

**Performing Diverse Sexualities:  
Queer Curating or Curatorial Strategies of the Schwules Museum\***



Exhibition Poster of Homosexuality\_ies, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2015. Artwork Image: Heather Cassils and Robin Black, *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, 2011, courtesy and photo: the artists and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

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## Introduction: Sexualities in Museum Exhibitions

In this thesis, I explore LGBTIQ-themed (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, Inter\* and Queer) museum exhibitions with a focus on curatorial methods. The writing of this thesis is largely motivated by recent curating practices of incorporating diverse sexualities into various public museums around the world. To give just a few examples this year in 2017: the exhibition *Queer British Art* at Tate Britain celebrates the fifty year anniversary of decriminalizing sex between men in the UK. Alongside the event of World Pride Madrid 2017, *The Other's Gaze: Spaces of Difference* was organized in the Museo del Prado. In the meantime, in celebration of the ongoing process of legalizing same sex marriage in Taiwan, the Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei hosts the first major exhibition of its kind in an Asian public museum, *Spectrosynthesis - Asian LGBTQ Issues and Art Now*. All these exhibitions attempt to work for social inclusion and foreground the diversity of human sexualities which have been previously ignored in mainstream narratives in museum space.

Curatorial attention has gone beyond the concern for the selection and installment of works by bordering on the care for how stories are told and how ways of interpreting the subject matter are provided. One common curatorial approach to deal with such exhibitions, as Robert Mills points out, is to identify the once marginalized subjects in the past, celebrate the liberation now and present a linear progression in history.<sup>1</sup> In *Queer British Art* and *Spectrosynthesis*, both public art museums in London and Taipei recognize the progression of decriminalization and minority rights. In particular, Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei draws a linear timeline which summarizes major achievements not only in arts and culture but also the breakthrough of LGBTIQ social movements in Taiwan and the world.<sup>2</sup> Although

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Mills. "Theorizing the Queer Museum," 2008, pp. 45-57.

<sup>2</sup> The timeline is available online both in Mandarin and English. For an English version, see: [http://60.250.96.120/mocataipei/mocastudio/download/SAL\\_P2017P4E01.pdf](http://60.250.96.120/mocataipei/mocastudio/download/SAL_P2017P4E01.pdf) (accessed on 23 October 2017)

such an approach contributes to the social inclusivity of gender non-conforming people, the problem is that merely displaying LGBTIQ subjects leaves the institutional discriminations and dominant narratives within museum space unquestioned as will be explained in what follows.

Public museums have been an authoritative institution in constructing systems of knowledge through taxonomic categorizations and representing a seemingly universal narrative which in fact prioritizes the heterosexual male perspective. In recent decades, there has been scholarly attention to gender and sexuality in museums.<sup>3</sup> Feminist and Queer scholarship have revealed that seemingly neutral museological practices of collections and exhibitions can be based on gendered bias and marginalization of gender non-conforming identities.<sup>4</sup> In twentieth-century modern art museums, as Carol Duncan has argued, abstract works by male artists were canonized as artistic progression in MOMA and many of them represented female bodies but revealed fears and distancing toward women, such as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and de Kooning's *Women I*.<sup>5</sup> In museums of natural history, the exhibition narrative of evolution model has been critically examined for its patriarchal ideological schemes. Following Donna Haraway's criticism of evolutionary narratives in museums, Amy K. Levin elaborates that these public institutions reproduce traditional views of sex and gender which in fact highlight male potency and exclude other sexual minorities and possibilities.<sup>6</sup>

Studies such as those above inspire me to reflect on identity representations and gender

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<sup>3</sup> Sex, gender and sexuality have various interpretations. Schematically, sex refers to the biological difference such as male and female. Gender refers to the social expectations of being certain sexes such as man and woman. Sexuality refers to the ability of or tendency in sexual experiences and feelings such as heterosexual and homosexual. Yet, what we attribute to biological sex might be also gendered or socially constructed. Recent gender and queer studies have begun to challenge the binary definition of sex, gender and sexuality. They recognized that sexualities might also vary in different times and cultures and intersect with various sexual and gender identities. See: David M. Halperin, "Sex, Sexuality, and Sexual Classification," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender*, 2014, pp. 449-486.

<sup>4</sup> See the critical anthology: Levin, Amy K, ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Duncan. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, 1995, pp. 215-236.

<sup>6</sup> Amy K. Levin. "Straight Talk: Evolution Exhibits and the Reproduction of Heterosexuality," 2010, pp. 201-212.

politics within museums and other public spaces. Even today, while representations of female bodies for the heterosexual male gaze in visual cultures have been abundant,<sup>7</sup> representations of gender non-conforming subjects in public space can invoke serious controversy. In the same year as LGBTIQ exhibitions in London, Madrid and Taipei, the exhibition *Queermuseu* (Queer Museum) in Porto Alegre, Brazil opened for less than a month and has been forced to shut down due to protests from a right-wing campaign. The oppositional group accused the exhibition of “bestiality, paedophilia and offences”.<sup>8</sup> While one painting titled *Transvestite* by the artist Bia Leite, which depicts four children in bright colors, has received the worst criticism, a local attorney for children’s issues sees nothing “criminal” in such representation.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the closure of the exhibition indicates the prejudice of homophobia which denies the possibilities of representing other sexual identities in public spheres such as museums.

My intention is to discuss: since museums have been a public sphere of heteronormativity, that is, institutions which privilege narratives of two sexes, how can curating of LGBTIQ exhibitions perform stories beyond the heterosexual dominance and reveal the institutional discrimination of diverse sexualities in museums. To tackle this problem, I propose “queer curating” as a potentially fruitful approach to critically engage with exhibition space which generally denies gender non-conforming subjects. The word “queer” originally meant “eccentric” which was initially used as an insult mainly to those who were involved in same-sex relationships. It was appropriated by activists after the 1970s and gained its progressive currency in social movements of LGBTIQ communities. Since the 1990s, following Michel Foucault’s studies of sexuality, queer theorists began to critically

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<sup>7</sup> See: Laura Mulvey. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 1975, pp. 6-18.

<sup>8</sup> See: Dom Phillips. “Brazilian Queer Art Exhibition Cancelled After Campaign by Rightwing Protesters.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/12/brazil-queer-art-show-cancelled-protest> (accessed on 23 October 2017)

<sup>9</sup> See: Shasta Darlington. “Brazilian Art Show Sets Off Dispute That Mirrors Political Battles.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/world/americas/brazil-art-show-gender-controversy.html> (accessed on 23 October 2017)

tackle the problem of identity politics, gender roles, social norms, and marginalization of other forms of sexualities.<sup>10</sup> In line with many queer theorists, my choice of the term “queer” is a convenient one to acknowledge the variety of human sexualities and therefore the meanings should remain unstable so that no simple categories can determine all sexual desires.<sup>11</sup> Thus, representing gender and sexuality from a queer perspective, in this sense, cannot be confined in the attempt and practice of documenting the marginalized desires and social groups, for it partakes in the enterprise of re-thinking and changing museum practice and defining human sexualities in a more nuanced way. It is this sort of ‘queer curating’ that I would like to highlight so as to investigate whether such a curating strategy would be effective in challenging the narrative of heterosexual dominance.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than looking at how museums include LGBTIQ subjects in their exhibitions, I focus on how an LGBTIQ community-based museum creates queer narratives which not only challenge the institutional discrimination in public museums but also reflect on their own limitations. For this purpose, the Schwules Museum\* in Berlin becomes my case study.<sup>13</sup> The founding of the museum traces back to the first homosexual-themed exhibition in a German public museum, *Eldorado*<sup>14</sup> at Märkisches Museum (later merged into today’s Berlin Museum) in 1984. Following this exhibition, the four gay men who initiated *Eldorado* founded the Schwules Museum in 1985, which was initially devoted to the collection, research and exhibition of the art and culture of homosexual men. Gradually, the museum has extended its mission to lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersexual and many other sexual

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 1990. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer. *Art & Queer Culture*, 2013, pp. 9-10. Clare Barlow. *Queer British Art, 1981-1967*, 2017, pp. 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> The theoretical framework of queer curating will be addressed in chapter one.

<sup>13</sup> The German term “Schwules” is generally translated as “gay” in English. Yet the German title is kept in this essay because: (1) the museum always refers itself as Schwules Museum\* in international context. (2) As will be explained later, the museum has expanded its mission to more diverse LGBTIQ communities.

<sup>14</sup> The full title is *Eldorado: Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur homosexueller Frauen und Männer in Berlin von 1850-1950 (Eldorado: History, Everyday Life and Culture of Homosexual Women and Men in Berlin 1850-1950)*.

orientations. In 2012, this has been reflected through the addition of asterisk sign (\*) after Schwules Museum.<sup>15</sup> Today, the museum is home to the largest LGBTIQ collections in the world. There are two main reasons for me to focus on Schwules Museum\*: First, locating in Berlin along with its vibrant queer history and culture,<sup>16</sup> the museum has worked closely with both local and international LGBTIQ communities and has extensive experiences in exhibition making. In the past 30 years, more than 150 exhibitions have been made. Hence, how such an experienced community based museum which brings gender non-conforming subjects into exhibitions deserves further analysis. Second, two recent exhibitions: *Homosexuality\_ies* (*Homosexualität\_en*, 2015, 2016) and *Odarodle: An Imaginary Their\_Story of Naturepeoples, 1535-2017* (*Odarodle: Sittengeschichte eines Naturmysteriums, 1535-2017*, 2017) initiated by this museum apply a critical queer perspective into their curating approach which will help us understand how curators challenge not only the heterosexual narrative in the national public museum but also the homosexual narrative in the Schwules Museum\* per se.

My methodology combines queer theory with museum studies. Drawing on queer theory, this study attempts to provide an analytical account of how curators reveal institutional neglect of gender non-conforming subjects and create scenography for diverse sexualities. Queer theorist Judith Butler's concept of performativity will be valuable to my analysis because it provides a critical framework to examine how curators perform subversive and diverse stories in exhibitions to challenge the heteronormativity in museums. The goal is not only to elaborate the theoretical concept but also to investigate how to put queer theory into curatorial practice. Through examining exhibition catalogues and employing visual and textual analysis, I look at how curators at Schwules Museum\* engage with the institutional

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<sup>15</sup> Andrea Rottmann and Hannes Hacke. "Homosexualität\_en: Exhibiting a Contested History in Germany in 2015," 2017, p. 59. Special thanks to Andrea Rottman for kindly providing this article with me.

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Hofmann, "Berlin is gay, and that's a good thing"  
<http://www.dw.com/en/berlin-is-gay-and-thats-a-good-thing/a-18543209> (assessed on 20 December 2017)

discrimination within museums and perform the diversity of sexualities. I also conducted interviews with three curators, Birgit Bosold (one of the curators of *Homosexuality\_ies*), Kevin Clarke and Ashkan Sepahvand (the curator of *Odardle*) at Schwules Museum\* and participated in the three-day symposium of the exhibition *Odardle*.<sup>17</sup>

Chapter one proposes a theoretical framework of putting queer theory into curatorial practice. Based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I argue that through producing specific narratives of sexualities, exhibitions which produce certain discourses of sexual identities, are also performative. Thus, a radical queer curating is to challenge the gender norms produced in museums and to open the possibilities to perform diverse sexualities.

Starting from bringing the theory of performativity into museum studies, I then examine how curators from the Schwules Museum\* create exhibitions with a queer approach in practice. Chapter two examines how the curators intervene in the narrative of national history in the exhibition *Homosexuality\_ies* (2015, 2016) at Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum). By introducing a large amount of counter-collections, these curators critically examine the institutional neglect of LGBTIQ subjects in the national historical narrative and perform various narratives other than the heterosexual one. In particular, the choice of an androgynous body image as the exhibition poster triggered public debates over the representation of LGBT identity as well as censorship on sexual contents.

After the intervention of the national history, the museum does not stop there but continue to use queer perspective to reflect even on its own history and identities. Chapter three returns to the Schwules Museum\* which displays exhibitions drawn on contradictory ideas about identity formations at the same time. On the one hand, *Odardle*, curated by artist-curator Ashkan Sepahvand proposes a highly critical framework which deconstructs the founding history of Schwules Museum\* from a post-colonial perspective. On the other, the

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<sup>17</sup> 14 to 16 September 2017 at the Schwules Museum\*



museum still organizes exhibitions such as *Winckelmann: the Divine Sex*, which assumed a rather fixed homosexuality in history and *Kai Teichert: House of Joy*, which presented exoticism and oriental images which might be in conflict with *Odarodle* and its post-colonial critique. Such dynamic but contradictory exhibition makings indicate the Schwules Museum\* itself as a contested site which performs different curatorial strategies. Addressing the potential as well as the problem of queer curating, the purpose of chapters two and three is not merely to apply theory but also to re-think queer theory through curatorial practice. Both of the cases in the two chapters present queer curating or curatorial strategies which challenge the heterosexual order and expose the institutional problems in museums that this thesis attempts to probe.

## 1. Putting Queer Theory into Curatorial Practice

This chapter deals with a theoretical framework that puts queer theory into curatorial practices. First, I propose the queer theorist Judith Butler's gender performativity as a theoretical tool to deal with the problem of identity politics which creates exclusive categories. Second, I intend to link the concept of performativity to the practice of museum exhibitions, for each exhibition conveys an acute sense of performance as it is a site where categories and identities are formulated and displayed. Although there has been critical attention given to museum studies under a feminist or queer perspective, a potentially subversive strategy to reshape the normalized narrative museums tend to produce has yet to be fully developed. In the light of this, I argue that a queer approach based on Butler's theory might provide critical revisions to the category formations and institutional forms of discrimination in curatorial practices. Third, cases of queer curating by artists Fred Wilson and Henrik Olesen are presented to expound on how their creative installations challenge the heterosexual narrative in museums. Both cases will provide insights into the following curatorial strategies of the Schwules Museum\*.

### 1.1 Queer Theory: Gender Identity is Performative

The central concerns shared by queer theory and museum studies are representational critique and identity politics. In the area of museum studies, Sharon Macdonald recognizes that since the second half of the twentieth century, "the ways in which differences, and especially inequalities, of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, could be reproduced by disciplines – perhaps through exclusions from 'the canon,' 'the norm,' 'the objective,' or 'the notable' – came under the spotlight."<sup>18</sup> Through these concerns for representation and identity

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<sup>18</sup> Sharon Macdonald. "Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction," in: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 2006, p. 3.

formations, museums have become significant sites of these cultural debates because:

In many ways, the museum is an institution of recognition and identity par excellence. It selects certain cultural products for official safe-keeping, for posterity and public display – a process which recognizes and affirms some identities, and omits to recognize and affirm others.<sup>19</sup>

Even though the importance of such identity politics and problems has been recognized, the literature of museum studies has for a long time rarely referred to theoretical frameworks from queer theory to provide in-depth insights on complex meanings of representation and problematic identity formations.<sup>20</sup> Although many museums have devoted themselves to the recognition of “other” identities, one may still wonder how “otherness” takes shape and whether reaffirming certain identity categories might inevitably exclude those who do not fit within them. The dilemma of identity-based politics is that they might become exclusionary and narrow when the community attempts to pursue imagined unity and solidarity. As Elizabeth Crooke has noted in the development of community museums, although some of this type of museum began with an inclusive mission to forge identity, new representation based on certain categories might still risk isolating other people.<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the exclusivity of identity politics, queer theory provides radical viewpoints which might be called “dis-identifications” that depart from identity-based recognition. Butler’s theory of gender performativity is useful in the implication of identity politics and the critique on representation because she proposes a non-essentialist framework to see beyond sex and gender categories. We often think of some gender characters as essential or internal to our identity. However, for Butler, gender is “performative” and there is

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<sup>19</sup> Macdonald, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Amy K. Levin, ed. *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader*, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Crooke. “Museum and Community” in: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 2006, p. 183.

no ontological essence of sex and gender identities. Those often taken-for-granted characteristics attributed to certain gender identities are formulated and naturalized by a constantly repeated set of acts: “Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”<sup>22</sup>

By “performative”, Butler makes use of J. L. Austin’s language theory which defines sentences enacting people to do things. For example, the use of “I do” in a wedding ceremony involves an action that takes the partner as one’s legal husband or wife. This is a performative sentence which neither describes nor states the doing but does it. In this case, “I do” is not a description of the relationship but an action to build the matrimonial institution of the union between a man and a woman in a heterosexual relationship.<sup>23</sup> For Butler, the languages or marks we attribute to certain gender categories do not describe or state any fact but it is these languages that fabricate the characters in whose truthfulness we tend to believe.<sup>24</sup>

If this is the case, how do these performative acts become normalized in society? Butler argues that:

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experience of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.<sup>25</sup>

Through repeating these gendered acts, which are in fact cultural fictions without original

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup> J. L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*, 1975, p. 4-7.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, pp. 171-174.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.

forms, our ideals of gender are established and become our gender norms. Furthermore, to stabilize the constructed norm, what are “abnormal” or “unnatural” must be positioned. Thus, homophobia and ‘gay-bashing’ for instance arise to exclude or punish those who are thought to be out of norm.<sup>26</sup> In fact, according to Butler, neither heterosexuality nor homosexuality has any ontological essence. Both are social constructions within what she called “heterosexual matrix” because homosexuality has been viewed as the unnatural counterpart of heterosexuality. The formations of the latter are established through the stigmatization, denial and exclusion of the former.<sup>27</sup>

Butler’s theory reveals that no one should be regarded as “unnatural” as a “monster”; the “monstrosity” is, in fact, an unstable social and cultural construction that varies in time and space. The strength of Butler’s theory does more than reveal the constructed nature of heteronormativity; it also provides potentially subversive strategies within the binary system of gender identity. Drag and cross-dressing, in Butler’s view, are “subversive bodily acts” because their parody and appropriation of gender characters reveal the truth that these gender identifications themselves are socially constructed “through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, the potential strategies to change the gender norm and open up other possibilities lie in the discontinuity of the norm itself.

However, the example of drag raised by Butler leads to a potential misunderstanding, that one might assume gender identity can be changed or reconstructed overnight based on one’s free will.<sup>29</sup> Butler herself is not unaware of such problem and adds that “[a] typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered.”<sup>30</sup> That is to say, drag and cross-dressing are not universal solutions to challenge the gender norms

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<sup>26</sup> Nikki Sullivan. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, 2003, pp. 84-85.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, pp. 87-91.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan, p. 87-89.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, p. 177.

and we should not neglect the context in which performative acts take place, and the subversive potential also depends on how the communities interpret such actions.

Although Butler does not specify what kind of receiving context allows more subversive potential, I would suggest that museum exhibitions conducted through a queer approach enact possibilities of alternative viewing which questions the heterosexual narrative. As noted in the introduction, traditional modernist museums such as modern art museums and natural history museums have played a dominant role in prioritizing the heterosexual narrative. If, to borrow Macdonald's phrase, "the museum is an institution of recognition and identity,"<sup>31</sup> it is my contention that museum exhibitions are also "performative" in the ways they formulate identity. In the following section, I will explain why exhibitions are also "performative" and present examples of curating strategies that might enact possibilities of queer voices based on Butler's performativity theory.

## **1.2 Exhibitions are also Performative**

If gender and sexual identities are performative as Butler proposes, I argue that museum exhibitions which give visual forms to identities are also performative. In line with Bruce W. Ferguson's argument: "If an exhibition of art is like an utterance or a set of utterances, in a chain of signification, it can be considered to be a speech act of an institution [...] when this institution speaks, it speaks exhibitions. It utters a kind of sense that it believes to be true."<sup>32</sup> Like gender performativity, museum exhibitions do not just describe unmediated knowledge but repeat certain ways of performance or representation to convince their audiences. The museum architecture, wall colors, captions, included display objects and even exhibition catalogues all post certain gestures or positions which create psychological or even real effects to their public. From what positions and in what gestures or curating methods

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<sup>31</sup> Macdonald, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce W. Ferguson. "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense," *Thinking About Exhibitions*, 1996, p. 183.

museums are speaking deserve further analysis.

Therefore, it is not only the contents of sexualities but also the “gestures” in exhibition making that this study seeks to explore. If queer theory attempts to provide a variable field which allows lives beyond sexual categories to exist and co-exist, is it enough to stage these queer subjects in modernist display settings without reflecting the problematic categories museum exhibitions tend to give form? Are there subversive strategies in these exhibitionary complexes? In consonance with Robert Mills and Jennifer Tyburczy’s analysis of curating museum exhibitions based on queer theory, I refer to “queer curating” as those curating methods which call heterosexual narratives into question and create possibilities of experiencing diverse sexualities.

Robert Mills has proposed a theoretical framework of a “queer museum.”<sup>33</sup> In line with the analysis of sexualities and the power structure of Michel Foucault, Mills points out that museums also participate in the modern classification of human sexualities and promote a certain structure of knowledge which is determined by heterosexuality. Hence, for Mills, the curating approach of incorporating LGBTIQ subjects which are thought to be from “repression” to “liberation” does little to challenge the overarching institutional power. Taking the exhibition *the Gay Museum* (2003) at the Western Australian Museum in Perth as an example, Mills proposes an appropriative strategy which juxtaposes objects to invoke queer readings. Rather than presenting objective facts, the artist-curator Jo Darbyshire creatively combined objects which seemed irrelevant to queer lives. For example, in the catalogue of *the Gay Museum*, a playful glove puppet of a policeman is placed before selected oral historical accounts of homosexual lives. For Mills, this juxtaposition evokes “reminiscences of male homosexual activity and police persecution in the same period.”<sup>34</sup> While Mills offers a theoretical institutional critique, the example of curating practice he

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Mills “Theorizing the Queer Museum,” 2008, pp. 45-57.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

provides seems not to provide enough institutional critique.

By contrast, Jennifer Tyburczy, drawing on her curatorial experiences at the Leather Archives and Museum (LA&M) in Chicago, demonstrates how queer exhibitions pose challenges to existing sexualities, race and power relations. *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*, the very first monograph deals with sexualities in the museum. Tyburczy contends that “all museums are sex museums” because museums have played an active role in managing and policing sexual issues, including those which seem to have nothing to do with sex.<sup>35</sup> In a series of exhibitions, *Debates in Leather*, she curated at LA&M, diverse issues such as gender, race and slave history were brought to the museum which had mostly focused on white gay male leather culture. Based on queer theory and Tyburczy’s curatorial practice, she proposes two purposes of “queer curatorship”: “(1) to expose how traditional museums socialize heteronormative relationships between objects and visitors and (2) to cope with ethically fraught objects of queer cultures.”<sup>36</sup>

While I agree with her first purpose, to challenge the heterosexual narrative in museums, the second one seems to be more limited to her curating practices at LA&M. Indeed, the exhibitions she has curated and presented in her work deal with erotic objects from kinky culture which is often regarded as “ethically fraught” in relation to dominant sexual culture. But what makes her curatorial practice radical is not the erotic codes themselves but the intersectional issues such as gender, race and slavery history she combines them with. For instance, in *Debates in Leather*, she presented “The History of Black BDSM” which involved people of color performing historical slavery role play to explore how contemporary sexual practice creatively engaged with the power relations in the difficult past.<sup>37</sup> For me, the subversive potential of “ethically fraught objects” comes from the various boundaries they touch upon such as the binary between art and pornography, white and black,

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<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Tyburczy. *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*, 2016, pp. 2-3, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pp. 186-187.



dominance and submission, etc. It is this intersectional approach that brings us diverse perspectives to view sexuality and society differently. Therefore, I would suggest revising the second purpose as: to cope with intersectional issues of queer culture.

Based on Mills' and Tyburczy's contributions to queer curating theory, I would like to further the theory of performativity which is still underdeveloped concerning the institutional critique and subversive potential. Since "subversive bodily acts" can occur within the binary system of gender categories, I suggest that subversive curatorial practice exists within the exhibitionary technology. In this regard, artists who intervene in museum displays have provided inspiring approaches toward queer curatorial practices. In the following text, I will explore two artist-curated exhibitions: American artist Fred Wilson's *An Invisible Life: A View into the World of a 120-Year-Old Man* (1993) and Danish artist Henrik Olesen's *Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists relevant to Homo-Social Culture Born between c. 1300–1870* (or *Some Faggy Gestures*<sup>38</sup>, 2007) to expound on how artists perform narratives derived from museums yet expose the institutional problem and evoke intersectional queer readings. Wilson and Olesen's artwork-exhibitions are chosen as examples because both of them make use of exhibitionary techniques to perform queer culture in non-essentialist ways.

### **1.3 How to Do Queer Exhibitions**

I view both *An Invisible Life* (1993) and *Some Faggy Gestures* (2007) as subversively performative exhibitions because in some ways they are both exhibitions in "drag" or "cross-dressing". Both Fred Wilson and Henrik Olesen appropriate narrative elements of exhibitions such as displayed objects with captions, photographs and archives to "dress up" their exhibitions. However, their combination of fact and fiction problematizes the "straight" (to borrow the phrase which means "heterosexual" in popular queer culture) narrative of

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<sup>38</sup> The title is taken from the art book/catalogue produced by the artist next year. See: Henrik Olesen. *Some Faggy Gestures*. Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008.

museums and exposes the cultural construction of museum exhibitions themselves.

In the 1990s, Wilson's installations were significant in terms of curating history because not only did they engage with institutional critique but also, rather than being limited to a small section, they occupied a major part of exhibition space and changed the display narrative.<sup>39</sup> *An Invisible Life* was one of the installations by Wilson integrated into part of the heritage tour *in situ* at Haas-Lilienthal House in San Francisco, an example of Victorian architecture belonging to the Haas family who were German immigrants. First, visitors were introduced to Baldwin Antinous Stein, a man of Jewish and Caribbean descent and "a guest of the Haas Family from 1906-90" without revealing the fact that this was a fictional persona created by Wilson. The space was furnished with photos, sculptures, portraits, and books to create a sense of historic presence. Although never specified, homoerotic marks such as an Ancient Greek wrestling sculpture, photos of intimate male sailors and even the middle name of the persona, Antinous, lover of the emperor Hadrian, hinted at "an invisible life" of a queer subject.<sup>40</sup>

Only at the end of this irregular tour did a handout reveal the artist's information and state that "You may or may not be aware that the tour you have just taken included a contemporary art installation,"<sup>41</sup> and by:

Using the format and language of museum presentation, the installation raises questions about how history gets told, what gets left out, and how we as audience members interact with institutions such as art and history museums.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Before *An Invisible Life*, Wilson had curated the renowned installation *Mining the Museum* (1992-93) which occupied eight rooms in the main floor in Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore and explored long-time neglected lives of African American subjects in national history. See: Terry Smith. *Thinking Contemporary Curating*, 2013, pp. 121-122.

<sup>40</sup> Susan A. Crane. "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," 1997, pp. 50-51. Marstine, Janet. *Critical Practice: Artists, Museums, Ethics*, 2017, pp. 89-95. Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer. *Art & Queer Culture*, 2013, p. 174.

<sup>41</sup> Susan A. Crane, pp. 50-51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

Afterwards, the heritage tour continued to the rest of Haas-Lilienthal House and visitors were left with a confused narrative which might provoke contemplation over the whole historic tour. For me, the use of “the format and language of museum presentation” shows that Wilson intends to expose the performative character of museum exhibitions through fabricating a queer identity. On the one hand, the presentation of Baldwin does correspond to the historical reality of “San Francisco’s gay history and its reputation for tolerance.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, its fictional gestures uncover the absence of queer lives in museum narratives as well as the fabrication of the narrative itself.

Whereas Wilson intervenes in the space of the museum through “queering” the physical objects, Olesen “queers” the historical images in an art historical framework which museums often work with. The initial lengthy title *Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists relevant to Homo-Social Culture Born between c. 1300–1870* seems to parody an art historical approach. Like an art historian or a museum curator, Olesen collects and categorizes numerous amounts of images of paintings, sculptures, photographs and documents on the subjects of criminalization of homosexuals, homoeroticism, gay and lesbian artists and their works, etc. Although the installations did not occupy as much space as Wilson’s works, Olesen presents these images in a collage with computer prints on different black boards on themes such as “The Appearance of Sodomites in Visual Culture”, “Masculinity”, “Dominance”, “American Male Bodies”, and “Lesbian Visibility”, to name just a few.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, unlike a “disciplined” art historian, within this seemingly objective art historical framework, Olesen mixes up his subjective and ahistorical engagement through the creative juxtaposition of pictures. For instance, in the panel, “Some Faggy Gestures” (fig. 1), selected

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<sup>43</sup> Susan A. Crane, p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> Henrik Olesen.

portraits of European male elites, mostly from the Renaissance and Baroque eras, are gathered as a portrait gallery. As the artist himself suggests, the intention is “to trace the historical arc of “faggy gestures” now codified in contemporary stereotypes of gay male comportment.” Whether the initial portraits were involved with homoerotic codes or same sex desires, the juxtaposition highlights their head wear, dress, and postures which might not be seen as “straight” in a heterosexual eye. In terms of Butler’s theory, all these gestures are attributed to certain sex or gender categories are performative. This playful and anachronic arrangement by Olesen echoes Butler’s arguments that these gestures that formulate human sexualities are not fixed and the boundaries vary through time and space.

Although the captions, image display and attached documents seem to be didactic, Olesen also twists this museological order by installing comical and yet subversive elements. In the panel of “Dominance”, the artist assembles sculptures and pictures of fights and wrestling, mostly arising from mythological motifs such as Herculean stories. However, at the very end, a photo of black male holding a white man’s penis and giving him spanking is shown, adding a kinky and subversive (in terms of race) remark to the whole narrative. In my view, Olesen’s curating gestures are subversively performative in the way that he employs the exhibitionary techniques to do queer art history.

In brief, both *An Invisible Life* (1993) and *Some Faggy Gestures* can be viewed as subversively performative acts because they borrow the museological or art historical techniques but call into question the approaches per se. While the former makes use of numerous physical materials to create fictional presence, the latter assembles a large amount of historical images to develop anachronic categories. In both cases, queer curating is used not only in terms of the subject matter but also the curatorial methods.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how Judith Butler’s gender performativity provides a non-essentialist framework to think outside the box in terms of sex and gender categories. In

line with her theory, I argue that the concept of performativity is equally applicable to museum exhibitions, for exhibitions are also kinds of speeches or acts performed by museums. As those performative gestures fabricate gender categories, museums speak or perform through exhibitions to formulate certain kinds of knowledge, especially knowledge of sexualities for the purpose of this study. Lastly, through the curating practices by artists Fred Wilson and Henrik Olesen, we see how queer exhibitions can “drag” themselves, using museological approaches to challenge the heterosexual narrative. In particular, *Some Faggy Gestures* later became one of the queering strategies adapted by curators of *Homosexualität\_en*. In the next section, I would like to discuss how the Schwules Museum\* using queer curating to intervene the national narrative at the German Historical Museum.

## 2. Queering the National History Museum

In 2015, *Homosexuality\_ies* was on view both in the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM, the German Historical Museum) and the Schwules Museum\*. This allows us to see what happens when a LGBTIQ community-based museum intervenes in a national history museum and challenges its heterosexual narrative. How did the curators arrange the exhibition sections in order to perform counter-narrative against the official narrative? First, if we compare the two very different museums, it has to be noted that the main exhibition venue, the DHM, since its founding in 1987, has intended to formulate a rather unified national narrative and this is also reflected in its permanent exhibition. Against such a homogenous national identity, curators from the Schwules Museum\* staged various counter-narratives which queered the national history and the museum space in *Homosexuality\_ies*. Second, the queer approach applied here not only introduced a large amount of LGBTIQ collections to criticize the long-running neglect of such subjects in the museum but also challenged the exhibition space by creating diverse display forms which allowed audiences to experience the queer history and culture in multiple ways. Third, the choice of exhibition poster image, an androgynous body by performance artists Heather Cassils and Robin Black, also addresses the issues of sexuality the curators wish to highlight. The social effects of the poster led to wider debates within LGBTIQ communities and in the general public about censorship in train stations. I view these controversies as “gender trouble” produced by the exhibition poster which opens up discussion space for the contested nature of sexuality.

### 2.1 Queering the National History

For the DHM, *Homosexuality\_ies* is the very first exhibition devoted to LGBTIQ history. I consider the exhibition as queer curating which interferes in a national narrative because not

only were the subjects of non-conforming gender presented but the display methodologies have been reflected against the conforming narrative the DHM produced. Before analyzing the curatorial strategies of *Homosexuality\_ies*, it is useful to compare the very different exhibition policies of the two museums. While the DHM stands for the official unified story of German national identity, the Schwules Museum\* performs various stories of LGBTIQ subjects.

The location and the founding history of the DHM express its national legacy. Its main Baroque building the “Amoury” (Zeughaus) was built by the Brandenburg Elector Frederick III between 1695 and 1730 and was used as an arsenal to display the military power of Prussia.<sup>45</sup> While some scholars, such as Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, find this national museum progressive because of its transnational perspective,<sup>46</sup> the creation of the museum was indeed out of an official agenda for national unity between West and East Germany. It was founded in 1987 by the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) in celebration of the 750th anniversary of the founding of Berlin. As the Chancellor Helmut Kohl stated in the same year, in the DHM, visitors would “experience first-hand the extent to which all Germans’ sense of togetherness derives from the irrepressible sources of language, culture, and also history.”<sup>47</sup>

The sense of unity uttered by Kohl can be still seen in today’s permanent exhibition *German History in Images and Artefacts (Deutsche Geschichte in Bildern und Zeugnissen)*. Opening since 2006, it displays 2000 years of Germany’s past in chronological order. While at the beginning, a map presents the changing borders of Germany, which questions the stability of national boundaries, the impressively long exhibition ends with the reunification in 1989 with many signboards proclaiming “Wir sind ein Volk!” (We are one people!).

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<sup>45</sup> See: “The Zeughaus,” <https://www.dhm.de/en/about-us/the-buildings/zeughaus.html> (accessed on 7 November 2017)

<sup>46</sup> Rosmarie Beier-de Haan. “Re-staging Histories and Identities” in: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 2006, pp. 189-190.

<sup>47</sup> Helmut Kohl, “Berlin bleibt Brennpunkt der Deutschen Frage” [“Berlin Remains the Focal Point of the German Question”], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 29, 1987. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1158](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1158) (accessed on 7 November 2017)

Although a major part of difficult history, such the Nazi era, has been substantially covered,<sup>48</sup> for some, the permanent exhibition is still reluctant to engage with controversy and the display method is rather conventional.<sup>49</sup> As Peter M. McIsaac and Mueller Gabriele have noted, the permanent display which focuses on objects and images highlights a sense of historical “authenticity” and avoids immersive experiences such as films and installations.<sup>50</sup> As we shall see below, such an object-based and disengaged approach was then challenged by dynamic displays in *Homosexuality\_ies*.

Contrary to the unified narrative presented at the DHM, the Schwules Museum\* displays diverse stories of non-conforming gender identities in a much smaller space (1600 m<sup>2</sup>). As mentioned in the introduction, the museum started as a “gay” museum but then gradually turned to more diverse LGBTIQ communities. From 2004 to 2013, there was a permanent exhibition at the Schwules Museum (without the asterisk sign) which represented mainly gay culture in Germany in roughly chronological order.<sup>51</sup> Although in another earlier exhibition, *Goodbye to Berlin: 100 Year Gay Movements* (1997) at the Akademie der Künste, lesbian subjects had been included, it was not until 2008 that the Schwules Museum\* organized its first lesbian show, *L-project: Lesbians in Berlin from 1970s to the Present*.<sup>52</sup> Since then, the museum has paid more attention to diverse sexual identities. In 2012, the subject of trans\* was also recognized.<sup>53</sup> In 2013, the museum relocated to its current address and since then, there have been on average 10 exhibitions each year.<sup>54</sup> Rather than constructing a unified permanent exhibition, the exhibition scenography at the Schwules

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<sup>48</sup> Kohl also wished to acknowledge the Nazis past. See: Helmut Kohl.

<sup>49</sup> Rottmann and Hacke, pp. 57-59.

<sup>50</sup> Peter M. McIsaac and Mueller Gabriele, *Exhibiting the German Past*, 2015, pp. 147-148.

<sup>51</sup> See: Andreas Sternweiler, *Selbstbewusstsein und Beharrlichkeit: Zweihundert Jahre Geschichte*, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> See: *L-project: Lesbians in Berlin from 1970s to the Present*

<http://www.schwulesmuseum.de/en/exhibitions/archives/2008/view/l-project-lesbians-in-berlin-from-1970s-to-the-present/> (accessed on 7 November 2017)

<sup>53</sup> See: *Trans\*\_homo - of Lesbian Trans\*\_ gays and Other Normalities*

<http://www.schwulesmuseum.de/en/exhibitions/archives/2012/view/trans-homo-of-lesbian-trans-gays-and-other-normalities/> (accessed on 7 November 2017)

<sup>54</sup> “How it Began,” <http://www.schwulesmuseum.de/en/the-museum/history/> (accessed on 7 November 2017)



Museum\* is constantly in flux and is open to projects initiated by board members, volunteers or guest curators.<sup>55</sup>

What happens when such an LGBTIQ community-based museum, which performs diverse sexual subjects, enters into a national history museum which pursues a unified national narrative? Does the representation of “one people” allow non-conforming gender identities to live within it? The proposal of *Homosexuality\_ies* was made by the Schwules Museum\* and the initial idea was an “exhibition on the history of lesbians and lesbian feminist activism in Germany.”<sup>56</sup> It went through the negotiating process with the DHM and the subject was then broadened.<sup>57</sup> The title of *Homosexuality\_ies* (mostly in red in the exhibition layout) provides a strong message which attempts to see through the seemingly solid “one people” identity and searches for diversity at the DHM. The contradictory wording turns one “homosexuality” into a plural form. This questions not only the unity of national identity but also the stereotype of homosexual identity per se. As Andrea Rottmann and Hannes Hacke indicate, the use of the plural form shows an awareness that homosexuality is not a constant but a “historical changing” identity category.<sup>58</sup> Following this dynamic title, the exhibition materializes its concepts through the powerful image of an androgynous body by performance artists Heather Cassils and Robin Black<sup>59</sup> as well as the exhibition spatial design. This could also be seen in the artwork *Homosexuals Only* bench by Elmgreen & Dragset installed at the exhibition entrance (fig. 2). A white bench was splitted into two parts. The longer part displayed “Homosexuals only” and the shorter part showed “Only”. This corresponds with the contradictory exhibition title and questions the exclusionary tendency of certain identity formation: Who are going to fit onto the bench and who are not? In what

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<sup>55</sup> According to Kevin Clarke, one of the board directors at the Schwules Museum\*, the unfinished permanent exhibition is also due to the limit of funding source and the exhibition space (author interview with Kevin Clarke on 15 September 2017).

<sup>56</sup> Rottmann and Hacke, p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> I will analyze this image along with the sensation it caused in the last section of this chapter.

follows, I would like to demonstrate how in the *Homosexuality\_ies*, intersectional ways of interpretations are permitted, which see through the solidity of the heterosexual narrative.

## 2.2 Queering the Museum Space

How did the curators arrange the exhibition sections in order to perform counter-narrative against the heterosexual narrative? The particular form of each exhibition section can be regarded as a way to queer the museum space, which created various routes of viewing experiences. Indeed, the exhibition organization of *Homosexuality\_ies* performed many counter-narratives against heterosexual order, which challenged the permanent exhibition of a unified national history. Although like the permanent exhibition, a large amount of objects and images was presented, *Homosexuality\_ies* intentionally rejected a chronological order and employed affective videos and installations which the DHM avoided. The whole exhibition design was intended to be “heterogeneous” as the curators stated, “a design that does not impose a unified spatial framework on the exhibition. Instead, a particular form was found for each chapter of the exhibition, which spatialized each of their central issues and theses.”<sup>60</sup> Like *An Invisible Life* and *Some Faggy Gestures*, the curatorial strategy of *Homosexuality\_ies* is subversively performative in the way that the exhibition techniques are applied to demonstrate the institutional neglect of LGBTIQ subjects.

The exhibition was structured in ten sections. Nine were in the DHM and one was in the Schwules Museum\*. While the last section, “What’s Next?” engaged with contemporary issues including migration, religion, recent artworks and queer porn<sup>61</sup>, the first nine sections dealt largely with LGBTIQ history, including personal stories, documentation of sexual minorities, criminalization, the Holocaust and social movements. In what follows, I focus on the venue of the DHM because this reflects how a LGBTIQ community-based museum

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<sup>60</sup> Birgit Bosold. *Homosexualität\_en*, 2015, p. 190. For English translation of the German text, see: the included English booklet, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Rottmann and Hacke, p. 63.

queers the national history museum.<sup>62</sup>

Rather than presenting a grand picture, the exhibition began with many personal stories. In “The First Time”, various audio-visual stations were installed to tell fifty-eight engaging personal “coming-out” stories through interview videos and personal belongings.<sup>63</sup> Beyond the narrative of “one people”, these people told their own stories which also showed how a person’s life was bounded up with the national history. For example, one man who appeared in the video recalled how he grew up in the countryside where he kept his sexuality secret but then moved to Berlin for a rather liberating life. Yet, it turned out the Berlin boy he loved worked for the Stasi (The Ministry for State Security in East Germany) and all his life was secretly documented and sent to his father back home.<sup>64</sup> While the interviewee narrated his personal love, the difficult past of the nation was also revealed. For one of the curators, Bosold Birgit, “The First Time” playfully referred to the first sexual contact in daily usage.<sup>65</sup> Yet, it might also have been “The First Time” that many audiences encountered people of non-conforming gender identities speaking to them. Visitors were invited to listen to various personal stories and each one might have individualized experience among these different installations.

Following “The First Time”, the exhibition then turned to female perspectives in “The Second Sex”, a title taken from Simone de Beauvoir’s iconic work. Portraits of women by artists throughout different times were displayed. Unlike many LGBTIQ exhibitions in which

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<sup>62</sup> Another reason for me to focus on the DHM space is that most visitors attended only the exhibition there. According to the visitor numbers provided by DHM PR department (DHM: 85,000/Schwules Museum 17,000), most visitors only visit the DHM despite the fact that there was audio guide connecting two exhibition venues. This might show that a barrier exists for many to visit an exclusive LGBTIQ museum. Furthermore, as Rottmann and Hacke suggest, the fact that no combination ticket offers might also have worsened the imbalance. See: Rottmann and Hacke, p. 64.

<sup>63</sup> All the personal belongings were returned after the exhibition but the personal stories were contented to be part of the collections of the Schwules Museum. See: *ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> Lui Zhi-Xin (劉致昕), “When the Gloryhole of Male Toilet was Hanged in the National History Museum: Thorough the First Homosexual Exhibition in Germany” (當男廁的門掛進國家歷史博物館，深入德國首次「同志歷史展」) <http://opinion.cw.com.tw/blog/profile/287/article/3126> (accessed on 7 November 2017) The English author name and the title are my translations.

<sup>65</sup> Author interview with Bosold Birgit on 16 September 2017.

males are often predominantly presented as even in *Some Faggy Gestures*, the curator intended to reflect on the male dominance even in queer culture. However, the section did more than incorporating lesbian subjects; it also permitted ambiguities among lovers, sisters and gender identities. For instance, the mise-en-scene photograph<sup>66</sup> by Tanja Ostojić and Marina Gržinić mimicked the mysterious gesture of the sixteenth-century French painting, *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (figs. 3-4). This painting of the Fontainebleau school, which portrays one woman pinching the other's nipple, has traditionally been interpreted as a depiction of pregnancy according to the heterosexual perspective.<sup>67</sup> Yet, were there possibilities of homoerotic reading in this affective gesture between two women? While Ostojić and Gržinić performed such a gesture, the breasts in their photograph are blocked with tape in x-shapes. Could this suggest the denied female sexuality in conventional art historical writing? Whereas Henrik Olesen imitates the art historical research method, Ostojić and Gržinić parodies the art historical canon and questions the "second sex" by which women are only considered the counter-part of men as Simone de Beauvoir suggests.<sup>68</sup>

Subsequent to "The Second Sex", "Other Images" assembled a much greater amount of paintings, drawings, prints and photographs from the Sternweiler Collection and displayed them under themes such as the homoerotic in art and the social history of homosexuals. As Rottmann and Hacke specified in this section, early photos of "odd couples" since the late nineteenth century demonstrate ambiguity. One might find it difficult to determine whether two men or two women in the photos are friends, lovers or in more complex relationships. One might look "through queer glasses" so that the "erotic potential" becomes possible.<sup>69</sup> Such potential of alternative reading was open to the visitors through caption placement. In both "The Second Sex" and "Other Images", captions were placed at a certain distance (figs.

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<sup>66</sup> Titled *Politics of Queer Curatorial Positions: After Rosa von Praunheim, Fassbinner and Bridge Markland*.

<sup>67</sup> This is how the artwork interpreted in the Louvre. See:

<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/gabrielle-d-estrees-and-one-her-sisters> (accessed on 8 November 2017)

<sup>68</sup> Bosold, p. 197.

<sup>69</sup> Rottmann and Hacke, p. 61.

5-6). While in the former, the captions were at the side of the pillar of each individual artwork, in the latter, the captions were beneath the image assemblage. Like *Some Faggy Gestures*, the image collections were gathered to reinterpret what might have been neglected in the heteronormative history.

Then we come to the central section of the whole exhibition, “Savage Knowledge” which parodies the painting storage shelves of the museum and exposes the absence of queer histories in the institution. Borrowing from Claude Levi-Strauss’ concept of “savage mind”, the “savage” here is the understandings of non-conforming gender subjects which have not been fully disciplined by an objectifying scientific method.<sup>70</sup> Like the appropriation of stigma in queer theory, the use of “savage” turns the negative mark into a subversive weapon against heterosexual dominance. As the curators have surveyed in the DHM, out of 7,000 items in the permanent exhibition, only five are related to homosexuals, mostly males.<sup>71</sup> This can hardly reflect the diversity of human sexualities in society. To resist such institutional oblivion, the curators brought into a large amount of “counter” collections, mostly from the Sternweiler collection in the Schwules Museum\*. The aim is not to provide an overview but to expose the general neglect of LGBTIQ collections in the museum.

What welcomed visitors in “Savage Knowledge” were large amounts of objects, pictures, publications and documents on the storage shelves (fig. 7). While everything was organized in a keyword index in alphabetical order, no dominant narrative was formulated. Visitors had to explore on their own the objects on the shelves and generate their own interpretations. The range of the objects was so wide (or “wild” as the term “savage” suggests) that no one could grasp the whole. Some were historical documents, magazines, photographs and films concerning the illegalization of homosexual people such as the paragraph 175<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Bosold, p. 192.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 191.

<sup>72</sup> The German criminal code illegalized sexual behaviors between men since 1872. In West Germany after 1969, it became only illegal when one male was less than 21 years old. It was totally abolished after 1994. See: Ibid, p. 112.

and LGBT social moments in Germany. Some were intriguing daily objects which might have never entered the national museum such as dildos, condoms, “gloryholes” used by male homosexuals for anonymous sex, and a set of Villerory & Boch dishes, the official prize from the German Football association for the victory of the German national women’s team in 1989. This shows the gender bias of football, a traditional domain of “white, mostly middle-aged, heterosexual men.”<sup>73</sup>

The exhibition catalogue also follows a similar logic with keywords in alphabetical order as “Savage Knowledge”. As a paper exhibition, a dictionary or encyclopedia of LGBTIQ subjects appears in a reader’s hand. Yet, unlike an encyclopedia, no sense of completeness is provided. Rather, each entry refers to more entries to give intersectional perspectives. For example, if one looks at “G”, one can find Butler’s influential book “Gender Trouble” which outlines her main theory of gender performativity. Below the text, one can also find references to other entries “Gender Blank”, “Male Impersonator”, “Queer”, and “X+Y=?”.<sup>74</sup> Both the section “Savage Knowledge” and the exhibition catalogue provide intersectional routes of learning and experiencing queer subjects.

After “Savage Knowledge” along the stairs to the upper floor, visitors began to experience a narrative transition which appeared to be more difficult histories of gender non-conforming people. In “Shame and Disgrace” (fig. 8), audio stations, installed in black isolated spaces against a red wall, offered homophobic “statements by preachers, church representatives, and leading cultural figures” as well as “voices of international activists.”<sup>75</sup> Again, as “The First Time”, visitors were not obliged to hear any particular voice or to follow certain storylines. Yet, while the black space distanced visitors from some of the hatred of the voices, quotes on the wall such as “Gesandte des Satans” (Satan’s envoy) as well as the red wall color indicated the hostile speech made toward the others in heteronormative society.

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<sup>73</sup> Bosold, p. 152.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 203.

Then, in “At Court”, a world map of criminalization and prosecution of homosexuality was displayed to look at the social conditions of LGBTIQ communities from a global perspective. What was then highlighted in this part was “In the Pink Triangle”, a space to mourn for homosexuals persecuted during the Nazis era. As the curators acknowledged in the introductory text, only very few survivors would be able to testify against the oblivions in post-war German society.<sup>76</sup> There, a triangle stone of historical memorial created by Munich activist in 1988, and then damaged in a storm, was installed. The triangle form appropriated how Nazis marked the “others” including Jews and homosexual people. In particular, the “pink triangle” identified homosexuality. The crack in the stone and the title of it, “Totgeschwiegen” (Silence to Death) were striking. “In the Pink Triangle” thus worked as “counter-monuments” which challenged the official holocaust memory. As James Young defines “counter-monuments”, they are not made to celebrate or commemorate, but to reflect on the failure and problem of commemoration. In this case, the very few testimonies and the crack in the triangle stone pointed out such failure in the national memory project.<sup>77</sup>

The final parts, “Inside the Matrix” and “The Personal is Political” proposed statements of gender discourse in science, culture and politics. In particular, “Inside the Matrix” presented framed boxes with quotes and documents concerning scientific discourse on gender and sexual identity. The concept of “matrix” comes from Butler’s elaboration on how homosexuality is constructed as the “unnatural derivation” in opposition to heterosexuality.<sup>78</sup> In the last section of the DHM, “The Personal is Political”, quoting from the powerful statement of feminist activists, daily life objects and fashion styles contributed by LGBTIQ people were presented on a colorful and bright wall. This section corresponded with “The First Time” where many personal stories were told and exhibited that these were real people in daily life who were affected by the public discriminations.

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<sup>76</sup> Bosold, p. 206.

<sup>77</sup> James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, 2000, pp. 27-48.

<sup>78</sup> Bosold, p. 209.

As we have seen, the curators of *Homosexuality\_ies* arranged the exhibition sections not only in terms of subject matters but also in the exhibiting forms of each section to perform counter-narrative against the unified permanent exhibition in the national museum. Artistic images of bodies, daily objects, archives, textual documents and recordings of voices concerning LGBTIQ subjects were used to queer the space of the DHM. Many of them can be viewed as performative in the exhibition in the ways they embodied the sexual experiences. As will be discussed below, I would like to conclude the performative acts of *Homosexuality\_ies* through the disturbing body image by Heather Cassils and Robin Black and the wider discussion it created outside the exhibition venue.

### **2.3 When an Exhibition Poster Arouses Gender Trouble**

When it comes to LGBTIQ subjects in the museum, one of the common problems is the representation of non-conforming sexual bodies and the irritations these bodies provoke. One iconic exhibition in art history was the controversy in the late 1980s in the U.S. surrounding the homoerotic works of Robert Mapplethorpe. The explicit censorship which canceled *The Perfect Moment* in Washington D.C. evoked public protestations as well as discussions about public funding and artistic freedom, the boundary between erotic art and obscenity, and queer politics.<sup>79</sup> Even recently, as I mentioned in the introduction, queer-themed art exhibitions like *Queermuseu* in Brazil, have raised the accusation of “paedophilia” and focused media attentions on what is considered “child porn”. These queer artworks are subversively performative acts on display whose queer bodies open up the space for conversations in public realms. Through displaying these queer bodies, curators potentially challenge the gender norms in not only the museum but the public space. As we shall see, the exhibition poster of *Homosexuality\_ies* garnered wide attentions not only from the general public but

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<sup>79</sup> Lord and Meyer, p. 160.



also within LGBTIQ communities.

The exhibition poster highlights the contradictory exhibition title *Homosexuality\_ies* that plays with sexual and gender ambiguities (fig. 9). The presented artwork called *Advertisement: Homage to Banglis* was part of the performance project *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* by Canadian artists Heather Cassils and Robin Black in 2011. As the title suggested, inspired by Lynda Benglis's 1974 provocative advertisement in *Artforum* which showed herself wearing a prolonged phallus (fig. 10), Cassils decided to build herself into a mix body of desired masculinity and femininity.<sup>80</sup> The contradictory body image demonstrates the heavily trained muscular body wearing a jockstrap with pierced nipples, highly whitened makeup and blood red lips which might be conceived of as ideal feminine marks. According to Butler's theory of gender performativity, either masculine or feminine characters are naturalized cultural fictions. By dramatizing these attributes, the work displays the performative acts of gender formations and denaturalizes them. The curators of *Homosexuality\_ies* chose this artwork and included it in almost every corner of the exhibition, from the posters hung around the two museums to the cover of the catalogue. The message was clearly strengthened by the use of white and red colors in the major exhibition layout. Hence, the image of the androgynous body also performs the visual speech of the exhibition.

Putting such an image of gender ambiguity into public space such as museums, train stations and the internet resulted in interesting reactions and discussions among different interpretive communities. From the moment of first release of this image, the Schwules Museum\* received a protesting letter from some LGBTIQ members because they thought the image was "monstrous" which did harm to the representation of their communities. Yet, rather than be discouraged by the remark, the curating team released an open letter in response to the critics. Instead of fearing the "monstrous" image, curators wanted the critic and many others to question what "monstrosity" or "against nature" means in society. They

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<sup>80</sup> Lord and Meyer, p. 251.

wrote:

That the different and ambiguous [gestures in the poster] are difficult to bear is, in our view, one of the roots of the hatred of homosexual women and men whose sexual desire and sexual expression have been persecuted, discriminated against and marginalized as “unnatural” and “abnormal”.<sup>81</sup>

Since the concept of monstrosity can be the social bias which diminishes LGBTIQ people, the museum raises a rhetorical question: “Should not exactly the acceptance of difference, political and perhaps also ‘only’ aesthetic differences, especially within the community itself as they are seen in the example of this poster apply?”<sup>82</sup> The letter ends with acknowledgement of the complexity of sexual and gender identities and an invitation to the exhibition for those critics in spite of their disagreement with the choice of poster.<sup>83</sup> The discussion indicates the disrupting power of the poster even within the LGBTIQ communities.

In the exhibition space, the poster was certainly an eye-catching conversation piece. As a Taiwanese journalist observed, school students asked their teacher if he/she is a man or a woman, invoking discussions and reflections on the gender identities.<sup>84</sup> Before moving to another dispute the poster aroused, it should be noted that the general strategy which the museum employs to deal with sexually themed topics and indicates how the museum is

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<sup>81</sup> “Dass das Andersartige und Uneindeutige schwer ausgehalten werden kann, ist aus unserer Sicht eine der Wurzeln für den Hass auf homosexuelle Frauen und Männer, deren sexuelles Begehren und deren geschlechtlicher Ausdruck als „widernatürlich“ und „abnormal“ verfolgt, diskriminiert und marginalisiert wurde und wird.” in: Kuratorisches Team der Ausstellung Homosexualität\_en, “Antwort auf Plakatkritik”, press release in 2015, now untrievable. Thanks Bosold Birgit for mentioning this opening letter and thanks Kevin Clarke for providing it with me.

<sup>82</sup> “Sollte nicht genau diese Akzeptanz von Differenz insbesondere auch innerhalb dieser Community selbst, politischen und vielleicht auch ‚nur‘ ästhetischen Differenzen, wie sie am Beispiel dieses Plakats sichtbar werden, gelten?” Ibidem.

<sup>83</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>84</sup> Lui Zhi-Xin (劉致昕).

performative in the way it manages issues of sexuality. While in the Schwules museum\*, sexual themes have been openly displayed, including a 20-minute video collection of queer porn without reservation, the DHM installed a panel to warn visitors about the sexual content and “recommended that children only visit in the company of adults.”<sup>85</sup> The warning sign of sexual contents is also a performative exhibition technique employed by the museum to manage potentially controversial themes and avoid accusations. As Jennifer Tyburczy has argued, the consequences of warning signs cannot be neglected because they might silence the voices of non-conforming sexualities.<sup>86</sup> The discreet attitude was also reflected, as Rottmann and Hacke note, in the concern of the museum and city education department’s members that the poster and the exhibition theme might discourage teachers and students from attending. The result of booking tours and workshops, however, showed that the schools were not troubled at all.<sup>87</sup>

What the warning signs and the discreet attitude of some museum staffs showed were not necessarily explicit censorship, but more disengaging acts that demonstrated a reluctance to be involved in controversy. Although such a discreet approach might be interpreted as considerate to the wider public, the silence and consequent loss is the opportunity for public conversation. The poster evoked another response when the exhibition traveled to Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kultur (LWL, State Museum for Art and Culture) in the very Catholic German city, Münster in 2016. While there were no disputes in the museum space, the Deutsche Bahn (German Railway Company) refused to display the poster in the stations before the opening due to the consideration that the image was “sexualized” and “sexist”. The company then explained that allowing the poster to be hung in the Berlin stations the previous year was an “oversight”. This time, the Schwules Museum\* responded quickly in the press and argued that the DB had no problem in accepting heterosexual normed

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<sup>85</sup> Rottmann and Hacke, p. 63.

<sup>86</sup> Tyburczy, pp. 104-115.

<sup>87</sup> Rottmann and Hacke, p. 63.

commercials, while censoring gender nonconforming subjects. The museum then invited the DB for an open discussion. However, without further participation in the conversation, within a few days, the DB began to display the posters. Although one DB spokesman expressed that the mass sexual assaults during the 2015/2016 New Year's eve in Cologne made the issue "sensitive", what they saw as "sexualized" and "sexist" in Cassils's androgynous body remained unclear.<sup>88</sup>

Considering all the unease the poster provoked, it can be shown that the artwork is exceptionally disturbing for its dramatized attributes of the masculine and feminine body. This not only troubles and confuses viewers, it also creates potential conversations over the boundaries between the ideal and monstrous body. Were it not through the queer curating that turned this *Advertisement* into the poster of the exhibition, the topical effect would not have been as wide as the poster had reached. The controversies invoked by the body image show that through performing a queer body both inside and outside the museum space, one might disturb the structure and the narrative of heteronormativity. This demonstrates how displaying powerful non-conforming gender image through queer curating can potentially unsettle the heteronormativity and create conversations in public realms.

In this chapter, we have seen how the Schwules Museum\* challenged the unified narrative in the DHM through queer curating. In general, the subversively performative strategy of *Homosexuality\_ies* was designed in a de-centralized form that permitted intersectional interpretations. Through displaying counter-collections and queer bodies in diverse ways, the curators call into question the museum's oblivion of LGBTIQ subjects and the heterosexual gender norms in society. Even if objections occurred not only from the authority as well as the LGBTIQ communities themselves, the exhibiting of a queer body without reservation

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<sup>88</sup> "Deutsche Bahn zeigt "Homosexualität\_en"-Plakat nun doch"  
[http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/queerspiegel/muenster-deutsche-bahn-zeigt-homosexualitaet\\_en-plakat-nun-doch/13575866.html](http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/queerspiegel/muenster-deutsche-bahn-zeigt-homosexualitaet_en-plakat-nun-doch/13575866.html) (accessed on 7 November 2017)

stimulated public discussions. This also shows that divergence exists within what have been marked as converged sexual minority in identity politics. In what follows, I would like to examine how a queer approach can raise questions upon the developing history of the Schwules Museum\* and meanwhile this can be contrasted with other approaches which persists rather consistent homosexuality.

### 3. Queering the Gay Museum

This chapter returns to the Schwules Museum\* to see how a museum which used to be exclusively devoted to male homosexual subjects opened itself up to diverse sexualities and different approaches. As I have shown in chapter one, for Butler, even homosexuality is socially constructed as the unnatural counterpart of heterosexuality. Hence, a radical queer perspective might also reflect on the cultural fictions of the homosexual subjectivity. The recent exhibition *Odarodle* curated by artist-curator Ashkan Sepahvand proposes a critical approach which examines the founding history of the Schwules Museum (without the asterisk) from a post-colonial perspective. Through archive display, contemporary art installations and performances, the exhibition calls into question the Eurocentrism which was hidden in the ethnographical narrative of the original exhibition *Eldorado*. Such a post-colonial approach is also queer in that it questions the centrality of the white male and the problematic identity formations of the self and others. However, the queer approach is somewhat at odds with other exhibitions such as *Winckelmann* and *Kai Teichert*, which are more based on white male homosexual identity. Rather than viewing the contradictory positions among these exhibitions as undesired disunity, I argue that the Schwules Museum\* is a contested terrain open to different curatorial perspectives which perform divergent stories.

#### 3.1 Performing Post-Colonial Critique

The exhibition *Odarodle* is an artistic intervention which enacts institutional critique. Like Fred Wilson's museum art, Sepahvand "mined" the museum collection and archive and researched a neglected area in the museum narrative. Like Henrik Olesen, he re-collected the historical texts and images and re-interpreted them from another perspective. Yet, unlike these artistic interventions, for this exhibition, Sepahvand himself worked as a research

fellow in the Schwules Museum\*. Rather than criticizing the museum from an outsider position, this artist-curator reflected on the founding myth of the museum from a position within the institution.

In the exhibition's introductory text, Sepahvand clearly specifies his post-colonial approach to challenge the origin myth of the Schwules Museum\*. The title *Odardle* is a playful reverse spelling of the landmark exhibition *Eldorado* in 1984 which is considered the founding exhibition of the museum. As an artist works constantly with translation, Sepahvand paid great attention to the multiple references of Eldorado. The 1984 exhibition named itself after the legendary nightclub in 1920s Berlin which was famous for transvestite shows and the social space of Berlin queer lives during the Weimar period. The nightclub named itself after the European legend of a lost city of gold in northern Amazonia which appeared in many sixteenth-century European accounts. Through those historical sources, the curator found that the "nature peoples" were exoticized and considered "primitive" and "strange". Thus, the legend is a colonial myth that rose along with European overseas expansion to America. The name of Eldorado, therefore, referred to three things: a homosexual exhibition, a night club and a colonial myth.<sup>89</sup>

All these three layers of reference are concerned with the concept of "nature", as the seemingly historical subtitle *An Imaginary their\_story of naturepeoples, 1537-2017* suggests. First, for European colonists, people living in the mythological Eldorado were regarded as "primitive", "uncivilized" or "strange" "nature peoples" who were waiting to be conquered. Second, in a heterosexual society, gender non-conforming people or those men who cross-dressed in the night club were considered "unnatural" in Weimar Berlin. Third, returning to the landmark exhibition in 1984, the curator pointed out that an ethnographical approach was adopted to curate the very first homosexual exhibition in a German public museum. The 1984 exhibition focused on gay and lesbian life in Weimar Berlin and

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<sup>89</sup> See the exhibition handout.

reconstructed living environments such as “the gay boudoir, the lesbian café, [and] the Tiergarten cruising area” in a theatrical manner.<sup>90</sup> Nature, sexuality and ethnography, all of them are categorizing techniques which draw the boundary between norms and against norms.

The backward Eldorado, that is *Odarodle*, attempts to subvert these naturalized categories. Like *Homosexuality\_ies*, the exhibition title *Odarodle* performs mutual meanings which go against a single-angle story. While *Homosexuality\_ies* questions a unified national narrative, *Odarodle* challenges the colonial root in the founding myth of a “gay museum”. Like the former, the subversive ideas are also embodied in the curatorial strategies. First, although comparably much smaller in scale, rather than displaying a large amount of existing collections, the curator invited 16 contemporary artists to contribute to the exhibition. Most of them are based in Berlin but there are also members from the global south. Ten artworks were made for this exhibition to engage with the colonial myth. As Sepahvand stated, most of them have not entered this museum and it is his intention to bring in this contemporary artistic network.<sup>91</sup> Second, unlike a conventional art museum, no captions, which often work as the curator’s interpretations of artworks, were provided. Although there was an exhibition handout which provided all artist statements and an exhibition map, it could take a while for a visitor to locate which artworks corresponded to which artists. Without the handout, a visitor would mostly have to rely on the bodily encounter with the artworks. As the curator expressed in the interview, he wishes to avoid methods of simple accessibility as seen in conventional museum exhibitions.<sup>92</sup>

But this does not mean a visitor was totally clueless in the exhibition. In fact, there was a singular opening video which became the key guide to understanding the whole artistic

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<sup>90</sup> See the exhibition handout.

<sup>91</sup> Author interview with Ashkan Sepahvand on 14 September 2017. Special thanks to Sepahvand for all his assistance and providing me with exhibition photos.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem.



project and its critical position. Entering the Schwules Museum\*, passing by the unfinished permanent exhibition and *Winckelmann*, a visitor would find *Odarodle* in the very last space of the museum. There, what greeted us was a video which showed the curator himself introducing the exhibition with subtitles in four languages (English, German, French and Arabic) (fig. 11). Beneath the video was a pink neon light which read “Odarodle”, creating a sense of a nightclub and tropical flavors. In the video, Sepahvand appears in the collection storage room of the Schwules Museum\*, wearing a black T-shirt with inscriptions of “Community & Diversity”. He explains the process of his job application to become a curator, the funding source<sup>93</sup>, the mission and the history of the museum and its tremendous collection, his post-colonial approach and his selected archives in this exhibition. The curator even identifies his own position as a “queer person of color”. Although all information seems to be provided with transparency, the tone of the curator is somewhat dubious as he talks in a slightly acting manner. Furthermore, in the middle of the video, Sepahvand reads out the lyrics from Enya’s popular 1980s song *Sail Away*, one full of tropical or even colonial imaginations. Then, the camera turns to show his back with the inscription “Staff” and the image stays still for a while, leaving the audience to ponder (fig. 12).

The video *Welcome Address* which works like an exhibition introduction is, in fact, an artwork by the artist Vika Kirchenbauer who employs the curator to “expose” his own position. As the curator mentions in the very last part of the video, what he says was written by the artist. Although most of the contents are probably true, the way Sepahvand addresses the viewer arouses suspicion (at the beginning, he repeats “welcome” several times which might also raise doubts) or even contemplation on the process of exhibition making. This is a remarkable gesture, for the artist’s video reverses the conventional power relationship in which the curator displays the artwork. In this case, the artist “displays” the curator and reveals the social, economic and political forces which gave birth to the critical position and

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<sup>93</sup> Kulturstiftung des Bundes (the German Federal Cultural Foundation)

the exhibition.

On the other hand, the ending of the performance highlights the institutional networks of the exhibition. The gesture can be viewed as a performance of institutional critique, even questioning the act of critique itself (as the “Staff” T-shirt also stresses that the curator is situated in the institution). If an artistic critique is institutionalized, is it still critical? Is it an institutional critique or institutionalized critique? What is an institution anyway? Similar questions have been addressed by Andrea Fraser, a performance artist who engages in institutional critique. She suggests that rather than targeting a specific institution, the core of institutional power lies in “the network of social and economic relationships”. In other words, she highlights: “It’s not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of value we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.”<sup>94</sup> By the act of performing, the *Welcome Address* recognized that the critical position of this exhibition is embedded with the social and economic networks within the museum and the cultural institutions that encourage the curator and artists to act from certain political positions (in this case, a post-colonial perspective). Rather than fantasizing themselves at an ideal vantage point, the video reveals the working process, the networks and the institutional reality.

The gesture of the video is critically performative which discloses the critical position and the social structure of the exhibition. This self-reflexive manner could also be seen in the contemporary artworks and performance in *Odardle*. In what follows, I examine how these artworks engaged with the issue of sexuality, nature and colonization and complicated the process of experiencing sexual identities.

### **3.2 Performing Archives and Queer Bodies**

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<sup>94</sup> Andrea Fraser. “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” 2005, p.105.

Like *Homosexuality\_ies*, staging the historical archives and performing queer bodies are the main strategies of institutional critique in *Odarodle*. Unlike the former, the queer bodies were displayed not only through visual artworks but also live performances in the latter. Either the body of archives (also used as a metaphor for the museum archive in the *Welcome Address*) or the body of the artist, they are all in some way performative for reshaping or exposing the fictional characters of historical narratives of sexual identity and ethnographical categories.

First, I would like to examine two artworks displayed from the archives in the center room after the *Welcome Address* video. These works call into question the neutrality of archival and scientific activities. One key character here is Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), the early sexologist who was also the founder of the first homosexual rights organization in Germany.<sup>95</sup> In spite of his contributions in activism, the curator and the artists found his scientific method and body display problematic in the way they categorize gender, sexual and even racial identities. As the *Savage Knowledge* section did in *Homosexuality\_ies*, both artworks perform the archives in order to disclose the systematic bias existing in the seemingly objective archival practices.

In the first installation, called *Sittengeschichte eines Naturmysteriums*, the selected archive materials from the Schwules Museum\* were gathered by Sepahvand and the artist Saida-Mahalia Saad in a collage form on the wall along with quotations concerning nature, gender, sexuality, ethnography and colonial history (fig. 13). Although it appeared disordered and fragmented at first sight, 65 documents from the museum collection and library, including mostly photographs related to the night club Eldorado, the exhibition Eldorado and many scientific images of Hirschfeld were numbered and the information could be traced in the handout. These images all related the way *Sittengeschichte* (a German historical genre, translated as “a history of mores and manners” in the handout) is constructed by using images to acquire knowledge. Very often, these images represent the “others”, such as indigenous,

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<sup>95</sup> Bosold, pp. 94-95.

monsters, gender non-conforming people, etc. One quotation affixed on the wall read, “And that’s what happened when straight white males got control of our lives” (fig. 14).<sup>96</sup> The statement corresponded with the artwork description in the handout that the viewing of *Sittengeschichte* is “a bourgeois conceit and a white platitude.” Yet, the quotation did not perform a didactic function like many museum captions. Rather, the quotation, like many others, was affixed with a patch of paper tape and could be easily removed by anyone as Sepahvand encouraged audiences to do so in his curator tour.<sup>97</sup> The installation therefore assembled images from historical archives as well as ethnography but destabilized them by ephemeral displays.

Contrary to the extravagant collage of *Sittengeschichte eines Naturmysteriums*, on the opposite wall, seven tightly framed black and white images were hung in a straight horizontal line called *Abstract Drag* (2012) by an artist duo Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry (fig. 15). These images were selected from the illustrations in Hirschfeld’s *Geschlechtskunde* (*Sexology*, 1930), an encyclopedia of a number of gender non-conforming bodies such as “cross-dressers, fetishists and bearded ladies with images of intersexual butterflies or chickens”.<sup>98</sup> The visual sources of Hirschfeld’s images derived from “erotic calendars, representation from big city subcultures, travel photography and freakshows.”<sup>99</sup> Although intended as scientific research, *Geschlechtskunde* nonetheless produced stereotypes and provided eroticized and exoticized viewings of the others. Against such an objectified gaze, the artists cropped and reframed the selected images while leaving many illustration titles visible. For instance, one image shows “Frauen als Arbeiterklasse, die als Männer leben” (Working class women who live like men) and yet the original photo is barely visible (fig. 16). Hence, the framed images are in drag to

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<sup>96</sup> The quotation comes from the work of German sociologist Klaus Theweleit, according to the curator in his lecture at University of the Arts Bremen on 2 November 2017. Most visitors, however, might not have been informant of the source. See: <https://salon-digital.com/salons/salons-salon-8> (assessed on 10 November 2017).

<sup>97</sup> On 16 September 2017 at the Schwules Museum\*.

<sup>98</sup> Renate Lorenz. *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, 2014, p. 144.

<sup>99</sup> Ibidem.

create an opaque viewing experience which rejects an objectifying ethnographical gaze. Meanwhile, the titles are left deliberately visible, exposing the categorizing process of scientific or ethnographic methods Hirschfeld worked with.

Second, another performative strategy in *Odarodle* was to use the artist's own body rather than inanimate archives. On the opening day of the exhibition (20 July 2017), four performances happened. Among them, *Reconnective Cruising* by Daniel Bernhard Cremer (GAIABOI) caught my attention because no material traces were left after his performance. The work performs "the cultural techniques of gay cruising" which includes pillow talk, cuddling, intimate touching, and a series of contingent actions or interactions in the museum space.<sup>100</sup> Yet, no photo or video documents were left after this performance and the artist is content with the temporality of this work.<sup>101</sup> Such a queer performance like many other performance arts also rejects being catalogued and challenges the exhibitionary complex which tends to put others on display as spectacles. For those who did not participate in the opening, one could only read the description in the handout. While the absent traces of the performance might lead to nowhere, the mere texts might spur queer imaginations of what intimate acts have happened in the space. In this way, the absence of material trace could become another curating technique to queer the exhibition space in audiences' mind.

Apart from absence, another artistic strategy is to create extravagant experiences. Some artists even complicated the viewing by using multimedia and installations to create sensory experiences that could not be easily categorized. Last, I turn to two such installations combined with multimedia performances. While these two artworks were located at two corners of the exhibition space respectively, both artists shared global south backgrounds and performed cultural hybridity which addressed post-colonial perspectives and challenged European-centered thinking. In *ALEX(ander) and AXOL(otl)* by Mexican artist Naomi

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<sup>100</sup> In the exhibition handout.

<sup>101</sup> In the personal contact with the artist on 2 November 2017.

Rincon Gallardo, an individual space was decorated with artificial grass and surrounded by a shower curtain printed with a nature landscape (fig. 17). On a wall, there was a projected image of the same landscape as the curtain. A sculpture of an axolotl-like creature with a human face hung from the centre of the ceiling. On the occasion of the performance, the artist created a mixed scenography of science fiction in her show. Drawing on the murdered Mixteco activist Alberta “Bety” Cariño (died in 2010), the artist imagined this heroine traveling through the magical world of pre-colonial Mesoamerica. Gallardo also fancied Cariño turning into her spirit animal, an axolotl, which was considered “queer” because “it reaches sexual maturity without undergoing puberty, remaining physically child-like and gender-ambiguous all its life.”<sup>102</sup> The artist also masqueraded as the spiritual axolotl and wore a phallus toy reminiscent of Benglis’s provocative advertisement. During the narrative, another girl cross-dressed as the European naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) who was fascinated by the queer creature. In this critically hybrid performance, the performers in drag danced and sang along with the musical film to blur the boundary between sexuality, humans and nature (figs. 18-19).

Moving to the last installation of my analysis, titled *Their Sounds Echoing between You and Me* by Brazilian Japanese artist Lucas Odahara (fig. 20), a painted complex of ceramic tiles presented the sixteenth-century story of Tibira do Maranhão who was murdered by the French colonists in 1614. His story has been recently revived by Brazilian activists and he has been commemorated as the “first indigenous gay martyr of Brazil” in 2016. Yet, rather than telling a story of execution, the tile panel presented a fragmented picture through divided tiles. While one could recognize the figures of European colonizers with their canons and landscapes of tropical forests, the main subject, Maranhão appeared to be merely strokes of a foot and right arm, suggesting a fragmented historical subject. In fact, the artist could rely on European sources to revive this Brazilian subject: Delft-blue like tiles, European paintings of

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<sup>102</sup> In the exhibition handout.

Brazilian landscapes and even the only written account by a French priest. Again, like other artworks in form of drag, the installation appropriated European visual expression. On the day of performance (fig. 21), Odahara introduced the history and played a series of sounds: noises of contemporary strikes, sound of canons, singing of birds and a recording of *House of the Rising Sun* played by the artist's musician father, a song whose original form might have been brought over by the French during the time of Louis XIV. Contemporary voices conflated with historical as well as personal memories. The artist created hybrid visual installations with sound performance and called into question the possibility of representing a gay subject in colonial history.

Putting both installations mentioned above at two edges of the exhibition, the curator also broadened the geographical horizons of the Schwules Museum\* which used to focus mainly on European white male homosexual culture. As we can see above, whether archives, body performance or installations in *Odarodle*, all of them reflected on not merely the problem of gender, sexual, racial identity but also the performative mechanisms such as historical narratives, ethnography and visual techniques which produced these categories.

### **3.3 The Schwules Museum\* as a Contested Terrain**

As discussed above, both *Homosexuality\_ies* and *Odarodle* are examples of the queer curating of the Schwules Museum\* in terms of not only subject matters but also display design. Yet, this does not mean Schwules Museum\* has completely turned into a queer museum which solely embraces queer curating. While *Odarodle* was apparently queer which problematized identity formation, the other exhibitions remained mainly based on homosexual identity. The contrast reveals that the museum does not speak in only one voice but permits various voices to co-exist. Of course, it has to be recognized that these exhibitions rely on different funding sources and this might limit the labor and resource

involved.<sup>103</sup> However, my intention is to point out that the divergent curating methods which might be at odds with each other are part of the creative process of the museum being open to disagreement and revision. Such a potentially conflicting exhibitionary complex turns the Schwules Museum\* into an openly contested terrain where different modes of exhibition narratives compete with or complement each other.

In early September 2017, there were two exhibitions, *Winckelmann: the Divine Sex* and *Kai Teichert: House of Joy* both curated by Wolfgang Theis, one of the founders of Schwules Museum\*. While *Winckelmann* centred on the sexuality of the putative founding father of art history and the same sex desires in neoclassical Europe, *Kai Teichert* presented contemporary pictures of a sensual and oriental utopia by the Berlin-based artist. Although they differed in times and subject matters, both of them pertained mainly to male homosexuality.<sup>104</sup>

Both *Winckelmann* and *Kai Teichert* were at odds with *Odarodle* in terms of curating methods and understandings of sexual identity. In *Winckelmann*, a succinct art historical and cultural historical approach was adopted. Displaying 120 sculptures, plasters, paintings, etchings, photographs and books, the exhibition was typically object-based. While in *Odarodle* no captions were attached to any artwork, in *Winckelmann* all objects were captioned in both German and English. The second major difference lies in their approaches toward sexuality. Whereas the former destabilized the identity formation, as *Their Sounds Echoing between You and Me* called into question the queer subjectivity of the sixteenth-century Brazilian indigenous Tibira do Maranhão, the latter emphasized on the homosexuality of Winckelmann, an eighteenth-century art historian, whose writings on art resplendent with suggestions of male eroticism tend to be overlooked.<sup>105</sup> According to the

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<sup>103</sup> While *Odarodle* was supported by the International Museum Fellowship Programme of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, other exhibitions were not benefited from the equal funding scales (author interview with Kevin Clarke on 15 September 2017). Special thanks to Clarke for all the assistance during my visit to the Schwules Museum\*.

<sup>104</sup> In *Winckelmann*, one section “How Feminine are the Fine Arts?” does address female artists.

<sup>105</sup> See the exhibition handout.



captions, this founding father of art history:

[N]ever concealed his homosexuality. The fact that Winckelmann's disposition was an "open secret" – his contemporaries, like Casanova, (who supposedly surprised Winckelmann in the middle of lovemaking with a page boy) [...] bluntly addressed his homosexuality – and did not damage his reputation of the scholar himself.<sup>106</sup>

Although there are few who dispute Winckelmann's same sex desire, not all scholars agree to characterize him as a homosexual, a modern sexual category. Alex Potts, for instance, hesitates to use this term because Winckelmann lived in a time when "the idea of sexuality as we know it did not yet exist."<sup>107</sup> The point is not to show which interpretation is correct, rather, my intention is to show the difference between identity-based classification, which views a rather homogenous sexual identity in history, and dis-identification which recognizes the variable concepts of sexuality in different contexts. While *Odardle* assumes the latter position, *Winckelmann* comes closer to the former.

In *Kai Teichert*, more contradictory readings can be made because of the eroticized and exoticized oriental scenery. The large wall paintings were based on the house of Charles Leslie, founder of Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. The artist took snapshots of people but transformed the scene into a Moroccan setting. People were turned into trees, leaves, and flowers and posed in various sexual positions. On the one hand, this might fall into the stereotype of orientalism where the East was portrayed as outside of Western civilization. On the other, it might also become a place for unrecognized sexual desires to exist, although it is mainly male homosexuals here. Nonetheless, the homosexual desires in the artworks by Kai Teichert assumed a more homogenous sexual identity than *Odardle* did.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>107</sup> Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*, 1994, p. 183.

Ironically, the orientalism was in conflict with the post-colonial position of the latter.

As we can see, the Schwules Museum\* indeed incorporates very divergent curating approaches, even though the curators' viewpoints are somewhat in conflict with each other. This divergent exhibitionary complex presents not only different curating methods but also various sexualities. As Kevin Clarke expressed to me in an interview, all exhibitions for them are a learning process. They are open to responses and making changes the next time. For example, during his curating project of *Porn that Way* in 2015, along with other curators, they included gay, lesbian, trans\* and queer pornography, which contained black people. Yet, in the guestbook someone questioned why there had been no Asian people. Clarke admitted that this was indeed an oversight, reflecting another instance of the institutional oblivion to which queer subjects are relegated, but in the meantime, he expressed welcome for proposals of prospective changes for future projects.<sup>108</sup>

As a museum open to critical responses and willing to change, this museum becomes a contested terrain which refuses to be simplified as certain categories and which performs diverse sexualities. Even though the divergence of methods in the execution of exhibitions might not be deliberately created, I view this as a creative process which opens up space for reciprocal exchange. As Butler reflects on the desired unity of early feminist movements which insisted on a universal female subject, she proposes:

An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternatively instituted and relinquished according to the purpose at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergence and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of a definitional closure.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Author interview with Kevin Clarke on 15 September 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Butler, p. 22.

In my view, the divergent exhibitions staged at the Schwules Museum\* potentially formulate such an “open assemblage” which allows conflicted positions to converge and diverge in different situations. Along with the unfinished permanent exhibition and constantly changing temporary ones, the museum does not attempt to provide a once and for all solution to formulate a unified identity but to always revise and revisit difference from intersectional perspectives.

In this chapter, I have explored how the queer curating of *Oldarodle* proposes post-colonial critiques in an LGBTIQ community-based museum. Through the contemporary artistic practice which performed archives and bodies in appropriative and hybrid forms, the exhibition called into question the concept of nature, ethnography and sexuality. Nonetheless, there were still exhibitions based on a rather homogenous sexual identity approach in the Schwules Museum\*. Any visitor in early September 2017 might have found the exhibition narratives and knowledge of sexualities in competition. Therefore, the museum can be viewed as a contested terrain with different performative gestures of sexualities opening up to possibilities of different stories.

## Conclusion: Thinking Exhibitions with Queer Theory

In this thesis, I begin with putting queer theory into curating practice, which has been rarely introduced into museum studies, as a theoretical attempt to expound on the potential subversive strategies of queer performance in museum exhibitions. In line with Butler's theory of gender performativity, I argue that museum exhibitions are also performative as they stage narratives of human sexualities. Through the lens of queer curating, we can see that the museum, along with other scientific disciplines, such as art history, ethnography, and natural science, has been part of the heteronormativity which prioritizes the narrative of two sexes. Therefore, exhibitions with critical queer approaches endeavor to not only display diverse sexualities but also call into question the institutional discrimination against LGBTIQ subjects.

Queer curating also reflects on the methods of exhibition displays. In both cases of queer curating of the Schwules Museum\*: *Homosexuality\_ies* and *Odarodle*, not merely were gender non-conforming subjects brought out but the institutional biases were also challenged through display methods. Not only were counter objects and images on view but multiple ways of experiencing the exhibition were also established. While in *Homosexuality\_ies*, the national memory was questioned due to its marginalization of diverse sexualities and each exhibition section was designed particularly against the unified narrative in the permanent exhibition, in *Odarodle*, even a museum dedicated to sexual minorities was critiqued for its Eurocentric origin, and post-colonial and queer strategies of drag and hybrid performance were employed to shun a simplified ethnographical way of viewing. Both cases demonstrate that the practice of queer curating can pose challenges to museums in exposing the systematic neglect of LGBTIQ communities and the diminution of sexual variety. Even though gender non-conforming subjects may be included, without such institutional critique, museums could

still risk reproducing prejudices and stereotyped subjects through the conventional ways of archiving, collecting and exhibiting, all of which register certain representation. Queer curating reflects on the museology as well as the heteronormativity and broadens our ways of experiencing human desires and love.

On the one hand, for museum studies and exhibition makers, queer curating provides opportunities to reformulate ways of display. Why are archives and collections assembled under certain principles which produce oversight of sexual variety? Why are exhibited objects hung and captioned in specific ways to manage interpretation which might shun queer readings? Why are certain body representations considered more ideal or desired than others? These questions raised by a queer approach would help curators to think about their curating methods differently. On the other hand, for queer theorists, museums are contested terrain to observe how certain narratives take hold and to explore the possibilities of divergent views of sexualities.

Even though both museum studies and queer theory pay particular attention to identity politics and poetics of representation, few attempts have been made to bring them together and benefit from each other. This thesis draws on the theory of gender performativity and the strength of the theory lies in its deconstructive analysis which de-naturalizes sexual and gender identities. If we see museum exhibitions as performative, further arguments can be extended to how queer curating develops subversive bodily performances which see through the solidity of heterosexual order in museums. However, it has to be acknowledged that the theory of gender performativity deals less with personal emotions and interpersonal relationships. The museum is also the space where visitors encounter and interact with objects, including emotional engagements. On this subject, recent queer theorists and museum researchers are also developing affect theory. Again, so far there are barely attempts to profit from both fields, yet this might be a potential area where queer curating and museum exhibitions can work together to create new research insights in the future.

In the twenty-first century LGBTIQ rights movement, museums have not been distant from this struggle for sustainable social development. While I have been conducting this research, two years after *Homosexuality\_ies* in DHM, same-sex marriage was legalized in Germany in June 2017. Even more recently, Germany's top court has ruled that new born babies can be registered as a third gender such as "inter" or "various".<sup>110</sup> Earlier this year, as noted in the introduction, Taiwan's top court supported the legalization of same-sex marriage and the following art exhibition, *Spectrosynthesis* occurred. This is not to suggest that museum exhibitions are so powerful as to enact direct social change, nor does legalization necessarily dispel discrimination as hate crimes against gender non-conforming people are on the rise even now, around the world, including Germany.<sup>111</sup> Yet, at least, museums can engage with social reality, and the theory and practice of queer curating struggles with past and present in the hope for a better, livable future.

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<sup>110</sup> "German Parents can Register Babies as Third Gender, Court Rules"  
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41912754> (assessed on 12 November 2017)

<sup>111</sup> Carla Bleiker, "Hate Crimes against Homosexuals on the Rise in Germany"  
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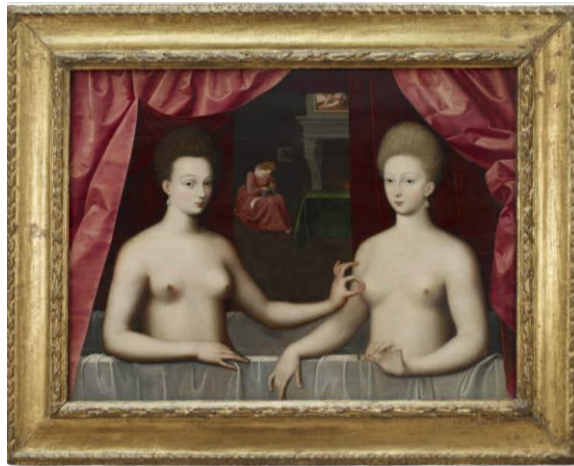
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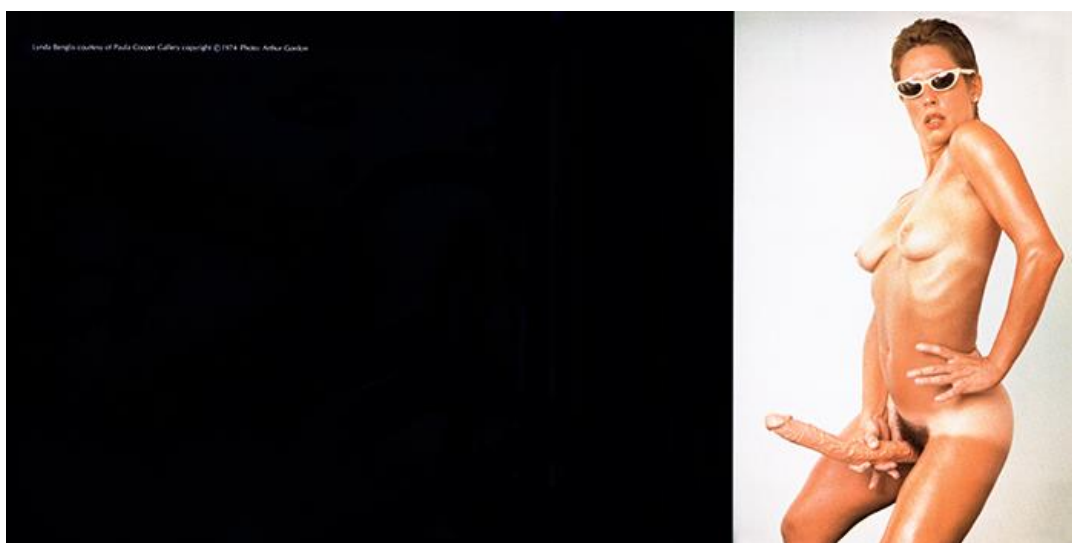
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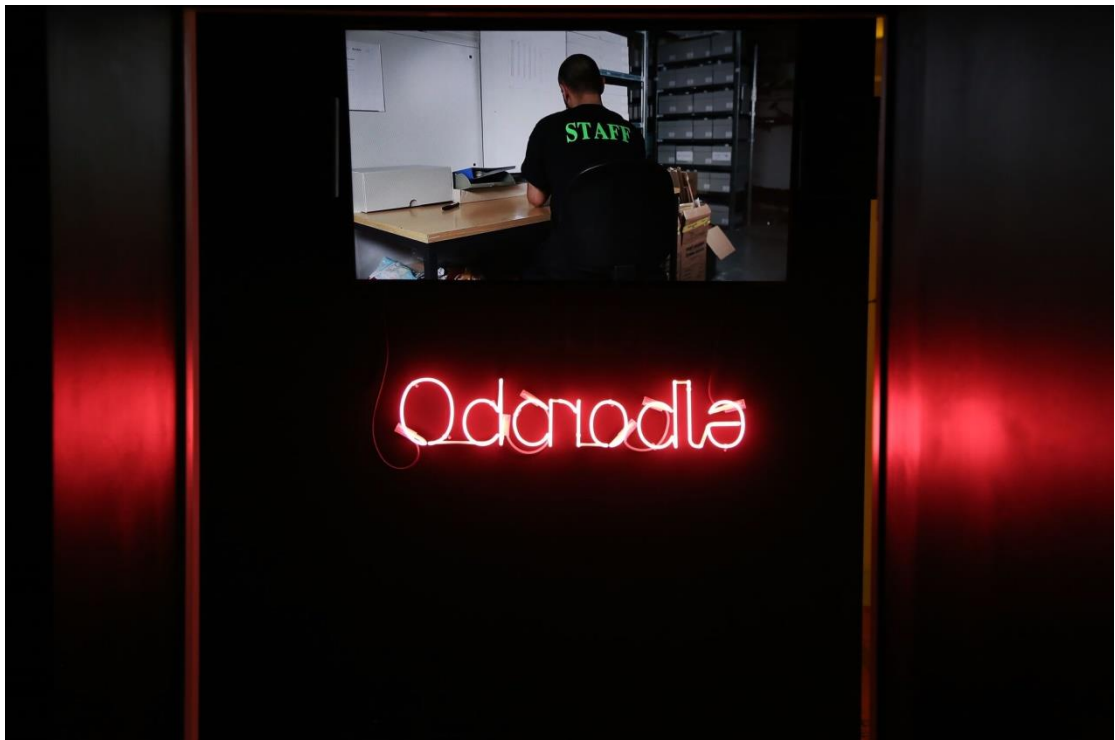
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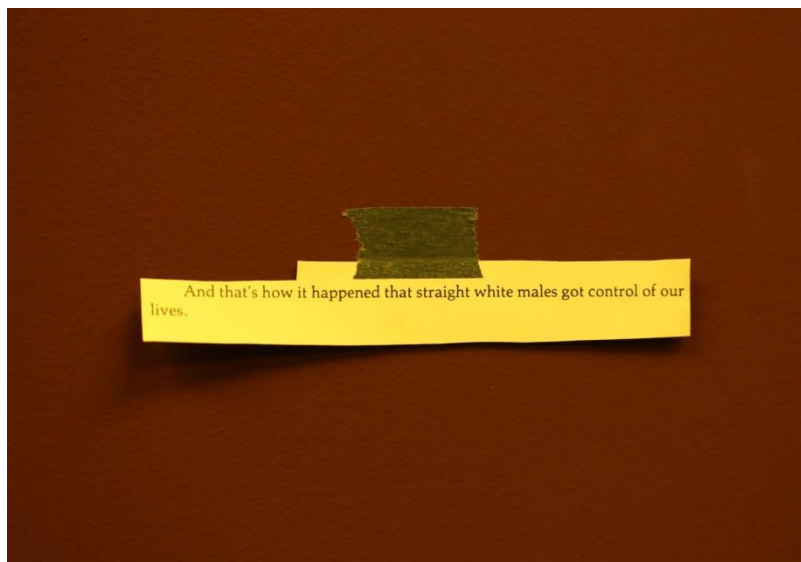


12. *Welcome Address* by Vika Kirchenbauer, installation view of *Odorodle*, courtesy of the artist and the Schwules Museum\*, photo: Alex Giegold (2017)





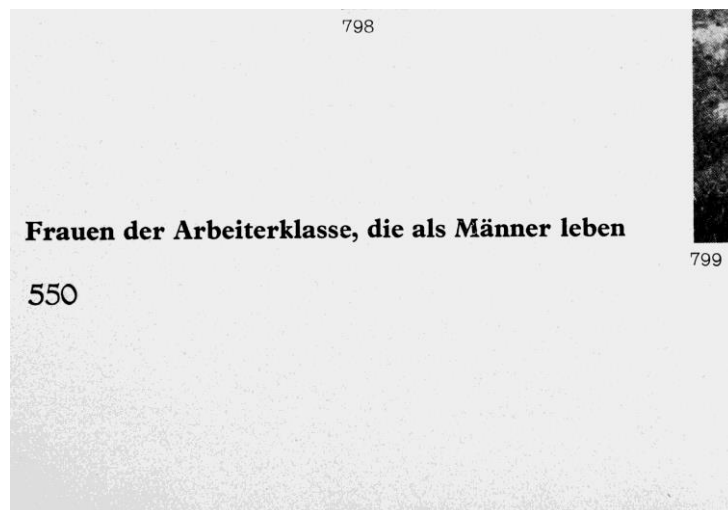
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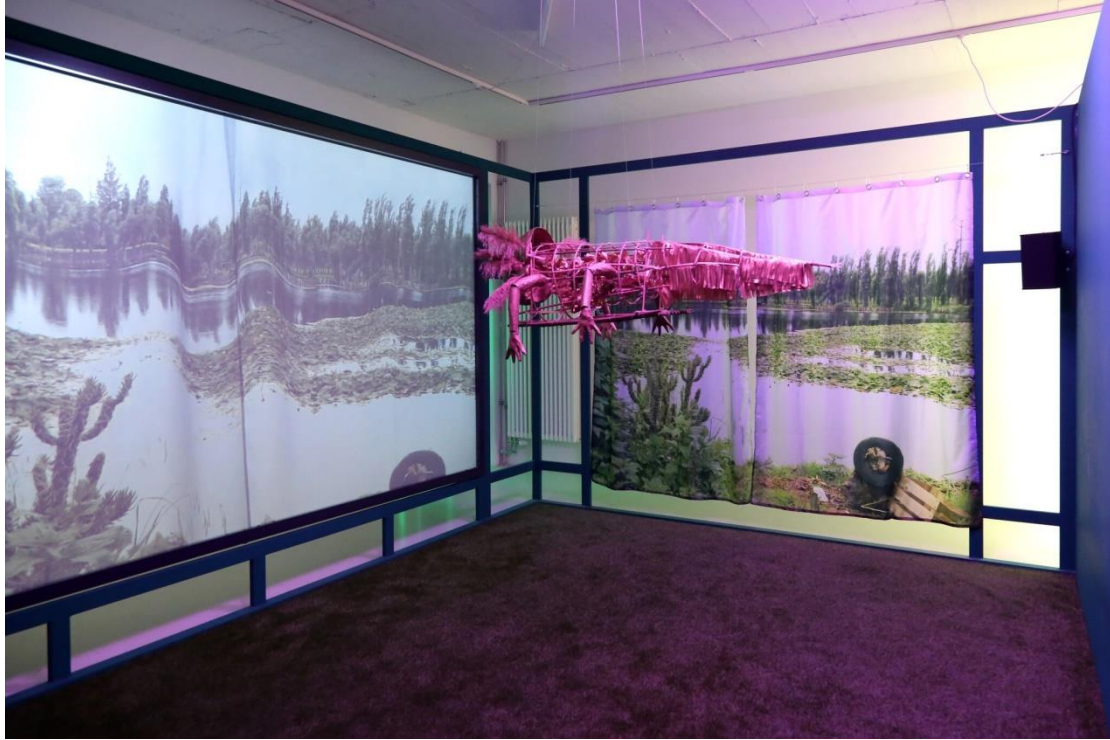
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