Queer Scenographies
From the 'Obscene' to Care and Repair

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Changing Heritage Practices

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Queer Scenographies: From the ‘Obscene’ to Care and Repair

Dirk van den Heuvel

Exhibition design stages the encounter between the visitor and that what is on display. The most effective designs are those that remain unnoticed by the visitor, yet discreetly naturalise this encounter, frame both the visitor and what’s on display.[1] Today, the white cube and black box typologies are the most familiar ones to the visitor of contemporary museum spaces. They take the visitor away from their conventional ways of experiencing their everyday world, just as they decontextualise what is on display, while making them both part of what you might call a larger museological complex, in which a preferred set of cultural values are produced and circulated to become a hegemonic, dominant system that favours certain voices and approaches, while silencing others.

When looking for an escape out of this normalising system, to allow for a richer approach, one that is more open and abundant in offering room for digressions and deviancies, could a different approach to exhibition design help? Can exhibition design help in bringing out unheard or marginalised voices, while not immediately neutralising them by institutionalisation? Can a change in exhibition design make queer visitors feel welcome? Or even more pronounced, as Aaron Betsky put it in his recent reflection on architecture exhibitions and queer space theory: can the ‘obscene’ – or what is assessed as such – be brought to the ‘scene’ of the museum?[2] He himself responds negatively to this rhetorical question, positing that queer architects and designers have now become part of mainstream explorations, and the queer space discourse is trapped in nostalgia, thus eliminating its formerly disruptive potential.

Queer space theory goes back to the 1980s and 90s, in direct response to the oppression of gay persons during the AIDS crisis. It must be noted queer space theory in its early years was mostly written from the perspective of the white, gay males, even when ‘gay’ and also ‘queer’ were then much broader, more general terms of sexual denomination than they are today.[3] Today, the discourse has expanded with new exciting authors, also including trans studies, intersectional approaches, and moving beyond the western discourse, even though admittedly, it still very much remains within the confines of western academia. In terms of space and exhibition design, one observes a strong interest in performance and installation art.[4]

A clear signal of this trend concerns the French pavilion at the 2023 edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale, which was devoted to ballroom culture including live drag performances. The silver, metallic disco club installation was something of a breath of fresh air to queer visitors. At the same time, it also made clear there is still a very palpable difference between the extremely coded discipline of architecture and the presentation of ballroom and drag culture as something ‘other’ outside of architecture, yet now brought into the very centre of the global architectural discourse. Such awkwardness emerged earlier with the exhibition *Queer British Art 1861–1967* at Tate Britain, in 2017. Undeniably, the show was a landmark to long overdue queer representation in British institutions, yet visiting the exhibition also felt as if witnessing an act of mainstreaming,

obfuscating the ‘obscene’ of a traumatic history of repression and marginalisation. The design and display of art works was organised in a quite linear and chronological manner, with little surprises to be found for the queer ‘insiders’ to this deviantly creative production of queer artists and writers – the result was more like commemoration than abundant celebration.

Queering Collections

Are there alternatives for such well-meaning, unintended acts of ‘othering’ as part of a practice of mainstreaming? They were discussed within the context of The Critical Visitor project, especially during the various field trips to some of the institutions of the project’s collaborative network, especially the Amsterdam Museum and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. The field trips were modelled on and overlapped with similar exchanges within the network of Queering the Collections. Queering the Collections brings together LGBTQI+ professionals in the heritage sector, which is nationally oriented but largely Amsterdam based. It meets irregularly since the eponymous symposium of 2015, and subsequent publication of 2016, which was compiled by Riemer Knoop, then lector at the Reinwardt Academy, and Lonneke van den Hoonaard, director of IHLIA LGBTI Heritage, the Dutch queer heritage organization with the largest collection in Europe.[5] In the symposium publication which is also a manual for heritage professionals, the emancipatory goals of the network exchanges are clearly stated: they are to be reached using the included ‘tools’ for curators and archivists to open up the collections and bring out unknown queer and trans histories. Riemer Knoop refers to Richard Sandell, professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, to define three queering strategies: making queer histories visible; presenting them as equal to and not separate from mainstream histories as part of a policy of inclusion; and creating awareness through so-called playful and poetical interventions by artists that deconstruct ‘normal’ and ‘everyday’ assumptions around gender and sexuality.[6]

Exhibition design is not a part of the ‘tips and tricks’ in the Queering the Collections book, rather, the focus is very much on language, audiences, curators, and their agency within the institutional framework of museums and archives. Exhibition design only became a topic during the field trips of the last three years when we collectively visited new exhibition projects, of which the scenography was an important ingredient to achieve a more diverse and inclusive approach towards collection presentations. What struck me as a common denominator during those visits is not so much a desire to restage the obscene dimensions from early queer space theory as mentioned by Aaron Betsky, but an approach that seeks to move beyond the shock and anti-institutional, avant-gardist attitudes towards practices of care, repair, and healing. This refocus has already been in the making in the various discourses, from feminisms to indigenous and Black activist movements, but the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have acted as an accelerator for this agenda.

The other striking aspect concerns a notion of recontextualising, to counter the decontextualisation, autonomy and abstraction strategies of the white cube and black box typologies. This recontextualisation is not so much a new fixing of canons and historical narratives, but rather a recognition of the relationalities at stake. It helps explain why research has become such a paramount element of artistic and curatorial practices.

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Recognition and understanding of the specific relationalities – of archival objects, art works, collections, institutions – enable artists and curators to retell familiar stories in new ways, and moreover, to bring out suppressed and forgotten stories. This recontextualisation or resituating also comes with a strong spatial component: the visitor too, is literally reframed, in relation to the materials on display, the curatorial narrative, the scenography, and even the architecture of the museum building itself.

Relinking and Cross Connections

The new collection presentation of the Van Abbemuseum took this new understanding of relationalities as an obvious starting point, as immediately communicated through its title *Delinking and Relinking*.[7] The design by Diogo Passarinho Studio and The Rodina studio makes clever use of the architecture of the museum building, which is a combination of the traditionalist main building in brick of 1936, designed by Alexander Kropholler, and an imposing new modernist wing and tower by the Amsterdam architect Abel Cahen, which opened in 2003. Cahen’s addition defies a rationalist ordering of the museum spaces thus creating a slightly labyrinthian experience of surprises, which is embraced by the curators and designers to present a multivocal and multisensory assemblage of stories.

The Amsterdam Museum is temporarily rehoused to the seventeenth century Amstelhof, because its own location in the medieval city centre is undergoing a profound renovation. The museum uses this moment to experiment with new exhibition formats and scenographies. The collection presentation *Panorama Amsterdam: A Living History of the City* designed by Studio L A involves a layered visitor experience by creating an open interior room inside the main room.[8] Along the walls of the main room visitors can view a linear chronology of main historical events. The interior room offers space for critical microhistories to achieve a multivocal experience to expand the received city history toward a more inclusive overview, including the little-known persecution of homosexuals in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Gay Games of 1998, and the Black Pride movement of today. Randomly placed door openings and windows between the interior room and main room invite visitors to explore the space in a non-linear way, thus creating their own cross connections between the very different city histories on display.

Doing the Queering

With the Queering the Collections network three exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum were visited, each dedicated to a queer artist.[9] According to Charl Landvreugd, head of Research and Curatorial Practice of the Stedelijk, the exhibitions are a demonstration of how you can 'do' queering of the institution without too much 'talking' about it. The exhibitions concern a retrospective presentation of the Canadian artists collective General Idea, a tribute to the work of Keith Haring and a monographic overview of the Dutch Afro-Caribbean artist Felix de Rooy.

General Idea, formed by AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, became famous in 1987 for the appropriation of Robert Indiana's pop art painting of the word *LOVE* (1966), which General Idea provokingly transformed into *AIDS* using the same colourful graphics. A very personal statement too, since two of the three group members, Partz and Zontal, died of the illness in 1994. For their show in the Stedelijk, the existing scenography for Stedelijk BASE of 2017, designed by Dutch architect Rem

Koolhaas together with then director Beatrix Ruf, was quite naturally and convincingly appropriated in a similar act of transformation. Only after a couple of moments did it dawn upon me that the whole basement room and its obliquely placed series of steel plate walls was hacked, as it were, and turned around into an homage to the group's history and art works. While the original Stedelijk BASE presentation was a most dense experience of a selection of disparate objects from the Stedelijk collection to create unexpected and surprising encounters, in the General Idea exhibition there is a much calmer pace with space to breathe and room to pause and reflect on the events of the AIDS epidemic and their lasting devastating impact. This notion of reflection and homage returned in the Hall of Honour of the museum, temporarily devoted to a restored piece created by Keith Haring, who also died of AIDS in 1990. Haring made *Amsterdam Notes* in 1986, at the occasion of his first solo exhibition at the Stedelijk. The 38-meter-long drawing was hung high up in the room almost against the ceiling, not eye level, thus forming a classic frieze telling Haring's tale of mythical creatures engaged in acts of love, death, sexuality, and desire.

Finally, Felix de Rooy's *Apocalypse* and its scenography presented similar acts of bending space towards queer experiences. The white room tradition of the Stedelijk, famously introduced by Willem Sandberg, made way for vibrant and colourful arrangements of room dividers, platforms and pedestals that reference familiar western museum typologies, in particular the nineteenth century museum, such as the original Stedelijk itself. The nineteenth century museum type stems directly from the enlightenment discourse in architecture, with a focus on rationalisation of space and disciplinary knowledge production through classical ordering principles of symmetry and repetition. This association with rationalism is immediately crushed by the exuberance and sheer eclecticism – if I may use this modernist term here – by which Felix de Rooy overwhelmed the space, the displays, and the visitor. No abstraction here, no less-is-more restraint, but big dramatic gestures cutting across mythical and religious iconographic traditions and their geographies, nothing less than “a multi-cultural orgasm” as one of the captions read.

Here, the strategy of surrealist contrast undercuts any assumed objectivity and classification. References to that other typology of western curiosity come to mind: the *wunderkammer*, or *rariteitenkabinet*. Especially the notion of ‘rariteiten’ is a slippery, yet productive link, since its meaning in Dutch is very close to the old usage of queer in English. In conversation with Landvreugd I suggested the show was a dismissal of white modernism on the very holy site of western avant-gardism that the Stedelijk still is. He was quick to point out that De Rooy represents another kind of modernity, namely Caribbean modernity. Tellingly, a portrait of De Rooy by Diana Blok, which depicts him as Frida Kahlo, dominated the central space. In that sense, we are looking at simultaneous acts of decentering and recentering.

Overall, in these recent Dutch exhibitions at large historical as well as modern and contemporary art museums we are looking at modernism being pluralised, and modernisms in transition, by cross cutting and cross connecting, in search of spaces of care and repair.

1 For further reading: Penelope Curtis, Dirk van den Heuvel (eds.), *Art on Display 1949-69*, (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, 2019), and Julia Noordegraaf, *Strategies of Display, Museum Presentation in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans Van Beuningen and nai010 Publishers, 2012).
2 Aaron Betsky, “The Scene of the Obscene. How Queer Space Helped Change Architecture Exhibitions (But Not Really),” in Bas Hendrikx (ed.), *Queer Exhibition Histories* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2023), 79-91.
3 The two foundational publications are Joel Sanders (ed.), *Stud, Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); and Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space. Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997).
4 Olivier Vallerand, *Unplanned Visitors. Queering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Domestic Space*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020).
5 Riemer Knoop, Lonneke van den Hoonaard (eds.), *Queering the Collections. Tips & tricks voor het nog zichtbaarder maken van gender- & seksuele diversiteit in musea en collecties*, (Amsterdam: IHLIA and Reinwardt Academie, 2016).
6 Riemer Knoop, “Queering the Collections,” Anders (Laten) Kijken’, in Knoop, Van den Hoonaard, *Queering the Collections*, 2016, 17.
7 Visited 20 November 2021, with conversations with the Van Abbemuseum staff and its director Charles Esche.
8 Visited 25 March 2022, with tours and conversations with curators.
9 Visited 27 June 2023, at the occasion of informal community updates around the renewed initiative for a queer museum in Amsterdam.

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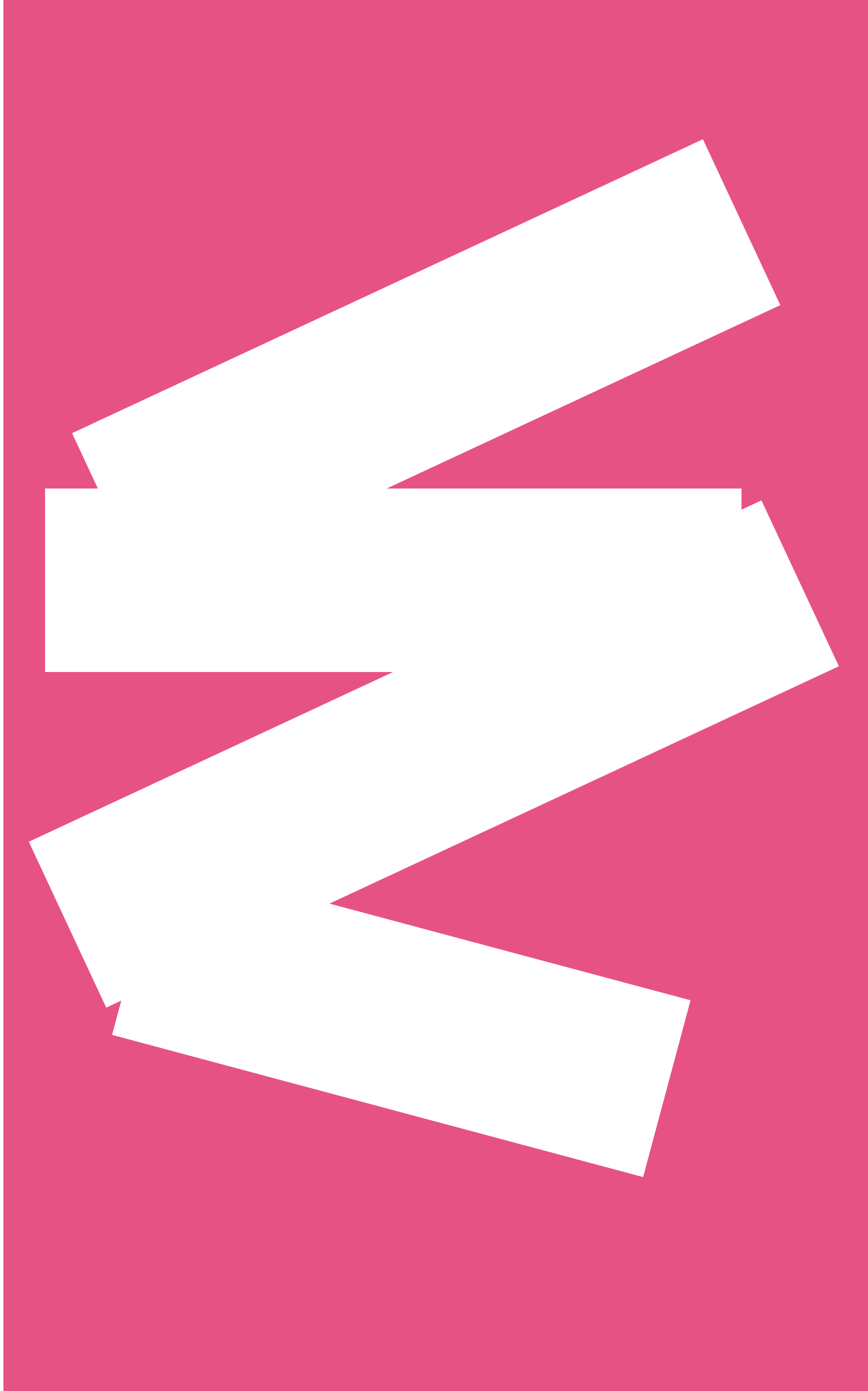

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