can achieve. As a field which presents objects, people and concepts in relation to one another, the curatorial is broad enough in its definition to be used for more than a representational role and instead not just imagine, but configure a better, more pleasurable world.

I will examine three queer practices to make this case, first examining the way sniffing poppers can create a break (meaning both ‘to disrupt’ and ‘to have a rest from’) in linear temporality and replace it with a future-looking curatorial approach. Having done so, I will then explore how the camp practice of disidentification provides an alternative definition of what belongs in the queer curatorial space that does not need to mimic straight ideas of what material should be valued, collected and exhibited. Finally, I will examine the implications of these practices on the institution, using the spaces, formal and informal, which have been used for cruising to envisage an alternative conception of institutionality. In each instance, I will draw on existing scholarship to outline what each of these practices entail and draw out the theoretical underpinnings that make them pleasurable. Having drawn out theory from practice I will then put it back into practice, this time in the field of the curatorial.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Oxford: Routledge, 1990).

¹¹ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right To Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp.85-6.

¹² Richard Scott, *Soho* (London: Faber, 2018), p.53.

¹³ Jonathan Katz & Anne Söll, ‘Editorial: Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating’, *OnCurating* 37 (2018), pp.2-4.

¹⁴ Freeman, p.173.

This text will primarily analyse *Out and About! Archiving LGBTQ+ History at Bishopsgate Institute*, an exhibition of items from the collection of the Bishopsgate Institute at the Barbican Centre in the spring of 2022. Whilst this can be seen as an example of the representational LGBTQ+ themed project I have reservations towards, I will highlight glimmers of queerness within it which indicate a tentative move towards the alternative that I am trying to speed along. I will also bring in other examples which can provide a foil, either being a clearer illustration of the problematic status quo, or of its potential alternative.

Adam Zmith, writing about an alternative to the dominant definition of sex, called for it to be 'fun, fearless, feeling and queer. Any sex coming close to these is something to desire.'¹⁵ This dissertation aims to envisage a fun, fearless, feeling and queer form of curating.

¹⁵ Deep Sniff, p.77.

you're such a rush, the rush is never-ending': poppers as temporal strategy¹⁶

As mentioned above, an issue with many LGBT+ projects has been their reliance on straight understandings of time, meaning both heterosexual and linear. Projects which track the work made by LGBT+ people over time often present an idea of progress having been made, a notion that is problematic for a number of reasons. One such example is Tate's *Queer British Art 1861-1967* exhibition which took place in 2017. Not only was the show's timing linked to the 50th anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK, the show's remit was also defined by this historical moment alongside the abolition of the death penalty for homosexuality in 1861. The works exhibited often did not address either moment and included personal, romantic and existential themes which bore little relation to these moments. Nevertheless, the work of these queer artists became defined by landmarks of oppression. Though celebrating queer art, the Tate did not feel able to leave out the history of oppression queers have faced, even if it was aiming to show the strides that have been made since. To show how far we have come, 'progress' requires our past to be filled with pain and oppression, the necessary foil to the freedom we have come to enjoy today. This continues to connect us to pain, even if we have supposedly moved on from it. Meanwhile the concept of progress still centres cishetermnormativity, which is both what has granted us progress and the yardstick by which our liberation is measured against. Linear temporality within the curatorial therefore not only maintains our status as other, it upholds straightness as a goal that we should aspire to reach, or indeed have now reached. Such a convention can only show (how far we've come) but not do (because, if we have come so far, what else could we want to do in the future). The temporal approaches of straight curating therefore struggle to capture queer experiences without foregrounding comparisons with straightness and narratives of pain. To be able to move beyond this, curation may instead look to methods of queering curatorial temporality, ones where joy in the present take priority over history.

To do so, this chapter will examine the ways in which pleasure has been derived from the sniffing of poppers. I will examine the potential that poppers hold to disrupt what Elizabeth Freeman has termed 'straight time' and bring in Adam Zmith's *Deep Sniff* into conversation with the pre-figurative politics of Rebecca Coleman's *Glitterworlds: The Future Politics of a Ubiquitous Thing*.¹⁷ I will set out how achieving a rush in the present, whether through a

¹⁶ Kylie Minogue, *WOW* (London: Parlophone, 2007) <<https://open.spotify.com/track/7xjut3yY1qOBy5Fi1egX0i>> [accessed 24 August 2022].

¹⁷ Rebecca Coleman, *Glitterworlds: The Future Politics of a Ubiquitous Thing* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020).

small glass bottle or a large white cube can articulate, and in doing so create, a better future.

Though they can be used in a range of ways, what all uses of poppers share is the way they provide their user, whether alone, with a partner(s) or in a crowd, a rush of pleasure that is both fleeting and relatively consequence-free. Unlike hard drugs, alcohol or relationships, poppers do not ‘hang over,’ there is no risk of them leaving a lasting remnant beyond the momentary pleasure they experience. Poppers act in the present, impacting the current moment regardless of what has preceded it and not determining what happens after this moment: ‘sniffing poppers can make you feel like the moment you are living in is better.’¹⁸ They are an articulation of a present that is detached from its past and future.

In this sense, a poppers hit rejects the temporal regulation of a linear, heteronormative understanding of time that, in its emphasis on reproduction, situates the present as tied to the past (ancestry) and the future as something which can only be engaged with through birthing a new generation. Poppers provide a potential alternative queered temporality, ‘a modality of ecstatic time,’ unmoored from the weight of that which has already happened and that which is yet to come.¹⁹ The rush is a form of Elizabeth Freeman’s ‘temporal drag’²⁰ in which ‘erotic relations and the bodily acts that sustain them gum up the works of the normative structures we call family and nation, gender, race, class, and sexual identity, by changing tempos, by remixing memory and desire, by recapturing excess.’²¹ In the space freed up by these now gummed up normative structures, ‘queer subcultures [can] produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.’²²

This is why poppers, and other acts which can pleasurably inhabit the present are potent. Seemingly counterintuitively, embracing a rush of pleasure in the present opens up better futures. Zmith writes that such a sensation of queer pleasure ‘feels like grabbing something from the future, grabbing a few seconds of who we want to be. We become our potential. No suffering, only pleasure.’²³ In doing so, he draws on José Esteban Muñoz’s work on

¹⁸ Zmith, p.96.

¹⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism’, in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* ed. by George E. Haggerty & Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp.452-463 (p.461).

²⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds*, p.62.

²¹ Ibid. p.173.

²² Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place*, p.2.

²³ Zmith, p.19.

queer utopias. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz calls on readers to,

strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there* ... we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately, new worlds.²⁴

Pushing against a straight time which tells us the future is not to be engaged or imagined in the here and now, even a momentary articulation of the future that can be felt and lived is a subversive act. The sensation they provide is 'essentially the future you hope for,' begging us to ask 'why can't it always be like this?'²⁵ Poppers allow us to find and feel our own utopia, rather than parity with straightness. In Muñoz's phrasing, an act such as enjoying poppers contains within it 'an anticipatory illumination of a queer world,' in that the construction of the future is made possible by experiencing and articulating that future in the present, illuminating what it is that is to be anticipated.²⁶

Understanding the use of poppers as a queer pre-figurative practice brings its relevance to the curatorial to the fore. Like poppers, a curatorial project provides a suspension of the here and now, inviting us to inhabit a time and space which contains an alternative set of relations: between one another; between objects and works; between ideas. As with poppers, it is understood that such a suspension is fleeting and that one cannot occupy it permanently. Jean-Paul Martinon's situating of the curatorial as something that 'always takes place in the middle, between promise ... on an indefinite but finite horizon,' places it within a similarly queer temporal position as Zmuth's situating of poppers.²⁷ There is every reason therefore to utilise the experience of the curatorial in the same manner as the experience of poppers, in which 'the ends do not necessarily come after the means but that the means create the ends now.'²⁸ Instead of being limited to creating narratives around what has already taken place, the curator can pre-figure a better future as their work 'articulates itself by always rendering the future always more futural, to futurize it so that it becomes not delusional or utopian, but radical.'²⁹ The curatorial is 'not so concerned with

²⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2009) p.1.

²⁵ Zmuth, p.96.

²⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising*, p.49.

²⁷ Jean-Paul Martinon, 'Theses in the Philosophy of Curating', in *The Philosophy of the Curatorial*, ed. by Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.25-33 (p.29).

²⁸ Coleman, p.142.

²⁹ Martinon, p.28

“awaiting their right time and space” then but with creating that preferred time and space in the present.’³⁰

While the rush-like temporary experience of a curatorial space can be had in any project, there are concrete ways in which curators are able to further emphasise their work’s futurity, its ability to serve not so much as a ‘Museum Yet-to-Come’ but as a museum *of* the yet-to-come.³¹ There is no reason for the job of the curatorial to end with the present, especially once it is no longer tethered to a need to represent. Instead of presenting linear narratives of progress, it can set out an alternative temporal dynamic that pushes out into the future, taking with it what is felt to be worth keeping from the past and present and leaving the rest behind.

In practice, this can be achieved through even simple choices, as an analysis of *Out and About!* will demonstrate. The exhibition took place in the Barbican’s Curve gallery space



Fig. 1 Detail of club flyers display. Photograph author's own.

³⁰ Coleman, p.142.

³¹ Pablo Martínez, 'Fail Better – Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come,' *Kunsthalle Wien*, 2020, <<https://kunsthallewien.at/en/pablo-martinez-fail-better-notes-for-a-museum-yet-to-come>> [accessed 14 October 2022].

and featured material from various collections held by the Bishopsgate Institute relating to LGBT+ movements, ranging from performance footage to protest literature. Works were not presented chronologically but in loose themes, with material about specific LGBT+ groups presented together. Given the exhibition was a historical archive display, it is notable that the presentation of works was not in any form of chronological order. This was highlighted upon entry when one of the first things a visitor encountered was a table covered with a collage of overlapping flyers and posters for queer nightlife (Fig.1). The events this material was advertising spanned from the 1970s onwards, but the presentation of the material made no attempt to distinguish a flyer by its age. As such, the large, centrally-situated table created a strong affective response wherein the flyers, ironically all originally intended to communicate events on specific dates, were now stripped of their temporalities and converged together. A sense was created that all these events could happen simultaneously and indeed that they were doing so. The presentation of these objects recontextualised them, from a world in which queer nightlife and its spaces are marginal, threatened and shrinking to a cacophonous coexistence. The 70s were not further behind than the 00s in this display as it did not present these periods in relation to one another but used them together to realize a world where they converged. The curatorial gave us a glimpse of a world in which British queer nightlife flourished, with new venues and nights adding to established ones, rather than filling the gaps they left when they almost invariably shut. By collapsing the rigidity of straight chronology, the collage of nightlife articulated a radically rich, vibrant future.

Such an atemporal approach was present in other displays in *Out and About* too. A screen played footage of a performance by the performer Zsarday from the late 1980s which was spliced together with footage of a re-enactment of that performance by Travis Alabanza in 2016. Here too, as with the club flyers, no distinction was made between different times, with the label noting the different dates and sources of footage, but not specifying how they should be understood in relation to one another. Alabanza, in recreating Zsarday's performance, was attempting to uncover a history of black trans performance and record it. *Out and About!* was able to momentarily achieve precisely what Alabanza had set out to do – Zsarday's performance was no longer shown as a 'marginal' or 'undiscovered' act but was simply presented as any other object in the show, thereby giving a visitor a glimpse of a world in which a black trans performer was known and presented without needing to be historically contextualised.

A more linear representation of these two works would have played into the notion that LGBT+ performers of colour were beginning from a position of marginality or otherness.

Even if it had then gone on to show the more positive reception Alabanza's more recent re-enactment had, the shadow of the past would have lingered. An explanation would have had to set out how this positive reception was notable as in the past, it would have been a markedly different situation. Whereas straight work, when presented in a straight context, is unburdened by a history of marginalisation, the same luxury could not be afforded to queer work such as Alabanza's. Even if it was celebrated in the present, it would have to be set out that this celebration is not lasting, and has not always been present. Parity with straight work would still be marked by the fact that this parity had not been present in the past, continuing the idea that our work needs to be understood and appreciated in relation to straightness. Instead, in *Out and About!*, the curatorial used its ability to break with the world around it to present both works, unburdened by any marginalisation that Zsarday and Alabanza's work had, or has received. In doing so, it hinted at a state, a state yet to come, where these works and their creators were truly unhindered from straightness, not just in the sense of achieving parity with it, but from the need to even compare themselves to straightness at all. *Out and About!* took the opportunity to complete Alabanza's work, articulating a future in which Zsarday, and Alabanza themselves, are simply practitioners and no longer labelled as 'marginalised' or 'underrepresented'. In envisioning this future, it also brought it closer to being by giving these black trans performers prominence within a mainstream public institution such as the Barbican.

These examples show how *Out and About!* embraced the futurity of the space of the curatorial, temporarily reshaping the temporal relations between objects and audiences to envisage a different, more pleasurable future. In Muñoz's words, it gave visitors the opportunity 'to think and feel a *then and there*' and in doing so, however briefly, it pre-figured and made concrete that then and there.³² Now that the rush of a better future could be felt, thought and seen, however briefly, that future feels a little closer on the horizon.

The future-leanings of *Out and About!* were present in some other areas too, however I do not want to argue that the exhibition was an exemplary model of the curatorial-as-poppers, partly due to its remit as an archival show and one using an existing collection, limiting the potential for things such as new commissions. However, even within these confines, *Out and About!* was able to queerly hint at a better future and this is why I believe the project was worth evaluating in this context. That even a historical exhibition, which should be backwards-looking to some extent, could move beyond a simple linear conception of progress and articulate a queer future should, I hope, demonstrate that it is the

³² Muñoz, *Cruising*, p.1.

‘fundamental contemporaneity that defines the cultural practice of exhibiting’ that contains this potential to build a better future, not just specific thematics within it.³³ The next chapter will go on to identify what the materials with which this future can be articulated with may consist of and how their value should be understood.

³³ Mieke Bal, *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), p.19.

‘pop culture was in art, now art’s in pop culture, in me’: disidentificatory practices³⁴

Having identified how the curatorial can be used to disrupt temporality and pre-figure a better future, this chapter will examine the materials with which that future may be constructed and how they may be differently valued. An exhibition such as *Queer British Art* was advocating for its artists using the claim that they were just as worthy of a spot in the canon of art history as their straight counterparts. As such, the show (mostly) featured material that may have already been typically represented in museum collections. It is the case however, that not only does much queer work not meet the requirements of that canon, but many queers find value in other metrics, ones which do not conform to straight curatorial conventions. Nightlife is a deliberately ephemeral event, lacking a lasting legacy and drag acts often embrace a cheap and tacky look. It is notable that these practices were not included in *Queer British Art*, despite being queer art practices. Instead, the show featured paintings, sculptures and works on paper for the most part, media which do fit within straight curatorial value systems.

The aim of that show, and others like it, was to demonstrate that LGBT+ people have made things that straight notions of worth would find valuable but they did not call into question why those things are afforded value and others are not.³⁵ Conventional factors such as market value, provenance, age and condition were still considered, only now to objects related to queer people. In essence, whilst concerned with LGBT+ representations, they retained a cisheteronormativity, adherence to which being the measure with which they advocated for their own value. This can only take us so far – at best we can reach a state where we are just as valuable as straight culture when viewed through straight eyes. Given that straight cultural production is not the utopia we seek to reach however, to go beyond this, it becomes necessary to redefine what materials we value and how we value them, and work from these questions to select the material that is used within the curatorial.

Whilst utopia may sound fantastical, I will argue that any future should be one that we can envisage ourselves living in and that, following Muñoz, ‘utopia exists in the quotidian’.³⁶ The connection between a utopian future and our present can be formed using existing material. It is not that new forms of material need to be created (that mimic straight objects of value) but new forms of valuing and status which can unlock existing material. Following,

³⁴ Lady Gaga, *Applause* (Santa Monica: Interscope, 2013) <<https://open.spotify.com/track/63LAR8TGAGvpfLLM8Z1weo?si=62efa95c107c4fd2>> [accessed 31 August 2022].

³⁵ These other shows include the Hayward Gallery’s *Kiss My Genders* in 2019 and the British Museum’s *Desire, Love Identity: Exploring LGBTQ Histories* in 2017.

³⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising*, p.9.

Muñoz, I will show how disidentificatory practices of pleasure, and camp in particular, can provide a framework of how to do so, through their performative adoption and co-option of aspects of a dominant culture in order to bring joy to a minoritarian culture.³⁷ The curatorial, as I will demonstrate, contains the potential for a similar camp theatricality, which performs cultural material in an alternative way to its original context even just for an ephemeral moment.³⁸

Susan Sontag's definition of camp is useful in unpacking this queer practice. She writes that 'all camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice' and therefore 'to perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-playing-a-Role.'³⁹ She goes on to elaborate how the camp embrace of artifice can create 'a double interpretation: gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders ... Behind the "straight" public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing'.⁴⁰ However, Sontag fails to identify the political potential of such an act, writing 'it goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticised – or at least apolitical'.⁴¹ Ann Pellegrini rejects this notion, and also Sontag's claim that camp and queerness are disconnected, noting that whilst camp is not inherently radical, it can be when used to queer ends writing 'When Sontag de- gays camp, she denies a precious form of queer resilience, imagination, and, I want to urge, "moral seriousness" in the face of vulnerability'.⁴²

When camp's embrace of artifice is used not to disconnect from the politics of the present, but to connect to a different politics, it becomes 'both "anticipatory," in its ability to imagine different social worlds, and a form of historical memory, in its wilful retention of despised or devalued love objects'.⁴³ When used not to reinforce cultural norms 'as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be "cited," twisted, queered', camp takes on a political power.⁴⁴ This specific application of a queer, camp tendency is encapsulated in Muñoz's definition of disidentification in which he writes that 'Disidentification is this "making over": it is the way a subject looks at an image that has been constructed to exploit and deny identity and instead finds pleasure, both erotic and self-affirming'.⁴⁵ This approach allows

³⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (London: Penguin, 1966/2018), pp.8-9.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 13.

⁴¹ Ibid. p 5.

⁴² Ann Pellegrini, 'Future notes on Camp', in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* ed. by George E. Haggerty & Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 168-193 (p.174).

⁴³ Ibid. p. 184.

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, (London: Routledge, 1993/2011), p.181.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p.72.

for pleasure, often denied, to be found in existing materials whose value has not been acknowledged in this manner by majoritarian cultures.

Such a disidentificatory approach is what provides a connection to the curatorial. The act of selecting and re-valuing found material to serve a specific aim and audience is both queer and curatorial. 'From the margins, queers have picked those things that could work for them and recoded them, rewritten their meanings, opening up the possibility of viral reinsertion into the body of general discourse ... left without cultural vehicles, they have hijacked somebody else's.'⁴⁶ Very similarly, the curatorial can also 'be a form of jailbreaking ... one can coax a work out of its accustomed frame, provoke a situation into yielding results other than what its authors, actors and agents intended'.⁴⁷ When combined with camp's irreverence of established value structures, this act of jailbreaking can make the curatorial into a performative space where materials, narratives and status are not constructed but instead where existing concepts are recontextualised and restaged.

In practice, this camp restaging can be achieved through bringing material that has been overlooked by conventional value structures, especially ephemera, into the curatorial space. *Out and About!* attempted such a strategy although as I will go on to show with the comparison to the 2014 show *Ephemera as Evidence*, there was scope for it to have gone further.



Fig. 2 Black Lesbians & Gays Fight Back! Posters. Photograph author's own.

⁴⁶ Nayland Blake, 'Curating "In a Different Light"', in *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by David J. Getsy (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1995/2016), pp. 120-121 (p.120).

⁴⁷ Raqs Media Collective, 'On the Curatorial, From the Trapeze', in *The Philosophy of the Curatorial*, ed. by Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.17-23 (pp.21-22).

The use of ephemeral material was central to the Barbican show, with badges, pins and posters from various pride marches and protests exhibited. This is in addition to the club flyers discussed in the previous chapter. These objects, by nature of the fact that they were tied to a specific (and long-passed) event and were printed on cheap paper in a single colour, had not been intended to provide much in the way of value in the long term. Nor were they made to be especially artistically valuable as queer ephemera does 'not seek to join the art world.'⁴⁸ Thus, now that the moment in which the objects' meaning had passed, they were no longer fulfilling a role and could be appropriated by the curators to make their own argument in a way that less ephemeral material that was intended to be preserved and referenced in the future could not. Flyers, such as those shown in Fig. 2 by Black Lesbians & Gays Fight Back! were able to be viewed through a camp lens, that is, as an aesthetic object appreciated separate to any original meaning behind it. An object such as the 'Asian Lesbians Growing Strong!' poster, whilst initially made in response to a specific situation at a specific moment was here stripped of that original specificity and can instead be read as a declaration being made by the curators in the present, declaring that Asian lesbians are currently growing strong. In this sense, the material was activated as it was not merely representing a historical moment, it was currently being used to engage with the present (and through the use of the gerund, the future).

The use of materials such as this, which were not intended to be preserved until today and which therefore do not hold their own message for a contemporary viewer allowed the curators to sympathetically hijack them, using archival material that viewers may already have been familiar with and have encountered, but staging them differently to bring out the value they hold, to create their own meaning in the present, with ephemera being especially ripe for this camp strategy. It is in essence, a rejection of canonical notions of value, understanding the curatorial as a site where value can be presented from scratch rather than one which relies on preconceived definitions of value or canonicity. Whilst the museum has found new forms of valuing previously overlooked objects, this has simply inverted what types of material are valued, not how this value is generated and operates.⁴⁹ Camp curatorial practice holds the potential to go further, creating new ways of engaging with value and objects which are deemed valuable.

In *Out and About!* such an approach relied on the objects displayed, perhaps counterintuitively, not being treated with much reverence and the exhibition design supported this to a large extent. The space was partitioned using cheap, thin fabrics in

⁴⁸ Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, 'Swishing: Queer Curating in the Heart of Europe', *OnCurating* 37 (2018), pp.73-83.

⁴⁹ Boris Groys, *On the New* (London: Verso, 2014).

jarring colours including bright yellow and plaid. The visible constructed-ness of the space worked in a manner antithetical to a typical white cube (and indeed, the exhibition was in the Barbican's Curve space which is not typically configured as a white cube to begin with), creating a theatricality that made clear that the objects visitors could see had been staged and configured in a specific context to give them the significance that they had. This Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, rather than imbuing the objects in the show with any innate value, emphasised the act of staging, with how the material had been used being presented as the source of the project's argument. In this way, the exhibition reused, restaged, existing material from the everyday world in a new, theatrical context to construct its own meaning.

These attempts to deconstruct the space of the exhibition as sacred or as being detached from the everyday outside it was further explored through an interdisciplinary and intertextual approach that referenced cultural material that existed in the world at large outside the exhibition itself. The public programme included a screening of *The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex*, a 1992 documentary that was screened in one of the Barbican's cinema screens.⁵⁰ Similarly, the exhibition was accompanied by a Spotify playlist featuring 40 pop songs, with one track from each year that the exhibition was covering.⁵¹ While creating an accompanying playlist or programming a related screening are not particularly unusual moves, my aim is to show how these already existing strategies can be used to queer ends. In particular, this can be done through creating a curatorial argument and identity through the appropriation of popular, accessible culture, without that cultural material necessarily even needing to be literally owned or presented to achieve this.

One can take this camp approach far further than *Out and About!* did and an example of this can be seen in *Ephemera as Evidence*, an exhibition organised by Visual Aids in New York in 2014. As the title suggests, the show's rationale explicitly involved harnessing material which 'leave traces outside of the more canonized forms of documentation and record keeping' and in doing so 'help to challenge notions of inauthenticity often associated with the ephemeral, not merely using traces to reconstruct a past but also to imagine pasts or futures both longed for and lost.'⁵² Such an approach marked a departure from

⁵⁰ Barbican Centre, 'The Gay Man's Guide to Safer Sex (18) + ScreenTalk with executive producer Tony Carne and Terrence Higgins Trust Campaigns Director Richard Angell', *Barbican*, 2022
<<https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2022/event/the-gay-mans-guide-to-safer-sex>> [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁵¹ Barbican Centre, 'Out and About!: 40 Years of LGBTQ+ bangers', *Spotify*, 2022
<<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5Ugl06X2DO3vj2lDTjHNHY?si=99debc3a18424eb7&nd=1>> [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁵² Joshua Rubin-Levy & Ricardo Montez, 'Curatorial Statement,' in *Ephemera as Evidence*, (New York: Visual Aids, 2014), pp.8-12 (pp.11-12).

traditional notions of value, acknowledging that the contents in the show lacked many typical criteria used by straight curating such as surrounding documentation, universal appeal and ability to be conserved but could still be presented as valuable through a performative context. Many of the works on display, especially when contextualised within this rationale can be read as attempts, often futile, to capture something which cannot be presented in the gallery space, with the curators embracing the inadequacy of these attempts rather than dismissing them.

Such works included Jack Waters & Peter Cramer's *A La Recherche du Temps Trouvé*, an ongoing research project that was presented as both a work and as its own documentary archive or Vincent Chevalier's *Places Where I've Fuck'd* series of Google Street view screengrabs, which show what their title suggests while also lacking any hint of sexual activity through the web engine's sterile, anonymising service. Such works, both contemporary, went against much curatorial orthodoxy of value. Neither complete, nor technically complex nor even historical (as the ephemera in *Out and About!* was) these works would not typically be considered valuable yet here they were not only included within the curatorial, but the very qualities that would often lead to them being overlooked was precisely what made them worth including. This approach evidenced a camp, performative approach to the curatorial, one which did not present material based on preconceived notions of their value to an audience, but that understood that any material, if put on the right stage and used for the right role, can be worthy and useful in a curatorial context.

From such approaches, a tentative model of a disidentificatory curatorial practice can be built, a practice that acknowledges the theatricality inherent to the curatorial and liberates it, understanding its stage as one in which cultural codes do not need to be reinforced but can also be rewritten to serve a minoritarian purpose.

‘hey i just met you and this is crazy’: encounter and ephemerality in the act of cruising⁵³

The previous chapters have set out the potential of the curatorial to engage the future and what materials may be used to do so. In part, the arguments made so far have relied on the notion of the ‘curatorial’ as a space, both physical and conceptual, which is distinct from the world around it. The question that arises is if, as the previous chapters have argued, queer pleasurable curating can be fleeting and use material that is already out in the world, what structures can accommodate such a practice when much of its essence is fluid and resists structuring? More specifically, can existing institutions, which have adopted the normative politics of representation and value critiqued above become a space where this alternative curating can come to inhabit or does this alternative practice necessitate alternative institutions? I will argue that the current operation of institutionality relies on maintaining the status of a definitive, authoritative voice and uses permanence (in space and throughout the years) to do so which makes it difficult for it to accommodate open, future-leaning and ephemeral projects such as those that have been discussed thus far. The attempts to bring in formerly-excluded perspectives into the curatorial without challenging the systems that have enacted this exclusion still leaves the space open for even more marginalised perspectives to still be excluded. Instead, institutions could change their understanding of their own position, becoming advocates for a specific position in a specific moment as part of a wider, open discourse, rather than aiming to be all-inclusive and authoritative.

Even newly-formed, intentionally queer institutions can perpetuate such an issue when they define queerness solely as an identity to be represented rather than a practice to be enacted. This can be seen with Queer Britain, a newly-opened permanent space that is billed as the UK’s first permanent LGBTQ+ museum. In its attempt to validate LGBTQ+ culture through traditional curatorial and cultural strategies, Queer Britain has fallen into conventional representational politics and a number of traditional modes of institutional practice in lieu of asking what form of institution, if any, can accommodate queerness and not just materials produced by queer acts.⁵⁴

The issue with such an approach can be unpacked by looking at fact that the institution markets as the first of its kind. To indulge in some linguistic analysis, the emphasis on being the first (and for now the only) of its kind hints at a desire to be seen as a singular, and therefore definitive authority within the LGBTQ+ museum world. Yet given the museum’s finite resources, this notion of singularity needs challenging. What are the implications for material

⁵³ Carly Rae Jepsen, *Call Me Maybe* (Vancouver: 604 Records, 2011) <<https://open.spotify.com/track/13F3IAiYW3M1ZCS6nVaU4E?autoplay=true>> [accessed 20 October 2022].

⁵⁴ Benoît Loiseau, ‘The ‘Museumification’ of Queerness’, *ArtReview*, 2022, <<https://artreview.com/the-museumification-of-queerness-queer-britain-queercircle/>> [accessed 1 November 2022].

not held by the museum or positions not represented by its collection? It is true that everything in the collection is connected to queer people in some way, but the entirety of queerness is obviously not encompassed by the objects in a single building in Kings Cross. It can be a museum of LGBT+ culture, but by emphasising its singularity, it attempts to become *the* museum of LGBT+ culture, inevitably reproducing the exclusion of traditional museums, wherein all positions not represented in the museum are seen as not worthy of study. Queer Britain, in positioning itself as *the* LGBT+ institution of the UK, is suggesting that the perspectives it does not contain are therefore either not sufficiently queer or sufficiently valuable to be there. Queer Britain's positioning as a singular institution means it falls into the role of demarcating, defining and ultimately representing queerness into a single site and position, an act that is ultimately impossible given the contradictions and fluidity of queerness. Instead of presenting a selection of work and articulating a single position within a discourse, it aims to present the entire discussion, a task which sets the museum up to fall short. It is for this reason that the desire to somehow validate queerness by presenting it within an institutional context 'should be scrutinised, for its promise of legitimacy often comes at the cost of normalisation.'⁵⁵

This chapter will propose that more suitable notions of space and institutionality can be found in cruising and its spaces, designated or otherwise. With an often-necessary ability to adapt, exist covertly and re-emerge in new contexts, sites of cruising have become institutions, allowing a community to be formed around them, while being nimble enough to stay relevant as the world around them changes. Their focus on the encounter and their permanently impermanent state provides a model for the curatorial to adopt.

Cruising 'might originate in sustained mutual glances - in the street, in front of a shop window, at a urinal, at a bar - and could lead (though not always) to conversation and sex.'⁵⁶ What ties these sites of cruising together is their shared embrace of the encounter. The covert, often-criminalised nature of cruising or just the simple reluctance of discussing sex out in the open, has not typically encouraged cruisers to be visible. Even the most intimate encounter can abruptly dissolve upon hearing a stranger nearby. As a result, even though some sites may have a small audience, many of whom visit regularly, a sense of anonymity and unpredictability remains and a community in the typical sense of the word does not form. As Jeremy Atherton Lin recalls,

The commonality I experienced at the G&D [The George and Dragon, a famous east London gay bar], or in any given bar is tenuous and fleeting. ... Gay bars

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gregory Salter, *Art and Masculinity in Post-War Britain: Reconstructing Home* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p.65.

require strangers, a constant influx of immigrants, whose presence foreshadows the next morning's regret.⁵⁷

Gay bars and other cruising sites become an 'alchemic blend of secrecy, hedonism, the unexpected.'⁵⁸ Alex Espinoza writes that 'Cruising happens in an instant, capturing a sudden opportunity that could never be planned.'⁵⁹ Despite visiting the same site, seeking the same thing, an unpredictability remains central to the nature, and arguably the appeal, of cruising. This unpredictability and ephemerality in cruising's audiences also leads to the physical sites of cruising themselves taking on these characteristics. Gayle Rubin sums it up when she writes 'Any gay bar is living on borrowed time, and neither the owners nor clientele can count on permanence.'⁶⁰ Such transience applies just as much, if not more so, to spaces which are not explicitly queer, but which have been 'selected'⁶¹ and queered through a 'deformation, subversion and appropriation of space.'⁶²

Yet despite the transience of cruising sites and their audiences, the fleeting, anonymous encounters in spaces which themselves may not exist in just a few months time, cruising continues. The practice, conducted through unwritten social signs and conventions, glances and brushes of contact is an institution that is not anchored to a specific site or an audience. For as long as there is a desire for these encounters, the institution of cruising will exist and find a way to exist in a space where it can be accessed and reach an audience who are seeking it out, even if these spaces shift continually and the audience do not recognise themselves or each other as such. An illustration of this is the Caminito Verde, an open space on the edge of Mexico City where cruising spots have emerged, been shut down and then re-emerged, making it,

A nomadic site. A public place of intimacy. A space whose flourishing leads to its inevitable demise and yet whose downfall always leads to its re-emergence in a perpetual and seamless loop of use, discovery, institutional annihilation and pleasurable regrowth.'⁶³

As cruisers move and change, the spaces that serve them can follow: 'Queer space comes and goes,' and pops up wherever and whenever it is desired as 'any space can be turned

⁵⁷ Atherton Lin, *Gay Bar*, p.240.

⁵⁸ Amelia Abraham, *Queer Intentions: A (Personal) Journey Through LGBTQ+ Culture* (London: Picador, 2022), p.99.

⁵⁹ Espinoza, *Cruising*, p.52.

⁶⁰ Gayle Rubin, 'Studying Sexual Subcultures: Excavating the Ethnography of Gay Communities in Urban North America', in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp.310-346 (p.342).

⁶¹ *Gay Bar*, p.5.

⁶² Elizabeth Darling, 'The Cave of Harmony', in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* ed. by Adam Nathaniel Furman & Joshua Mardell (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022), pp.74-75 (p.74).

⁶³ Sergio Galaz García, 'Caminito Verde', in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* ed. by Adam Nathaniel Furman & Joshua Mardell (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022), pp. 168-171 (p.168).

queer.’⁶⁴ Cruising is an institution without a permanent site or audience but an institution all the same, it is a queer institution in that its presence ‘is always on the horizon.’⁶⁵

Whilst the reasons for cruising being so transient are not by design but rather a necessary response, it does nevertheless provide a model of institutional flexibility that the curatorial can adapt. The fluidity and anonymity of cruising creates a ‘constant flow’ that means the spaces of cruising are ‘constantly being repurposed and reimagined so that they remain caught in a constant cycle born not out of stasis but transformation.’⁶⁶ Museums, a number of which have been running for centuries, are a stark contrast to this model of institutional operation. Even though curators may come and go, the need to preserve the museum’s relevance, its authoritative voice, means that, regardless of staff turnover, established practices and ways of thinking persevere.

Out and About! is a useful case to look to illustrate how I envisage this fluid institutional practice operating within the curatorial. The format of the show engaged with this practice to a limited extent, making it possible to compare it to more traditional forms of institutional curation while also allowing us to imagine how it could have gone further. The exhibition was institutional both in the sense that it was hosted at the Barbican, one of the UK’s largest arts centres but also in the fact that the objects on display were part of the collection at the Bishopsgate Institute. The notable aspect of *Out and About!* in relation to cruising comes from the involvement of the Bishopsgate. Whilst the Institute has a small public exhibition and performance space, it is far smaller than what other national collections of roughly equivalent scale have. Instead, what *Out and About!* did was allow the Institute to select and present parts of its collection in an external venue. Rather than the whole Institute needing to try and present a celebration of 50 years of queer culture in its own space that is not suited for large scale exhibitions, it was instead able to pop up at the Barbican. This allowed the selected material to be presented more suitably both in terms of space and audience. Whilst the Bishopsgate has much of the benefits of a more traditional institution, being able to build up and research a large, specialist collection, it operates more flexibly, and can take parts of the collection it has built up back out into the world to meet audiences wherever they may be. The similarity between the institutions of cruising and Bishopsgate are in this flexibility: both hold a body of resources that an audience will be looking for but neither relies on a single permanent physical site to do so and instead pops up wherever its audience are felt

⁶⁴ Olivia Laing, ‘Foreword’, in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* ed. by Adam Nathaniel Furman & Joshua Mardell (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022), pp.VII-IX (pp. VII, IX).

⁶⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising*, p.11.

⁶⁶ Espinoza, *Cruising*, p.158.

to be. Indeed, one could argue that the Barbican estate itself contains some of this within its sprawling, labyrinthine design that lends itself to furtive exploration.

The transitory nature of cruising and how it can be put into practice provides an alternative to straight institutionality. The benefits of traditional institutions, their ability to accrue comprehensive resources and knowledge, can be maintained but within a more fluid, impermanent space. Cruising-as-institution can create queer space, that is, space that 'allows [us] to be in the right relationship with change; that which allows us to move between worlds, to shapeshift, to learn and teach the skills necessary to gestate and conceive our own worlds.'⁶⁷ It is a model for curatorial space that draws on practices of pleasure and in doing so, allows other forms of pleasurable queer practice to better exist (and not just be represented) within it. Whilst *Out and About!* provides a tentative illustration of how this may work, I will end this chapter with the example of Museo Q, a curatorial initiative in Colombia that illustrates how this spatial cruising can be taken further. Whilst being a museum, it holds no permanent space and is instead 'an ever-shifting assemblage of bodies, buildings, spaces and actions.'⁶⁸

In practice this has meant holding weekly gatherings in living rooms, pop ups in botanical gardens, classrooms and pride parades and wherever else it can contribute to, or start, a critical discussion. This mode of operation has allowed it to reflect critically on its position as a museum even as it is still developing with its ongoing *Devenir Queer* [Becoming Queer] project aiming to determine the limits of heritage and what role such a 'rigid, patriarchal and homogenous concept' concept such as heritage can play in a queer practice.⁶⁹ The museum's initial show was held in Bogotá, and is planned to tour to other cities in Colombia however each iteration will consist of entirely new materials and participants. Rather than seeking to set out to a universal institutional authoritativeness across all potential audiences, the museum will re-form itself in each city, understanding that 'living and getting out of the closet in Medellín is not the same as, in Cartagena, Amazonas or Bogotá.'⁷⁰ This understanding of museological curating understands the value of its work as its responsivity to its context, stemming from how the institution can shape itself to the moment, rather than aiming to capture the moment with established institutional practices incapable of doing so. In other words, Museo Q views its value not in its space, collection or audience, all of which

⁶⁷ Ailo Ribas, 'Train Journey between Premía de Mar and Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain', in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* ed. by Adam Nathaniel Furman & Joshua Mardell (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022), pp.2-3 (p.2).

⁶⁸ Michael Andrés Forero Parra, 'Museo Q', in *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* ed. by Adam Nathaniel Furman & Joshua Mardell (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022), pp.198-199 (p.198).

⁶⁹ Museo Q, 'Devenir Queer', *Museo Q* <<https://museoq.org/project/devenir-queer/>> [accessed 23 March 2023].

⁷⁰ Museo Q, '¿Quiénes Somos?', *Museo Q* <<https://museoq.org/quienes-somos/>> [accessed 23 March 2023].

are impermanent, but in the position it takes. 'Reimagining the museum forces us to redraw the geographical boundaries that demarcate institutional origins ... Reimagining the museum demands taking a position, defending a voice and celebrating difference.'⁷¹ An institution such as this which is discursive rather than didactic needs to be open to shifting, reacting to its surroundings while also shaping it through temporal encounters. The lack of permanent space or collection is therefore instrumental to the Museum's ability to position itself in this discursive, response manner. Just as with cruisers looking for illicit encounters in the most public of spaces, Museo Q does not seek to create 'a niche for queer people' or a space to show representations of queerness but instead '*queers* the space of others by being, knowing and doing otherwise.'⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Forero Parra, (p.198).

‘we found love in a hopeless place’: conclusions⁷³

In conducting an application of queer pleasure to the curatorial, the aim of this dissertation has not been to suggest that a curatorial experience should *literally* provide spaces for hooking up or the sniffing of poppers. Whilst those may no doubt enliven some more tedious exhibitions, my concern has been to show how queer pleasure, in its various forms, provides a conceptual model for worldbuilding that can be applied to the curatorial. Faced with a cultural hegemony that rigidly, unimaginatively, excludes queerness, we have turned to fleetingness and fluidity to find ways to build worlds for ourselves in the cracks, worlds which reconfigure the oft-harsh reality of the present into an, if not utopian, at least pleasurable vision of the future. The curatorial, with its temporal incursions into past and future, holds the potential to do the same and doing so will move the field beyond a tired representative regime.

Central to this approach is a rethinking of presence and institutionality. The same conventions and technologies that have given the institution its authority can limit its relevance in a reality that cannot be held within a single authoritative body. Instead, one can look at cruising, and the way these sites of encounter act as a dialectical anti-institution. At once supporting an established audience, they also keep that audience at bay, encouraging encounter, the skin-deep. The spaces themselves contain an internal tension, establishing a presence whilst being aware that this presence will draw the ire of forces that will close them down, be it gentrification or police raids. Sites of cruising therefore become institutions, holding a deep body of resources for their audiences, whilst being far more nimble, able to close down in one place and re-appear elsewhere, constantly adapting to the environment they exist in. Such a nimble, responsive approach to institutionality, if applied to the curatorial holds the potential to reshape relations between the curatorial and its audience. Institutions may become more pluralistic and polyphonous, their authority, as much as any remains, stemming from how they are contributing to a discussion rather than from their permanence. Unburdened by the need to preserve themselves, in a developing culture, they can fade away as their relevance diminishes and they are replaced by other institutions.⁷⁴

This momentariness is not to undermine the lasting impact that a queer, pleasurable form of the curatorial can have. As demonstrated in the first chapter, the all-encompassing, un-

⁷³ Rihanna & Calvin Harris, *We Found Love* (New York: Def Jam, 2011)
<<https://open.spotify.com/track/6cZqFT5RanA70lmN9wuWzB?autoplay=true>> [accessed 6 September 2022].

⁷⁴ Such a flourishing curatorial ecosystem is, I am aware, utopian. As it stands, if a major institution was to close its doors, it most likely would simply not be replaced by anything at all.

anchoring pleasure of a poppers-esque rush can overcome its all-so-fleeting duration. If even for a brief moment, the curatorial is able to illustrate an image of a world that is so pleasurable, so unlike what we know in the present, it can expand what is understood to be imaginable and possible. A spark of utopia in the present can not only inspire us to build it in the future, it can be the first step in constructing it.

These may be grand-sounding ideas but they are hardly far from home. The potential for pleasure, and for utopia, is clear within the everyday. The shimmer of a south London drag queen's velvet-imitation dress or the lyrics of the Britney Spears song she is singing both contain a sense of the ridiculous – of being artificially earnest, vigorously performing something and embracing the theatricality. The queer approach to staging material has thrived on this tension, scavenging for that which has been made to perform and scrambling its lines, giving the performer-object an entirely different role to play on an entirely different stage of value. By taking overlooked materials from the world around us and restaging them, queer aesthetics has been able to create visions of entirely different, more enjoyable worlds, but illustrated them with the familiar, allowing us to be able to conceive of how we may come to construct and inhabit those worlds. The curatorial too has this potential, should it want to use it. A curator who exploits their role as scenographer, can take audiences to entirely new worlds, paradoxically, by using more material from this world, especially the superficial, the overlooked, the merely 'pretty' in other words, that which has not conventionally been valued.

If anything, this text is a claim to begin to think beyond the heavy, solid, representational discourse of the curatorial, be that a more traditional avant-gardist conceptualism or the more recent emphasis on nurturing, long-term care. It is not to invalidate either approach, but to cheekily hint at an alternative approach that may be better able to achieve the same ends by embracing the superficial, the temporary, the rush, the exhibition-as-gay-club-at-2am. As a bonus, it'll probably be a lot more fun for everyone too.

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Given the nature of queerness and its inherent fluidity, many of the people I will refer to will have identified themselves in different ways at different times. For the sake of consistency, I have referred to everyone using (one of) the names and pronouns which they are currently using. These may not match the ones they used at the time they produced the work which I am referencing and may not match the ones they will go on to use in the future.

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