

Queer Expression in Art

By Ritchie Hagen (he/him)

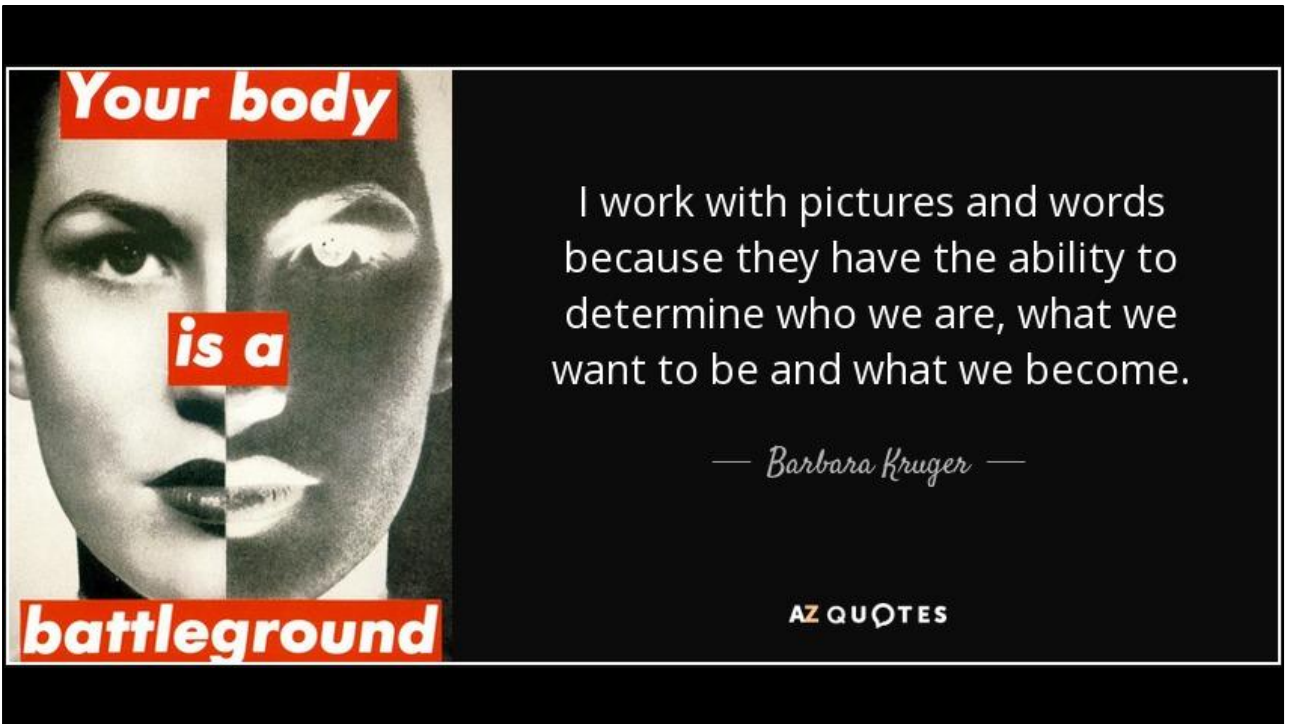
May 2021

Hi everyone, my name is Ritchie, pronouns are he/him. Thank you so much for having us today.

I have an English associates already, but now I am back at COC, studying sociology with the intent of someday doing archival work or teaching. This presentation is an abridged version of a project I worked on for Prof. Paez's Women's Studies class earlier this year.

Queer Expression in Art is a very broad topic so please forgive me if I move a little quickly. I selected it because I am also a hobby artist, and the art that I did, ended up being instrumental to putting together my personal coming-out narrative. I was working out my gender identity and sexuality through my art a decade ago before I even had the vocabulary to understand what I was feeling, so looking back on that stuff was interesting to me – and I can't be the only person who's done that.

SO. This project. I was curious about how art is practiced as a form of resilience for the individual queer person, and as a tool for self-exploration. We're also going to look at the "gay jobs" stereotype and how gender norms and social acceptance of LGBT populations may have influenced those.



I wanted to open with this quote because I think it perfectly encompasses why some queer folks are drawn to the arts. “I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are, what we want to be and what we become.” - Barbara Kruger



This is the LA County Museum of Art, where in 2018 through 2019 it hosted “Outliers and American Vanguard Art.” This was a collection of works by marginalized creators, work that is beyond statistical norms, a collection that ArtForum.com says examines “the ways that race and class have determined who is considered ‘inside’ and who is defined as ‘outside’.” And speaking of Barbara Kruger, that is her work in the elevator on the left.



Greer Lankton (1958-1996)



One of the artists featured at this exhibit was an East Village artist and trans woman named Greer Lankton. They had two of her art dolls on display, the actress and trans icon Candy Darling, and Jackie Kennedy in her famous pink suit, and some of her paintings. When I saw these pieces I didn't know a trans woman had created them, but I still had this subtle feeling that the artist was queer. That goes to show that her identity is inseparable from her work. But one of those pieces, titled "Operation Day," felt more like a private diary entry than something that was created with the intent of having thousands of people look at it.

See link below to view "Operation Day" (trigger warning for gender dysphoria, blood, post-operation)

Bryan-Wilson, Julia. "Outliers and American Vanguard Art." Artforum International, 1 May 2018,
www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201805/outliers-and-american-vanguard-art-75055



During the course of her lifetime she struggled with both gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia, which led to eating disorders and drug abuse. As an artist she was exploring and processing these feelings by doing art. And I like to think that all of us – not just artists, and not just queer people – have done that at some point in our lives. Whether it's from the angry crayon drawings we did as kids to adult coloring books, we can vent our feelings through art.

Cohen, Alina. "1980s Icon Greer Lankton Explored Glamour and Gender in Her Eerie Dolls." Artsy, 15 Feb. 2019, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-1980s-icon-greer-lankton-explored-glamour-gender-eerie-dolls

“There is growing evidence in support of a relationship between personal creative expression and sexual identity, as well as between expressiveness and physical and emotional health.”

Coming Out Through Art: A Review of Art Therapy With LGBT Clients

Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 25(4) pp. 170-176 © AATA, Inc. 2008



Art therapy is the guided form of this. In 2008 the Journal of the American Art Therapy Association published an article about working with LGBT clients, which said, “There is growing evidence in support of a relationship between personal creative expression and sexual identity, as well as between expressiveness and physical and emotional health.” We all know that not having space for your feelings can affect you mentally *and* physically. That is why people who don’t have a safe space to express themselves, AKA live their truth as gay, lesbian, bi or trans, will experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, drug abuse and suicidal ideation. Therefore, expressiveness is so important for your mental and physical wellbeing.

Pelton-Sweet, Laura M., and Alissa Sherry. “Coming Out Through Art: A Review of Art Therapy With LGBT Clients.” Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, vol. 25, no. 4, 2008, pp. 170–76. Crossref, www.plumeriacounseling.com/coming-out-through-art-a-review-of-art-therapy-with-lgbt-clients

Art therapy dual portraits: Cynthia Emerlye



The image shows a screenshot of the Picrew website. At the top left, the Picrew logo is visible. The main focus is a custom avatar of a young woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing large black sunglasses and a white jacket with a rainbow flag patch. She is holding a rainbow flag. Below the avatar is a grid of icons for customization, including a dice, a question mark, a close button (X), and several peace sign and rainbow flag icons. The background of the entire image is a solid green color.

“Through books and magazines, Internet chat groups, movies... LGBT adolescents are able to find others with whom they identify. By finding and emulating these others, they are able to ‘try on’ various identities. In addition, self-expressive hobbies and interests offer new contexts in which to understand themselves in relation to gender and sexual norms.”

Coming Out Through Art: A Review of Art Therapy With LGBT Clients

Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 25(4) pp. 170-176 © AATA, Inc. 2008

Same article says “Through books and magazines, Internet chat groups, movies... LGBT adolescents are able to find others with whom they identify. By finding and emulating these others, they are able to ‘try on’ various identities.”

I want to highlight Internet Chat Groups, online spaces. If you can’t experiment with your identity safely in person, doing it virtually is an option. On the left is a screenshot from Picrew, that’s a website where a lot of people make avatars that they’ll use on websites like Twitter.

Picrew: https://picrew.me/image_maker/94097



Games like Final Fantasy 14 and Second Life have very robust character creators, so you can create an avatar of yourself, or of your ideal self, or someone who is completely unlike yourself but you're very curious and you can wear that hat for a little while. Anecdotally speaking, there is no research on this that I know of, I've personally seen a lot of queer people who flock to these games, just for the ability to be someone who is a more authentic representation of themselves.

Second Life Pride: <http://go.secondlife.com/landing/lgbtq/>

More about LGBTQ+ rep in online games:

<https://www.kotaku.com.au/2020/04/lgbtqia-representation-community-video-games/>

“Welcome to the 66th annual Tony Awards, or as we like to call it, *50 Shades of Gay.*”

Neil Patrick Harris



So now let's go back to the professional side of doing art. Not just visual artists like Greer Lankton, but also singers, musicians, Broadway and so forth. Is there any sort of connection we can make between personal expression and doing it as their job? But of course I can't go any further without acknowledging that society has a stereotype for gay men. Including the assumption that there are a lot of queer people in theatre.

Panel: Are LGBT people really more artistic than the general population, or is it just a stereotype?

“Those in power who dictate the social rules have strict perceptions of what is acceptable for gender roles. Figure skating, being artistic, and making love to a man are all things that “society” has decided are activities for women. **Men who do not follow these prescribed roles and rules are seen as deviant and have attention drawn to the fact that they might be gay.** If these social rules weren’t in place, would more straight men engage in artistic pursuits and expressions?”

Dr. Karen Scarpella, LCSW; *OUT FRONT Magazine*, 2 Apr. 2014

So we can look at this from a couple of angles. One is that this is a stereotype formed as a result of gender norming. *OUT FRONT Magazine* had a panel discussion on this, “Are LGBT people really more artistic than the general population, or is it a stereotype?” Where we get this great quote from Dr. Karen Scarpella, “Those in power who dictate the social rules have strict perceptions of what is acceptable for gender roles. Figure skating, being artistic, and making love to a man are all things that “society” has decided are activities for women. Men who do not follow these prescribed roles and rules are seen as deviant and have attention drawn to the fact that they might be gay.” Basically society is saying, if you’re not one gender, you have to be the other gender, and there isn’t much fluidity between the two.

Tolsma, Pieter, et al. “Panel: Are LGBT People Really More Artistic than the General Population (and If so, What Causes It), or Is It Just a Stereotype?” *OUT FRONT Magazine*, 2 Apr. 2014,
www.outfrontmagazine.com/trending/artistic-or-stereotype

“A Theory of Gay and Lesbian Occupations”

Some occupations with the highest proportion of LGBT workers:

Training and Development Specialists and Managers | Community Service Managers | Technical Writers | Occupational Therapists | Massage Therapists | Urban Planners | Producers and Directors | Postsecondary Teachers | Probation Officers | Funeral Directors

Lesbians in female-majority occupations: Psychologists;
in male-majority occupations: Bus/truck mechanics & diesel engine specialists

Gay men in female-majority occupations: Flight attendants;
in male-majority occupations: Actors

“There May Be Some Truth to the ‘Gay Jobs’ Stereotype.” *LSE Business Review*, 18 Jan. 2016

Another angle is consideration of skills in the workplace. All this is from an article based on a study that set out to develop a framework for predicting what jobs gay men and lesbians may pursue. Some of these jobs include community service managers, producers and directors, psychologists, flight attendants and more. Is there anything that any of these jobs have in common? Yes.

Anteby, Michel, et al. “There May Be Some Truth to the ‘Gay Jobs’ Stereotype.” *LSE Business Review*, 18 Jan. 2016.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2016/01/18/there-may-be-some-truth-to-the-gay-jobs-stereotype/>

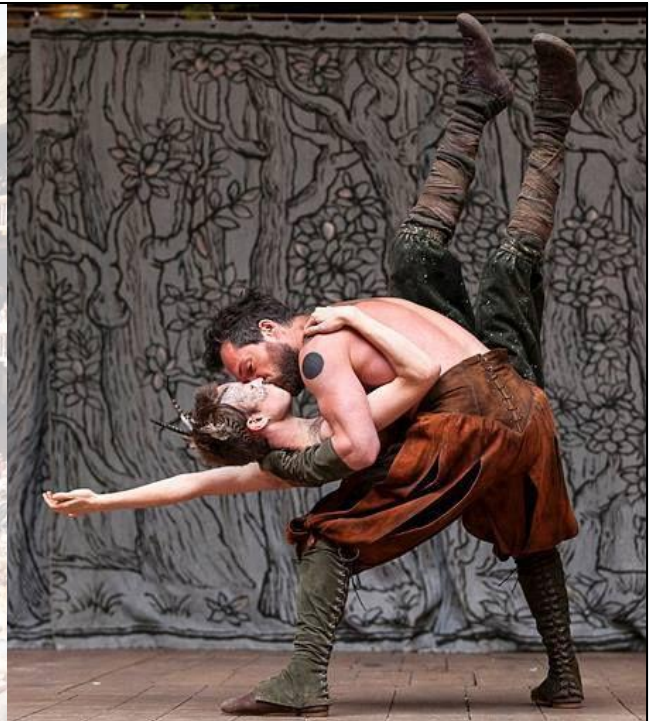


- Most of these occupations require **above-average social perceptiveness** and/or **above-average task independence**
- Workers probably developed these skills as a result of social adaptation to discrimination

What they found is that queer people are drawn to jobs where they can either work alone most of the time, or they need to have a high level of social perceptiveness. In other words, they prefer not to rely on coworkers or supervisors, and anticipating clients reactions comes more easily to them. Hence, all the jobs that require people going out on the road or just sitting at their desk and just doing their thing.

“Audiences for all types of arts events are more accepting of homo-sexuality than are the general population and audiences for movies, auto races, and other sports events.”

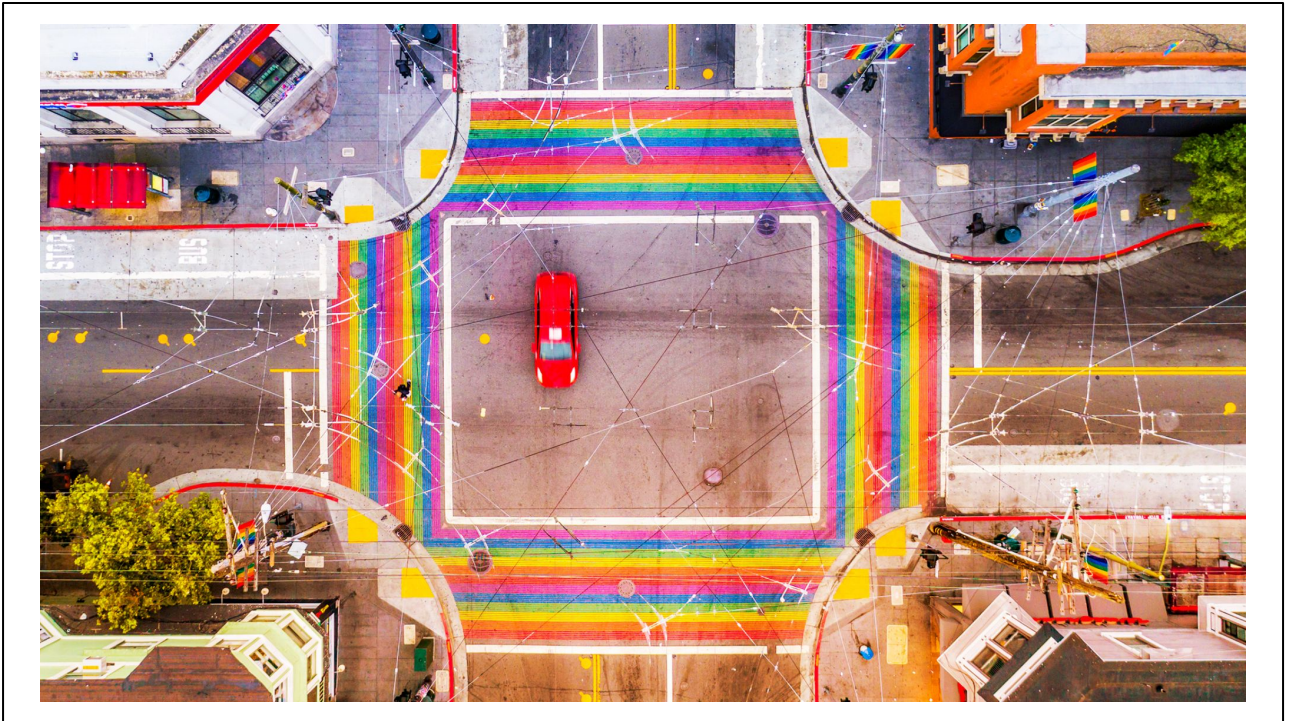
“Sexual Orientation and Demand for the Arts*.”
Social Science Quarterly, vol. 85, no. 3, 2004,
pp. 523–38



But it's not just how they work with people, it's how people work with them as well. And the fact is, that probably part of the reason a queer person pursues art as a career is because the social environment, the majority of people who come and go, are all more accepting and welcoming to diversity, compared to, say, NASCAR.

Lewis, Gregory B., and Bruce A. Seaman. “Sexual Orientation and Demand for the Arts*.” *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2004, pp. 523–38. Crossref, www.researchgate.net/publication/4790745_Sexual_Orientation_and_Demand_for_the_Arts

Image from Shakespeare's Globe's 2013 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* -- <https://www.globeplayer.tv/videos/a-midsummer-night-s-dream-english>



Which raises the thought that a space that is shared by both LGBT and cisgender heterosexual people, is only as safe as the cishet people in it. Sure, we have gay marriage and it's illegal to fire someone for being queer in some places, but we still experience microaggressions, and violence and sexual assault, and new anti-trans state laws everyday. I might just be preaching to the choir here. We've come a long way but we also have a long ways to go.

“Pre-history is a poem, ‘Cross-dressed walk,’ as it sometimes is, when art precedes knowledge and inspection in the production of truth. Art is truth, indeed, but one that can not be measured within the scope of time. And so it starts...”

Anonymous, *from cross to trans*



Now, you might remember that my presentation started out being about art. So to wrap this up, I want to feature a writer who probably doesn't do this for a living, who anonymously published this zine of poetry and prose that I found on the Queer Zine Archive Project. “Pre-history is a poem, ‘Cross-dressed walk,’ as it sometimes is, when art precedes knowledge and inspection in the production of truth. Art is truth, indeed, but one that can not be measured within the scope of time. And so it starts...”

Art is more than decorations on your wall or a way to pass the time. It is an extension of the self, a visual language for a truth that might be too complex for words. I could say so much more but I've already said enough, so I just want to leave you all with this: Doing art is good for you. Thank you.

Anonymous. From Cross to Trans. London, United Kingdom, Queer Zine Archive Project, 2010. https://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/93