

SQS: Introduction

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Introduction

Queer art

“To what extent does the cultural discourse we know as art create a veil of mystery around itself, feeding on the tantalizing mystique of hidden secrets?” (Kalha 2005, 22) Harri Kalha asked in his 2005 book *Tapaus Magnus Enckell*. The analytics of the book was above all about language: the relationship between ideology and politics and language, looking, writing, and reading. Kalha’s rigorous, and careful analysis of historical texts revealed ideological and psychological aspects of our culture, that a synthetic approach emphasizing “broad strokes” would inevitably be blind to. (Ibid.)

In the early 2000s, queer theory revealed and challenged the construction of normality and norms, as well as phenomena and ways of being that were defined as deviating from or falling outside the normative. Queer theory examined the norm and its outside: focusing on heterosexuality and its constitutive outside, and various ways in which it revealed cracks and inconsistencies in a culture’s self-understanding. Acknowledging the nature of the split subject, concepts such as anachronism, ambivalence, anality, antisociality, camp (perversion), intertextuality, performativity, discourse analysis, gaze theory, desire, hapticity, and habitus were constantly used by researchers when they wanted to deconstruct the workings of knowledge production and construction – when they wanted to understand and interpret the dimensions of othered or rejected forms of desire, that is: *art*.

Queer theory’s engagement with art delved deep into the cultural unconscious, challenging not only forms of normativity and rationality, but the societal norms around morality and decency, highlighting the complexity of subjectivity and desire. Queer theory took a firmly anti-identitarian stance, and a psychoanalytically informed gaze towards the workings of sexuality and gender. Queer and art was wild and untamed in focusing on not only desire and the unconscious, but rejection, abjection, repression and various forms of temptation, thus also actualizing the role of self-reflexivity, thinking and critique, in short: engagement with *meaning*. Queer signified a particular kind of analytics, a theoretical perspective on our history, culture and ourselves. Art was not only an object to decipher, it was a key to understanding the discarded and darker sides of our cultural psychic, but also signified different possibilities, fantasies, alternatives, utopias and futurities.

Queer as critical engagement

While queer theory helped researchers tease out the dynamics of a cultural subconscious, its gendered dis/identifications, power relations, taboos and prohibitions it also engaged in a deconstruction of its own terms, acknowledging a complicated relation to its own subject matter. This ‘self-critical turn’ in queer studies (Ashtor 2021, 6, see also Love 2021) has lately been discussed as primarily a methodological crisis of the

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field. Its diminishing belief its radical or political potential has emerged through discussions of its complicity in colonial or imperialist structures, and neoliberalism – structures it defined itself against when engaging in a radical critiques or dismissals of societal institutions such as marriage or the family. A criticism that now increasingly has shifted towards demands in the name of rights, recognition and equal citizenship, especially in the light of increasing anti-gender movements. The methodological challenges in queer studies however, as we see it, also relates in the context of queer and art to the context of neoliberal corporate academia, the increasing devaluation of the humanities and non-quantifiable knowledge and the polarizing tendencies and moralizing nature of public debates in our times.

Recently, there has been repeated discussion in the public arena about the erosion of literacy, the undermining of sophistication, understanding, and interpretation and the labeling of intellectual engagement as elitist and alienating. Developments that dilute and stifle critical thinking are paralleled with developments that weaken democracy. Contemporary academic research shows a growing alignment with empirically driven frameworks, identity-based categories, and a relative bracketing of historically contextualized concepts and analysis. Within queer studies, this has produced a configuration in which gender and sexuality are examined primarily through the lens of identifiable subjects, lived experience, and measurable forms of vulnerability. In this arrangement, the analysis of gender, sex and sexuality as sites of meaning production – shaped by discursive practices, cultural practices, and regimes of intelligibility – as objects to deconstruct, tends to recede into the background. Genealogical attention to the historical emergence of these categories and to the wider networks of discourse in which they are situated tends to be displaced by approaches centred on recognition, precarity, vulnerability, trauma, and marginalized identity. This shift is something we have noticed in particular in our teaching and supervision practices, but it also reflects tendencies

within the larger context of academic work.

The danger is that the nuanced, mirage-like optical illusions or refractive errors, the whispers that cause auditory hallucinations, or outright silences often found in art remain unseen and unheard. After all, art research is largely about the senses – seeing, hearing, pausing – and engaging in an affective dialogue with the object of study. Queer reading has provided researchers with keys to seeing cracks in visual performances and gendered representations, opening up vistas to non-normative sexualities and genders.

Dreamy

In fall 2023, the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma organized an event called “Queer and Art” with the aim of highlighting different social, cultural, and historical perspectives on queer art. In particular, the aim was to discuss the exhibitions presented at Kiasma during the year, *Tom of Finland* and *Dreamy*, from the perspective of queer research, as well as their cultural-historical and social significance. The event sought to stimulate discussion (in Finnish, Swedish, and English) at the intersection of queer art, research, and society. At the same time, it sought to highlight the rich knowledge of Finnish queer art research and emphasize the queer perspective in art by bringing together queer art historians such as PhD Harri Kalha, PhD Asta Kihlman, and PhD Juha-Heikki Tihinen, as well as artists and curators focusing on queer themes, such as Camille Auer, Aleksi Kolmonen, and Max Hannus. The event aimed to highlight the significance of the cultural-historical context of queer culture and art, as well as its political implications.

The event was organized by the editors of this special issue, Salla Aldrin Salskov, PhD (Åbo Akademi University) and Asta Kihlman, PhD

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(University of Turku) in collaboration with Kiasma and the Finnish Queer Studies Association. Inspired by the day's discussions, we decided to publish a call for papers (in Finnish, Swedish, and English) on a theme issue on queer and art.

The result of all this is now this special issue at hand. Harri Kalha's article "Taidetta ilman tulevaisuutta, Inklusiosta eksklusioon" ("Art Without a Future, From Inclusion to Exclusion") takes as its starting point the challenges of inclusivity in an advertisement for the clothing store Lindex. The article shows how, when bowing in one direction, it is easy to end up sticking one's rear end out in the other. However, the author also observes that he himself has internalized the ideals of (re)productive futurism (see Edelman 2005). Kalha's article, which draws on his artistic production, can also be viewed solely through the images. After all, the interpretation of images is always up to the viewer. In their article, "Straight Pride: In Defence of T4T Heterosexuality" artists Camille Auer and Niko Wearden stage a discussion of the politics of trans intimacies and relationships using their own heterosexual trans-trans partnership as a frame of reference. Drawing on an archive of queer perspectives on gender, sexuality and culture they engage in a dialogue on the power, politics and ethics of trans and queer intimacies.

In this issue the cultural-historical context of queer culture and art is discussed also by Pauliina Lukinmaa & Alexandra Milyakina in their article "It is a Representation of What We All Need as a Queer Community": The Transformative Power of Communal Queer Quilting at the Behemoth's Centre, Estonia. By exploring the meanings and values associated with two quilting projects undertaken by a grassroots queer collective in Tartu, Estonia, the article discusses belonging and craftivism in a transnational context. Queer subcultures and art is also addressed by Vera Boitcova's piece "Queer Enough: Methodological Perspectives on the Dramaturgy of

Queer Refugee Narratives and Identity Performance". Boitcova addresses the questions of research ethics and accountability by investigating the notions of "home" and "belonging" in performance dramaturgy through the lens of queer refugee and migrant experiences.

The political implications of queer art and the role of contextual and historical analysis is highlighted in Sanna Ojanen and Sanna Karkulehto's piece on the Finnish artist Kalervo Palsa in their article "Heteronormeja ja naisia vastaan: Kalervo Palsan queerit cowboyt" ("Against heteronormativity and women: Kalervo Palsa's queer cowboys"). Analyzing the queer comics of Palsa raises questions of ambivalence and ambiguity, anti-identitarian historicities of queerness and the possibilities of art to both display and critique cultural norms and its darker sides.

Isa Hukka's article "Turvallista tilaa rampauttamassa" ("Crippling the safe space") – critically assesses the current culture of safe space ideology and the practices that follow from it, arguing for a need to crip and queer its meanings, drawing on a tradition of crip and queer philosophies and voices in addressing the problems of collectivity and identity-politics. Hukka argues that we need to engage with the cruel optimism of promising safety, and acknowledge the illusionary and phantasmatic aspects of speaking of safety, when in fact it is something that cannot be promised, nor delivered.

Henry-Paul Ontto-Panula's "Stories We Tell and Art That Changes Them" explores queer themes through the medium of comics. Antu Sorainen's contribution "Porilaista protoqueer-elämää sodan varjossa (Nike Sandelin (1903–1940))" ("Protoqueer-life in the city of Pori, in the shadows of war) (Nike Sandelin (1903–1940))", examines the artistic production in relation to the research project on Nike Sandelin (1903–1940): especially focusing on the exhibition at Satakunta Museum and other artistic contributions within the project. Sorainen's piece with commentaries by Salla Aldrin

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Salskov, Kari Silvola and Arto Kallioniemi underlines the way in which art can reach other registers in people than academic discourse, and the need for artistic expression in making sense of forgotten or hidden histories.

We also have the privilege to publish the *lectio praecursoria* by Kari Silvola, who in his doctoral thesis examines how ideals of masculinity defined advertising images in Finland in the 1990s. The thesis highlights the cultural tensions of the time, which were dominated by homophobic attitudes, an atmosphere of fear marked by the AIDS epidemic, and strict boundaries of masculinity.

We hope this special issue on queer and art can contribute to the understanding of cultural and queer forms of expression, as well as deepens our awareness of our own relationality to them. If we take the engagement in queer thought to be, in Tim Dean's words "a practice of opening one's mind to what might appear as dangerously "other", in the context of art we hope it can inspire a discussion on questions of reading, interpretation, nuance, ambiguity. Instead of asking if a piece of art is 'good' or 'bad', we should engage in the investments in the 'good' and 'bad' of art, its politics and its ethics. As the purpose of art cannot be to be, or do good or improve the world, because art also involves negative energy and pure futility. Art must also be able to explore the darker sides of our existence. We hope that the contributions in this issue can inspire the process of thinking queerly, as not only engaging with the non-normative, but also as "a practice of opening one's mind to what might at first sight appear as dangerously "other." (Dean 2009, 29-30).

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