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Queering Art Before, After and During the Sexual Revolution (1960-1980): A Study of Aesthetics and Subversion

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Art in revolution is usually dismissed as mere propaganda used to further dominant ideologies and homogenize viewpoints to squash dissent, completely disregarding the efforts of artists who have used their medium for beauty, self-expression, and even resistance against the old order. Equally generalized are contemporary perceptions about the American sexual revolution that sprang from artwork and popular media produced in the 1970s. Widespread images that have influenced public thought about the sexual revolution include couples who “swing” (or rather, exchange partners), such as those featured in *The Joy of Sex*; radical feminists holding coat hangers above their heads and screaming, “Never again!” immortalized by photographers at the numerous rallies that occurred around the time of *Roe v. Wade*; and the widespread use of contraception that allowed white women to don pantsuits and work outside the home, as depicted in popular television and film of the time.

But one perspective that influenced, as well as was influenced by, art of the sexual revolution remains relatively unknown: that of the budding LGBT community. During the 1970s, many artists who were openly gay gained notoriety, revealing the strong presence of queer individuals within the artistic sphere. In this paper, the methods visual art and television used to influence public perception and foster gradual acceptance of homosexuality before, during, and after the American sexual revolution from around 1960 to 1990 will be discussed. Ultimately, I argue that movements for a broader acceptance of gender and sexuality were intertwined during the sexual revolution, as demonstrated by the crucial role LGBT artists played not only their own liberation, but also that of women, using art that was intended for both aesthetic and subversion. Several questions to keep in mind are: What role, if any, did LGBT visual art have in the American sexual revolution before its narrative and during gay liberation in 1969? If present, did artists intend their work to be used for aesthetics or subversion? That is, was the aim of art purely

to be appreciated by both heterosexual and homosexual individuals, or did artists expect political change to arise because of their work? How was queer visual art influenced by the sexual revolution? Were any other societal movements of the 1960s influenced or espoused by queer art and artists? How did the discovery and spread of HIV/AIDS (which, along with the feminist sex wars, are credited by most mainstream feminist scholars for ending the sexual revolution) change the queer art community and queer visual art? Was this change positive or negative in American society's perception of homosexuality?

Before the American sexual revolution, homosexuality in art was generally limited to subtle homoerotic overtones, yet subversive intentions were still present. Erotic art was one of the few ways gay male artists could build solidarity in the then-virtually nonexistent LGBT community, using their work for both aesthetic and political purposes. Beginning after World War II, physique magazines featuring photographs and drawings of muscular men were produced to cater for a growing homosexual audience. One of the most well-known gay artists of the 1960s was Tom of Finland, who reinforced traditional notions of masculinity by focusing on truck drivers, leather-clad bikers, policemen, soldiers, and cowboys. About his appeal, Emmanuel Cooper comments, "Tom of Finland's highly skilled drawings epitomize work that is about gay fantasy for a gay audience. Because the execution is so accomplished they question the difference between the erotic and the pornographic. ... With this is combined an element of humour and enjoyment even in the most uninhibited situations, a quality photographs can rarely achieve" (Cooper 236). In other words, by blurring the line between risqué and obscene in mainstream discourse through gay artwork, the overall theme of homosexual male desire was expressed, however surreptitiously, one of many factors that led to gay liberation in the following decade. Unchecked or unnoticed by mainstream society, gradual community-building

around same-sex desire would eventually come to a head with a generally discriminatory American public who viewed homosexual erotic art as proof of promiscuity within the community. Unfortunately, this visibility would come at a cost to others in the movement.

Although lesbian communities had been established in urban centers for roughly fifty years, in the early days of the sexual revolution, they remained as marginalized as ever before. This was especially true within the flourishing LGBT visual art community. As Leila J. Rupp goes on to explain in her essay entitled “Loving Women in the Modern World:”

Though a considerable amount of attention has been given to lesbianism in literature and in film, with regard to the visual arts the silence remains almost as dense as it ever was. For many artists who are lesbian there seems to be three principal ways of dealing with this. Firstly they can present themselves as artists, ignore their own sexuality and compete in a predominantly male-dominated art world for funding and for exhibition space. Such artists rarely make lesbianism a central part of their subject matter, nor do they come out publicly about their sexuality. A second possibility is to identify as feminists, making their lesbianism a part of the wider struggle of the Women’s Movement. Many women who have lesbian relationships do not see themselves as lesbian but as feminists. ...Within these useful and constructive debates, the question of lesbianism has not been discussed at any length. The third possibility is for artists who are lesbian to make this an issue in their work, recognising [*sic*] it as having a major, if not the most important, influence on their practice as artists as well as on their choice of subject matter. (Aldrich 230)

In other words, lesbian sexuality and desire are completely divorced from visual art of the 1960s. Pressure was placed on lesbian artists to ignore their sexuality to compete with men for notoriety; lest these women have opportunities taken from them. On the other hand, one could identify herself with another budding movement: feminism. Although there was indeed a vocalization of same-sex female desire through this tactic, unfortunately, the identity marker “lesbian” was not attached to individuals, distancing women from gay liberation but allowing them to contribute to other societal movements of the late 1960s. Instead of fighting against discrimination through art based on sexuality, work produced by these women was used to

further the feminist cause and dismantle gender-based oppression, lesbians building solidarity around gender as opposed to sexuality. Art, in this respect, was intended mostly for subversion. While this did help the sexual revolution gain momentum, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, lesbians artistic contributions to gay liberation are scant due to discussion about lesbianism being silenced, a result shared by the third option Rupp describes. The rare piece that openly depicted lesbian sexuality was often subject to intense scrutiny not only from mainstream American discourse, but also from the art community.

Cooper does state that while some openly lesbian artists produced notable works before the sexual revolution, how they chose to represent themselves influenced the seriousness with which their work was taken, once more demonstrating the marginalization lesbians faced. How one negotiated this rather precarious issue was up to the artist. He asserts:

Discussion has included the problems of finding exhibition spaces and how to approach the whole question of lesbian representation and presence in art. For instance, there is the question of whether images of women together can be done which will not merely be seen by men as soft pornography for their own pleasure. Some artists, determined to confront the issues of their sexuality in their work, to become visible as artists, have directed it specifically at a lesbian and gay audience, while others want it seen in a wider, more general context. (Cooper 239)

Determining the appropriate techniques to represent lesbians and lesbian sexuality in visual art was a key issue during this time. In stark contrast to the erotic, hypermasculine images produced by gay men for both the LGBT and mainstream communities, lesbian artists needed to decide individually if their work was intended for one audience or the other. If a lesbian decided to broadcast images concerning her sexuality and desire to the latter, it was necessary to minimize sexual content, lest her artwork only serve to indulge heterosexual men's fantasies. This is further enforced by Cooper's point that, "Female erotica is less likely to objectify and exploit women, who are not shown as helpless and passive victims. Women artists are creating images

of women making love or openly showing affection for one another” (Cooper 258). Thus, while lesbian artists did create vibrant, and sometimes erotic, works before the sexual revolution, they were usually intended for an assumedly queer audience and could not interact with mainstream discourse about sexuality in a manner that could foster acceptance of the LGBT community. Instead, lesbian artists had the element of sexuality completely erased from their work or were snatched up by the growing feminist movement, their messages used to fight gender-based oppression as opposed to sexuality-based. Thus, while gay male art was a relatively common sight in mainstream society before the sexual revolution, lesbians had a much more difficult experience trying to speak as women who loved women. Gay liberation would, unfortunately, not give them a voice.

The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement that began in the summer of 1969 and fought for public recognition of sexual minorities (more commonly referred to as “gay liberation”) caused radical change in queer visual art due to the merging of gay life and radical liberalism advocated by American sexual revolution. Instead of reflecting desire, art shifted to being a mirror of society that reflected oppression of queers, leading to an increased sense of solidarity. Community building relied heavily on photography, which, according to Saslow, chronicled who, “...Gay people were who they were becoming, both for themselves and for the larger society” (263). Patrons and artists alike, then, had a tool for individual and shared self-understanding with photography, which reflected their shared oppression. Solidarity was also built through shared gallery spaces. Continuing, he states, “...The (largely male) gay galleries have provided moral as well as fiscal support: dealers play not only business agent but nurturing parent, encouraging younger artists and developing an audience” (265). Dealers such as New York’s Leslie-Lohman Gallery, owned by partners Charles Leslie and Fritz Lohan, supported up-

and-coming gay artists with their own notoriety; when an artist gained fame and became dealers, they were able to perpetuate the cycle. As societal acceptance of homosexuality increased and homosexuality transitioned from a mental defect or a sexual deviance to an “alternative lifestyle,” queer artists were able to broadcast their messages more overtly and in progressively politicized fashions. As Robert Aldrich states:

Whereas the homophiles had favoured an integrationist approach, the gay liberation fronts assumed a very different political perspective, one based on a comprehensive analysis of political, economic, social and cultural structures and strongly influenced by Marxism and by Marxist criticism of psychoanalysis. The causes of homophobia were inherent in the middle-class, capitalist ethic: racism, imperialism and sexual repression were all expressions and instruments of the exploitation of one social group by others. (Aldrich 213)

In other words, the gay liberation movement had espoused the ideology of Marxism to produce a vehement anti-homophobic, antiracist, anti-imperialist, pro-sex discourse, allowing queer artists to seamlessly assist other liberal movements. As opposed to the earlier homophiles who pacifistically supported LGBT rights on the sidelines, those who participated in gay liberation advocated for a strong refusal to assimilate to “mainstream” heterosexual culture and wanted to emphasize deviance in sexual behavior. This desire to highlight difference and take pride in one’s identity led to an explosion of gay artists producing both highly suggestive and subversive artwork that focused on sexual experimentation as well as deeply personal, aesthetically pleasing pieces that focused on LGBT identity formation and establishing a queer narrative.

This narrative did not leave much space for lesbians to vocalize their history and identity. Until the end of second-wave feminism, lesbian art was still largely associated with radical feminism. Saslow states that this was allowed to happen because, “Feminism offered lesbians the support of half the population for their common goals as women, and the tactics that encouraged separatist institutions for art and politics carved out a safe space for ‘women-identified women’”

(268). Lesbian feminism offered queer women a large, supportive audience of other women who could sympathize with their gender-based oppression. As time passed, though, a conundrum presented itself: Should homosexual women throw their proverbial lot in with other women, or gay men? The general misogyny of gay men triggered distrust of them in lesbian circles, while the homophobia they were subjected to by their heterosexual “sisters” was fierce. An example of this can be seen in 1978, when Kate Millett, a popular American feminist author and activist, and her friends publicly came out. The National Organization of Women, of which Millett had been a part, became furious, worried that they would feed the stereotype of butch man-haters. Millett, eschewing NOW’s criticism, and her friend Harmony Hammond would later go on to produce a Sapphic network of artists in New York (Saslow 268). What happens after this remains hazy.

Tracing queer artistic territory after gay liberation becomes difficult due to a lack of detailed chronologies that focus on styles and personalities. Rather than plotting time and movements, it becomes necessary to map space, both of terms of culture and geography. As is written in “Pictures and Passions:”

Any attempt to chart this burgeoning territory faces several hurdles. One is sheer size: it is no longer possible to name all the players when a recent book on Australian lesbians covered four dozen women, merely the tip of the country’s talented iceberg. Another is too little time: the present still swirls too close at hand for us to make out the long-term patterns of its conflicting currents. And a third is diversity--of sex race, politics, and class. ...Gay people’s myriad self-images fit no single shared mold of subject matter, style or media. (Saslow 261)

Culture rapidly evolved into a postmodern, postcolonial, and, at least in America, increasingly postindustrial and digital visual. As Saslow so astutely points out, after the Stonewall riots in mid-1969, a gradual acceptance of homosexuality began to permeate the American public. With same-sex desire not being stigmatized, other identity markers, such as race or class, that were labeled more pressing needed attention from the art community. This shift, combined with an

increasingly globalized, digitalized culture led to a downshift of the number of queer artists producing work focusing strictly on LGBT issues. This is particularly evident in the lack of community-building found in large-scale art projects, murals being the most frequently cited examples. Galleries are no longer a place for queer artists to build coalition; instead, museums, archives, and libraries are absorbing collections at an alarming rate as once-famous artists begin to perish. Despite this, a number of artists, including Andy Warhol and Robert Maplethorpe, have set up personal foundations in their wills to keep their collections in less wealthy hands located in the LGBT community.

The 1980s, however, saw a resurgence of LGBT artists producing works as activism for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, another point of solidarity-building in the queer art community. Campaigns against ignorance and for a cure were facing an enormous amount of hostility largely directed at the plague's first victims, largely white, middle-class gay men, fermenting outrage among LGBT activists. Theorists such as Cindy Patton and Douglas Crimp mounted an attack on mainstream discourse, revealing through photographs how the earliest pictures of sufferers isolated and condemned them, much like what Renaissance printmakers did to syphilitics (Saslow 278). Individual artists created harrowing pieces, such as Barton Benes, who used crematorium ashes and his own infected blood as art materials, or David Wojnarowicz, an outspoken artist who dramatized his disgusted realization of having contracted HIV. Collectives like New York's ACT UP and Gran Fury stage confrontational performance and visual art that produced many slogans and symbols, such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt and red awareness ribbon, still used today. These efforts humanized queer individuals and, to a certain extent, made mainstream America more sympathetic to the community's plight, returning queer art to a place of both aesthetic and subversion.

Perhaps a result of this vocal response was the seismic shift from modern to postmodern, which rocked the very ground beneath LGBT culture with the shift from “gay” to “queer,” increasing inclusivity. Of this transition, Saslow states, “The postmodernists’ ambitions are political: to expose the incestuous relationship between desire, power, and images. Their central insight is that even when authority walks softly, it carries a big metaphor: the control over culture, which enforces uniformity of thought as well as behavior” (Saslow 275). In other words, postmodern artists in the LGBT community state that any sexual, ethnic, or class category is artificial. Mainstream discourse in society shifts its tactics to exclude threatening minorities. Contemporary art is a resistance to this practice; no longer is it a mirror of society, but propaganda broadcasting opposition to homogeneity, more about subversion than aesthetic.

In this paper, I have tried to answer several questions concerning queer art in the sexual revolution, the largest of which concerning whether LGBT artists impacted the sexual revolution, what their intentions were, and whether they were able to fight for the liberation of other people. Throughout the narrative of the sexual revolution, works produced by LGBT artists satisfied both the purpose of being aesthetically pleasing and subversive. Additionally, because of lesbians inadvertently having their work labeled as feminist and being roped into a separate movement, early in the sexual revolution, queer artists split their efforts between gay liberation and feminism. Prior to this, before the sexual revolution, active LGBT artists (mostly male) built solidarity through depicting their own homosexual desire. Espousing ideals of Marxism after gay liberation, queer artists began to use their art not as a means of self-reflection, but rather for reflecting society’s oppression and violence. As other identity markers, such as race and class, were paid more attention than sexuality, largely due to decolonization, the works of queer artists were snatched up by mainstream galleries. In the 1980s, however, HIV/AIDS provided another

opportunity for community-building, with artists trying to rally some semblance of support for victims. As the transition from modern to postmodern and gay to queer adds inclusivity, we must ask ourselves: For what is art intended? Aesthetic? Subversion? These are questions that we must ask as art continues to expand into new mediums and evolve.

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