

MFA Thesis excerpt

“Queer Matters: Transforming the Museum Through Ally Practice”

©Xander Karkruff

University of the Arts, 2014

From Invisible to Visible: Queering the Museum

In February of 2014, the LGBTQ Alliance of the American Alliance of Museums initiated the production of a best practices document aiming to outline recommendations for queer-inclusive museum practice. While it will be important for museum professionals to have standards to reference, a best practices checklist is more a palliative approach than a transformative one. The problem of queer invisibility in museums should be approached by delving into the role museums have historically played in maintaining power relations in an inequitable society. This thesis proposes queering the museum as a process that destabilizes those power relations in a way that can have universal implications for improving museum practice and the museum experience.

Queering the museum:

- can engage visitors in identity-affirming experiences;
- subverts the dominant narrative of heteronormativity (and this process can be applied to other dominant narratives); and
- acknowledges the important role gender and sexuality play in all of our lives.

Central to each of these propositions is the idea that representation of marginalized groups in the museum really matters, and can contribute to public acceptance of the queer population.

Queering the museum can engage visitors in identity-affirming experiences.

[Sidebar: The need for an identity-affirming experience is summed up most eloquently by Paul Gabriel in his essay “Embracing Our Erotic Intelligence,” in which he describes the “seemingly insatiable, passionate need of queer people to find others like themselves and to have such a reality affirmed and reaffirmed,” (Gabriel 2008).]

The problem of queer invisibility within the museum is, at its root, a problem of identity. One of the results of privilege is that, as a white person, or a heterosexual person, your identity is considered the norm, and you can be assured that people like you will be represented widely in cultural institutions. The privilege of representation means that wherever you go, you are likely to have your interests acknowledged and your needs met. The primary task of queering the museum, then, is to enable queer visitors to have an identity-affirming experience in the museum. John Falk, in his book *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, argues that going to the museum is a selfish act, one in which the visitor’s goal is to understand more about the self: “to forge their identity,” he says, (Falk 2009, 60). Falk’s work is an important bridge between queer theory and museum theory, the former being deeply engaged with identity politics: how we construct identity, the intersections of identities, and how identity influences the way we navigate social spaces.

According to Falk, an identity-affirming experience - one in which a series of identity-based needs are satisfied - is central to a positive museum visit. A visit includes more than just seeing an exhibition, so queering the museum needs to happen on an inter-departmental level: potential visitors will consider all parts of the museum experience in their decision to visit or not, from the website to the restrooms. For example, a transgender person’s identity-based needs might include gender-neutral restroom facilities as well as options beyond M and F on membership forms and surveys. Those needs can be thought of as basic needs relating to a transgender person’s identity, and making it a point to meet those needs will have an impact on a transgender person’s decision to visit (and support) an institution.

A look at statistics can help us understand the benefits of an identity-affirming experience, especially for youth. A survey conducted in 2011 by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) sums up the need for identity-affirming experiences in school: "A curriculum that includes positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events (i.e., an inclusive curriculum) can promote respect for all and improve LGBT students' school experiences," ("2011 National School Climate Survey"). Although only 17% of the students surveyed reported an inclusive curriculum at their school, the benefits are manifold: an inclusive curriculum fosters more acceptance of LGBT people in the overall student body, and helps LGBT students feel more connected to the school community (and more safe from harassment and bullying) than in schools without an inclusive curriculum. To see oneself reflected and positively represented in cultural and educational institutions, whether it is at school or in a museum, is to feel not just more connected to society but also more valued as a member of society.