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CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers
 April 2007. Vol. 11, No. 1.
 Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy
 Arts & Administration Program, University of
 Oregon ISSN 1541-938X

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Queering the Museums

[James H. Sanders III](#)

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What is queer about the museum? Certainly not its silence when it comes to sexuality. Traditionally the museum has claimed its practices of collecting, categorizing and conserving as scholarly, scientific, rational and objective. It has also historically served as an instrument of heteronormativity⁽¹⁾ by systematically erasing or rendering artists' queer ⁽²⁾ identities, desires and representations invisible. Amidst a U.S. political backdrop of homophobic legislation ⁽³⁾ this paper calls for museum curators, educators and administrators to reexamine their role in the construction and maintenance of mandatory heterosexuality. I argue that historic and representational technologies employed by the art museum have silently privileged white male heterosexual ideologies. Challenging museum scholars, art historians, critics, and educators to (re)consider their inattentiveness to (homo)sexual subjects, I seek a reinvention of the museum as a responsible and responsive institution that reveres human rights through its representations.

I begin by introducing key concepts and aims of queer theory and intelligibility, ⁽⁴⁾ social and aesthetic signification, and those ways in which the museum might serve as a site of progressive social change. After reviewing the neglect of queer subjects by museum historians and theorists, I discuss both the possibilities and potential problems faced in queering museum practice and study.

Why Queer Theory?

Queer theory is a dynamic concept that problematizes identity as a construct; a theoretical development owing much to feminist, race, postcolonial and critical theories, postmodern and post-structural thought concerning ethics, ontology,

epistemology, (see Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990 and; Warner, 1993). Concurrently emerging from gay and lesbian liberation struggles and gay activists' questioning of notions of normalcy (D'Emilio, 1983/1998; D'Emilio, Turner & Vaid, 2002; Sanders 2004; Weeks, 2000), the political move from gay and lesbian to queer marks a shift in self identification that Warner (1996) called, "an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal" (p. 288).

Queer theory denies any singular definition for sexualities, and like visual texts, allows for multiple readings according to a reader's values and experiences. Queer reading practices (Britzman, 1998), like performances of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990) constitute (un)conscious acts that articulate and define our being in the world. Proliferating queer readings of museums and their historic, curatorial and educational practices could benefit both those engaged in museums and cultural studies, and those subjects challenging heterosexual norms.

(re)Examining the Master's Tools

Wallis (2003) asserted that, "museums are central to the ways our culture is constructed... principally concerned with sorting and classifying knowledge" (p.163), and noted that they "... serve as disciplinary structures, socially constructed means of defining and regulating difference" (p. 179). He further argued that these differences in meaning are fixed by museums, therefore "... it is crucial to understand the arsenal of institutional means geared toward the enforcement of... ideologically inflected principles" (p.179). French philosopher Michel Foucault's notion of bio-power (5) is useful for unpacking the political, social and scientific functions of naming and classification, and questioning the ends served by objects being ordered and understood within specific historical and cultural context (see Rabinow, 1984).

Foucault's archaeological methods of historic research (1970, 1974) has provided the philosophical and methodological foundation for Hilde Hein (2000), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 1995), and Stephen Weil (1995, 2002) who explicated the museum as a changing social and cultural institution. Each author has attended to the museum's role in producing meanings, subject positions, valuations of knowledge, historic worth, and aesthetic merit—considering the museum an instrument and technology of social and cultural reproduction. While at times problematizing its historically classist, elitist, nationalist, masculinist, racist, and abilist productions—each largely ignores the museums' failures to address queer subjects.

Hein (2000) noted that, "exhibitions traditionally put objects 'on view,' inviting visitors to inspect and contemplate them, guided by the epistemically privileged museum authority" (p. 5). This authority selects what is to be collected, preserved, documented and publicly presented; decisions unavoidably reflecting

an authority's beliefs, values, vision and standpoints —many involving unremarked complexes of social/sexual concern. Hooper-Greenhill (1992) linked the Western museum's evolution to shifts in social/scientific searches for knowledge —attentive to what Foucault noted are historic ruptures. Exploring the significance of individuals' and groups' collecting, organizing, and presenting objects as representations of knowledge (systems of meaning making and claims to knowledge and power), she too fails to consider how the museum constructs and sustains mandatory heterosexuality by suppressing subaltern sexual subjects.

Museum and education theorists staking claim to critical perspectives at times seem more interested in preserving their own professional authority, than in changing the social conditions that gave rise to a critiqued problem. (6) In calling for a queering of museums, I seek not to simply sweep subaltern sexual subjects to the center of curatorial practice, but to disrupt those socio-sexual assumptions that have been thoughtlessly reenacted. Through this repeated practice of queerly (un) naming and opening history and artworks to multiple readings, one may reinvest in the museum as an institution and its objects' ongoing (re)production, relevancy and vitality.

Museums' encyclopedic collections are (re)presentations of past and present understandings of the world—serving as our lexicons of visual language. The language of the museum, however, is always/already assumed to be heterosexual—a presumption so pervasive as to be considered commonsensical. Wittig (1992), following semiotic analyses of discourse, suggested that language itself is an order of materiality and one tightly connected to politics. She asserts that, “To live in society is to live in heterosexuality.... Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories. It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or thought of differences) as its main category” (pp. 40 & 42). The museum philosopher and historian's role in sustaining this sneaky dialectical thought is a problem to which I now return.

The (im)Possibility of Queering the Museum

While Hein (2000) and Weil (1995, 2002) both asserted that museums have shifted from object-centered to experience-centered self-reflexive institutions, neither considered queer concerns except in light of controversies arising over Mapplethorpe's sadomasochistic homoerotic imagery and resultant culture wars. By contrast, gay, bisexual, lesbian and queer artists, cultural theorists, and historians have been producing writings, exhibitions, and art works that do address such matters. In example, essays by Ruby Rich, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña queerly speak to border crossings and disrupting staid readings of raced, gendered, and classed relations—turning the reader's gaze back on those donors who fund museums and cultural institutions (Becker, 1994; Patner, 1994). Ferguson, Gever, Minh-ha & West (eds.) (1990) offered dozens of essays critical of the museum's role in the maintenance of social injustice, as well as essays by French post-structural (lesbian) theorists Irigaray and Spivak who attest to those ways that museums fail to rethink misogyny and heteronormativity. Exhibits,

like Harmony Hammond's (2000) groundbreaking, *Lesbian Art in America, A Contemporary History*, curator Jonathan Katz's (2002) *Queer Visualities: Reframing Sexuality in a Post-Warhol World* (<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/QVisuality/QVEssay.html>) at Stony Brook University in New York, have made similar contestations of dominant sexuality, but through assemblages of object and words. More recently, Glenn Ligon's (2005-2007) *Some Changes* (also see *Annotations*, at Dia Arts Foundation website www.diaartcenter.org) extend the discourse of Hammond and Katz, by attending to the intersecting constructions of race, gender, class and sexuality deployed through technologies like the family photo album, and today's interactive websites.

Art historians and scholars such as James Saslow (1989, 1999), Martin Duberman (1997), Horne & Lewis (1996), Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey (1989), among others, examined the specific contributions of gay and lesbian artists. Encyclopedic references are now readily available in print, or on the internet, including such sites as Claude Summers' (2002-04) *glbtq: An encyclopedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer culture*, virtually sited at http://www.glbtq.com/arts/lempicka_t.html. Too rarely, however, do these scholars' research make their way into curatorial essays, wall labels within the museum, or the interpretive educational programs of museum art educators.

Museum professionals must begin to grapple with their representation of artist and subjects' queer biographical data while considering historically and culturally bound notions of sexuality that, at present, have largely been structured into binary hetero/homo sexual thinking. Perhaps through cross-disciplinary explorations by museum arts professionals – examinations that consider cultural, sociological, and art historic research within feminist and queer theoretical frameworks can inform and challenge current heteronormative practices within the museum. Discussing the libidinal energies of artists and subjects within and across genders, disclosing those lives rendered invisible by current curatorial customs, and embracing queer scholarly research within and outside the art historic and curatorial communities the field may someday regularly name those artists' longings and desires denied in disciplinary neglect.

Given the hundreds of years that museums have consistently ignored concerns of sexualities, it is difficult to know where one might best begin to make recommendations for change. Certainly museum associations could begin the process by taking a stance on human rights and social justice. Curators within existing institutions could begin to employ existing research in their writing, and in re-labeling public presentation of works by non-heterosexually identified artists in their collections. Additionally, arts administration and cultural policy researchers might begin to trace how museums are addressing shifting social attitudes and legal sanctions regarding queer subjects—research not only on late 20th and early 21st century curatorial practices, but also involving institutional employment policies, or trustee readings of representational responsibilities. In addition to the promotion of single artists' exhibits (Ligon), and those identity

based group shows (Hammond, or Katz) that some see as ghettoizing and limiting the queer artists' reach, I want to challenge curators to begin openly questioning those categories through which they see, organize and represent sexuality. Further, I would challenge historians, archivists and database managers to begin grappling with ways of developing fluid sexual categories and discussing their utility, so future researchers might be able to consider how an artist's sexuality might have shaped their representations and gaze.

If actors across arts museums and historic collections can openly discuss and consider those challenges put forth in this paper, the field might begin to act as an active agent in the struggle for human rights. An unaltered alignment with those preservation practices of the past could alternately be seen as a renewed commitment to cultural injustice and straight privilege.

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1. Heteronormativity is a term identifying the innumerable social practices, legal strictures, semantic structures, definitions and rituals through which either explicitly or implicitly, heterosexuality is constructed as the only "normal" way of sexually being in the world. Sedgwick (1990) asserts that any cultural analysis that fails to address the embedded heteronormative structures in social performance is fundamentally flawed.
 2. In this paper I use the term "queer" in a number of different ways. Firstly as a political reclaiming of a violently and derogatory naming; secondly, as a rubric under which gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and two-spirited identities might be organized; thirdly as a way of thinking and doing things in unexpected ways; and fourthly as an ongoing palimpsestic process of (re)performing one's identifications.
 3. In a *New York Law Review* (2000) essay entitled *No Promo Homo: The Sedimentation of Antigay Discourse and the Channeling Effect of Judicial Review*, William N. Eskridge Jr. traces antigay rhetoric and its "constitutionalization." In the essay he reveals the multilayered strategies behind calls for enacting and sustaining discriminatory legislation against queer folk. Considering key court cases, like *Boy Scouts of America v Dale* (1998), in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the state could not apply public accommodation laws to require a private group to retain an openly gay scoutmaster (p. 1332), he shows how social republican argument superceded medical research (the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*](#) in 1973) and through individuation, rationalized the state's discrimination. More recently, "Defense of Marriage" laws enacted by a majority of US States, and State Constitutional Amendments limiting marriage and its benefits to only unions of a man and a woman. Such actions claim the majority's right to enact economic and legal injustice—an about face from historic protections of other minority populations.
 4. My challenge regarding "queer intelligibility" asks museum professionals to

not only acknowledge the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer subjects in history, but work toward making those subjects comprehensible or understandable.

5. Foucault's notion of "biopower" was first introduced in his (1976) *History of Sexuality*. The term serves as a rubric under which a broad array of technologies (especially governmental policies and law) can be deployed to subjugate and control its subjects' (sexual) bodies. These technologies, including sexual repressions, in turn produce docile bodies that can then be more readily manipulated.

6. James Scheurich (1995) critiques traditional and post-positivist research, asserting that both focus on maintenance of existing policy authorities and institutions. Scheurich argues that researchers should critically examine their own role in sustaining or managing defined "problems." He proposes a "policy archaeology methodology" which draws heavily on Foucault -- challenging researchers to first question the construction of the problem, then consider the range of policy options available, and finally, self-reflexively/critically examining the role of policy studies within (or as a part of) the problem. My queer reading of the museum as an institution recursively reenacts this analytic process.

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Jim Sanders is an Assistant Professor within the [Cultural Policy and Arts Administration Program](#) of the Department of Art Education at The Ohio State University, where he guides the graduate specialization in Museum Education studies. His academic career began in 2003 after 26 years of nonprofit organizational leadership, during which he served as Executive Director of the Sawtooth Center for Visual Art from 1987-2003 and as Executive Director of the Ozark Craft Guild (a membership cooperative operating a half-dozen galleries across that state) from 1977-87. Sanders dissertation on Arts-Based Education Reforms at the Millennium (UNC-Greensboro, 1999) served as the foundation for the North Carolina Elementary School he chartered and led from 2000-2003. A self-avowed intellectual slut, Sanders' recent research ranges from arts advocacy, education policy, museum studies, and board and governance concerns, to professional arts career preparation, critical theories intersections with cultural policy, and visual cultural constructions of (homo)sexualities. Sanders is the author of [FOUNDERS: A Social History of a Community School of Art](#) (2000) and has actively shared his research through scores of performances at National and International arts and education conferences and dozens of essays in scholarly journals and anthologies.



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Editors: Julie and Robert Voelker-Morris
Blandy.

Advisor: Dr. Douglas

Comments to: culturwk@uoregon.edu