

# Art

MONTHLY

JULY-AUGUST 2019 | No 428 | £6 €8 \$9



**Walead Beshty**

Interviewed by John Parton

**Exhibition as Medium**

Marcus Verhagen

**Ima-Abasi Okon**

Profile by Maria Walsh

**Fast Forward Festival**

Stephanie Bailey

# GENTRIFICATION

Prem Sahib  
Helix IV 2018

## Archives, Queerness and Gentrification

Queer spaces and queer cultures turn on many contradictions. Not least because for the greater part of their histories, lack of visibility and erasure have been internal to both queer life and, conversely, to art's very 'queerness'. For these reasons the archive is a privileged site in LGBTQ+ culture, and theories of the archive and indeed theories of the queer archive, indicate the extent to which queerness is pre-eminently an archival mode of existence. For Michel Foucault – who is synonymous with this subject – and whose archaeological and genealogical methods furnished the archive with critical agency, the homosexual was born of the archive and successive queer scholars have identified the archive as a site of oppression and therefore as a site of resistance. In the past few decades queer and trans theories of 'the queer archive', 'archives of feeling' and 'the body archive' in the respective writings of Jack Halberstam, Ann Cvetkovich and José E Muñoz have given critical purchase to the archive not just as a site of oppression, surveillance and trauma but as an embodied and collective site of social and political transformation located within queer cultures.

Two current exhibitions, 'Queer Spaces: London, 1980s – Today' at Whitechapel Gallery, London and 'The Club's Conception (or How The Egg Was Cracked)' at Recent Activity, Birmingham, combine archival, artistic, activist and spatial practices to engage LGBTQ+ histories and queer archives in which the space of the art gallery functions as both an activist and pedagogical site. The former is curated by UCL's Ben Campkin and Whitechapel curators Nayia Yiakoumaki and *AM* contributor Vassilios Doupas, assisted by Cameron Foote. Featuring artworks and new commissions by UK artists Ralph Dunn, Evan Ifekoya, Prem Sahib, duo Hannah Quinlan & Rosie Hastings and US artist Tom Burr, the exhibition frames itself as an archive of personal memory and queer histories mapped by political, aesthetic and ethical objects. 'Queer Spaces' also builds on shared research initiated by UCL Urban Laboratory, Queer Spaces Network and Raze Collective's finding that 58% of London's queer spaces have been lost in the past decade. Under threat of continuing regeneration and the uncertainties of the HS2 rail project, Birmingham's cultural and LGBTQ+ communities face their own challenges. Both exhibitions successfully

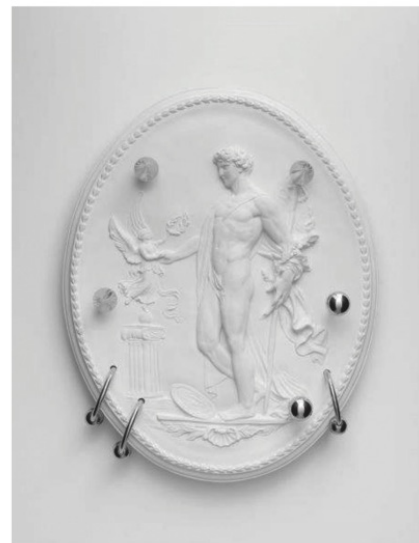
locate their archival efforts in the context of understanding the longer-term challenges that LGBTQ+ people and spaces face.

'Queer Spaces' takes a longer view of London's queer histories and opens these out in the context of recent threats to queer space and reciprocal activist efforts, presenting an archive of London's bars, clubs and historic LGBT centres gathered from institutional LGBT archives and private collections displayed in vitrines together with extensive interviews. These include Save the RVT/RVT Futures, which since 2014 has rescued the UK's oldest LGBTQ+ venue, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, from immediate redevelopment, in the process making RVT the first Grade II listed LGBTQ+ venue in the UK, with the aim of making it a community-owned venue. The Friends of The Joiner's Arms, which closed in 2015, have successfully lobbied Hackney Council to secure a dedicated LGBTQ+ venue as part of the future development of The Joiner's site plus financial concessions from the developer. This is the first such outcome for an LGBTQ+ venue. Finally, The Black Cap Foundation continues its weekly vigil to reopen the venue following its closure in 2015.

'The Club's Conception', by Birmingham-born writer and curator Ryan Kearney and Intervention Architecture stages the histories of Nightingale's, Birmingham's oldest LGBT venue founded in 1969, via the archive of Birmingham's LGBT Centre at the Library of Birmingham. The exhibition maps three of Nightingale's venues, from the men-only private club to its current status as a stalwart of Birmingham's gay village. Kearney cites the absences of the previous venues in the photographic record, as well as the inaccessibility of archival materials for the exhibition, as a distinctly queer scenario.

Working with the architectural studio Intervention Architecture, Kearney enriches the drawings and sketches, mostly drawn from memory, while the works are also enhanced with the use of the speculative aesthetics of mapping and 3D visualisation. Kearney's archaeological method seeks to explore spatial politics and sex cultures of male homosocial space and expose gender inequality from a queer feminist standpoint. A collectively made map considers the histories of 'Campania' – a fictional gay male city-state-meets-queer community honour system, older than Nightingale's, as a palimpsest of some of these 'inherited' issues.

The art exhibition setting retools the queer archive into an activist one, where



well-established critiques concerning the relationship between art, artist and gentrification – a term coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe demographic and socio-economic shifts in central London – is made actively present. By the mid 1980s Craig Owens and Rosalyn Deutsche would take Glass's critique and apply it to that of the Lower-East side of Manhattan observing young artists and galleries seeking cheaper rents. For Owens this amounted to an 'appropriation ... the levelling of real sexual, regional and cultural difference and their replacement with the culture industry's artificial, mass-produced generic signifiers for "difference"'. That this continues to be the case is consistent with the globalisation of contemporary, and indeed LGBTQ+ culture and politics. Further to this end, almost a decade ago, Anthony Iles and Josephine Berry (*Reviews AM424*) shifted the well-worn critique of art and gentrification towards culture-led regeneration in London, to consider the contradictions that underpin the alienating effects of neoliberal capitalism and art's role as ameliorative to systemic marginalisation. What therefore of queer-led regeneration?

In a recent parallel event staged at Whitechapel Gallery, 'Queer Spaces' co-curator Campkin suggested that the very act of making queer space in the 1980s was a kind of activism, more recently renewed as market-driven failures that have led to queer spaces coming under repeated threat of, or actual, closure. As Campkin further reflects, looking at queer space through the archive offers a window into the governance of London from the minority-rights agenda of the Greater London Council





Gentlemen

**Ralph Dunn**  
*Public Toilets 2004*

'Queer Spaces:  
London, 1980s – Today'  
2019 installation view  
Whitechapel Gallery



to London Borough start-up grants for LGBTQ+ businesses, peripatetic squatting spaces and more recent lobbying by the contributing queer networks, all of which have had an impact on LGBTQ+ space and contributed to a notion of a 'queer civics'. This presages current debates as to what LGBTQ+ people need from their spaces, and the subtle ways in which the value of community has been financialised owing to the 'Assets of Community Value' designation, a Tory-Lib Dem coalition instrument that has come into play in recent campaigns.

The obvious cue for these exhibitions is the acceptance of Sarah Schulman's 2012 *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* into the wider cultural imaginary. Schulman's memoir is a polemic driven by the collective amnesia surrounding the state violence inflicted on people with AIDS at the height of the US AIDS epidemic of the 1980s to mid 1990s, when Schulman was active in non-violent direct-action AIDS activist organisation ACTUP in New York (see Features 'Love AIDS Riot' AM423). The inabilities of younger LGBTQ+ people, or worse still the wilful ignorance of gentrifying most often straight, white Manhattanites to comprehend the human toll and the dispersal of communities that facilitated better life prospects for the privileged, is borne out by the concept of 'the gentrification of the mind'. Schulman's counter-archive, her memories of a litany of artists and writers lost to the epidemic, and how they died – in most cases badly, cared for by traumatised carers who were so often their friends and lovers – exposes the erasure of these histories and tries to map out possible futures that acknowledge their past.

As such, Schulman builds on a critical template set out in *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue*, the 1999 memoir of sci-fi writer Samuel R Delany. Delany maps the site of the

---

**IN SUM, WE LEARN FROM THESE HISTORIES THAT IN FACT THE ARCHIVE AND COUNTER-ARCHIVE OF QUEER EXPERIENCE IS A POWERFUL SITE OF LEARNING AND ACTIVISM.**

---

Times Square redevelopment as a collective memoir of the people and the places, mainly porn cinemas, he frequented from the 1950s to 1996 as a queer African-American regularly engaging in MSM sex. Delany's now-and-then depiction of otherwise forgotten lives in a blighted neighbourhood explores the intersections of race, socioeconomics and sexual identities in the post-war and post-industrial boom and bust of capitalist, pre-contemporary New York. In sum, we learn from these histories that in fact the archive and counter-archive of queer experience is a powerful site of learning and activism. Delany persuasively breaks apart the supposed 'marginality' of these sites by suggesting that this is the pretext for 'dismissing' and erasing these spaces, emphasising that, more than anything, this aims to disempower. Or, as Schulman writes: 'the same argument that dismisses the needs of blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Asians, women, gays, the homeless, the poor, the worker and all other margins, that taken together (people like you, people like me) are the country's overwhelming majority: those who, socio-economically, are simply less powerful.'

In 2019, 50 years since the beginning of the modern gay liberation movement, queer culture and queer space continue to be

displaced from the urban centres in which LGBTQ+ people first found sanctuary. And yet, as Gay Liberation Front activist Stuart Feather suggests in Urban Laboratory's *Urban Pamphleteer #7: LGBTQ+ Night-time Spaces*, despite the gains of recent campaigns to win back queer space, one must remember a gay liberation motivated by socialism and feminism, 'the politics for changing society based on power: who has it and who is oppressed by it'. A kind of contemporary pseudo-politics that seeks special protections for LGBTQ+ space as vanguard cultural space for LGBTQ+ communities, or to win back their spaces at the expense of other marginalised or oppressed peoples, or even to accept corporate compromises, is equally flawed (interestingly, writing in *Archive M*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs finds tools for survival in the present era by taking historic violence and trauma as a collective embodied archive perceived from a future ecological disaster).

If one of the defining contradictions of LGBTQ+ existence is strength despite the odds, and the ability to carve out space or to make queer worlds, Schulman and Delany's experiences remind us that the task of forging queer futures is first and foremost one of the collective, artistic and literary imagination that refuses to neutralise the past. The ephemerality of an archive describing queerness presents challenges both to latent queer-led regeneration and the threats of market failure. As Muñoz suggests, the horizon of a queer utopia lies where 'queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future'. ■

**Conal McStravick** is a London-based writer.