

# Uneasy Queer Art Histories

Greg Salter (University of Birmingham)

In the UK in 2017, the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales was marked with celebratory media coverage, academic publications, and high-profile exhibitions (including Tate's 'Queer British Art', 'Coming Out' at Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and the National Trust's 'Prejudice and Pride' programme). The presence of queer art histories and queer histories in major museums was framed as reflecting social progress and the increasing cultural acceptance of LGBTQ identities.

While these gains are notable and worth celebrating, wider work in queer theory has begun to seek to address elements of queer histories that have been ignored or forgotten in more recent years. In response, this session focuses on uneasy queer art histories; queer art histories which may be disturbing, disruptive, difficult, disavowed, or rooted in failure. It seeks uneasy queer art histories in response to queer theorist Kadji Amin's call for queer scholars to 'inhabit unease' rather than seeking to avoid it. In addressing what might be uneasy, this session aims to expand and disrupt queer art histories beyond narratives of progress and beyond purely UK or US contexts, and to reflect on how we do queer art histories and queer histories more widely.

## Speakers and Abstracts

### Age Difference Debates and Classical Artefacts: The reception of ancient 'uneasy' queer art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

Jen Grove (University of Exeter)

The imperial Roman silver *skyphos*, known as the Warren Cup, is (questions about its authenticity aside) arguably the most explicit visual depiction we have of men having sex with men from the classical world. Its purchase by the British Museum in 1999 has been viewed as symbolic of a new 21st-century open-mindedness to sexual themes and especially LGBTQ+ histories within the museum sector. It currently features in the BM's 'Desire, love, identity' trail, newly revamped for the 2017 decriminalisation anniversary. However, the BM has not avoided addressing aspects of the cup's imagery that remain 'highly controversial' (Richard Parkinson, *A Little Gay History*, 2013: 51) by today's standards, despite the now legal status of homosexuality in the UK. The cup embodies the acceptability of age-differentiated relationships between men in antiquity, and especially relationships between adult men and teenage boys. This paper will focus on the cup's first modern owner, American collector of antiquities Edward Perry Warren, who amassed a substantial collection of pederastic objects from the ancient world. I explore how such material, together with other ancient art, played a key role as affirmative images in Warren's determination throughout his life to celebrate erotic attraction to young men and boys. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, informed in part by new sexological research, Warren's fellow homophiles and classicists were discussing male–male desire in reference to contemporary fears about the corruption of youth, and examining the ethics of looking back to 'uneasy' aspects of queer Greece and Rome.

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### The 'Coolie Homo/erotic': (Re)Tracing queerness in the archive of indentureship

Amar Wahab (York University, Toronto)

The erotic lifeworld of Indian indentureship remains buried. This visual investigation probes the 'coolie homoerotic' as a creative reflection on the place of the homoerotic and queerness within the trans-oceanic lifeworld of coolie indentureship. It uses the methodology of visual assemblage to creatively and critically engage with a rare (and recently found) archival record of alleged sodomy on a coolie ship, the *Mersey*, bound for British Guiana from Calcutta in 1898. The research explores the archival document, as a residue of homoerotic possibility, to re-trace and deliberately reconfigure the historically present narrative of indentureship through a seven-image collection entitled *Postcards from the Perineum*. In critically

responding to Victorian imagery of moral-labour discipline, the postcards were produced using techniques such as photography, sketching, painting, crafting and body printing. The aim is to visually and imaginatively open up a space for contemplating an aesthetic-eroto-political field of knowledge production in relation to the violence and indignities of indentureship. In doing so, the research also suggests that indentureship is a site of contrapuntal queerness, through which we might critically provoke normative understandings of this term.

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### **Queer Ruskin**

*Thomas Hughes (The Courtauld Institute of Art)*

This paper will consider the unstable status of 'colour' in John Ruskin's art theory to ask whether we can think of Ruskin's studied, strained, peculiar and self-defeating ambivalence as in some way an uneasy or unresolved 'queerness'. In the mid- to late-1850s Ruskin comes close to securing really radical positions on 'colour' but steps back from them. By 'radical' I mean Ruskin puts significant pressure on dominant ways of thinking about 'colour' in the 19th century, about its functions and place in relation to 'drawing'. Ruskin elevates the conventionally subordinate category above 'drawing' only contradictorily to reiterate the pre-eminence of the normally masculine-gendered term. This movement from radical destabilisation to conservative re-entrenchment maps onto Ruskin's arguments about male and female roles around 1860. Ruskin's unwillingness to inhabit the radical is bound up with his unbearable sense of loss amidst ugly 'modernity', his almost-elegiac politics. Strikingly, however, Ruskin does not securely gender 'colour'; in *Modern Painters* volume 5, 'colour' is analogous to 'human sexual love' but this sexual love is not expressed as straightforwardly 'heterosexual'. A whole constellation of younger 'queer' artists and writers, such as C R Ashbee, Walter Pater and Marcel Proust, develop out of Ruskin new and distinct, though undeniably 'Ruskinian', ways of thinking. Focusing on how Pater transforms Ruskin on 'colour' to describe J M Whistler, I will suggest that art history needs to attend to a difficult, loss-obsessed and ultimately highly generative kind of 'queerness' in Ruskin that is lurking underneath more familiar 'queer' art histories.

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### **The Locker Room Project, HIV/AIDS, and the Making of a Global Queer Public Culture in Cape Town**

*Jackson Davidow (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)*

The crumbling of apartheid coincided with not only the invigoration of lesbian and gay organising and visibility, but also the growing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. This paper asserts that the development of a global queer public culture in Cape Town was premised on more than just constitutional freedom. It was also based on the AIDS pandemic – a phenomenon that was regarded as a chief global queer concern by the late 1980s. This paper examines the evolution of the Locker Room Project in December 1994, the first iteration of the Mother City Queer Projects. Originated by two white gay men, artist Andrew Putter and architect André Vorster, as an extravagantly kitsch Gesamtkunstwerk-like one-night party, the Locker Room Project can be credited for popularising the term and notion 'queer' in Cape Town, at least within the art world. Perhaps the largest work of public art in South African history at the time, it was also, crucially, conceived of as a memorial to Vorster's lover Craig Darlow, who died from AIDS complications earlier that year. This paper contends that the pioneering large-scale event both linked local participants and actuated a global queer public culture, in part, through singling out HIV/AIDS. However, it was predominantly – and problematically – white. By grappling with the uneasy alignment of Euro-American queerness with South African whiteness, especially in light of the intensifying AIDS pandemic, this paper reveals how cultural production is a window into the complex post-apartheid entanglements of racial and sexual identities.

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### **Queer Theory's Violence**

*Theo Gordon (University of Sussex)*

Queer theory's attempts to theorise violence through psychoanalysis have hinged on Freudian/Lacanian models of subjectivity. This work, much of which has emerged from the United States through the work of writers such as Leo Bersani, Tim Dean and Lee Edelman, has been keen to observe the death drive in the 'negativity' of sex as a site of nonsovereignty and hence resistance to the violence of the social order.

However, this work fails to explore how, as a discursive field that refuses the 'heteronormative', violence may demark and disrupt queer theory's own parameters and insights.

This paper proposes to explore Jacqueline Rose's 2017 suggestion that 'the ugliest part' of psychoanalysis, its exploration of hatred, destruction and psychic pain, has been left out in queer theory's use of it. Critiquing Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant's discussions of Larry Johnson's *Untitled (Ass)* (2007) and of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013) by returning to Melanie Klein, this paper argues that for queer theory to address violence meaningfully, it must account for its own process of negation and refusal in its use of psychoanalysis, and thereby inhabit the psychic unease that it continually sidesteps. In relation to Edelman and Berlant's work, this process will involve an art historical appreciation of Johnson's images, and recognition of psychoanalytic feminism's sustained interrogation of destructiveness.

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## **The Problem of Race in Contemporary Queer Art from Poland**

*Aleksandra Gajowy (Newcastle University)*

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison asks: 'When does racial 'unconsciousness' or awareness of race enrich interpretative language, and when does it impoverish it?' Introducing the queer context in this debate, Hiram Pérez poses another question in *A Taste for Brown Bodies*: 'Is it even imaginable to think the erotic – and the homoerotic – without contemplating its intercourse with race?' The answer Morrison and Pérez seek – as both non-white and working in the North American context – is further complicated by the Polish context of the almost exclusively white nation, as well as a certain cultural blindspot regarding the narratives of race in the country with no colonial past. A non-white body in a country such as Poland, can be seen as both 'an object of desire and as the repository of disowned projections cast temporally and spatially backward.' (Pérez, 2015) In Karol Radziszewski's video work *Ceremony* (2017), the artist performs an Afro-Brazilian Umbanda ritual in a reparative reading of the AIDS-related traumas. Embodying Indian Shamaness, a character from a Polish queer archive dating back to the 1970s, Radziszewski appears to place the locus of desire outside himself, and the Polishness and whiteness he represents. This paper thus asks what happens when the cultural blindspot present in the country with no colonial past forgoes the complex and violent undertones of the racialised discourses? Is it possible, after Pérez, to begin to think of the (homo)erotic without 'contemplating its intercourse with race?'