

Queering the Museum

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Andy Horn
Exhibitions Manager, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Of chaotic desire and the subversive potential of things

Oliver Winchester
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Queering the Pitch

Matt Smith
Artist and Curator



Civil Partnership
Figure Group

The brides are missing.



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The process by which museums acquire their contents are many and various, the result of thousands of acts of donation and acquisition that happen for a multitude of motives. In the calm atmosphere of gallery displays, whether permanent or temporary, these contents are presented within often simple rationales - a brief history or description - which belies their rich and complex histories. The messiness and diversity of human life can be difficult to represent, and until recently has often been neglected in the agendas of museums which are often seen to present their collections with a single authoritative voice.

Museums are becoming more responsive to their audiences, and particularly to those constituencies of existing and potential visitors who are on their doorstep. As society changes, and has changed, in recent decades, there is a greater recognition of the different needs and interests of audiences; audiences who want greater representation within cultural institutions. As a consequence, museums such as Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, invite people to work with and re-interpret their collections to explore their appeal and meanings to visitors. Artists in particular delight in challenging and subverting the status quo and can have a natural affinity with objects and works of art which provide material for

The Ladies of Llangollen

Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby ran away together from their aristocratic Irish homes in 1778. They set up home together in rural Wales bonded by 'something more tender still than friendship' and lived there together for 51 years.

They attracted the attention of the outside world and visitors to their home at Plas Newydd included the Duke of Wellington, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott.



them to work with, often taking at once both a playful and serious approach to how they engage with collections.

Society has historically placed very different values on the material it chooses to represent and the means by which it does this, whether this is the printed page, a work of art, television or organisations that control these – publisher, gallery or media channel. Objects are made and displayed according to social norms – figurines in heterosexual couples, the lives of artists suppressed in preference to the art historical value of the work, social history collections that respond to the concerns of the day such as rural or trade histories.

Queering the Museum is an opportunity to look at our collections with a fresh eye and explore further the multitude of possible perspectives and readings. As environments that showcase the creativity of others through the displays of fine and applied art, it is important that we continue to work with artists such as Matt Smith in order to communicate the currency of creative practice and the value of what art brings to society.

A Green and Pleasant Land

Forces of Nature

Carnation Cape

Sexual acts between men were illegal in the United Kingdom until 1967. Therefore gay men had to communicate with each other in covert ways to avoid persecution and prosecution.

Green carnations were worn on the lapels of gay men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to signify their homosexuality. They were often worn by Oscar Wilde.

In 1894, Robert Hichens anonymously published the novel 'The Green Carnation'. Based closely on the lives of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, it was used in the prosecution of Wilde during his trial for Gross Indecency. The cape is placed on Epstein's sculpture, 'Lucifer'. 'Lucifer' was sculpted with the body of a man and the face of a woman.



The Pre-Raphaelites

A Tribute to Simeon

Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) and Lord Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) were both painters with links to the Pre-Raphaelites. Both were seen as great talents at the start of their careers.

There are numerous indications that, were they alive today, both men would identify themselves as gay. Solomon had numerous same sex encounters, two of which lead to his arrest in London, and later in Paris. Leighton was much more discrete about any sexual relations he may have had either in England, or in North Africa. Solomon's arrests and the subsequent scandals limited his career. Leighton, in contrast became a pillar of the Victorian arts establishment, was knighted and made a baronet.

The trophy in the cabinet is of a bear playing the part of the tortured Saint Sebastian. It is a small compensation for the difficulties that befell Solomon and a celebration of his living his life regardless of the consequences.



A small informational card with text, likely describing the objects in the display case.

e Birmingham



Drug Jar

The popular willow pattern design tells the story of two lovers who, when put to death, transformed into two doves.

Advances in drug technology have massively increased the life expectancy of people with HIV. Tragically, many people died before the drugs were available. The gay male community was hit particularly hard by the HIV virus.

Over 70,000 people in the UK are currently living with HIV.

Of chaotic desire and the subversive potential of things

Oliver Winchester, V&A

Museums keep our culture safe. Their four walls keep objects that have been selected as historically significant or socially representative secure and hauled up in elegant stasis, protected from physical decay. Once admitted into the museum, objects are kept alive on the vast life support of interpretation, narrative and meaning that the museum machine generates and sustains. Principally organised around a taxonomic categorization of knowledge and its material remains, the museum project 'conjoin[s] multiple experiences of time and space [...] in order to preserve, order, educate and collate.'¹ It is this drive to order that distinguishes a visit to a museum to view objects from a visit to the Bull Ring Shopping Centre to look at commodities. Visitors to museums expect to benefit from time spent there (spent willingly or under duress) and the stories suggested by the displays define the identity of a museum, and in a much broader sense, contribute to and reflect our sense of gender, class, racial, local, national, religious or political identity.

However, this warm and fuzzy communitarian logic conceals the always present fact that museums function through exclusion in order to make sense of the material to hand, separating ideas from the chaos of things. A museum's potential to explain is always based in its ability to focus on a particular set of relations and meanings. In the silence of the museum gallery, the cacophony of potential associations that the exhibits display is suppressed to ensure the communication of a singular, coherent and audible intellectual narrative. Thus the luxury of this authoritative and contemplative educational space is always predicated upon exclusions that may slip into an authoritarian, exclusive or undeniably dismissive mould, intolerant of atypical narratives or unrepresentative stories and ideas.

But of course museums do not stay still in this way and the ideas, narratives and objects that they deem important flow and change with time. Over a long trajectory, museums are far from quiet and they throng with intellectual change and movement. The key to successful museum collection management is to keep pace with society's mores and desires. Exclusions must therefore be considered, rather than arbitrary, and meaningful in their absence, rather than pointed in their denial.

Lesbian, gay, bi and trans experiences and histories are a relatively new area for examination within the museum sector. An area of research currently in its infancy, the telling of such histories - and



Contemplating Mr Buturo

Consensual acts between same-sex adults are criminalised in 80 member states of the United Nations and being charged with homosexuality can result in the death penalty in six of these countries.

In 2009 James Nsaba Buturo, the Ugandan Minister of State for Ethics and Integrity campaigned for the death penalty for gay men. He said of same sex acts: "not even animals do that". These half man-half animal figures are concerned as to their place in this logic.

Mr Buturo has also denounced sub-standard service delivery and the wearing of miniskirts.



Dandies in Love

Civil partnerships have given same-sex couples an opportunity to publicly and legally celebrate their relationships.

Civil partnership photographs have increased the regularity with which lesbian and gay male couples are shown in a positive light.

the methods for so doing - is exciting, complex and difficult: a field littered with political, moral and personal challenges. Any investigation into this area throws up many questions and provides only partial answers. Perhaps the most complex question stems from the inherent contradiction that lies at the centre of the gay liberation movement and its legacy - the desire to eradicate discrimination whilst enshrining difference.

Thus, when sexual identity is discussed with any kind of thoughtful sensitivity beyond that of a simplistic, restrictive trans-historical essentialism, the museum project hits a problem. Many recent exhibitions have sought to address the exclusion of same sex desire from their collections and displays by presenting a series of 'discovered' identities and 'hidden' histories, telling self consciously bright and optimistic narratives that are built upon a retrospective outing of notable men and women of the past whose sexual desires could be described as non-normative.

Yet, as is well documented, the crystallisation of homosexuality as an identity rather than a set of activities occurred only towards the end of the nineteenth century and the simultaneous medicalisation of desire led to the disregard for, and in many cases wilful persecution of, homosexuals. How then can museums play catch up without producing reductive and overly simplistic stories of gradual transition from repression to liberation over the course of history, a form of telling that fetishises a breaking free from the closet? Desire is chaotic and can not be confined to neat binaries and tidy labels.

Donkey Man

In addition to describing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and activities, 'queer' can also mean odd or unusual.

Most people will experience situations where they are the odd one out. Donkey Man never fits in.



What can be said of the post-op, male-to-female transsexual lesbian for example? How can this radical desire be translated into the museum without a tacit acknowledgement of the gaps, disruptions, fissures and exceptions that such desire inflicts upon the objective museum system? How can museums engage with this messier, more confusing, far more chaotic queer reality?

Queering the Museum by Matt Smith is a deliberate act of wilful confusion and disorder, a rummaging through the museum dress up box to see just what we might be missing. Consisting of a series of calculated and provocative additions, amendments and small changes to the gallery displays and sealed vitrines of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, each change that Matt has made - each object that Matt has inserted, moved or recontextualised and that now patiently lurks around the corner of each successive gallery space for the visitor - is intended to playfully upset the museum applecart, play with visitor expectations, upend the sober, educational and rigid conceptual boundaries that usually constitute a museum display. Matt's interventions confuse and question the conventional narrative of objects on display and thereby undermine the authority of that same system. Matt is messing about with the museum.

The fun Matt has had with the gallery spaces signifies and enables much more than a wry smile or bemused shoulder shrugging. Matt's deliberate provocations and mischievous changes are made from the inside out and counter the typical idea of the museum object as

Fitting In

Unlike ethnic groups, the gay, lesbian and bisexual community does not share visually identifiable characteristics. This has allowed us to hide within the heterosexual population during times of persecution. It also means that we have to actively 'come out', telling family and friends that we are queer.

Drag refuses to fit in and is linked to performance and camp. Drag queens are men dressed as parodies of women, with make up and clothes that few women would wear. Drag kings are women dressed as men, often with extreme masculine looks.

Drag's aims are very different to those of transsexual people. Transsexual people want to live in a different gender to the one they were assigned at birth and generally seek medical interventions to support that.



representative, as standing in for a larger intellectual idea. Rather, what we have here is an exploration of the ways in which meaning is made through relationships, the chatter between objects, and perhaps most importantly the assumptions that we as visitors bring to a gallery space. The baggage that most museum displays attempt to suppress is the very texture of Matt's interventions, the untidy association we may have as visitors Matt welcomes with open arms.

The confused visitor, staring blankly at the garland of green carnations that currently adorns Jakob Epstein's Lucifer, will readily perceive a breakdown of meaning within the museum system. The question is not so much 'what does that mean' as 'why is that there?' In fact if these garlands mean anything the question should read 'what do these garlands here mean to me?' As Bob Mills has noted, in these kinds of circumstances, queerness is less a state-of-object that a position-as-subject, a 'relational concept that comes into view against the backdrop of the normal, the legitimate, the dominant, and the coherent – and it would be precisely the challenge that queer poses to the normative structures of the museum that constitutes its subversive potential'². The museum visitor is thus implicated within the creation of narratives and meaning through the use of jarring, confusing or 'provocative juxtapositions' in a model of active experiential participation. Here the meaning of objects and their display is always an unfinished process and meanings are necessarily provisional, dependant upon the freedom of the visitor to bestow significance upon a chaos of things and the subversive potential of desire. Emphasis is upon the 'provisional and



partial, the ways in which meaning is made and felt by the visitor[...] a multiplicity rather than a single authoritative museum narrative, and the ways in which meaning becomes a process rather than a product, one in which the visitor is wholly implicated.¹

Chaotic? Perhaps.
Subversive? Certainly.

Radical in its embrace of the contingencies of spectatorship as part of the museum's open ended project? Well yes.

But most importantly, go see for yourself.

¹ Mills, R, 'Theorizing the Queer Museum' in *Museums & Social Issues. A Journal of Reflective Discourse. Where is Queer.* Volume 3, Number 1, Spring, 2008. (Michigan State University). p.46

² *Ibid*, p.46

Polari

Polari is a secret gay male vocabulary which was popular in the 1950s and '60s as it allowed same-sex activity to be discussed secretly at a time when being homosexual could lead to imprisonment.

Polari probably developed from Parlyaree, a 19th century slang used by fairground and circus people as well as prostitutes, beggars and buskers. It became widely known when it featured in the 1960s' radio show, 'Round the Horne'. The programme featured Julian and Sandy, two out-of-work actors, who used Polari to say explicit things whilst avoiding the censor's radar.

Polari is seldom used – or arguably needed – today. However, some words live on. Naff, bimbo and camp were all part of the Polari lexicon.

Bona arm: nice penis



Reflection

"Living in a body that did not fit my self-image was like living in a very personal prison".
Lore M Dikey

Few people feel delighted with every part of their body. For some, the sex of the body they inherited at birth and their innate gender do not match at all.

Lore was born with a woman's body, but identified as male. He is now living as a man and has made the decision to have gender confirmation surgery.





Figure of a Youth Cruising

When displaying human figures, there is a tendency to pair up male and female figures into heterosexual couples. Often this is done with no historical evidence that the artist intended this to happen.

The carnation and the handkerchief were both used historically to let other men know you were gay.

WORCESTER PORCELAINS

FIGURE OF A SWISS BOY

French porcelain
Dated 1780-1800
Manufactured in Worcester (1790-1811)

SIMEON SOLOMON (1840-1905)

Bacchus 1867

oil on panel

Solomon was a close friend of Burne-Jones and the poet Swinburne. This is one of Solomon's most celebrated works. **Bacchus** represents the god of wine in classical mythology and was inspired by a portrait by the fifteenth-century Sieneese Renaissance artist Sodoma in the Uffizi, Florence. The art critic, Walter Pater described this picture as an embodiment, not of the joyous Dionysus of the Renaissance, but a melancholy and sorrowing Dionysus-'the god of the bitterness of wine, "of things too sweet"'.

Solomon's sensual but androgynous images can be linked with his own homosexuality. His career collapsed in 1873 when he was convicted of homosexual offences and spent the last twenty years of his life living mainly in a London workhouse.

Bequeathed by Miss K E Lewis, 1961 (P52'61)

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery Label, circa 1990

Queering the Pitch

Matt Smith, Artist and Curator

Queer has a number of meanings. Its primary use in this exhibition is as an inclusive word for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities. However, its dictionary definitions also include: 'differing from the normal or usual in a way regarded as odd or strange' and 'to be put in a difficult or dangerous position'. This ambiguity is one of Queer's biggest allures.

In the early 1990s, when I first started visiting Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, there was one mention of same sex relationships. It was a label that accompanied Simeon Solomon's painting of Bacchus.

The world was a different place in the 90s: Clause 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting same sex relationships had been in force since 1988; the age of consent for gay men was different to that for heterosexual men and civil partnerships hadn't been dreamt of.

Before civil partnerships were introduced in 2005, there was no positive state recording of same sex relationships. Particularly pre

Double-Spouted Teapot

'Tea-rooming' is American gay slang for anonymous male-male sexual encounters in public toilets.



1967, when being a gay male could result in criminal prosecution, most gay men and women kept their sexuality a secret. Since Oscar Wilde was a married man with two children, a degree of judgement needs to be taken with historical 'facts' and records of 'bachelor uncles' who were 'married to their work'.

Most museums have been slow to represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities. Even when there is willingness on the part of museum staff, few objects can relate to all sections of the diverse queer community, and museums rely on material culture – objects, things – to tell stories.

This lack of material culture created a dilemma when we were developing the exhibition. A more lateral – and fragmented – approach to the subject matter was needed. If an exhibition of 'queer' objects wasn't possible, could we 'queer' the whole museum instead?

Interventions using the existing collections and galleries enabled us to draw out queer stories and themes, exploring subjects that a queer viewer might overlay onto objects the museum already held.

Same sex pairings were an obvious starting point. Once we started to look, male and female pairings were ubiquitous. Sometimes they were originally made to form pairs, on other occasions it was curatorial decision-making that paired these men and women together.

Looking for a Chicken Hawk

Chicken' is gay slang for younger men and 'hawks' are older men who are attracted to them.



In some cases we swapped female figures with male ones from the collections, in others I made new figures, and same sex couples, which were placed with their heterosexual counterparts.

Using craft to tell these stories seemed a natural decision. It has strong gendered links – woodwork for boys and sewing for girls – as well as a domestic connection. Its homely connotations make it an idea vehicle for conveying potentially unsettling messages.

The museum allowed me access to its stores to search for objects which could be brought out to tell other queer stories. Museum objects are categorised by material or subject matter. It is unusual to have the opportunity to select objects from across a museum's collections.

It brought up exciting connections: pairing a stuffed otter with ceramic bears to explore slang and stereotypes; linking polychrome figures from a fairground organ with coded language used by itinerant travellers and the gay community.

Other connections were quieter and more difficult. Using drug jars to explore the impact of HIV, and ceramic sphinxes to consider homophobia in Uganda.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has taken a very positive and proactive step towards further social inclusion with this exhibition. Their commitment to the project is possibly best illustrated by

The Orange Seller

In 1985, Jeanette Winterson won the Whitbread Award for a first novel for 'Oranges Are Not the only Fruit'. The book explores the tension between Jeanette's lesbian desires and the rules and regulations she has been brought up to believe in.

Working with opposites: good and bad, friends and enemies, the book explores how Jeanette's lesbianism places her outside the heterosexual male/female norm.



allowing one of their most iconic objects – Epstein's figure of Lucifer - to be 'queered' with a cloak of green carnations at the entrance to the museum.

No exhibition could adequately, and equally, convey the subtleties and complexities that are inherent in such a large and diverse group as the queer 'community'. Rather, I hope this very individual take on the museum's collections reminds people that there is more than one story to tell about any object.

This exhibition could not have happened without the good natured help and support of numerous people. I'd like to thank Dave Viney at ShOUT! and Andy Horn at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery who have backed and facilitated the project from the outset.

Andy's colleagues at the museum have ensured that it was a pleasure to work there. They include Fiona Slattery, Linda Spurdle, Oliver Buckley, Victoria Osborne, Zelinda Garland, Brendan Flynn and Dave Rowan.

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Tiles Decorated with Jake's Progress

White earthenware transfer-printed overglaze
2010

Looking for Liza Minnelli

At the Bar

Tattoo

Pride Drag

Grindr

Daddy in the Bushes

Sex Club

Sauna

Threesome

Falling down a K-hole

Sunning in Sitges

Finding Seaman Truelove

Queering the Museum is a series of displays which explore Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender themes using the museum's collections. It is funded by Arts Council England. To comment on the exhibition, tweet using the hashtag #queering.



Stereotypes

Stereotypes and slang abound within the queer community. Twinks, daddies, lipstick lesbians and femmes are joined by muscle marys and rice queens.

Bears are larger, hairy gay men who often have beards. Otters are slimmer hairy gay men. They are sometimes seen playing together in the wild.