Lavender War: Exclusive Community Places and Queer Individuals

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Abstract

Place informs identity through defining boundaries and shaping interactions with others. Failure to adhere to the institutional values of exclusive sites causes acute distress to those excluded. Social and cultural standards integrate into the composition and use of community places. The theory of social constructionism asserts identity as dependent of the discourses surrounding it. Utilizing a constructionist lens, these visual works explore the ostracization of queer persons in public locations. Evaluating those who exist outside normalized social and sexual cultures, these narrative photographs highlight communicated messages of systematic oppression. Lavender-toned black and white images associate contemporary gay and queer identities to the McCarthy-era Lavender Scare, a time when homosexuals were publicly deemed a threat to social and national securities. Public community places remain contested for sexual minorities, due in part to moral panics established during this campaign. The artist's work created in response utilizes common locations integral to his experience, borrowed phrases, and the symbiotic relationship between language and identity.

1. Introduction

Personal biases and historical connections highly influenced this creative project. The use of lavender in this work acknowledges an interconnectedness of past and present as this color referenced homosexuality from the 1920s to 60s. As a gay man, these homosexual and gay histories impact my own understanding of self and others. During this time gay men were viewed as a combination of man and woman, for same-sex desire combines the two psyches. "A fusing of genders," lavender referenced a halfway point between the modern color associations of blue for men, red or pink for women.[1] The Lavender Scare, a hunt for homosexuals within the American government, occurred in the 1950s-60s. Much like the Red Scare, a "witch hunt" for Communists, it was believed that these 'deviants' presented a risk to national security.[2] "Sexual gossip," particularly rumors of engaging in same-sex acts, was frequently used as a means to control and demean others in public office.[3]

It was in the early 1950s that the Mattachine Society, a leftist collective advocating social rights, began to work toward the establishment of homosexuals as a credible minority population.[4] This was the start of the contemporary gay movement, and led to public awareness and advocacy for gay and lesbian individuals. The anti-Communism efforts of the McCarthy era not only defined political stances; it also considered homosexuals a risk to governmental and social structures. Even now homosexuality and queer behaviors remain contested with regard to social and legal institutions due to strong religious beliefs, as evidenced by the moral debates regarding gay marriage and the censorship of "Fire in My Belly" by David Wojnarowicz in the 2010 exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*.[5]

Central to my work, the notion of 'queer' identity serves as a broader and more inclusive way to define non-traditional and non-conforming bodies and identities. In *The Passionate Camera*, editor Deborah Bright explains:

"The older terms, gay and lesbian, embody two polarities: one between the biological sexes, men and women; the other between hetero- and homosexuality as mutually exclusive modes of erotic object choice. The term 'queer,' on the other hand, connotes a radical assault on both of these naturalized sex-gender binaries…In other words, 'queer' points to how all of us might live and love regardless of how our bodies are marked."[6] In this paper I differentiate between both gay (which includes lesbian) and queer identities because of the duality in contemporary cultures. Gay culture frequently serves as a counterpart to heterosexual norms (known as homonormativity), where the gender binary and affiliated scripts remain true. Queer has emerged as a political stance denouncing this assimilation, but also serves to acknowledge lived experiences of those who stand outside heteronormativity.

Growing up in a homophobic community, where homosexuality was demonized and consistently associated with moral depravity, I intentionally relate my work back to the Lavender Scare for many reasons. For my own safety as a teenager and young adult, I was forced to guard myself against any potential rumors or questions about my sexuality due to rhetoric established in prior decades. My family is deeply religious and the experience of coming out (acknowledging myself as gay) severed our relationship. Because of my identity I became marked as a traitor in the eyes of virtually everyone I ever knew. In researching these histories I find comfort seeing how people responded to their circumstances with bravery and integrity. I also find it a challenge to use my experience as fuel for social change, particularly regarding how place and everything affiliated with it affects an individual.

size matters

place is important because these voices often lack recognition in mainstream society, and my work highlights this underrepresentation.

The artworks exhibited in *Lavender War* offer tangible evidence to the systematic exclusion of these persons. In *A Critical Pedagogy of Place: Learning through the Body*, authors Altha Cravey and Michael Petit note, "places are often objects of power created to further particular forms of domination based on gender, sexuality, race, age, class, and physical ability."[9] Using two-word phrases representing social dynamics in each work, I point at exclusions of those 'othered' (excluded by difference) within community place. In *size matters* (Figure 1) I use a phrase associated with physical standards (e.g. penile size), and by juxtaposing it with an image of a swimming pool I form a narrative regarding body standards in public spaces.

Between August and December 2012 I experimented with the relationship between text and image. I found that these two-word phrases from my own experiences succinctly reflect problematic relationships between individuals and settings. Asserting that community sites are problematic reflects the thesis of Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst's *Space, Place, and Sex*, where they discuss how language and context establish the meanings surrounding place. Saying that "there are no spaces that sit outside of sexual politics," the authors assert that spaces cannot be removed from surrounding societal and cultural settings.[10] They theorize that "place is the materiality of space," space is influenced by those who inhabit it, and that these locations reflect the "power relations" surrounding them.[11] Through representing common public places in this body of work the viewer can consider their own relation to the portrayed sites.

Queer studies acknowledge the fluidity of identities and desires, as well as the relationships between various social and cultural factors. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Axiomatic* notes that ownership by the act of definition has become essential to contemporary Western societies. This colonialist "world-mapping" continues to affect how we perceive bodies and identities through the quantification of experience.[12] The assertion of the human experience as relative to one's surroundings reflects the notion of social constructionism, or the understanding that "people's ideas are ultimately given meaning by their social context."[13] It is not that morality or standards for human interaction are innate, but that they are defined through the cultures in which we live. Representing text directed toward myself and members of my community addresses the power dynamics and social expectations within these commonplace sites, pointing toward institutionalized biases influencing these places.

Normalization affects the perception of queer individuals through deeming certain experiences, such as heterosexuality, as a baseline (standard) for societal acceptance.[14] Portraying scenes common to contemporary American life, such as sporting venues, domestic settings, and buildings associated with authority, the locations and language used in this work reflect often-silenced experiences. Through representing the conflicts I deal with in these photographed places, I am asserting my identity and experience as valid.

Language "creates reality and gives meaning to the world," and by language we come to understand and interact with our surroundings.[15] "The word 'homosexual' entered Euro-American discourse during the last third of the nineteenth century" and before this time same-sex relationships were regarded in a less severe way than in later years.[16] The naming of boundaries for human sexuality is a relatively modern concept. According to Foucault, as summarized by Sedgwick it now holds great influence in Western society over "individual identity, truth, and knowledge," and "the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know."[17]

In the photographing of these places, I document physical structures where communities and individuals come together. Place serves as a landmark for social interaction, whether for work, play, or support. However, the meanings surrounding public place impact its patrons through the expression of (often normalized) social and cultural values. The words used by those who inhabit these areas actively guide the constitution of these places through acceptance and prohibition. Through uniting phrase and image, this work considers the impact of these oppressive forces on queer identities.

Essential to contemporary Western media, photography interacts with the viewer's own experience through its associative and representational properties.[18] "Documenting time-related sights through light receptive properties," the photograph is a "mediated" object that requires the process and hand of the photographer to guide its representation.[19] This connection between input and output is not always acknowledged however, leading many to consider the photograph as factual and without overt bias. I use this relationship in my work to offer viewers the ability to consider their own experiences and become invested in these common places, emphasizing spatial depth and the relationship of the individual within space.

Cindy Patton writes in *Lavender Culture* that the notion of identity emerged in the late nineteenth century and was "made possible by the technologies of visibility," including formats such as newspapers and photographs (both private and of mass media).[20] It was through this visibility that homosexual and gay-identified individuals began to

form a group identity and feel 'less alone'.[21] Author Michael Anton Budd explains in "Every Man a Hero: Sculpting the Homoerotic in Physical Culture Photography" that photography's emergence coincided with the notion of "sexual practice as social identity," and that "being gay would be very different" without the "framework for circulating and valuing photographic images."[22] Male homosexuality as an identity began to take shape through the photographic exploration of masculinity and the male body, and this new awareness spread not only to homosexuals but to the surrounding world as well. Budd goes on to mention that "it is no accident" that the emergence of male fitness photography coincides with morality trials such as that of Oscar Wilde.[23] The photograph allows for an exploration of identity, desire, and the body through communicable portrayals of reality.

3. Influences and Work

Figure 2. David Shrigley, *Cat* (2007). Taxidermy, wood, acrylic paint.

Artist David Shrigley uses signs with text extensively in his work, inviting questions into the phenomenon with the label-object relationship. As evidenced in his piece *I'm Dead* (Figure 2), "images [converge] with words that are being seen" and the linked connection causes new meanings to arise through the act of juxtaposition.[24] In my work I use photographed communal places and phrases typical to these settings on a single document, combining them into a single image. The contrast between physical sites intended to inspire community and representation of words significant to the artist's experience creates a visual argument against notions of place as non-biased. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of these two constructs, place and language, the work in *Lavender War* points toward an exclusion of those who do not conform to the standards and expectations of participants interacting in the portrayed space.

  I intentionally reference signage through the formatting of text and image on the same plane. This allows for evaluation of these parts as a whole, while also tying these artworks into a visual canon. Signage is typically used to

Figure 3. Frank Selby, *Now on Now*
(2010). Graphite on Maylar,
24 x 31.5 in.

Figure 4. Mark Morrisroe *Self-Portrait*
(To Brent) (1982). Photograph and pen,
50.5 x 40.5 cm.

promote agendas related to commerce, law, and ownership, and these agendas are biased through greater social norms. Signs frequently signify social control by conveying rules to those in the public realm, as evidenced on roadways and in restrooms. Through form I link phrases used in these places to pre-existing relationships viewers have with the sign, using this visual lexicon as a method of social commentary.

Also influential to my art practice are the works and questions raised by Frank Selby and Mark Morrisroe. Selby creates drawings from found photographs and texts, reorganizing and reinterpreting these forms in a variety of ways. Intricately drawn, many works reflect an intense level of control and dedication to representing photographs – down to specific file format renderings of digital imagery. These images are often 'flawed' by the interpretation of other media through hand-applied graphite. My approach to photography differs from others who use it; concepts establish the process of creation, manipulation, and final output. Captured images rival text as the most accessible media as evidenced through the worldwide use of photography and video in mass media. Using this relationship with the viewer I intentionally create larger contexts for the work through manipulation and juxtaposition, shifting the primary focus of the image from documentation to social commentary. Arguably, the two are interrelated. However as Selby's work suggests, visual cues relaying the hand and influence of the artist can bring about questions beyond those arising from the source material.

Mark Morrisroe's notated photographs were an initial source of inspiration for this body of work. I originally conceived *Lavender War* as an investigation into my own experiences with masculinity, expectations, and the influence of my upbringing. Though my ideas eventually shifted to a more sociological concept, institutional exclusion, the influence of my past and present surroundings cannot be removed from the context of this work. Morrisroe used Polaroids to capture images of himself and his community in the late 1970s and 80s. The handwritten text applied to the images was of particular interest to this project. Marking images with time and message, these seemingly personal snapshots and figure studies transform into a commentary on gay and queer experiences. Desire, pleasure, and death characterize Morrisroe's portfolio, providing an authenticity and time-bound quality I found appealing. Choosing a font rather than using handwriting in my work, I reversed what I was initially attracted to while staying true to early intentions. From the sterility of this industrial typeface, furthered by the crisp precision of the printer, the text of phrases placed on my images point toward the institutionalization of place in a way handwriting could not. This body of work becomes more about society than individual, more about power than reflection.
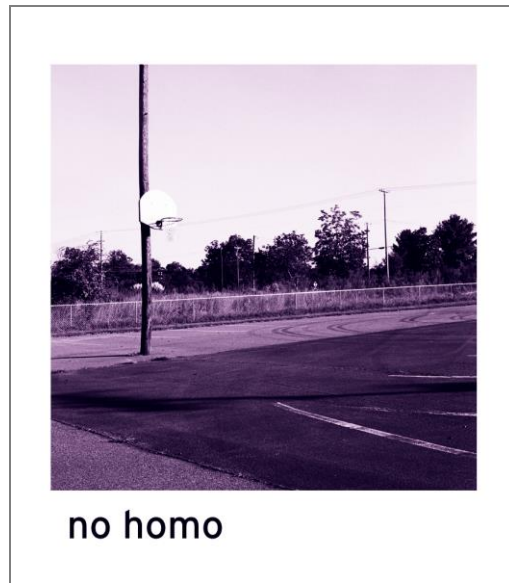
Figure 5. Adam Cable, *no homo* (2012). Photograph and text, 28.5 x 32.5 inches.

In *no homo* (Figure 5), the basketball court is framed as a site of conflict by the inclusion of text. Using a phrase common among straight men to reaffirm their masculinity and implicit heterosexuality among peers, this phrase reflects the stigma of any behavior perceived as same-gender eroticism. Many same-gendered groups, such as athletic teams, engage in physical and emotional contact frequently. By defining such behavior as not-homosexual, these groups operate under an assumed commonality (e.g. heterosexuality). The use of this phrase reflects aspects of the American mainstream culture surrounding it, and "uttering 'no homo' can be viewed as regulating oneself to maintain social dominance, to remain 'masculine', and to mask any alleged gender transgressions."[25] It negatively impacts bodies and identities through implicating same-gender acts as unacceptable and invalid, which only furthers a homophobic discourse.
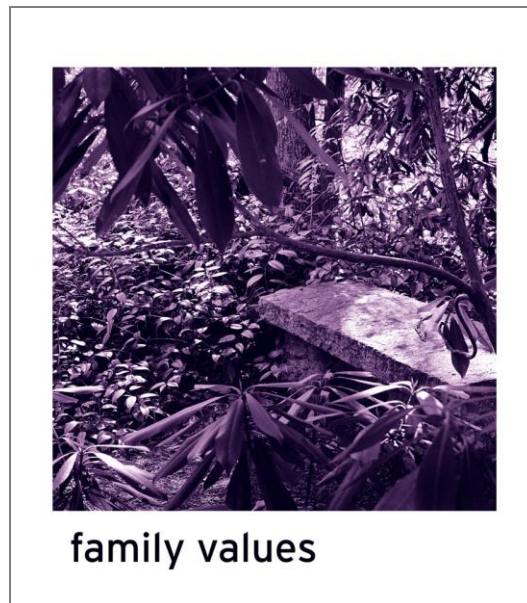
Figure 6. Adam Cable, *family values* (2012). Photograph and text, 28.5 x 32.5 inches.

Exploring the implications of the phrase "family values," the artwork referenced in Figure 6 juxtaposes a politically conservative catchphrase with a public park. This photograph of a public park references "cruising," or the pursuit of casual sexual acts by men who have sex with men. Many gay men including myself experience shame (both internal and from others) when showing any form of affection to another man in public, whether intimate or not. Though seemingly objective in its purpose, common space is safe primarily for those who do not break normalized roles such as heterosexual individuals and couples. Jean-Ulrick Désert talks about the discrimination of same-gender affection in public in the essay "Queer Space," remarking that "public kissing, which is socially or legally tolerated between heterosexual couples…[is] violently suppressed between same-sex couples."[26] Public displays of affection outside of straight sexualities are policed through scrutiny and open hostility toward the participants.[27] Often defined as traditional values in place for the safety of the family (i.e., including children), the notion of "family values" actively rejects those outside of standard heterosexual identities.[28] Relating such judgments to a 'moral' code, alternative sexualities disrupt the supposed security of heterosexuality. This is due to a disavowal and lack of adherence to these established social roles and sexual scripts.[29] In his book *Sexuality* Jonathan Weeks notes, "Existing languages of sex, embedded in moral treatises, laws, [and] educational practices...set the horizon of the possible."[30] Public place becomes a charged setting for non-normative individuals due to potential reactions from a homophobic society, reactions that are sometimes violent and often disruptive.

4. Conclusion

Place impacts the individual in a variety of ways, but most significant to my own experience is the language reifying the values of a mainstream straight society. In juxtaposing their words with images of these locations I reflect the pressure to conform to a heteronormative standard, particularly as it relates to sexual minorities. The exclusion of queer individuals goes beyond interpersonal communication; it is built into the institutions with which we live and the spaces we inhabit. While I focus on my own experiences, public place is contested for all persons. These damaging methods of exclusion hinder communication, affect beliefs, and create divisions based out of fear and tradition. Through deconstructing the relationships between people and place, we can begin to resolve conflicts and create change within our own environments. While creating this work I found a sense of resolution in providing a voice to the anger I experience from a society that rejects my identity. Although the Lavender Scare was many decades ago, the stigmas surrounding gay and queer persons remain strong around the world. Through using provocative phrases, I hope to inspire a reaction or connection in the viewer. Visually engaging conflicts, this body of work clearly demonstrates the strained relationship between queer individuals and place. It is not heterosexuality that is the problem, nor queerness, but rather the culture of exclusion toward different others.
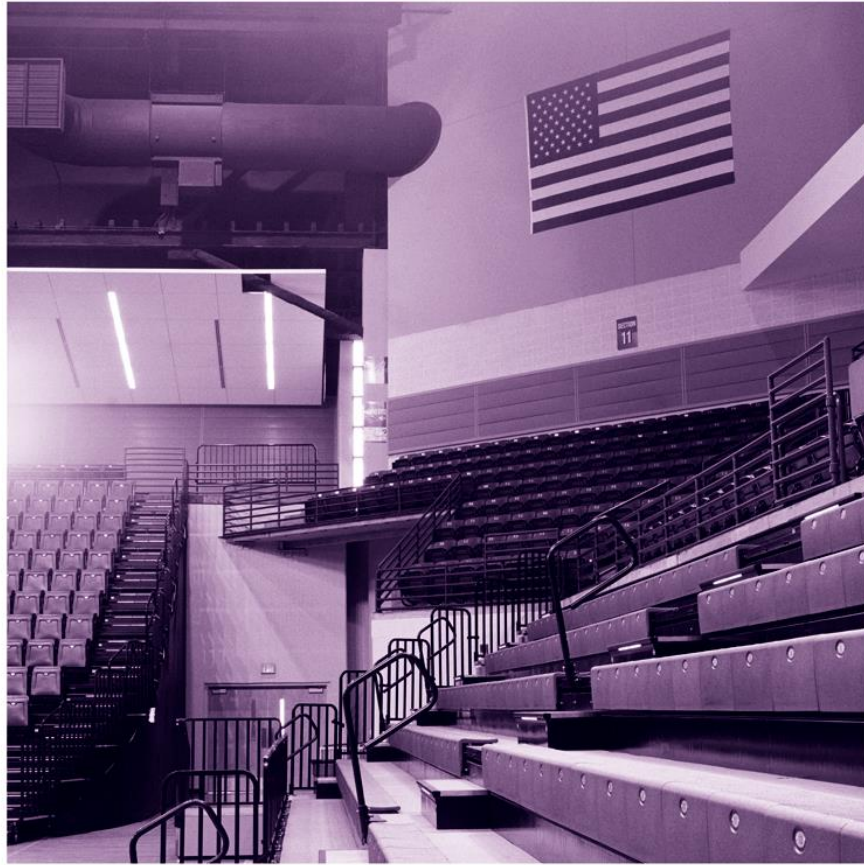
Figure 7. Adam Cable, *kill 'em* (2012). Photograph and text, 28.5 x 32.5 inches.

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