

QUEER AS A QUEER GUIDED TOUR

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SQS
1–2/2020

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QueerScope
Articles

ABSTRACT

In this article I focus on the queer guided tours held in three publicly funded museums which form the Finnish National Gallery. In my analysis I alternate between my reconstructions of the tour guide's narration during each respective tour, and my interpretative reading of it. I am interested in seeing how *queer* was defined and put into practice by each of the different tour guides. On the one hand, I pay attention to the queer-informed content of the tour; while on the other, I am also curious to see whether and how *queer* was translated into the pedagogies of the guiding practices themselves. By doing so, I hope to illuminate the different ways in which *queer*, both as a theoretical and political concept, may be put into practice in mainstream museums, and the possible ramifications of this for both the guiding practices and the positioning of the visitors.

ABSTRAKTI

Artikkeli käsittelee kolmessa Suomen Kansallisgalleriaan kuuluvassa taidemuseossa toteutettuja queer-opastuksia. Analyysissäni siirryn kunkin oppaan kerronnan rekonstruktioista omaan tulkitsevaan luentaani ja jälleen takaisin. Kiinnostuksen kohteena on se, kuinka oppaat määrittelivät *queeriä* ja käyttivät sitä opastuksessaan. Yhtäältä kiinnitän huomiota opaskierroksen queer-näkökulmaiseen sisältöön, toisaalta siihen, näkykö *queer* ote myös opastuksen pedagogisessa toteutuksessa. Artikkelissäni teen näkyväksi niitä erilaisia tapoja, joilla *queer*, niin teoreettisena kuin poliittisenakin käsitteenäkin, voidaan ottaa käyttöön valtavirtamuseoissa. Samalla nostan esiin tehtyjen valintojen seurauksia sekä opaskierrosten toteuttamiselle että vierailijoiden asemoinnille.

“What do queer guided tours accomplish?” was a question I stumbled across in October 2019, when a one-day seminar *Toisin katsottu museo [Reconceiving the Museum]* took place at the Finnish National Gallery's Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, Finland.¹ The event raised the notion of how supporting democratic practices in the context of art and art education may result in furthering equality regarding sexual and gender diversity. Seminar participants were offered lectures, case studies, panel discussions, workshops, and a film screening. As a pre-seminar offering on the day prior to the event, participants were welcomed to attend queer guided tours at four different Helsinki art museums.

I was able to attend three of the queer guided tours held in the publicly funded museums which form the Finnish National Gallery: the Ateneum Art Museum, the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, and the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art.² Although these museums are part of the same Finnish National Gallery, the ways in which each tour guide approached

- 1 The seminar was organized by the Finnish National Gallery and the Aalto University Department of Art, in collaboration with Culture for All Services and the Finnish Museums Association. The program is available at: <https://ateneum.fi/tapahtumat/toisin-katsottu-museo-seminaari/>.
- 2 I was unable to be present at the fourth queer guided tour offered simultaneously at the Finnish Museum of Photography by Jemina Lindholm and Kaura Raudaskoski. See, however, Lindholm and Raudaskoski 2018.

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queer guiding during their respective one-hour tours differed considerably (similarly Turino 2015). In this article, I seek to analyse the ways in which queerness was evoked during the different guided tours, and how it affected both the guiding practices and the positioning of the visitors.

In recent years there has been increasing discussion about queering museums and interpreting lesbian, gay, bi, and trans histories (Levin 2010; Adair & Levin 2020). Whereas Susan Ferentinos downplays the necessity of queer theory for interpretations in public history contexts (Ferentinos 2015, 7), I rather align myself with Nikki Sullivan and Craig Middleton, who argue that radical change in museum practices requires critical self-reflection based on theoretical analysis (Sullivan & Middleton 2020, 6). In this article I take Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussions about queer reading styles as the starting point for my analysis of the queer guided tours I partook in.

Instead of measuring the queer guided tours I visited against any pre-given definition of *queer*, in this article I make their queerness the object of my analysis. Before going into detail regarding the ways in which *queer* was interpreted in the queer guided tours, I will lay out the impetus to organize queer guided tours in Finnish art museums. Subsequently I will describe the methods concerning both the gathering of data and analysis, followed by a closer examination of the queerness in the three tours I attended. I will close the article by discussing the queerness of queer guided tours and presenting my conclusions.

Normative Museums Queered

It is common to see museums as sites of establishing and maintaining normative power structures, art museums being no exception to the rule here. From this perspective it is tempting, as well as easy, to do a *paranoid*

reading (Sedgwick 2003b) of museums. According to Sedgwick, those leaning towards paranoid readings already know there is something wrong with the world. In this case, they lay bare the myriad ways in which museums, through their practices and collections, create normative hierarchies by excluding and othering that which is labelled *queer*.

Unequal and exclusionary power dynamics have also been the driving force in creating specifically queer museums, in which queerness may be put on the centre stage. Hence, we have museums that have been created by activists of the gay community, such as the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York, in which the focus is to “inspire, explore, and foster understanding of the rich diversity of LGBTQI+ experiences”.³ Similarly the Schwules Museum in Berlin, a permanent “Eldorado for the history, everyday life and culture of homosexual women and men”, organizes not only social history exhibitions, currently including trans topics, but also frequently displays gay art.⁴ Increasingly often many historic house museums are also acknowledging their queer legacies; for example, the Kirpilä Art Collection, located at the late Juhani Kirpilä's home in central Helsinki (Sorainen 2020).⁵ While such places provide an oasis for visitors who wish to dwell in a queer world, the efforts of such dedicated museums may also easily be overlooked and rendered insignificant by the general public. It may also be difficult for queer art to break into the consciousness of the mainstream from those self-induced margins, regardless of its quality and opportunity to provide a catalyst for different discourses.

A *reparative reading* offers a different take on the question of the normative power of mainstream museums. It proposes that *queer* is something that is already always present (Sedgwick 2003b, 149–151), even in those museums

3 Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art: <https://www.leslielohman.org/about>.

4 Schwules Museum: <https://www.schwulesmuseum.de/ueber-uns/?lang=en>.

5 Kirpilä Art Collection: <https://taidekotikirpila.fi/visiting-the-collection/>.

that seek to exclude it. All that is required is taking a different perspective when examining museums and their collections. Then we begin to see both the Sisyphean task in maintaining the norms through reiteration, and the inevitable cracks that appear in the process. Becoming aware of that normalizing process begins to uncover of all kinds of queerness that normalizing seeks to hide. Hence, applying a queer gaze to museums will challenge the assumed normativities and offer differing narratives.

Since institutions such as national museums and galleries have historically been the sites of nation building, and as such, sites of exclusion for various “undesired” others (Bennett 2014, 71–73), it will be a lengthy process to undo their permanent collections and exhibitions. There is currently a lot of activism taking place in and around museums, as formerly excluded groups are fighting for their presence in museums (Sandell 2017). This has resulted in increased inclusivity through organizing special exhibitions. Furthermore, the biased results of past collection and exhibition processes can be challenged, and their hidden queerness may be made visible by creating queer paths⁶ throughout exhibitions, as well as providing queer guided tours. During queer guided tours, guides may use differing approaches to the collections in question. They may, for example, alternate between paranoid and reparative readings, and consequently encourage their audiences to see through the normative constraints of museum collections, and perhaps even recognize unexpected queer histories within the exhibitions. But could they achieve even more?

Answering that question is difficult, due to the challenge posed by data collection when studying any form of guided tours. The ephemeral

6 E.g. the British Museum’s theme: Desire, love and identity <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/desire-love-and-identity> or A Rainbow Thread at the National Museum of Iceland <https://www.thjodminjasafn.is/english/for-visitors/the-national-museum/visitor-informations/events-exhibitions/temporary-exhibitions/a-rainbow-thread-1>.

performances of tour guides are notoriously difficult to capture for analysis (Potter 2106, 255). Those scholars that have taken up the challenge have used various methods of data collection; interviewing the guides (Shep, Boxtel, and Noordegraaf 2018; Potter 2016), attending the tours as a participant observer and conducting practice-as-research (Smith 2013), or videotaping the guided tours (Burdelski 2016; Best 2012, 36–37; De Stefani and Mondada 2017). In those cases, the scholars have been interested in issues such as the power politics imbedded in the guiding profession, the various linguistic, affective, or bodily means by which a guide captures the attention of the visitors, as well as how a guide creates the flow of verbal and nonverbal interaction between the visitors. In order to understand how a guide creates a smooth museum experience, or struggles to gain authority, thematic analysis of transcriptions and recordings, along with conversation and interaction analyses, have proven very useful.

I, for my part, stumbled into this field of study quite by accident, as I became both struck and fascinated by the differences between the three queer guided tours I experienced. All three were held during the course of one day, each with some 20 participants, some of whom also attended all three. While attending the respective queer guided tours, I did what I so often do when I focus on any lecture: I took hand-written minutes while listening to the tour guides. Thus, I had at least one page of meticulous mind maps of each of the tours.⁷ In my notes, I had captured verbatim the guides’ definition of *queer*, the plotline of the tour they presented, and the reasons given as to why or how certain items were chosen for a closer look. However, my notes did not include any information about the interaction during the tour, also because my focus was more on noting down the narrated content rather than making any other observations, as a trained

7 My take on mind maps roughly follows the guidance offered by Buzan and Buzan 1999.

ethnographer with a planned participant observation would have done (Spradley 1980, 52–62). Yet I decided to see how far my notes would allow me to go in understanding the differences between the tours, and decided to use them as the source of my conceptual analysis that seeks to clarify what kind of positions the use of queer indicates, and how that understanding informs the guided tours (c.f. Perko 2008, 69, 73–75; Alm & Laskar 2017, 138).

In this article I determine the means by which each tour guide in each of the three museums I visited tackled the challenge of offering a queer guided tour. The text alternates between my reconstructions of the tour guide's narration during each respective tour, and my interpretative analysis of it – whilst I am fully aware that my reconstructions of the narrations remain a questionable twice-told story (Howard 2001, 5). In my analysis, I, as a queer feminist gender studies scholar with an interest in lesbian and queer history, am interested in seeing how *queer* was defined and put into practice by each of the different tour guides. On the one hand, I pay attention to the queer-informed content of the tour; while on the other, I am also curious to see whether and how *queer* was translated into the pedagogies of the guiding practices themselves. By doing so, I hope to illuminate the different ways in which *queer*, both as a theoretical and political concept, may be put into practice in mainstream museums, and what the possible ramifications of this may be.

When presenting the data, I chose not to make assumptions about the gender of each guide. Even though each guide introduced themselves to the tour guests with their first name, given names do not necessarily equip us to draw conclusions on a person's gender. Moreover, as the Finnish language does not make gender distinctions with third-person singular pronouns, there was no need for the guides to raise the issue of gendered pronouns during their Finnish-spoken tours. Consequently, for such reasons, when

referring to the guides in this article, I use 'they' as a third-person singular pronoun, similarly as I would use 'hän' in Finnish.

Some of us also routinely make assessments about the sexual orientation of the people we meet, with our judgements often colouring our responses to them. The tour guides we encounter in museums are not exempt from becoming objects of such a scrutinizing gaze, and even less so, if they offer queer guided tours which specifically foreground issues of gender and sexuality. However, I resist the urge to let my own assumptions about the sexual orientation of the guides become part of my study of the tours, and seek to limit my analysis only to their addressing of the audience's sexual preferences that the tour narration seemed to evoke.

The Ateneum Art Museum

*A norm-critical, rainbow-coloured, and multi-voiced guided tour of the collections exhibition Stories of Finnish Art. During the guided tour, we explore the diversity of identities, genders, sexualities, and the means of their representation; as well as gaze, power, and desire through using examples from the works in the exhibition.*⁸

The Ateneum Art Museum is founded on the collection work initiated by the Finnish Art Society in the 1840s. Since 1888, the collection has been housed in a purpose-built museum in central Helsinki. The Ateneum's

⁸ The insert given in italics is from the announcement provided by the organizers about the respective queer tours: *Normikriittinen, sateenkaareva ja moniääninen opastus Suomen taiteen tarina -kokoelmanäyttelyyn. Opastetulla kierroksella tutkimme identiteetin, sukupuolten ja seksuaalisuuden moninaisuutta ja esitystapoja sekä katsetta, valtaa ja halua kokoelmanäyttelyn esimerkkiteosten kautta.*

standard exhibition displays Finnish art from the mid-18th century through to the modernist movements of the 1950s. Furthermore, the museum shows temporary exhibitions of renowned domestic and international artists.⁹ During the queer tour, we visited the current permanent exhibition *Stories of Finnish Art*.

A student volunteering as a tour guide leads the group up the colossal staircase to the second floor. While we gather around them in the hallway, they briefly tell us about the history of queer guided tours the museum has offered since 2012, initially in collaboration with Helsinki Pride (Lahtinen & Paqvalén 2014, 46). The guide then explains their take on *queer*, which is influenced by their education in both visual arts and gender studies. They define *queer* as a critique of normativities, not just of heteronormativity, but a critique that also takes into account intersectional differences such as class, race, and ability. Additionally, they promised to offer us readings of the artworks that both gave attention to, as well as challenged, issues such as the gender binary and eurocentrism. The idea of *queer*, they emphasize, is however not to settle for a given meaning, but to keep it open for new interpretations. They furthermore encourage the audience not to necessarily view the tour guide as an expert, but as a fellow gazer.

The tour guide's interpretation of *queer* was sensitive to the intersectional take on queer theory that has been present within Finnish academic discussions since the 2010s (Rossi 2015). They drew our attention to certain issues, and set up certain expectations, which helped to prepare the audience for the upcoming tour. Moreover, the guide was establishing themselves as an educated expert, while at the same time decentring their own position of power with an invitation to be regarded as one of the gazers.

Before escorting us in to the exhibition hall, the guide situates the historical role of the National Art Museum in the process of nation building (Berger 2014, 18). The Ateneum was founded in 1888, during the golden age of museums, with the intention to collect and display artwork that later on would be received as the most iconic visual images of Finnishness. They point out that when looking at the collections we should not only look at what is there, and by whom, but also ask ourselves what is missing – considering that the acquisitions were most likely made by white, heterosexual men whose choices decided what was and wasn't suitable to be displayed in such a prestigious setting (Pettersson 2010, 168–174, 178–181).

Hence, by highlighting the limitations of the collections, the guide was pointing out the often overlooked nationalist and gendered power structures that lurk behind any collection and exhibition process, even in present day. True to a paranoid reading practice, they also asked us to pay attention to the omissions driven by inequality, which are often harder to notice than the things that are visually present. Such guidance geared the attention of the visitors in a particular way, giving them an idea of the critical framing that the chosen queer perspective would offer for the tour.

After the introduction, the guide leads us to the first exhibition hall, which houses paintings from the late 19th century. We learn how at the time Finnish painters used to frequent Paris, which was an important European art centre. But not only that, as the city also offered many pleasant opportunities for queer encounters – unlike Finland at the time, where homosexual acts for both men and women were criminalized since 1894.

The first work of art at which we halt is *Luxembourgian puisto* [*The Luxembourg Gardens*] (1887), painted by Albert Edelfelt (1854–1906). [Fig. 1] The guide informs us that Edelfelt was a privileged noble man that easily fitted into the Parisian circles of both artist and their patrons. The

9 Ateneum Art Museum <https://ateneum.fi/museum/?lang=en>.



Fig 1. Albert Edelfelt: *The Luxembourg Gardens*, 1887. 141,5 × 186,5 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen.

large conventional painting shows wet nurses, nannies, and a mother taking care of small children in a sunny Parisian park. The topic of the painting gives the guide the possibility to discuss upper- and middle-class women's predetermined role as *mother*, and the ways in which women that fell out of the given norm were labelled as hysterical or sexually questionable at the time. Among the sexually questionable women were also wet nurses, and artists' models in general. We learn how the models, frequently selected by eroticizing and exoticizing criteria, had precarious work contracts which often led them to servicing the artist sexually as well.

The guide contrasts the working conditions and oeuvre of Edelfelt to that of Elin Danielson-Gambogi (1861–1919) by pausing at her self-portrait (1900) [Fig. 2.] Unlike men, women painters had a difficult time receiving

any professional art education at all. During their studies women were, for example, not allowed to draw naked male bodies. Encountering such difficulties may have made them more determined, but also rebellious. For example, Danielson-Gambogi challenged through her work the ways in which women were commonly portrayed. She painted, among other things, breastfeeding mothers and cigarette-smoking women.

In that same hall, the guide points out how the misery of peasants and poor workers was portrayed in a romanticized and even sexualized manner by the upper-class painters that went 'slumming' in their dwellings. Yet the debilitation of an upper-class lady caused by a stroke remained a feature that would be delicately cached by the very same painter – exemplified here by Edelfelt's portrait of Anna Sinebrychoff. [Fig. 3.] In a similar manner to able-bodiedness and class distinction, whiteness was also privileged both in the artists' choice of topics, and consequently in the museum's collections. The guide informs us that there are only two images showing a black person in the Ateneum's collections, which is comprised of some 80 000 paintings. The one painting on display, painted by the Swedish Nils Jakob Olsson Blommér (1816–1853), is titled "Portrait of a Black Man" (undated), thus reducing Pierre Louis Alexandre Pettersson (Werner n.d.) from a person to just a type of people. [Fig. 4.]

In their talk, the guide dismantled naturalized distinctions as an effect of structural inequality. By naming privileges and disadvantages based on gender, sexualization, ability, class, and race, and connecting them to particular artists and artworks, they became undeniably vivid for the visitors. By doing so, the guide also challenged the apparently self-evident and innocent portrayals and descriptions present in the museum as being imbued with othering.

Next we move to Kalevala hall, where the most iconic images by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), based on the Finnish national epos Kalevala,



Fig. 2. Elin Danielson-Gambogi: *Self-Portrait*, 1900. 96 × 65,5 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen.



Fig. 3. Albert Edelfelt: *Portrait of Mrs. Anna Sinebryhoff*, 1884. 129 × 104,5 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Janne Mäkinen.

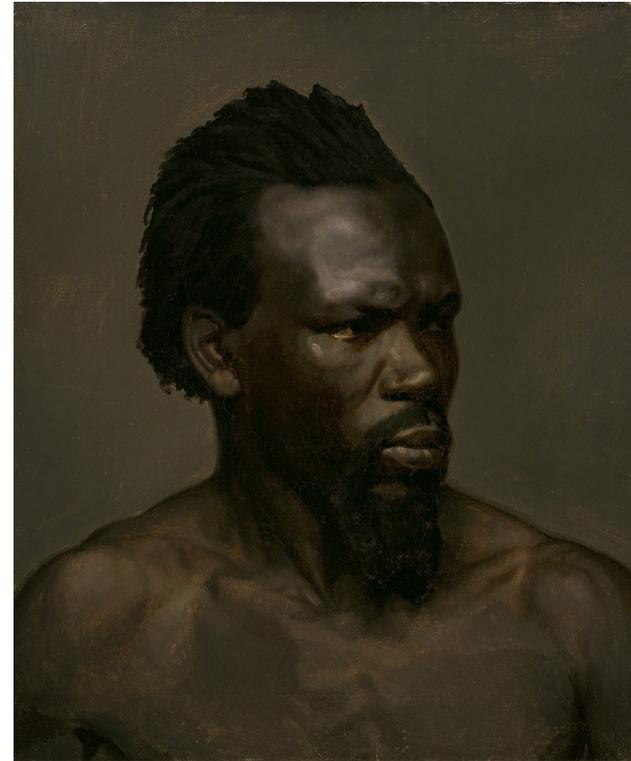


Fig. 4. Nils Jakob Olsson Blommér: *Bust portrait of a black man*, 1835–1853. 55,9 × 46,8 cm, oil. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen.

are on display. [Fig. 5.] We gather around the *Aino* triptych (1891), which illustrates the story of a young woman named Aino who refused an arranged marriage with old Väinämöinen, and chose rather to drown herself instead. In the images, we see firstly the fatal meeting of Aino and Väinämöinen, in the centrepiece, a naked Aino in a lake avoiding his grasp, and finally a contemplative Aino sitting at the lakeshore, again naked, gazing at the mermaids. These images allow the guide to discuss the selection – given the ample choice – of Kalevala stories to be painted in the first place. They also point out the ways in which naked women

were portrayed in the paintings by contrasting Aino with the heroic and active image of Kullervo in another of Gallen-Kallela's Kalevala paintings. [Fig. 6.] The guide also raises a more recent queer feminist interpretation of the Aino myth, namely the one that suggests that instead of getting married to a man, Aino chose to spend her eternity in the company of mermaids, depicted in the third segment.

Thus the guide once more made visible the active decisions involved that led to what the final work on display will be. Although the male gaze



Fig. 5. Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *Aino Myth*, Triptych, 1891. 200 × 413 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen.

dominated the artistic depiction of the Aino myth, one that every visitor was already well familiar with, the guide challenged its unavoidability by highlighting the possibility of its queer feminist interpretation. It added queer agency to Aino's choice and removed the necessity to view her as a victim of sexual harassment and compulsory heterosexuality.

The final hall we move to is dedicated to turn of the 20th century symbolism. Here we learn that symbolism was not only characterized by inner visions, but also by the exploration and portrayal of androgynous bodies. Here the guide chooses first to discuss Ellen Thesleff's (1869–1954) questioning take

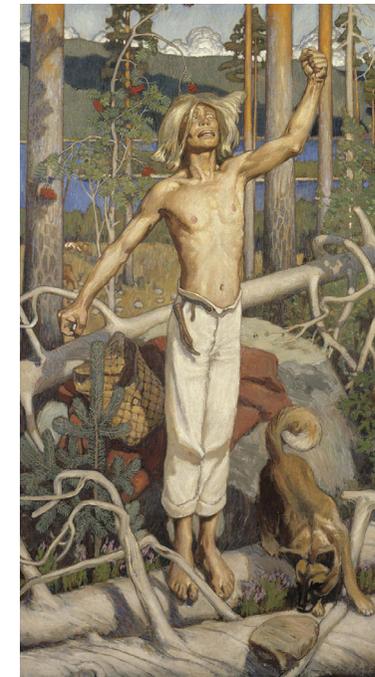


Fig. 6. Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *Kullervo Cursing*, 1899. 184 × 102,5 cm, oil. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen.

on embodiment, and her subtle and inward gazing portraits of women, in particular her sister Thyra Elisabeth (1892). They also circulate a photographic image taken of Thesleff in Paris during the 1890s. It shows a young, androgynous female artist with very short hair. The second painter the guide draws our attention to is Magnus Enckell (1870–1925), whose male nudes *Herääminen* [*Awakening*] (1894) and especially *Heräävä fauni* [*Awakening Faun*] (1914) display an unforeseen sensuous and eroticized take on male bodies. [Fig. 7.] [Fig. 8.] As a circulated photographic image of Vaslav Nijinsky attests, the latter painting was inspired by the dancer's performance in the Ballets Russes' *Afternoon of a Faun*, which Enckell saw



Fig. 7 (left). Magnus Enckell:
The Awakening, 1894. 113 × 85,5 cm,
oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National
Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum. Photo:
Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis.

Fig. 8 (right). Magnus Enckell:
Awakening Faun, 1914. 65,5 × 81 cm,
oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National
Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum.
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni
Nurminen.

while in Paris. Yet Enckell's Finnish contemporaries were less taken by his enthusiasm for male nudes, and also labelled his ample use of colour as too effeminate, flamboyant, and grotesque for a male painter.

Quite as the tour started, it also ended in Paris. Now the city's capacity to offer transnational queer inspiration to Finnish artists is made tangible to the visitors with the help of photographic images. The guide made the tour guests aware of how the artists in question refused the conventionally gendered painting styles, and the deliberate ways in which they both went against the grain. Moreover, they explicitly addressed and brought to view the non-binary gender performance and homosexuality of the artists. That the guide was able to offer visitors such details and interpretations was also due to the delightful fact that there are queer scholarly works available in

the publications of art historians Harri Kalha (2005), Juha-Heikki Tihinen (2008), and Asta Kihlman (2018).

The queer guided tour at the Ateneum delivered what it promised; namely a well-rounded norm-critical and multi-voiced tour that explored the diversity of identities, genders, and sexualities, as well as the art historical means of their representation, while embedding all of this in a cultural historical context. Hereby it quite adheres to the understanding of queer guided tours put forward by Emmi Lahtinen and Rita Paqvalén in their report on queer visitor expectations regarding services in the art and culture sector (Lahtinen and Paqvalén 2014, 45). The engaged and educated tour guide captured the attention of the visitors, who kept wanting to hear more, and thus rarely interrupted them even to ask further questions.

However, it is by no means atypical for Finns to remain shy and silent in such situations. Yet the end effect, even when the tour's content could be called *queer*, mostly in the sense of a paranoid reading, was that the rather traditional format of conducting the tour did not support the explicit offer from the guide to be viewed as a fellow gazer and interpreter.

The Sinebrychoff Art Museum

*How does European art from the 14th century through to the beginning of the 19th century open up to the queer gaze? How do gender and sexuality appear in classical artworks? During the tour, we familiarize ourselves with the Sinebrychoff house museum and the collection exhibition.*¹⁰

The Sinebrychoff Art Museum is a historic house museum located in the former home of the entrepreneur Paul Sinebrychoff and his wife Fanny, which was bequeathed to the Finnish state in 1921. The couple had used a portion of their fortune to create an art collection, notably comprised of portrait paintings by old European masters. The collection is currently exhibited on the second floor of the building, the interior of which is maintained to preserve its original 1910s appearance.¹¹

Our tour guide greets us in the museum shop on the entrance floor, possibly in a similar manner to how they have been greeting tour guests over the past eight years that they have offered the tours as a volunteering docent. They start by engaging us in a discussion on what *queer* is, and quote its

definitions from a guide published by the Kunsthalle Helsinki art museum. The cited definitions include “odd; an umbrella term for identities; a term that escapes definitions; challenging norms; providing alternatives” (Kunsthalle Helsinki n.d.). Moreover, they point out that often when we try to create an overall picture of a matter, it is the peculiarities that get overlooked.

Based on the tour guide's introduction, it was rather difficult for the visitors to attune themselves to the upcoming tour. Its all-encompassing take on *queer* seemed to offer something for everyone, yet did not really define its own stance. During the course of the tour, it became evident that *queer* would mostly be present in the tour guide's keen attention to historical detail, particularly the peculiar and the odd.

After the introduction, we move on to the second floor, where we enter the opulent Empire hall. While standing there, the guide offers us a historical overview, punctuated with catchy anecdotes about the historically changing attitudes towards homosexuality. The narration starts with the Greek antiquity, moves through to the Roman Republic and Empire, on to the advent of Christianity, past the era of *Völkerwanderung*, to the attitudes harboured by the Catholic Church, over to the Renaissance, and all the way through to the 19th century. It becomes evident that the attitudes towards (male) homosexuality shifted radically over the different periods, as it resurfaced again and again in different forms and in various places. After the lecture, the guide points out some of the furniture in the hall that borrows images from Greek culture, especially the Greek vases – even if they are nowhere near as racy as the explicitly homoerotic images on the Pompeian vases which the guide previously referred to.

It was striking that the guide did not explicitly address or problematize the (presumed) heterosexual family home context where the queer guided tour took place. Yet the visitors were made to feel most certainly rather

10 *Miten eurooppalainen taide 1300-luvulta 1800-luvun alkuun avautuu queer-katseelle? Miten seksuaalisuutta ja sukupuolta tuotetaan taiteen klassikoissa? Opastuksessa tutustutaan Sinebrychoffin kotimuseoon ja kokoelmanäyttelyyn.*

11 Sinebrychoff Art Museum. <https://sinebrychoffintaidemuseo.fi/en/>.

queer by the temporal inconsistencies of the situation: modern people, today here more equal in the face of law, were standing in the opulently furnished Empire hall, attuning to the guide's queer stories about the often vicious means by which homosexuality had been addressed and controlled over the past centuries.

Without further ado, the guide takes us to the next rococo-themed room, where we find a rich portrait gallery of Swedish royals.¹² In this room, we focus on a portrait of Gustav III (1746–1792), the first of the three Swedish royals we were to concentrate on. [Fig. 9.]

The guide offers us a lively piece of gossip about Gustav's married life. It started with Gustav III marrying the Danish Princess Sofia Magdalena, with whom he had been engaged since the age of five. The 18-year-old king was, however, not present at his own wedding, but sent his brother to stand in for him instead. Gustav's interest in marital life remained vague, and thus, after seven childless years, his Finnish equerry Adolf Fredrik Munck had to be invited to the marital bed as an instructor, in order to secure "an heir and a spare" for the royal house. We also learn how the contemporaries of Gustav III were puzzled by his behaviour, and wondered whether he had possibly acquired "Italian habits" from his journeys. All in all, the king was considered to be odd and effeminate. No watertight evidence of his homosexuality has survived, but his close relationship to his political adviser, the Finnish Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt, raised eyebrows and caused rumours.

Through the guide's narration it soon became evident that during this queer guided tour the artworks were not going to be approached from

12 The Swedish royals were also the rulers of Finns, with Finland forming the eastern frontier of the Swedish Kingdom until 1809. Thereafter Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Imperial Russia, and remained so until its full autonomy as a nation in 1917.

an art history perspective, as often not even the name of the painter was mentioned. The guide's focus was rather on cultural history and on queering the perceived truth of its narration. The queer tidbits offered by the guide made it evident how the writing of mainstream history holds firmly to a heteronormative narrative, and continues to reduce queer history writing to anecdotes and gossip only. The guide's talk also showed how our current language fails us when we try to interpret past intimacies: how are we to name and understand "Italian habits" without falling into anachronisms? (c.f. Lahtinen and Paqvalén 2014, 46). Even though it is impossible to know for sure what was going on in the king's life, the guide's narration provided visitors points of departure for second-guessing the more commonly served straight story. Listening to the tour guide while examining a portrait of the long-gone king, the visitors could vividly imagine that his life might have been different and queerer than is usually volunteered.

The theme of the following hall is baroque, and the paintings on its walls are mostly portraits of rich Dutch merchant families, as the guide tells us. Amidst all of them is also a portrait of the Swedish Queen Christina (1626–1689), on which we focus next. [Fig. 10.] The person in the image is rather unassuming, but the cape with ermine lining gives her away as a royal, our guide informs us. Queen Christina was one of the remarkable, unmarried female rulers, along with Queen Elizabeth I and Empress Catherine the Great. Unlike them however, she was trained to become a king. Already at her birth she was assumed to be a boy, and consequently, throughout her life, she distained the role reserved for women and rather preferred hobbies 'not suitable' for a lady, such as studying. Moreover, the guide adds, her contemporaries were puzzled over her intimate friendship with her maid of honour Ebba Sparre – a relationship that is difficult to interpret even today, as the classification of friendship would likely have been different at the time. The interpretation is further complicated in



Fig. 9. Alexander Roslin: *Gustav III, King of Sweden*, 1775. 75 × 59 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen.

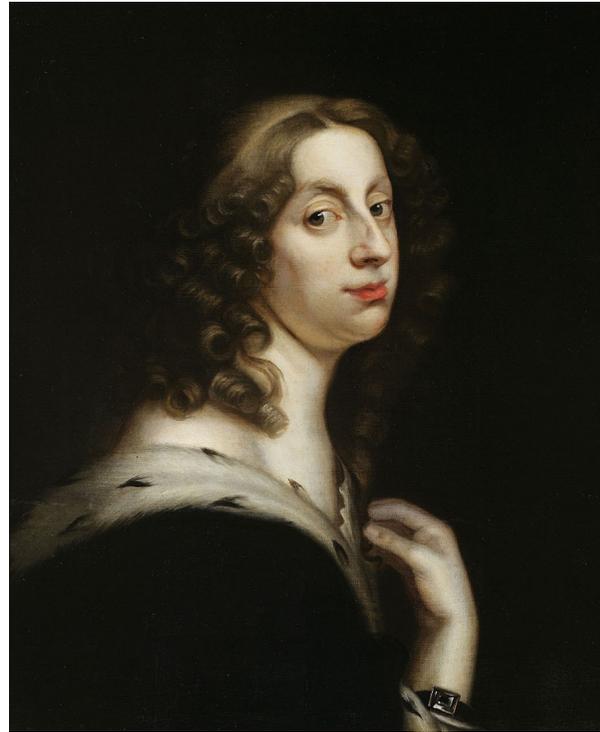


Fig. 10. David Beck: *Christina, Queen of Sweden*. 68 × 56 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola.



Fig. 11. David Klöcker: *Charles XII, King of Sweden*. 140,5 × 108,5 cm, oil, oil on canvas. Finnish National Gallery / Sinebrychoff Art Museum. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen.

light of the fact that the former queen is said to have fallen for a cardinal after rejecting the crown and moving to Rome.

Again here, rather than offering us a window to art history or the life of the painter, the guide chose to use the painting in question as a steppingstone in addressing the queer history of the person it portrayed. Quite like with Gustav III, but even more so in the case of Queen Christina, the trope of gender inversion was implied in the context of alleged same-sex relations. On the one hand, our guide faced an epistemic dead end due to the normativities and omissions characteristic in conventional

history writing: it has persistently shown difficulties with capturing and understanding relationships that do not follow a heterosexual trajectory (Sullivan & Middleton 2020, 27–28). Yet on the other hand, the guide's narration revealed a likewise problematic reliance on the idea, present also in some approaches to lesbian and gay history, that a person's sexual orientation must be understood as both a binary and permanent feature throughout time. However, Christina's presumed love affairs both with her maid of honour Sparre and the (unnamed) cardinal trouble such a view, quite as queer theory suggests.

In the final hall, we see more baroque portraits. Among them is the image of Charles XII (1682–1718), Sweden’s warrior king. [Fig. 11.] The guide points out how the portrait depicts a king that refuses to wear the obligatory white wig of a noble man of his time – quite in contrast, for example, to the gay brother of Louis XIV, who completely camped up his wig in the French royal court. Charles XII, for his part, preferred the life of a soldier to life in a royal court. Since the age of 18 he favoured the company of his fellow soldiers, with whom he lived and slept. “The Army is my wife”, he announced, and fought wars in Central Europe for years, before he had to flee to Turkey. “Nowhere have I seen such beautiful men”, he is told to have said after his arrival. And when he eventually was killed by a bullet, it is maintained that it was fired by his abandoned male lover. The guide also points out the paradoxical co-optation of queer history today: whereas queer people choose to see Charles XII as a predecessor of the modern manly gay man, the nationalist right-wing Swedes devotedly hail him as their war hero.

Once more the visitors were offered glimpses of potential queer history. Based on the figure of Charles XII, the guide was able to contrast the campy royal courts with the lives of manly men among soldiers, opening up yet a new facet of queer history writing. Interestingly, they also managed to build a bridge from past historical uses to present ones by addressing the contested interpretations of the king’s relevance both to queer and nationalist history writing. In doing so, they also revealed the political importance of offering queer readings at memory institutions.

Before leaving, we get to see a glimpse of the master bedroom of the former owners, the Sinebrychoff spouses. In that spacious room the tour guide points out the large painting of a nude Bacchus on the wall. This is of course a rather aptly chosen image, considering that Paul Sinebrychoff made his fortune in the brewery industry. Before we leave the second floor,

the guide leads us through a small corridor which they have nicknamed the “Tinder corridor”. There we see on display palm-sized portraits, which people used to send to their family, friends, and (potential) partners as gifts before the era of photography. Among these pictures there is also a ring with a miniature portrait of a man. Interestingly enough, the ring is constructed in a manner that allows one to flip that image around. On the other side there is a portrait of yet another man. What was the purpose of this ring? What was the relationship of these two men in the images, and theirs to the owner of the ring? These are the questions the guide urges us to ask ourselves as we leave the museum.

One could argue that the queer guided tour at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum did not quite hit the mark in what it was aiming for, as described in its advertisement. Although we were in a house museum, we learned only very little about the place itself, or about the ways in which sexuality and gender were presented in the classical artworks of its permanent collections. We were, however, given novel information about the queerness of the historical figures portrayed in three of the artworks on display. In their narration, the tour guide managed to raise many implicit questions about queer history writing and telling. Consequently, the queer tour was able to offer “more [...] to think about and more to *envisage*” (Lahtinen and Paqvalén 2014, 47; author’s emphasis), quite in the spirit of reparative reading, which urges us to focus on the queer affordances provided by the material at hand. Envisioning the past from this more optimistic perspective is immensely valuable, as it may open up queer horizons that also propel us to think differently about our present and future.

However, the tour also drew its own limits as to what could be thought of differently. For example, as the tour guide’s focus was clearly on homosexuality, the heterosexual context of the museum was left

unaddressed and thus the heterosexuality of former house owners normalized, as if it would have been immutably the same as in our times. The chances to explicitly problematize anachronistic and normalizing assumptions, such as the choice to have a male nude prominently displayed in the couple's master bedroom, were left unattended. Similarly, the concept of a queer guided tour, as it was put into practice here, did not challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of a guided tour, where the only fully informed party is always the guide. Although visitor's questions were accepted and answered, the tour guide's scripted stories did not leave the audience much of an opening for interaction. Hence, even during a queer tour, the visitors were reduced to a passive audience.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

*The word 'queer' translates into Finnish as 'odd' or 'weird'. Modern art is often just like that: deviating from the expected and posing a challenge to the rules. During an active guided tour, modern art offers a point of entry for discussions regarding sexuality, gender, power, norms, and identities.*¹³

The Museum of Contemporary Art was parted from the collections of the Ateneum Art Museum in 1990, and moved to the new purpose-built museum Kiasma, designed by architect Steven Holl in 1998. The Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art displays varying modern art exhibitions based on its own collections, as well as invites domestic and international artists to present their work.¹⁴ During the queer tour, an exhibition titled

13 *Queer-sanan suora käänös tarkoittaa suomeksi outoa tai kummallista. Nykytaide on usein juuri sellaista: totutusta poikkeavaa ja sääntöjä kyseenalaistavaa. Toiminnallisella opastuksella nykytaide toimii keskustelunavauksena seksuaalisuuden, sukupuolten, vallan, normien ja identiteettien tematiikkaan.*

14 Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art. <https://kiasma.fi/en/about-kiasma/>.

Coexistence. Human, Animal and Nature in Kiasma's Collections was on display.

Our tour guide – who, as we later learn, is a trained museum pedagogue – greets us in the spacious entrance hall of the Kiasma. There they offer us cushions to take along, as “we will be sitting on the floor”. The guide does not introduce us to the building, but instead explains how the queer tour we are about to embark on came into being: some teachers approached the museum with a request for a guided tour that would allow their pupils to examine identity-related themes via art in a neutral setting. Consequently, the queer guided tour was designed to initiate art-based discussions among school-aged children by adding different activities to narrated guidance.

From the entrance hall, we move to the second floor, to the artwork *Kesäyö* [*Summer Night*] by Outi Heiskanen (b. 1937). [Fig. 12.] We quietly enter a large hanging tent made from white, sheer fabrics. In the middle of this cathedral-like tent rests a masked, human-shaped and sized, mummy-like figure laid on massive dark logs.

We place ourselves around the silent figure, and our guide wishes us welcome once more. They then initiate an introductory round, during which we walk around the tent introducing ourselves to each other with a first name and a handshake, or some other form of greeting to our fellow visitors. As we continue to introduce ourselves, we must then use the name we heard from our previous encounter and apply the gesture we saw the previous person use to greet us. When the delightfully confusing exercise was over and the laughter stilled, the guide reveals to us the aim: to literally move us, and shake off our accustomed ways of thinking and being.

We then sit down on our cushions to form a circle and our guide demonstrates how they commonly create an atmosphere of trust with visiting pupils: they ask what kind of rules would allow us to feel safe



Fig. 12. Outi Heiskanen: *Summer Night*, tent, 1986. 4,1 × 8,2 × 4 m, gauze, fabric, wood, wool. Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / kuvaaja Antti Kuivalainen.

during the tour. We answer by bringing up things such as speaking up voluntarily, and from one's own perspective, listening to others, giving space, not making assumptions, and being able to voice one's discomfort if needed. Our guide accepts each of the suggestions with a simple "thank you", and closes the exercise by asking whether we feel we could commit ourselves to the rules we just created.

Many of the pedagogical tools the tour guide used at the beginning of the tour are similar to the ones Jemina Lindholm and Kaura Raudaskoski have developed and used in their queer/crip guided tours (Lindholm & Raudaskoski 2018). The guide also spent a lot of time and attention here in creating an atmosphere where visitors could feel at ease with each other. The inherent power hierarchies among the visitors were mitigated by treating everybody's input with the same unconditional and non-judgemental acceptance. The first exercise with rotating identities and assumed bodily gestures was also indicative of the unsettling ways in which the queer guided tour was to evolve, while the shared laughter and respectful tone of the guide helped in reducing the vulnerability of the visitors.

After the introduction and engagement exercises, we cast our attention on the artwork in a form of free watching. The guide asks us to move around the artwork silently for a while, to let it affect us, and then sit back in our place. The exercise, they tell us, aims at raising questions such as who am I? How do I look, not only at art, but also at other people? While we are seated again, they ask us to capture our feelings in one word, and to share that with the group. After the initial round, people may volunteer to further explain their interpretations, which may be respectfully reflected on by others. During the discussion, the guide responds to one participant's concerns about the artist's current ill health, and the ways in which that knowledge had coloured their viewing experience. The guide confirms that

the aged artist Heiskanen was aware that her time was limited when she produced the artwork depicting imaginings of her own death. They also raise a question in return: should our knowledge of the artist's approaching death limit our playfulness in interpreting her work?

The approach chosen here by the tour guide seem to align with Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, who has pointed out how “[q]uestions about educational purpose, pedagogy and performance come together in post-modern times, placing the museum in a swirling vortex of ambiguity, confusion and potential opportunity (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 201)”. Whereas the guides in the museums that were filled with old art had chosen to give us informative lectures on the artists, their works, and the histories behind the people portrayed, in this museum of modern art we had none of that. The guide only briefly mentioned that such information is partly available through the museum's apps and on-line guides. Here the only lecturing they gave concerned the pedagogical choices they had made while planning the tour, and the rest was about demonstrating the effectiveness of these tools on us. Although we all probably already knew that viewers can perceive art in very different ways, hearing the multitude of interpretations was still a revelation. That the guide greeted each interpretation with a simple “thank you”, further fostered the atmosphere of acceptance and empathy. The end effect was that we ourselves, our preconceived notions and interpretations, became the focus of questioning, challenging, and queering, rather than the artworks we encountered.

We continue our queer tour and move to the third floor, where we stop to look at the four-piece conceptual work *One of Them Is a Human* (2017) by Maija Tammi (b. 1985). It presents four close-up photographic portraits: three picturing androids and one, maybe, an actual human – yet without informing the viewer which one is which. The tour guide asks us to first have a good look at the images by ourselves, and then to line ourselves up in front of the one we assume to be human.

Again we share with the group our differing interpretations and arguments, while the guide engages us in a discussion regarding additional questions; what does it do to us if we cannot tell the difference between a human being and a human-like robot? Why does a robot need to be gendered? What can we know of someone just by looking at them? What are the many minute codes we follow and base our assumptions and interpretations on? Which ones are necessary, which ones could be let go?

Even though the museum space limited the types of engagement the participants could be involved in, the activities reminded one of those put forth by Phil Smith. He had created walking tours on heritage sites and then evaluated their effects, in particular participants' sensitization to the multiplicity of meanings, as well as reflection of those meanings and their production (Smith 2013, 106). It seems that here the guided tour aimed at creating similar effects.

During the exercise, the visitors put into practice some very basic museum visitor activities: pausing, looking closer, moving, and asking (Kallio 2004, 128–129). Yet here the guide had chosen for the exercise to examine a piece of art that forcefully made the visitors aware of their pre-conditioned ways of watching images – or even other people. Rather than allowing the participants to settle for just one right and final interpretation, the guide demonstrated how viewing can be, and *remain*, an open-ended process, without resting on any given certainty. Since all the viewers could participate in the process and contribute to the experience, either by placing their bodies silently in front of the chosen work, or by sharing their interpretations with others, the epistemic authority of the tour guide was reduced and that of the visitors was foregrounded. Instead of providing answers, the guide rather kept pushing the visitors further with their questions.

At the end of the tour we group together in a quiet side room on the uppermost floor of the Kiasma. There we may together reflect on the pedagogies through which the tour was conceived. Discussion, and especially the non-judgemental listening, is raised as a key component of the tour's pedagogy. Since people are often afraid and ashamed to be found adhering improperly to the given norms, the non-judgemental and generous listening practiced during the tour is highlighted as a means to subtly challenge the authority of prevailing norms. Careful listening, as well as taking responsibility for shared discussions, allows participants an immersion in the matter at hand, and gives them further tools to achieve a pluralistic understanding of it. Here the role of the guide is far from lecturing, as they rather concentrate on breaking the given structures and supporting the group in its explorative and participatory processes.

After a wrap-up, the visitors that still had the time and stamina move on to the next room to view the video *The Visitors* (2012) by Ragnar Kjartansson (b. 1976). Others leave the museum, in order to prepare for the following day's seminar.

As the advertisement of the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art's queer guided tour promised, it was an active guided tour that used modern art as a point of entry for shared discussions. The discussions that took place during the queer tour did not particularly centre around the artist or even the details of the artist's work in itself, but rather focused on the multiple readings and interpretations of the visitors that challenged the idea of only one given truth, making use of a queer theoretical stand that Gudrun Perko calls plural-queer (Perko 2008, 76–84). The role of the tour guide was not limited to the selection of such works that allowed the visitors to engage in discussions about sexuality, gender, power, norms, and identities, but also included the respectful facilitation of those discussions. The chosen method also profoundly queered the concept of a traditional guide-centred tour. Although the allotted time only allowed the visitors

to see two of the dozens of artworks on display, they were offered several interpretations of each.

What Gets Queered in Queer Guided Tours?

One guided tour of a museum will never be exactly the same as another, even with the same tour guide, due to the social, interactive, and thus unpredictable nature of the event (Potter 2016, 255). Even less similar are tours taking place in different museums and being led by different people with varying pedagogical backgrounds – even if all are called queer guided tours. The diversity of these three queer guided tours presented and analysed here propel us to think of art museums not merely as memory institutions that are content to manage their own collections, but also suggest that museums can and should be approached as sites of queer pedagogy and learning.

When the three tours are contrasted, we see how the Ateneum Art Museum offered a well-substantiated academic tour. It was one that remained always polite and was able to offer something new for everybody, regardless of their sexual orientation. The queerness of the tour was clearly based, true to its foregrounding of a paranoid reading practice, on the critique of the production of various privileges. It sought to address and challenge the ways in which privileges have been maintained structurally, discursively, and socially, both in society and in museums (Laskar 2019, 42–43). Will the visitors now have a keener eye for the various ways in which inequalities are reproduced in society, or will the museum visit rather remain a stint in a liminal space, from where one returns back to everyday life scot-free (Nelson 2019)?

There is certainly a risk of that. When focusing on the pedagogy of the Ateneum's tour with its cultured lectures, one may notice how the tour

turned the visitors foremost into learners. The well-known and practiced framework for learning, where one person lectures while others listen, is effective for spreading new information, but also fosters the passivity of learners. If learning is a risky event, in which the learner is being moved or even displaced (Sedgwick 2003a, 8), one can ask in what ways were the visitors moved by this tour? What has possibly changed, and how will that change be put into action after the visitors/learners leave the museum? There is, of course, the hope that in the future the newly informed visitors may object and challenge the overdue and non-reflected on museum practices, and demand changes, for example, in the traditional titles or interpretations offered by the museum (Laskar 2019, 49–52; Clayton & Hoskin 2020, 67).

The guided tour at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, in contrast, is an example of a tour that seems to be designed with the gay visitor in mind – noting also that gay is not a gender-neutral term. Since it is delivered as “from us to us”, it seeks to give gays and lesbians back the histories that were previously stolen and hidden from them, and so to sustain and nourish their already assumed, yet fragile gay identities. Such an approach clearly has its own empowering value in its use of reparative reading practices, but it is queer primarily for those visitors whose heteronormative world view has not previously been challenged. One can also ask whether such an approach that assumes particular oppositional identities may result only in fostering the pre-existing stereotypes attached to them. If so, how and in what ways would that move the visitors?

It may also be argued that the chosen pedagogical approach for this guided tour turned a group of individual visitors into one homogenous entity; the (gay) audience (Best 2012, 44). Here the role of the audience was also reduced to listening to the guide’s narration, which may or may not have resulted in some changes of mind. But even if the tour’s queer narration created a wishful continuum from past to present queer identities, it most

likely also left the visitors with a politically productive and activating question: what *else* has the heteronormative historical narration denied us?

The Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art is by definition exempt from having foremost to establish a position on the questions of (art) history writing. Here the queer guided tour used the museums’ collections not to address art history, but instead to challenge its visitors’ preconceived certainty that there is only one pre-given and normative way to see, not only things, but also each other – or oneself. It also chose to take a radically queer approach to the pedagogy of its guided tour by rejecting the traditional setup between the lecturing tour guide and their listening tour guests. The way the Kiasma’s tour was designed, it made it difficult for the visitors to become simply one passive audience, as the exercises required them to become active participants. Despite the collaborative nature of the tour, the learning experience nevertheless became very individual for each of the participants.

This tour took to the extreme the trend of moving away from an object-focused approach towards an audience centred one (Sullivan and Middleton 2020, 64). For this tour the object of queering was neither the artist, their artworks, the models they depicted, the related cultural histories, nor even the various interpretations made of the artworks, but quite profoundly the visitors self-understanding of themselves and the ways in which they relate to others. The queering was even more powerful when combined with the bodily exercises that moved bodies more than just from one hall to another. Yet precisely this could also become a challenge to those visitors with varied abilities, for whom, for example, the simple sitting on the floor might be excluding, and who would thus find more traditional approaches more accessible.

Even if all the queer guided tours analysed here offer in their own ways access to difficult knowledge, and thus create a risk of crisis that inevitably

occurs when previously held wisdoms are challenged (Laskar 2019, 53), the Kiasma tour took the risk a step further. It was moving the participant beyond known or even knowable identities towards a fluid subjectivity. Hence I suggest that the guide was moving the participants towards a *tentative reading* of themselves and their potentialities. Adding a tentative reading to the toolkit of queer tour guides would mean that tours are not limited only to a paranoid reading and its critique of past or present normativities, or to a reparative reading, by which the items presented in the museum are seen and interpreted differently and thus *queered*. A tentative reading allows one to look beyond the items on display, into oneself, and to recognize the unforeseen possibilities, either in relation to gender and sexuality, but also beyond them, and especially to their capacities to connect with others. Such an ability may help one to re-orientate with less resistance and a more open mind towards unpredictable futures yet to come.

The seminar *Toisin katsottu museo* could not have had a better start than offering thought-provoking pre-seminar queer guided tours to its participants. One is, however, left wondering, what about wider audiences? When and how often do they have a chance to join queer guided tours and progress in various ways from them? Or even further: how come such elements that could make the museum visit not only “a more socially and historically just experience for all” (Potter 2016, 259), but also a transformative one, must be isolated from other guided tours and marked specifically as *queer* tours? Why cannot *queer*, as they interpret it, be part and parcel of any tour that routinely takes place in a museum?

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and Aro Savusuo for language checking.

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SQS
1-2/2020

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