

*The Signs on The Walls:
Gender and Sexuality in Public Space*

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Abstract

Public spaces are perceived as locations which are equally accessible to all people who wish to use them, under the condition that they conform to the strict but loosely defined behavioural rules that are deemed socially acceptable. However, those who exist in the margins of hegemonic discourses have largely experienced that what is considered “socially acceptable” tends to be decided through a patriarchal hierarchy, which undermines the democratic and egalitarian values promised by a public space, open to all people. This article examines some of the ways in which public expressions of gender and sexuality are navigated by those who don't conform to the hegemonic confines of what is acceptable. By reappropriating traditional ideas and signs of gender and sexuality, I have created a series of art works which subvert the hierarchy of public space.

Key words: Gender, Sexuality, Queer, Public, Art

The city streets of Barcelona are rife with controversy: a layer of political slogans and symbols coat the walls and doors there. The palimpsest of a contemporary saga contributes to a rich history that is encased within the stone bricks which lie beneath a visage of opposing messages from far right to leftist propaganda. The recent political history of the Catalan independence movement can be identified on them, without looking at a single newspaper. These walls become the battleground of anarchist, conservative and liberal ideologies, contesting each other in hieroglyphics. A main motif in the graffiti I saw when visiting this city was an abundance of the female astrological symbol, appropriated as iconography for the feminist movement, and queer imagery of gay and lesbian couples, as well as the gender variant symbol, a combination of the male and female astrological signs. And as always with graffiti, no matter where you go there was no shortage of phallic imagery, that is, dicks.



Figure 1. Stickers found on the streets of Barcelona. Copyright [2019] by Fabian Pertzel.

Through experiencing these explicitly gendered symbols and images that occupy the public space, I began to question the more subtle ways in which gender and sexuality are materialised and experienced by individuals in public. What is thought of as public space has long been associated with a masculine dominance, as opposed to the private and domestic spaces that have often epitomized the realm of female passivity (Milanovic,

2017, p. 113). Similarly, the materialisation of male hegemony on public space can be perceived through the sexualisation of the breast and the stigmatisation of mothers who breast-feed in public. Underlying this reinforcement of patriarchal values there is the male gaze, through which “bodily signs of reproduction overtly mark women as the other, and the visibility of the other poses as a threat to masculine, rational space.” (Lane, 2014, p. 198) This mode of alterity which objectifies, fetishizes and reduces the breast purely to sexual characteristics prompts some women to behave differently and more discreetly in public, opting for a nursing bib or using designated family rooms when feeding their child. By performing their gender in this way, by covering up or leaving the public space entirely, acts as an apologetic gesture which highlights the male dominance on the public and ultimately displaces women who breast-feed from that space. The innocent act of feeding a child becomes thereby something unsuitable or controversial in a space where men may be prompted to feel uncomfortable or aroused.

Many expressions of sexuality have also been designated in the domain of privacy, particularly variant sexualities other than heterosexuality. Gay, lesbian and other queer sexual identities experience significant inequalities when navigating public spaces because of a social code which stigmatise affection between individuals who deviate from traditional heteronormative coupling. Although some embodiments of sexuality, like sexual acts and nudity, are equally deemed private acts for both queer and heteronormative sexualities alike, queer people experience an overarching designation of their sexuality as a private matter which is justified by the false assumption that “heterosexuality is also defined by private sexual acts and is not expressed in the public arena. Yet, heterosexuality is institutionalized in marriage and in the law, tax, and welfare systems, and is celebrated in public rituals such as weddings and christenings” (Valentine, 1993, p. 396). Although in more recent history both Spain and Australia have both had many wins in regards to LGBTQ+ rights (same-sex marriage was legalised in 2005 in Spain and 2017 in Australia), the legacies of institutionalised prejudice still exist and many queer people still face harassment and violence when they express their desire and affection openly through simple, harmless gestures such as holding hands and kissing.

It is important to take into account how gender and sexuality are experienced and navigated in public space. Due to the heteronormative structure of society and its

limitations on sexual/gender expression as mentioned above, many men who identify as gay are marginalised, isolated and fail to conform to traditional gender norms. Particularly in low socioeconomic regions they develop an “alternative persona to survive in a highly homophobic environment.” (Frye, Egan, Tieu, Cerda, Ompad, Koblin, 2014, p. 12). Subsequently, there is a need for these men to have a discrete expression of their sexuality and eroticism, which comes in the form of heterotopic spaces such as public restrooms, bathhouses, adult book stores and theatres, public parks and nude beaches.



Figure 2. Pasteup in Gaixample. Copyright [2019] by Fabian Pertz.

Conceptualised by Michel Foucault, a heterotopia is a physical space that exists outside the normal conditioning of society, where the values of that society can be represented, contested and inverted. This is enabled by the people who inhabit that space through the shared acceptance that a specific location will serve a particular purpose. The purpose which it serves must happen isolated from the society that surrounds it and can only be accessed through invitation or ritual. Heterotopias are also linked to time, as they can only exist through a shared mentality that a location serves a purpose, they can disappear if that idea also disappears. Therefore, they must always be opened and closed, or constructed and deconstructed in the shared consciousness of people who use them (Foucault, 1967).

Less extreme and more literal examples of gay heterotopias are gay bars and night clubs: they exist outside of heteronormative society, and allow people of the same gender to interact with one and other in the same way heterosexual couples would in a traditional bar, representing and inverting regular societal behaviour. They exist because of the shared mentality that the other people who inhabit the space are also gay, or at least lack prejudice towards gay people—this is also the condition/ritual of entry. These types of spaces for gay people are thought of as crisis heterotopias, locations reserved for individuals who experience a crisis in relation to the society they live in. Generally speaking, this crisis, for example, can take the form of adolescence or the elderly, individuals who are learning how to function in society or those who no longer can. Yet, for queer people this crisis is the need to act on desires or live a lifestyle that is in opposition with what has been generally accepted in society as normal behaviour: “Hence... the gay population has the opportunity to meet like-minded people and express their sexuality openly while simultaneously avoiding the insurmountable constraints encountered when disclosing their sexuality in heterosexual spaces” (Andriotis, 2010, p.1085).

Therefore, heterosexual constraints that are placed upon public and shared spaces limits the way gay and queer people can express themselves and interact with one and other. This creates a need for the existence of heterotopic spaces outside of heteronormative society in order to navigate the traditional and hegemonic rules of public space.

Through these examples of how gender and sexuality can change the way people inhabit and interact with and within the public space, the graffiti of feminist symbols and queer representation throughout the city of Barcelona can be understood as an attempt to challenge the masculinisation and heteronormativity of what is perceived as appropriate public behaviour. Such images create visibility and recognition of the marginalised other and force their experiences and lifestyle into the public sphere. Conversely, the overwhelming abundance of phallic imagery reinforces a male dominance and is a juvenile expression of gender that undercuts the political message that is represented in much of Barcelona’s street art.

In response to observations I made of the gendered imagery represented Barcelona’s street art, how they act as political subversions of what is accepted in public, as well as

my own experiences of the difficulty and limitations on expressing myself as a queer person in daily life, I have created a series of art works, including drawings, prints and sculptural pieces that explore my ideas of how people of different genders and sexualities navigate and experience public space. The four pieces I have selected examine traditional gender roles, challenge their relevance to contemporary society through appropriation and convey the experience of expressing queer identities in public as well as how it can be perceived by others. In my own attempt to create space for queer expression and force the visibility of marginalised people into the hegemonic space, I have exhibited and documented my work in the weaving alleyways of Lismore's back ally gallery, surrounded on four sides by the main business area. In so doing, I have attempted to create a kind of heterotopia in its own way for exhibiting graffiti and street art. While it is celebrated here, on other walls would be washed away and painted over to preserve the normality of that space. By displaying my work here, it takes this concept one step further, merging a crisis heterotopia of queer identity, inaccessible to the public, with an artistic heterotopia that exists as part of public space.



*Figure 3. 'Mr Knife & Mrs Fork', 2020, Oil stick and ink on paper (59 x 84 cm).
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My first piece plays with the title of an exhibition commissioned by Studio Voltaire and a poem of the same name which featured in that show. Mr knife and Mrs fork, exhibited

and written in 2009 by the artist Hendrik Olesen, references the story of Alan Turing, a computer scientist who was criminally prosecuted for homosexuality and underwent chemical castration as corrective treatment, ending his career and resulting in his suicide. The poem describes the traditional roles of a mother and father. Written as a letter from a man to his parent, he laments his inability to live up to these familial and social expectations as a gay man. The poem also describes a perspective on the process of “coming out”, depicting it as a coming-of-age experience. This constitutes a shared experience with many others in the gay community and can be summarised as: a disconnection from traditional family values enforced by the Christian church, the feelings of shameful desires, a deconstruction of individual identity, the necessity to rebuild an identity and sense of self, and, finally, the celebration of the self and sexuality (Olesen, 2016, pp.127 – 130). Inspired by this poem and the inability to participate in the heteronormative family dynamic that it describes, I created two drawings of the male and female toilet door signifiers.



Figure 4. Mr Knife & Mrs Fork (detail). Copyright [2020] by Fabian Pertzel.

Using a self-inking office stamp that I have customised to print the title “Mr Knife Mrs Fork” I printed on two pages which were tiled with the phrase, then overlaid with the

male and female signs drawn in black oil stick. The chunky tackiness of the oil paint created a textured surface which contrasts with the flat black of the printed text and sits above the flatness of the paper. These two signs that designate the departure from a public space shared by men and women to explicitly gendered spaces reinforce the traditional binary of gender, which is underscored by the reference to Olesen's description of traditional gender roles. In his poem, Olesen uses the fork as a metaphor for the roles of the mother, a nurturing figure and provider of sustenance: "No mother no mouth no tongue no teeth no larynx no oesophagus no belly no anus." Subsequently, the knife represents the father as a provider of strength and protection "No Father no legs no arm no feet no eyes no belly no thumb no elbow no fist." (Olesen, 2016, pp.127 – 130). The poetic voice continues and begins to say "Farewell" to the respective body parts, showing a sense of loss over his inability to live up to those gendered expectations. He later accepts this and realises that to be whole he must construct a body composite of these qualities. "Self production, says I Produce your own body... Face Neck Breast Spleen Face Liver Arms Feet Stomach Pelvis Genitals Thighs Calves Thumb Elbow Fist Finger Ankle Hip Hand arm Wrist Hair Chin Mouth Nose Nostril Thigh Ear Elbow Waist Shoulder Cheek Belly Anus Thumb Tooth Tongue Toe ETC" (Olesen, 2016, pp.127 – 130).

When visiting the University of Barcelona, I experienced the deconstruction of a gendered binary in the form of student toilets. They had been explicitly re-labelled and ungendered. Back then, I didn't think much about them other than it wasn't something I had seen in Australia. However, when creating this work, I considered this experience in a new way: I appropriated the traditional signs of gender as well as this poem to demonstrate the conflict in being queer and attempting to navigate the institutionalised gender binary and heterotypical nature of society.

Having established the tradition of a dual gender system and in some ways deconstructed how it is embodied, I wanted to reconstruct a more contemporary understanding of gender by manipulating the two astrological man and woman signs. I created new symbols by taking apart the traditional imagery and bound them back together in new formations. These new shapes resemble the variant gender symbol, which is a representation of transgender rights and activism, and among the symbols I saw in the streets of Barcelona. I used wax as a material, as it is transformative in nature and has the ability to be

reconstituted and reshaped to suit the needs of the artist, an appropriate metaphor for the understanding of gender as a social construction that is beyond the binary of man and woman.



Figure 5. 'Untitled', 2020, Wax cast and jute twine. Copyright [2020] by Fabian Pertz.

Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* critiques traditional theories on the materiality of gender and the body. She posits that gender is not a deeply internal characteristic of our identity, a fact determined at birth by our biology and physiology. It is instead performative, a phenomenon produced through the things we do, which affirm our gender. For example, the ways we walk, act, speak or dress are all gendered in certain ways. It is these gendered acts that constitute the materialisation of our gender because

they give physicality to the conscious or subconscious idea of who we are. Butler claims that traditional gender theories essentialise feminine materialisation, by equating womanhood with the womb and the ability to create life. She highlights that historically, theories of gender materialisation have come predominantly from a male perspective which sees the gender of a body as a surface to be worked upon or a fixed matrix to be manipulated. Butler claims that it the body is instead a temporal medium in flux that can alternate between genders (Butler, 2015, pp. 120 – 122). I have applied this concept to the wax, which follows a similar fluctuating materiality that can alternate in form and representation, in an effort to make space for the spectrum and ambiguity of gender in the shared public space.



Figure 6. 'Untitled (Bound)', 2020, Paster, condom and jute twine. Copyright [2020] by Fabian Pertzel.

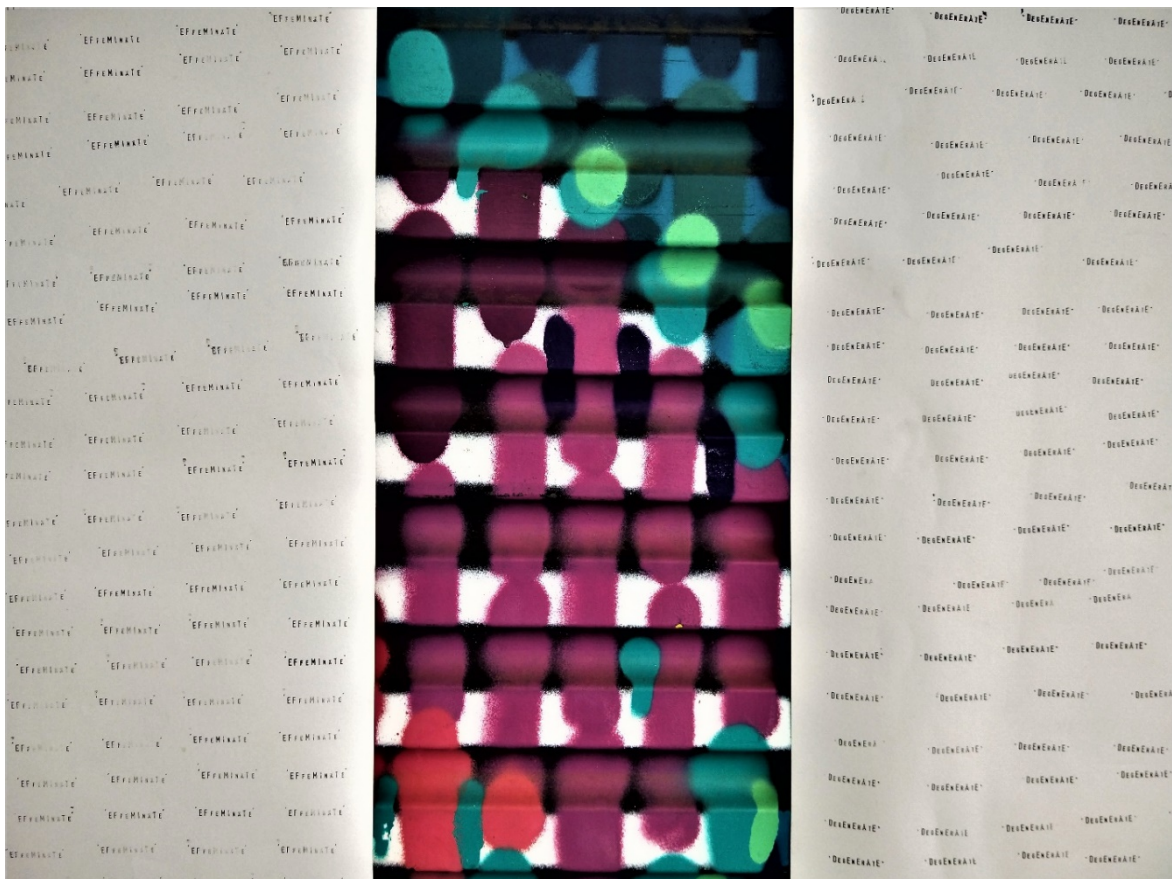
My third piece is inspired by the fetish art of bondage and the explicit imagery of homoerotic affection represented in the pasteups and graffiti of Gaixample (a nickname for the central gay district of Barcelona, playing on the neighbourhood's Catalan name, Eixample, which means extension), through which I confront explicit expressions of sexuality in the public space. Originating from the Japanese practice of Knibaku and Shibari, bondage explores the sensuality and aesthetics of consensual knot-tying and binding of the human body into erotic positions (Kinoko, 2018, n. p.). These white

droplets appear to slide through the jute twine that suspends them as they trickle down the walls of the space. Created from the binding of condoms filled with plaster, these ambiguously-humanoid forms resemble something that lies between a penis and breast, some strange organ that is entirely of the body but alien with an uncanny eroticism.



Figure 7 and 8. 'Untitled (Bound)' (details). Copyright [2020] by Fabian Pertz.

The vague, simple beauty of these forms and the obvious allusions to non-heteronormative sex references the abjection that is associated with the queer bodies and sexuality. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Julia Kristeva describes the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 2014, p.145). Anything that falls beyond the strict rules of gender constructed by Western society can be seen as the abject. However, these exclusions from mainstream culture and regulations on expression of love and gender make it dangerous for people who cannot conform to that ideology to exist and navigate the hegemonic space.



*Figure 9. 'Effeminate Degenerate' (detail), 2020, Ink print on paper.
Copyright [2020] by Fabian Pertzel.*

The final piece, *Effeminate Degenerate* (2020) is a large-scale print made through the repetitive mark of a self-inking office stamp on paper, an action that references the pervasiveness of anxiety. The words “effeminate” and “degenerate” refers to the way homosexuality has historically been perceived as a shameful and degenerative act, the word “homosexual” itself originated as a medical diagnosis and was registered in *The*

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 1973. In particular this work references my own fears about needing to act a certain way in public and create a protective persona. The repetition of a single word and unconventional use of capitals and punctuation echo the anxieties and hyper-fixation that many queer people have in regards to being recognised or discovered in scenarios where it would be dangerous for them to be themselves. The word 'effeminate', originally a derogatory term referring to a feminine gay man, was reappropriated, in the 1972 journal *Faggotry*, by Steven F. Dansky, not as a noun but as an active verb meaning "to oppose the masculine hierarchy an ideology of fascism . . . to fight against our oppression as faggots in militant ways." (Lord, 2013, p.134) These two words, 'effeminate' and 'degenerate', have been used to stigmatise queer sexualities and genders, entrenching shame into our very identities. Like the heterotopic oasis' that allows free expression of desires and affection without the judgement of society, the reclamation of derogatory words can help alleviate the fear associated with them and help heal the way we see ourselves through the eyes of hegemonic society as damaged and undesirable.



Figure 10. 'Effeminate Degenerate'. Copyright [2020] by Fabian Pertz.

Through a critical lens it is apparent that there are underlying power dynamics in much of our world that are taken for granted. Public space, by definition, is a space that all people have access to, however, due to societal codes of what is considered acceptable behaviour and a hierarchy of gender not all people navigate or occupy that space in equal ways. It is apparent that a person's gender and sexuality are some of the factors that contribute to how they occupy this shared space. The performance of apologetic gestures

which accommodate the masculine hegemony on public space alongside the construction of satellite heterotopic spaces that queer the heteronormativity of acceptable societal behaviour are some of the ways that these power dynamics are materialised and subverted. The gendered signs and imagery I observed scrawled on the walls and doors of the city when visiting Barcelona can be seen as another form of materialisation and subversion, a political act in the public sphere, challenging the masculine dominance and declaring a right to exist there equally.

I have taken this imagery and the ideas of traditional male and female gender roles that have been explored by queer artists and have appropriated their meaning, reflecting my own views and experiences in the artworks I have created. By bringing contemporary ideas of gender as well as hidden queer cultural practices and experiences into a public graffiti gallery, I have enacted a catharsis, bringing to light this small part of a world that is shrouded from regular society. Merging the public territory with a queer heterotopia, subverting the politics of gender and sexuality in public space to create a new type of place, a place for expression and a place for discussion.

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