

Queering the White Cube:
Curating Queer Exhibitions Since 1995

by

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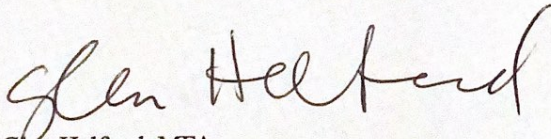


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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines two Bay Area art exhibitions to generate a definition of queer curatorial practice. I look at how queer theory and queer exhibition making have evolved in tandem with one another, and have challenged the programming in art and cultural institutions since the 1990s. The paper first considers *In A Different Light*, curated by Larry Rinder and Nayland Blake at the Berkeley Art Museum in 1995, as an early example of queer curating in art institutions. It then focuses on the 2019 exhibition *Queer California: Untold Stories*, curated by Christina Linden at the Oakland Museum of California, analyzing Linden's curatorial strategies that enact a queer curatorial practice. The investigation of *Queer California: Untold Stories* includes a particularly in-depth analysis of the *Museum of Transgender Hirstory (MOTHA)* by artist Chris E. Vargas—an art installation that forms a major component of the exhibition. Grounding the paper's exhibition and visual analysis are theories from scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz, Claire Mead, and Jonathan Katz. Ultimately, this thesis determines that defining characteristics of queer curatorial practice include: representing and preserving the works of queer artists; deploying queer tactics that subvert normative gender/sexuality politics; and using the term queer as a verb to challenge society's status quo or traditional standards.

Keywords: queer, curatorial practice, heteronormativity, hirstory, representation, activism, sensibility, drag, appropriation

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Queer Curatorial Practices: An Introduction

How can queer curatorial practices include those who don't identify with queerness? Exhibitions and curation—and the queering of those practices—have become increasingly prevalent within the history of art. While this includes the artists and their work, the curators, research and thematic intent, formal choices, and sociopolitical context that compose these exhibitions are being written into history as well with equal importance. Queer theory, politics, and history are now recognized as having an important exhibition history of their own. This thesis examines two Bay Area exhibitions and their contributions to queer curatorial practice. *In A Different Light* was mounted in 1995 at the Berkeley Art Museum, now known as the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).¹ Curated by Nayland Blake and Larry Rinder, this sprawling exhibition marks a late 20th century art world shift towards queer models of curation. In my argument, *In A Different Light* establishes a framework, introducing challenges and questions to define a queer curatorial practice. Fast forwarding to 2019, the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) presented *Queer California: Untold Stories* curated by Christina Linden. Comparing *In A Different Light* to *Queer California: Untold Stories* creates a dichotomy between two Bay Area exhibitions that were grappling with the challenges of evolving language, politics, and cultural landscapes. I focus specifically on the California Bay Area, a region known as a hub for queer activism and political upheaval. Examples of key activist touchstones include the Compton's Cafeteria Riot of 1966;² the election of Harvey Milk in 1977, the first openly gay

¹ In 1996, the Berkeley Art Museum's name changed to the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

² This event occurred in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood, notably three years before the Stonewall Uprising in New York, which is often credited as the rebellion that transformed LGBTQ rights in the United States. The Compton's Cafeteria Riot website gives the following overview: "In the summer of 1966, a trans woman and patron of the Tenderloin's Compton's Cafeteria threw her cup of hot coffee in the face of a police officer as he made an unwarranted attempt to arrest her. The riot that followed would come to be known as the United States' first recorded act of militant queer resistance to social oppression and police harassment." For more information, see: <https://www.comptonscafeteriariot.com/about>.

man to be elected to public office in California; and the opening of the GLBT Historical Society Museum in 2010, the country's first stand-alone museum of queer history and culture.

While analyzing these two exhibitions, their objects, artworks, and display methods, I use queer theory as a tool to inform my definition of queer curation. Queer theory stems from both gay and lesbian studies and feminist theory, and was established in the 1990's—right around the mounting of *In A Different Light*. It acts as a strategy to challenge the notion of defined identity categories, therefore operating with the philosophy that there is no set “normal.” One of the key components of queer theory is defining heteronormativity, which points to “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged.”³ From here, queer theory is understood that it can be applied to anything, not necessarily just topics pertaining to gender and sexuality. Pulling from intersectional feminism, queer theory operates with the notion that sexuality cannot be unlinked from other category containers. The intersectionality of queer theory allows it to be used in a wide range of applications, from gender and sexuality, to art criticism, and even analyzing tools of power and privilege. I'm using this queer ‘lens’ to analyze the tactics of the curators in *In A Different Light* and *Queer California: Untold Stories*.

One of the most provocative tactics Blake and Rinder use was creating an exhibition exploring queer sensibilities that exhibits artists who identify gay, lesbian, straight, or other. Rinder explains in his catalog essay, “Queerness, as opposed to gay or lesbianism—or, for that matter, straightness—is becoming a term which subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it: queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political. Much more than the terms gay or lesbian, queer, from the outset, alludes to a way of life in which sexual freedom and

³ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 548.

gender transgression are but component parts.”⁴ Here, Rinder explains how he’s catching on to the idea that queerness evolves over time, and that these containers of identity are losing the meaning they once held.

In A Different Light was not the first exhibition to showcase queer identities or explore gay and lesbian resonances. For example, *A Lesbian Show*, curated by Harmony Hammond in 1978, was a groundbreaking exhibition of work by solely lesbian artists in the United States.⁵ The New Museum in New York showed *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*, curated by Daniel Cameron in 1982, which also predates *In A Different Light*.⁶ It was not Blake and Rinder’s intention to create an exhibition about queer identities—in fact, they wanted to steer clear of any queer nomenclature that made specific reference to gender or sexual identity in the exhibition’s title.⁷ Because of queer theory’s emergence in the 1990s, it was difficult to name exactly the types of curatorial strategies these curators were deploying. I’m inserting a queer lens and a generational lens to look back and analyze the exhibition, its contents, and display strategies, and to uncover what queer curating has looked like and how it has evolved since.

In the nearly 25 years between exhibitions, the language around queerness has changed. For example, the curatorial essays by Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder speak to “gay and lesbian” sensibilities. Using “queer” sensibilities would be more apt for contemporary conversations around these topics. Queer sensibilities are a reframed perception of the same “gay and lesbian” ones Blake and Rinder explore. Rinder writes in his introductory essay, “For many

⁴ Lawrence Rinder, “An Introduction to In a Different Light,” in *In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (San Francisco, California: City Lights Publishers, 1995), 7.

⁵ The exhibition is considered groundbreaking for creating a community of publicly identified lesbian artists, at a time in which they could risk discrimination for identifying as such in this time period. See more: <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/harmony-hammond-12855/>.

⁶ Daniel J. Cameron, *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*, New Museum, 1982.

⁷ The exhibition’s title is *In A Different Light*, but the accompanying catalog is titled *In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, and Queer Practice*.

artists in their twenties and early thirties—at least those in urban areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York—the very definitions of sexual identity are in flux. The category of queer is rapidly replacing gay and lesbian as the defining term for both men and women of this younger generation.”⁸ This marks that Rinder and Blake were noticing a shift in language, trying to articulate it in real time while queer theory was emerging. The term “queer” can be used as an umbrella term, encompassing all non-normative identities in regard to gender and sexuality. This inclusive terminology has evolved since the mounting of *In A Different Light*. Also during this time span, a seminal text by José Esteban Muñoz was published, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). According to Muñoz, queerness is a future-oriented, utopian mode of being and doing in the world.⁹ To “queer” something is a practice. It’s an active and purposeful lens to reconstruct what society deems as “standard.” In the time between the exhibitions (1995 and 2019), scholarly writing on curatorial practices has become more commonplace. Curator Jonathan Katz has written extensively about “queering” curatorial practices, and meditates on how exactly a curator’s project can be “queered.” In an essay co-written by Katz with Anne Söll, they point to two cornerstones of a queer curatorial practice I interpret to construct my arguments. The first is to honor and preserve the art of queer artists.¹⁰ The second is to subvert and challenge society's status quo around gender and sexuality.¹¹ I argue that at least one of the elements must be present to place them within the category of queer curatorial practice.

In A Different Light was the subject of many articles and essays during its time, and continues to be revisited by scholars and critics in the years since. Blake and Rinder each wrote

⁸ Rinder, “An Introduction to In a Different Light,” 7.

⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, “Utopia’s Seating Chart,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 121.

¹⁰ Jonathan Katz and Anne Söll, “Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating,” *OnCurating* no. 37 (May 2018): 2-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

an introduction to the exhibition that outlines their efforts to queer their curatorial practices. In an exhibition review of *In A Different Light* for the July 1995 issue of *Art in America*, art critic Michael Duncan first praises the exhibition as smart, witty, and filled with mind-bending juxtapositions of works. He then critiques the catalog essays by Blake and Rinder claiming that the authors are heavy-handed in describing their curatorial decision making. This type of writing, Duncan argues, leaves no room for interpretation by the audience.¹² While I agree with Duncan's critiques, in that there should be more nuanced guidance and less didactic explanations of the curatorial decisions, I argue that in this moment in time, the mid-1990s, these conversations about queer theory were not common, and these ideas were not as fleshed out as they are today. By contextualizing *In A Different Light* amid the development of queer theory in the 90s, Blake and Rinder's expository explanation of their process is thorough and purposeful. *In A Different Light* was on the cusp of a new conversation in queer theory, queer history, and queer curatorial approaches. Therefore, the curatorial essays by both Blake and Rinder are pioneering texts in the formation of queer curatorial practices. Blake's essay entitled "Curating In A Different Light" deconstructs the exhibition's nine subthemes to articulate their importance and some of the juxtapositions of works within those groupings.¹³ They argue that postmodern ideas of art have carved out new ways of thinking that have led to the introduction of queer theory.¹⁴ As a philosophy, postmodernism rejects the concept of universal truth, therefore the initial thoughts regarding multiplicity were a precursor to queer theory in art and by extension, exhibition making. Rinder's "An Introduction to In A Different Light" opens the catalog, laying out the

¹² Michael Duncan, "Queering the Discourse," *Art in America*, July 1995, 31.

¹³ Nayland Blake, "Curating in a Different Light," in *In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (San Francisco, California: City Lights Publishers, 1995), 9.

¹⁴ Blake, "Curating in a Different Light," 13.

conceptual framework for the exhibition and narrating the story of how the exhibition came to fruition.

The term “queer” is intentionally loosely defined in broader discourse, which demonstrates the expansive and encompassing spectrums of gender and sexuality. Because of this, terms like “queer curatorial practice” and “queer theory” are difficult to objectively define. I embrace the challenges of these evolving, amorphous notions and allow them to take shape in different ways. This malleability is exemplified by the evolution of queer theory throughout the twenty-five years between *In A Different Light* and *Queer California: Untold Stories*. Both exhibitions act as benchmarks that evolve queer theory and queer curatorial practice within the art world. In their 2018 essay “Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating” Jonathan Katz and Anne Söll write,

Queer exhibitions and queer curating interrogate the passive position of the viewer and demand active engagement, honest investment, and frank questioning, while also leaving room for unanswered questions, gaps, and fissures. Secondly, queer curating addresses the productive role of the body and its (queer) desires, even if the terms of that address are non-representational, and even utterly abstract. Third, queer curating must necessarily question and challenge the normative structures of the museum itself by addressing questions of the archive, collecting, and education as well as acknowledging and addressing a “queer” audience.¹⁵

This quote offers a reference to understanding the agenda of queer curation. Taking the theory into practice, the three major points that Katz and Söll make in their essay are active engagement, representation of queer desires, and challenging normative institutional structures. These three qualifications are seen throughout examples in both exhibitions and provide clear instruction on where to find the queer interventions of the curators. I’m particularly interested in the “leaving room for unanswered questions, gaps, and fissures.” Thinking about Duncan’s critique of the exhibition catalog for *In A Different Light*, I believe this is what Duncan is

¹⁵ Katz and Söll, “Queer Exhibitions/Queer Curating,” 2-4.

referring to—this loss of space for unanswered questions or fissures doesn't allow for the audience to come to their own conclusions about the exhibition. This type of personal sensibility is important to the practice of *queering*.

Queer California: Untold Stories centered “untold” stories from California’s queer communities in the Bay Area and beyond. Linden provides visibility to queer stories that remain unseen, whether that be because museums have not understood their importance or because they were erased from institutional archives. The exhibition wove together contemporary artworks, historical objects, archival records, and ephemera throughout the museum space. A timeline installed in the gallery illustrated artworks and archival objects contextualized by historic queer milestones (fig. 1). Although *Queer California*’s goal was to identify and narrate untold stories that have been left out of history, it does not claim to tell *all* untold stories. The exhibition was not all-encompassing—and once research began, it became clear that Linden and her team had only scratched the surface. One critique of the exhibition was that it was physically dense—lots of artworks were jam-packed together.^{16 17} Despite this critique, therein lays the argument that Linden is only touching upon what there is to discover about queer narratives. This realization about the incredible breadth and scale of stories in the queer communities of California, speaks volumes about the little we see and hear about queer communities on a national and worldwide scale. Linden’s approach to curating these narratives is indicative of a queer curation. Examples include prominently featuring the term “queer” in the exhibition title, asking visitors to actively engage with community-based art projects, and hosting an installation that specifically calls out exclusionary institutional practices. Looking at history in both directions and transgressing

¹⁶ Matt Sussman, “‘Queer California: Untold Stories’: A Confetti Shower of the Overlooked,” *48 Hills*, May 11, 2019, <https://48hills.org/2019/05/queer-california-oakland-museum/>.

¹⁷ Linden addressed this critique in our interview, stating that the checklist was completed before the Oakland Museum of California had to cut down the floorplan space by nearly half, resulting in the exhibition design becoming “dense.”

intergenerational boundaries are important cornerstones to understanding queer curatorial practices.

In both exhibitions, I look at the curators' motivations and interventions to find examples of queer curatorial practices. The context in which artworks are placed in conversation with each other is a crucial piece in defining queer curatorial practice. It's true that curation is defined by different modes of display to shape audience perception of the objects, their meanings, or their histories. This aspect of the practice is not inherently queer, but speaks to how the objects can be *queered* through their display. Through close visual analysis of selected installations within each show, I highlight examples that use the term *queer* as a verb; *queering* the objects thereby becomes a queer curatorial approach to the organization of the exhibition. Curatorial practice has three essential functions: 1) research and interpretation; 2) collection management and documentation; and 3) communication, like exhibitions and public programming.¹⁸ The major focus of my thesis is on the analysis of the communication function, but there are moments when the other two functions are touched on.

Part One: In A Different Light

In A Different Light, co-curated by Nayland Blake and Larry Rinder, was on view at the Berkeley Art Museum from January 11 to April 9, 1995.¹⁹ Opting for poetics rather than polemics, this exhibition “explores the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in twentieth-century American art.”²⁰ Organized around nine themes, *In A Different Light* was a smart, playful, and witty map of queer practice in the visual arts across the twentieth century, but focused on art from the previous

¹⁸ “What is Curatorial Practice,” IGI Global, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/revitalising-the-south-african-museum-sector/62143#:~:text=Curatorial%20activities%20refer%20to%20the,%2C%20education%20and%20public%20programming.>

¹⁹ The exhibition title alludes to an LGBTQ bookstore chain that operated from 1979 to 2011. One of the four locations for this bookstore was in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco, operating from 1985 to 2011.

²⁰ Rinder, “An Introduction to In A Different Light,” 1.

thirty years (1965-1995). Outside of the thirty-year focus, artists like Marcel Duchamp and Romaine Brooks are examples of works included prior to 1965. Blake and Rinder conceptualized the exhibition more intuitively rather than linearly, guided by their personal inquiries—asking the question, “what do queer artists do?”²¹ Shifting the focus of queerness from an adjective to a verb, *In A Different Light* suggested that this field of inquiry is headed in a new direction, one that is incomplete and in the development stages. The exhibition steered away from identity politics, including both queer and straight artists, and not stating how these artists identify anywhere in the exhibition. Artists featured include Harmony Hammond, Diane Arbus, Carrie Leibowitz, Man Ray, Zoe Leonard, Jerome Caja, and General Idea. It was critical to the curators to not allude to any sort of sexual identity for the exhibition title. In their catalog essay, “Curating In A Different Light,” Blake writes “...my third requirement was that the exhibition should not have the words gay, lesbian, or queer in its title. The title is the doorway through which the viewer enters the exhibition. If we essentialize the work of these artists in the title, we limit the viewers’ chances of being able to find new information and connections among the works.”²² They continue, “it seemed important to let people know up front that they were viewing a different type of exhibition.”²³ This strategy is in conversation with what Katz and Söll described as queer curatorial practice—the chance for unanswered questions or leaving gaps—and this breathing room is a critical component of queer curation.

The inspiration for *In A Different Light* was born out of Rinder’s desire to document the particular moment in the San Francisco art scene; one that was generative, vibrant, alive, and queer. He was particularly influenced by the programming that took place at Kiki Gallery—a

²¹ Blake, “Curating In A Different Light,” 11.

²² Blake, “Curating In A Different Light,” 10.

²³ Blake, “Curating In A Different Light,” 11.

short-lived gallery founded by Rick Jacobsen in 1993.^{24 25} As an exhibiting artist at Kiki Gallery and the Matrix Gallery at the Berkeley Art Museum,²⁶ as well as a program director at New Langton Arts,²⁷ Blake was a prominent figure in the Bay Area arts scene in the 1990s. They curated the 1991 exhibition *Situation: Perspectives on Work by Gay and Lesbian Artists* with Pam Gregg at New Langton Arts, which is considered a precursor to organizing *In A Different Light*. Blake described the exhibition as “a gathering of works by over thirty young gay and lesbian artists. For the most part these were artists whom I regarded as my peers.”²⁸ When Rinder first approached Blake about the project, Blake was apprehensive because Rinder’s proposal felt like an expanded version of *Situation*.²⁹ In addition, some artists that were featured in *Situation* also exhibited in *In A Different Light*—such as Cary Leibowitz, Catherine Opie, and Rex Ray. Blake countered Rinder’s proposal with a suggestion that was “cross-generational, and more broad reaching, something that would place the current San Francisco scene historically.”³⁰ Ultimately Blake did join the project as co-curator, bringing with them a few requirements that aligned with their values. Among these requirements: the need for a multigenerational group of artists; the inclusion of both queer and straight artists; and the exclusion of any identifying terms

²⁴ Dennis Cooper, “Kevin Killian presents Kiki Gallery: A Year or Two of Crazy Art Making,” DC’s: The blog of author Dennis Cooper, last modified September 17, 2019,

<https://denniscooperblog.com/kevin-killian-presents-kiki-gallery-a-year-or-two-of-crazy-art-making/>.

²⁵ Jonathan D Katz, David C Ward, and Jennifer Sichel, *Hide/Seek : Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, in Association with the National Portrait Gallery, 2010), 54–55.

²⁶ Berkeley Art Museum houses Matrix Gallery—an experimental programming initiative. According to the Museum’s website, “MATRIX, a changing series of contemporary art exhibitions, introduces the Bay Area community to exceptional work being made internationally, nationally, and locally, creating a rich connection to the current dialogues on contemporary art and demonstrating that the art of this moment is vital, dynamic, and often challenging. Confronting traditional practices of display and encouraging new, open modes of artistic creation, MATRIX provides an experimental framework for an active interchange between the artist, the museum, and the viewer.” For more information see: <https://bampfa.org/about/matrix>.

²⁷ New Langton Arts was active from 1975-2009. “New Langton Arts was founded in 1975 by a coalition of artists, performers and arts professionals who sought to provide San Francisco with a center for research and experimentation in performance, visual arts, music, media arts, literature, and practices that cross these disciplines.” For more information see: <https://annex.exploratorium.edu/nagasaki/Library/NLA.html>.

²⁸ Blake, “Curating In A Different Light,” 9.

²⁹ Nayland Blake, interview by Megan Kelly, February 11, 2024.

³⁰ Ibid.

(gay, lesbian, queer) in the title. The inclusion of multigenerational artists along with the ambiguity (in some cases) of their sexual preference or gender identity set *In A Different Light* apart from preceding exhibitions. Objects on display were divided into themes instead of employing a chronological model. This helped to reinforce that ambiguity and affirm that generations of artists have been engaging in conversations about queer sensibilities for decades. The flow of the themes throughout the exhibition—Void, Self, Drag, Other, Couple, Family, Orgy, World, and Utopia—showed a throughline of topics relevant to the human experience that start inward and are sometimes existential (Void/Self), then blossom into community (Other, Couple/Family) and connect with world issues (Orgy/World), and finally, dream of optimistic futures (Utopia) (fig. 2).

On view in the Couple section, was *Untitled (Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman)* (1980)—a diptych of photographs by the artists Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman (fig 3). The work depicts two bust portraits of two very similar looking models. The models are the artists themselves; they photographed each other. Both looking off camera, their faces are slightly obscured by their left hands, which hover around their mouth and chin area. The landscape orientation of the portrait focuses the light directly in front of the models, flattening their facial qualities and creating an orb of light framing their heads against the dark background. Both figures wear the same reddish pageboy wig atop their heads, and are dressed in a black suit jacket, white collared top, and black tie. Perhaps the only way to tell these two figures apart lies in their slightly different facial structures—the model on the right appears to have thinner eyebrows, and their noses have different contours upon close inspection. Both of these photographers are known for their play with appropriation and their legacies are tied to The

Pictures Generation.³¹ Cindy Sherman has been costuming herself for the camera since she started her photography practice. Disguising herself as such an array of characters, it's hard to tell if we even know what the real Cindy Sherman looks like. This is a play on gender expression, creating ambiguity between who's who, who might be male or female. Both Prince and Sherman identify as straight, and this is an example of Blake and Rinder pulling in artists of any identities that touch upon queerness.

Presented in the Drag section, *Double Blue Barbra (The Jewish Jackie Series)* (1992) by Deborah Kass is a painting on canvas with silkscreen ink laid on top (fig. 4). The painting consists of a solid blue background, which is bisected with the right half of the painting with imagery silkscreened in black. On the right half of the piece there are two columns of three images of Barbra Streisand's profile stacked on top of each other. Each of the six silkscreened faces have slight variations, which bring attention to different contours of Streisand's image. The profiles are facing the blank blue field that comprises the other half of the painting. Her face is very recognizable despite the simplicity and stylization of the portrait. It is unquestionable that Kass's portrait references the high-contrast silkscreen prints made popular by Andy Warhol. Warhol's portraits also get the same silkscreen treatment, using a limited color palette to bring out contrast and information in the faces. The repeated or tiled imagery in the silk screens also references Warhol's famous works, including images of Marilyn Monroe.

The painting is displayed centrally on a wall in the Drag section, where the title is seen in small text in the top left corner of the wall (fig. 5). Kass's painting is surrounded by other portraits in various mediums, including illustrations, paintings, photographs, and more. The repetitive motif of Streisand's profile is almost mimicked by the arrangement of artworks on the

³¹ The Pictures Generation was an arts movement particularly among photographers and filmmakers that used popular media to generate criticism around media culture. For more information see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/pictures-generation>.

wall, with images similarly tiled. Kass's painting draws the most attention on the wall, not only for its pop of color among the neutrals that surround it, but also for its size in comparison to its neighbors.

The Drag theme in *In A Different Light* serves the goals of the exhibition in several ways. When talking about gay and lesbian sensibilities, the art of drag and drag culture certainly populates the conversation. Some works included within this sub-theme directly depict drag in the subject matter, which is a more straightforward approach. However, works categorized in this theme, like *Double Blue Barbra*, have also resonated outside of the broader arena of drag culture. Some artists, including Kass, use drag as a method.³² Using drag as a method behind making an artwork is different because it addresses topics such as appropriation—this approach often involves “artists taking on each other's personas and voices.”³³ Deborah Kass uses techniques and aesthetics that Andy Warhol is known for (mass reproduction, silkscreen printing, images of celebrities in the US), and uses them to call attention to new areas of marginality. In a 2010 interview, Kass succinctly tells us why she was inspired to make works like *Double Blue Barbara*, which is from a larger body of work entitled *The Warhol Project*:

Barbra is the pop diva who changed my life as a Jewish girl growing up in suburban New York in the '60s. Her sense of herself, her ethnicity, glamour and her difference affirmed my own ambitions and identity. I identified with her completely. Andy and Barbra both stood outside mainstream America, she as a Jewish woman, he as a gay man. He subverted the macho myths of post-war US painting and invented Pop art. She gained control of her own Hollywood projects before any other female star and made the movie *Yentl* before queer theory ever hit a university. In my own work I replace Andy's male homosexual desire with my own specificity, Jew love, female voice, and blatant lesbian diva worship.³⁴

³² Blake, “Curating In A Different Light,” 32.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Irving Sandler, “BOMB Magazine | Deborah Kass,” BOMB Magazine, September 17, 2010, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2010/09/17/deborah-kass/>.

Kass appropriates and appreciates the art of Warhol as an homage to his iconic and poignant works. While he's pulling from subverting the traditional ideas of masculinity, Kass represents her own queerness through a pop star. In Blake's words, Kass's work shows that "while history may have made a place for Warhol, it still has not made a place for all outsiders."³⁵ Kass is continuing to bring visibility to the outsiders she identifies with, which ultimately is a refusal of the marginality she is placed within.

The curators' decision to include *Double Blue Barbra*, and to highlight the ways in which it comments on marginality by appropriating Warhol's style, exemplifies a queer curatorial practice. Indeed, Warhol is known for the queer-coding of his work, and queerness is addressed head-on in a theme like Drag. The real novelty is discovering that drag can take on an array of definitions, widening its scope to create space for artists who drag their personas as part of their practice. Calling attention to this topic was a fairly new concept in visual art in 1995. Allowing space for a new take on the term "drag" questions the status quo of society's familiarity with drag culture, and encourages its audience to explore new ways of thinking about these appropriation works.

In A Different Light was met with mixed reviews. A major critique rests in the representation of lesbian women in the exhibition. Although *San Francisco Examiner* writer David Bonetti was pleased with the representation of the emergence of a fierce and funny lesbian "sensibility," others felt that the lesbian representation as a whole was lacking, pigeonholed, and missing the nuance of that sensibility.³⁶ Harmony Hammond, an exhibiting artist in *In A Different Light*, was not enthused with the two gay men's idea of the lesbian sensibility.³⁷ During a panel

³⁵ Blake, "Curating In A Different Light," 32.

³⁶ David Bonetti, "Looking at art 'In a Different Light'," *SFGATE*, January 11, 1995, <https://www.sfgate.com/style/article/Looking-at-art-In-a-Different-Light-3153388.php>.

³⁷ Blake has come out as nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns after Hammond made this comment.

discussion revisiting the exhibition, hosted at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco in 2017, Rinder addressed Hammond's criticisms. Rinder mentioned that Hammond went on to organize an exhibition in response to her disappointments about *In A Different Light*. That exhibition, titled *Gender, Fucked* and co-curated with Catherine Lord, was on view at the Center for Contemporary Art in Seattle Washington in 1996.³⁸ It featured twenty three lesbian artists, situating its visibility between the erasure in queer culture dominated by gay men and feminist culture that is dominated by heterosexual women.³⁹ Further validating Hammond's claims, Nayland Blake also admitted that they wish they had done a better job with this. Blake says, "Larry and I did not bring any women into the project as curators. I would do that differently now. Amy Scholder was the major collaborator on the catalog, and while we asked many folks for artists they thought were important to include, we should have worked with women curators from the earliest possible time."⁴⁰ Amy Scholder, the only woman collaborator on the project, at the time was an editor at *City Lights* in San Francisco.⁴¹

At the end of Blake's curatorial essay they write, "I hope that this exhibition can be a catalyst, a launching pad for a new discourse, a new flowering for artists to respond to. If you love this exhibition, or if you hate it, go out and organize another one. We've all got a lot more to say."⁴² Harmony Hammond uses *In A Different Light* as a launching pad, to discuss issues related to lesbian visibility and erasure. While there were many identity-based exhibitions preceding *In A Different Light*, Rinder and Blake's exhibition does something different. Their curatorial

³⁸ Larry Rinder, Scott Hewicker, and Margaret Tedesco, "A Different Light, Revisited - A Panel Discussion," moderated by Richard Meyer, *Contemporary Jewish Museum*, May 24, 2017, video, 1:26:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td5GmIUkSl8&ab_channel=ContemporaryJewishMuseum.

³⁹ "Gender, Fucked," CoCA Digital Archive: 1996-1999, Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA), accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.cocaseattle.org/digital-archive/1996-99-ejjs8>.

⁴⁰ Blake, interview.

⁴¹ David L. Ulin, "The Beat Goes On : City Lights, the Bookstore and Publisher Famous for Its Connection to '50s Dissidents and Poets, Celebrates 40 Years as a Landmark of the Counterculture," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-22-ls-27422-story.html>.

⁴² Blake, "Curating In A Different Light," 43.

conceit was pioneering. They acknowledge that this show wasn't perfect, rather, its goal was to freeze a moment in time, bring contemporary art with queer sensibilities into the art historical canon, and put San Francisco on the map as a hub for queer art—and for that I think it's successful. We are still talking about this exhibition, nearly thirty years later. Blake's foreshadowing, when they remarked, "we've got a lot more to say," has come true in the present. *In A Different Light* continues to inspire more contemporary curators to queer their practice. We see this at work in another Bay Area exhibition, *Queer California: Untold Stories*.

Part Two: Queer California: Untold Stories

Upon entering *Queer California: Untold Stories*, visitors were greeted with two flags (fig. 6); the first by Gilbert Baker and right behind it, another by Amanda Curreri. Baker's piece was a historical object—the hand-sewn, hand-dyed fabric prototype of the 8-color pride flag, which Baker designed in 1978 (fig. 7). Baker conceptualized each of the eight colors on the flag to represent a certain motif—pink: sex; red: life; orange: healing; yellow: sunlight; green: nature; turquoise: magic and art; indigo: serenity; and violet: spirit. Pink and turquoise were ultimately cut from the original prototype. Pink fabric was not readily available at this time, so Baker made the decision to remove it from the flag's final version to be mass-produced. Turquoise was cut as an artistic choice, to keep an even number of colors and symmetry in the design. These decisions ultimately shaped the design of the iconic Pride Flag seen today.

Amanda Curreri's *Misfits 1979 (Sex and Art)* (2013) sits behind Baker's piece, waiting to be discovered by visitors as they proceed further into the exhibition (fig. 8). A little less colorful than Baker's, Curreri's flag makes use of the discarded colors from the original pride flag design. A sea of neutral gray separates the turquoise- and pink-colored fabrics. *Misfits 1979* generates

commentary on the omitted colors, and their corresponding motifs that were also left behind—sex and art. She uncovers the story of Baker’s flag by revealing its discarded history. Subtly correcting or giving context to its historical, archival counterpart, Curreri’s flag, in dialogue with Baker’s, captures the essence of a queer curation by honoring and preserving the works of queer artists.

The exhibition’s curator, Christina Linden, is at once honoring and preserving the work of queer artists, while also inserting the missing narrative back into the historical context. In an interview, Linden explains, “Amanda’s piece became a wonderful way to talk about the whole show because she is specifically recovering these colors that were, quite literally, cut out.”⁴³ Linden felt this was a necessary choice to bring to the front of the show—it’s an easy introduction to the elements of queer history visitors might already know, but their knowledge is about to deepen upon entering. The display of Baker’s flag in front of Curreri’s demonstrates this point. The original prototype is familiar, and gives the viewer exactly what to expect in the exhibition to come. When you pull back the curtain, to see what’s underneath—or in this case, behind—there’s more than meets the eye.

Another pair of objects in *Queer California* that open a dialog of queering curatorial practice are two video pieces: *Dyketactics* (1974) by Barbara Hammer and *All Male Mash Up* (2006) by William E. Jones. Hammer is considered to be a pioneering figure in the lesbian film genre, especially within avant-garde communities. Hammer’s experimental approach to *Dyketactics* defined the onset of the lesbian aesthetic, and was one of the first representations of lesbian desire and love on screen in joyous empowerment. Her four-minute film takes place on rolling hills in Berkeley, California. It features dream-like sequences of lesbian women coming

⁴³ Christina Linden, interview by Megan Kelly, San Francisco, CA, February 16, 2024.

together as community and lovers in a public setting (fig. 9). Groups of women sunbathe nude in open fields, frolic and run up or down hills, brush each other's hair, photograph one another, and are generally seen enjoying each other's company on a sunny day. Before *Dyketactics*, rarely were lesbian desire and joy seen on screen, in art, or in public. Hammer eschews the traditional rolling titles and credits typical of film from the time period and instead films the women painting the title and credits onto rocks, adding an element of permanence to the public display of lesbian desire (fig. 10).

All Male Mash Up is a film of the unseen—an elaborate montage of archival footage from gay male porn videos stretching back to the 1960s (fig. 11). Spanning four decades and hundreds of hours of footage, this archival material was spliced together to create the 29-minute video. Jones uses this archive of porn footage, editing out the explicit content to focus on stages and settings. The video consists of the in-between shots from the films he sourced. The storytelling aspects, such as dialog between the characters, landscapes that depict a location setting, and fashion of the characters are all seen in Jones's film. *All Male Mash Up* is a lens through which society views gay men and their subculture. Focusing on everything but the sexual content, viewers are watching a non-narrative archive of gay porn, and watching the culture surrounding it evolve over time.

This work by Jones is not unfamiliar to his oeuvre. He held a day job creating compilations of porn to be sold on DVD. He was inundated by a huge archive of sexual imagery as he screened videos for hours every day working for Larry Flynt, producer of *Hustler* Magazine. Over time, taking in all of this visual material, Jones started to seek out the story underneath the explicit content. Other videos by Jones that use the same method of creating

compilations from an archive of pornographic work include *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998), *V. O.* (2006), and *Finished* (1996).^{44 45}

In *Queer California*, Linden displayed *All Male Mash Up* and *Dyketactics* in separate screening rooms, but they shared a wall that they were projected on, back to back. Linden's decision to juxtapose these films on butting walls stages the tension between the public and private sex lives of queer people, as well as displaying a binary of gender.⁴⁶ *Dyketactics* takes place in entirely public settings with all women, while *All Male Mash Up* is made from scraps of porn videos, archival footage, and in the subtext between scenes. They both uniquely shed light on parts of queer culture that aren't part of the mainstream narrative. In the case of Hammer, it was a radical act to create work about public lesbian sex at that time. Jones draws attention to society's views on gay men through looking at pieces of evidence that are otherwise discarded or perhaps unseen by those not knowing what might happen in certain locations—untold stories. The binaristic approach to displaying the videos employed by Linden creates a tension between either end of the gender and sexuality spectrums. Both videos also use frameworks that question and challenge society's general assumptions about gay men and lesbians. This curatorial strategy embodies what it means to have a queer curatorial practice—putting together two unlikely objects to generate a new conversation around works that previously might not have been seen before. This is honoring the works of queer artists, and giving nuance to conversations around their works.

Linden has said that she was heavily influenced by Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* in developing her approach for *Queer California: Untold Stories*. Muñoz's text goes in depth about

⁴⁴ William E. Jones, "All Male Mash Up," Work, William E. Jones, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.williamejones.com/portfolio/all-male-mash-up>.

⁴⁵ Luigi Fassi, "Sexuality as a Utopian Promise: William E. Jones in conversation with Luigi Fassi," *Mousse* 17, (February-March 2009), <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/william-e-jones-luigi-fassi-2009/>.

⁴⁶ Lucas Hilderbrand, "Queer California: Untold Stories," *After Image* 46, no. 3 (September 2019).

queerness as a mode of being, arguing that it is necessary for society's futurity. He is invested in the ways that the past informs the present and future, defining queerness as a mode of thinking about this timeline at all times. He writes, "Utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward...It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be."⁴⁷ He addresses queerness as a flux, recognizing its destabilizing nature. This notion that queerness is a "doing," a verb, positions it as an act, a practice. Muñoz argues that "queer utopian practice is about "building" and "doing" in response to that status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world."⁴⁸ He continues, saying, "I attempt to inhabit a queer practice, a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world."⁴⁹ These quotes point to Muñoz articulating queerness as a verb, an act of "doing" as world building, which is a crucial aspect to the urgency of queer curatorial practice.

In what I see as a departure from strategies in *In A Different Light*, Linden purposefully makes use of the exhibition space to offer educational materials for their viewers. *In A Different Light* displayed the works without labels and let the viewer come to their own conclusions, influenced by their own sensibilities they bring to the work. Linden of course has similar goals in this regard, as this is a common practice in curation. However, at a higher, institutional level, the Oakland Museum of California and the Berkeley Art Museum do not share the same values or mission. Whereas the Berkeley Art Museum "uses the power of art and film to spark curiosity, inspire creativity, provoke meaningful conversation and create community,"⁵⁰ visitor experience is at the center of OMCA—administration at the Museum requires wall labels and exhibition

⁴⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 118.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 121.

⁵⁰ "Mission," BAMPFA Mission and History, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://bampfa.org/about/history-mission>.

information to be accessible to a fourth-grade reading level. The Museum has a history of creating more educational and cultural exhibitions. Therefore, some of the works that require explanations or context, needed further information alongside them in the interest of catering to all audiences. The definitions of unclear, contested, or opaque terms used throughout the exhibition are presented on a black wall entitled, “What We Are Called” (fig. 12). Linden and her team identified twenty-seven terms such as queer, heteronormative, cisgender, third gender, and gender expression for clarity on how these words are used throughout the exhibition. In addition to the traditional introductory wall texts that categorize themes in the exhibition, there were other educational, community-oriented, and sometimes interactive moments throughout. This includes the Gayme Room (fig. 13); a map of lesbian bars in the Bay Area, either closed or still operating; and a wall of interwoven acknowledgements from visitors that responded to the following prompt: “Many people, organizations, movements, events, and sites of gathering have played a role in the complex and vast histories of LGBTQ+ communities in California. Call out those that have been important to you here.” The prompt created a community-generated timeline that focused on important events in queer history in California.

Part Three: Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art (MOTHA)

At the heart of the *Queer California: Untold Stories* exhibition was an installation of the Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art (MOTHA)—a project spearheaded by interdisciplinary artist and video maker Chris E. Vargas. Since its inception in 2013, Vargas “performs” as the self-appointed Executive Director of the Museum of Transgender Hirstory, whose mission is to “ask audiences to think critically about what a visual history of transgender life could and should look like, and if it’s even possible to compile a comprehensive history of an identity category for

which the language is fairly new, sometimes contested, and still rapidly evolving.”⁵¹ MOTHA’s goal is to create a cohesive visual history and archive of transgender culture, while also critiquing institutional models and methods of acquisition. MOTHA is not housed in any one location, and instead only ephemerally actualizes through events like performances, public programming, and exhibitions. Without a brick and mortar location, MOTHA’s “structure” remains under construction indefinitely, perpetually allowing for transformation to take place at any moment. MOTHA’s inherent structural and conceptual fluidity is designed to reflect the openness and fluctuating nature of the transgender experience. Vargas is fascinated with the idea that MOTHA may never be able to encompass all that there is to collect in order to construct an archive of transgender history, but the mission stays open-ended enough that it allows for this type of never-ending concept.

Linden’s queering of curation is seen with the inclusion of MOTHA. Referring to Katz’s defining features of queer curatorial practice, MOTHA questions and challenges the normative structures of the museum itself. Vargas does this by questioning the erasure of transgender histories and lack of representation in standard museum collections and archival practices. The MOTHA installation in *Queer California* acts as a museum-within-a-museum. Its objects are contained within four built walls within the exhibition, with a wallpaper facade that resembles the neoclassical aesthetic of a traditional museum, with columns and archways creating its architecture (fig. 14). Vargas says the exterior was a play on the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁵² Unlike a traditionally built museum, the neoclassical aesthetics in MOTHA are only illustrations by Vargas—loose, two-dimensional sketches in black and white that allude to formal and traditional architecture. When you exit this museum installation, you

⁵¹ Chris E. Vargas, “About,” Museum of Transgender History and Art (MOTHA), accessed March 22, 2024, <https://www.motha.net/about>.

⁵² Chris E. Vargas, interview with Megan Kelly, February 25, 2024.

are then greeted by a park bench, made from slatted wood with backrests and armrests, similar to one you would find in an outdoor setting. This is a notable departure from a typical museum bench, which are usually designed in a sleek and minimal style, with certain aesthetics that do not distract from the artworks in the gallery. The park bench is an installation by Kate Clark entitled *Queen's Circle: Cruising Oral Histories of Balboa Park* (2016/2019) (fig. 15), for which the artist interviewed the San Diego's neighborhood's "drag queens, dykes, madames, healthcare workers, leather daddies, police officers, politicians, park rangers, and others about their relationship to the surveillance, management, and celebration of hookup culture in Balboa Park."⁵³ Linden's curatorial decision to place Clark's piece immediately outside the exit from the MOTHA installation reinforces Vargas's vision to bring a formal museum of transgender archives to life, emulating the feeling of entering and exiting its own structure. For this iteration of MOTHA, Vargas tiled the interior walls with hand-drawn black and white illustrations of movie posters (fig. 16). It was his way of bringing in important cultural works without housing the actual objects.

For the iteration of MOTHA installed in *Queer California*, Vargas was commissioned to create a BayArea-specific archive of transgender history and culture—including contemporary artworks, archival ephemera, and historical objects of importance. One of the most eye-catching objects in the collection was a bright blue sequined jacket, hung on the middle of the wall, housed inside a vitrine for protection (fig. 17). This iconic garment was worn by California disco legend, Sylvester, who was born in Los Angeles, and died in San Francisco of AIDS-related complications. Known as the Queen of Disco, Sylvester was a later addition to the drag troupe, The Cockettes, before breaking off onto his own solo career. Hailing from the Haight-Ashbury

⁵³ Museum label for Kate Clark, *Queen's Circle: Cruising Oral Histories of Balboa Park* (2016/2019), *Queer California: Untold Stories*, Oakland, CA, Oakland Museum of California, April 13-August 11, 2019.

neighborhood in San Francisco, The Cockettes went on to become legends in the drag world, bringing major popularity to this queer art form. Although the group was short lived, only lasting three years before officially disbanding in 1972, their contributions to drag have made a lasting impression on queer communities and beyond.

Vargas worked closely with Bay Area cultural centers, like the GLBT Historical Society, to borrow objects for this iteration of MOTHA. A few select objects included in the installation were from Vargas's personal collection of transgender archival material—including a commemorative mug of the Compton's Cafeteria Riot by artist Nicki Green (fig. 18). These objects were on display in very traditional wood cases, similar to what visitors would find in a natural science or history museum displaying archival objects of significance. The cases look very academic, which brings an element of irony since Vargas's intention is to call out museum practices, and their lack of representation of archival materials that are important to transgender "hirstory."

While there were historical objects and ephemera inside of the MOTHA installation, there were also some contemporary works, such as *The Q Sides* (2015)—a photographic series by Kari Orvik in collaboration with DJ Brown Amy and Vero Majano (fig. 19). The inspiration for this project came from the desire of Orvik and collaborators to advocate for queer inclusion in California's lowrider scene and culture. To reclaim this culture as their own, Orvik photographed queer people and drag queens in the style resembling album covers from *The East Side Story*. *The East Side Story* is a collection of twelve volumes of various songs that were popular in lowrider culture in Los Angeles. Genres of music in the collection span funk, soul, and doowop, which, together, create this iconic "oldies" sound specific to the Chicano/a/x community. The title of the series, *The Q Sides*, is a reference to b-sides, a common name for songs that are

recorded on the second side of a cassette or vinyl record. As time went on, the b-side phrase also came to define songs that were recorded, but didn't make the final edit for an album. The *Q Sides* referential title encapsulates the meaning of being on the "other side" of this larger lowrider culture. Displaying three images from *The Q Sides* series within MOTHA speaks to the larger story in queer curatorial practice of mixing contemporary works and historical objects—seen not only in MOTHA, but also in other parts of *Queer California*, as well as *In A Different Light* (fig. 20).

Although Vargas does not describe himself as a curator, I consider MOTHA to also be a curatorial project. Each of MOTHA's more formal installations at traditional institutions—The New Museum, Portland Art Museum, Legacy Art Gallery, Henry Art Gallery, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archive at USC Libraries, and the Oakland Museum of California—had queer curatorial objectives. MOTHA is "committed to developing a robust exhibition and programming schedule that will enrich the transgender mythos both by exhibition works by living artists and by honoring the *hireos* and *transcestors* who have come before."⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ Through his commitment to representing cross-generational artists, like we see throughout the installations of *Queer California* and *In A Different Light*, Vargas is enacting a queer curatorial practice. In addition to giving space and legacy to transgender artists, MOTHA as a concept also challenges society's traditional institutional practices in museums.

Conclusion

⁵⁴ Chris E. Vargas, "Introducing the Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, eds. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: MIT Press, 2017), 121.

⁵⁵ Vargas uses the terms *hireos* and *transcestors* to be more inclusive of fluid or nonbinary identities. *Hireos* would be the gender neutral term for hero and *transcestors* is the inclusive terminology for ancestors.

Much like the exhibitions selected and examined as case studies, this thesis acts as a touchstone on the timeline of queer exhibitions and curatorial practice. I hold sentiments similar to those Nayland Blake expresses at the end of their curatorial essay, “we should continue to learn from the past and keep queering the discourse. I hope that this exhibition can be a catalyst, a launching pad for a new discourse, a new flowering for artists to respond to.”⁵⁶ Like Blake wished for *In A Different Light*, this thesis is a launching pad for a new or continued discourse about queer curatorial practice; a new flowering of ideas to respond to. Queerness as a framework has a self-reflective quality to it, aware of its presence at a moment in time, and accepting of its slippery (in)definition. It calls back to other queer moments, artists, historical events, and archival objects, keeping them alive in the present.

The first characteristic of queer curatorial practice pertains to the preservation and representation of queer artists and their work. Representation has always been a hot-button topic. Sometimes representation is highlighted by critics because it is lacking in some way. Other times, representation is mentioned in a way that tokenizes the subjects represented, which can be problematic. When first attempting to define queer curatorial practices, I wanted to steer clear of the theme of representation. My approach was influenced by Rinder and Blake’s requirements for their title—to exclude any sort of identifying nomenclature in order to reach a broader audience, and to not pigeonhole the artists. I initially thought that queer curation was broader than just representation, but representation ultimately became an important factor in my research. While I do center *queer curatorial practice* as a methodology, and *to queer* as a verb, representation is another thread that ties together these exhibitions. I had to consider how *In A Different Light* and *Queer California: Untold Stories* approach the topic of queer representation differently. *In A Different Light* was able to seamlessly bring together queer, straight or cis, and

⁵⁶ Blake, “Curating In A Different Light,” 43.

unspecified sexualities and genders through its selection of artists. The title of the exhibition doesn't allude to its queer resonances, which allows the visitors to come to their own conclusions about what they are viewing. *Queer California* takes a different approach, hosting the term "queer" in its title. This tactic was important to the exhibition, as its main objective was to shed light on, and give representation to, groups of queer folks, with an urgent imperative to share their stories. The role of representation in each exhibition varies among the subjects and stories featured in *Queer California*, but it is present throughout.

In "Light Years: Revisiting *In A Different Light*," a 2013 conversation between curator Glen Helfand and artist Josh Faught for *Art Practical*, Helfand said, "We lack this kind of art history. Someone will write a thesis about it (it's probably already happened). *In A Different Light* was a groundbreaking show, but I'm not sure it got its due."⁵⁷ Helfand is referring to the lack of exhibition history, and more directly, queer exhibition history. Exhibition histories are often cursory and not as fleshed out as the more robust scholarly studies that exist for individual artists or artworks and object-based narratives. Generating these discourses around curatorial tactics and approach enriches the landscape of curatorial practice.

Very little writing has put *In A Different Light* in conversation with *Queer California*.⁵⁸ This is a missed opportunity. They both weave together contemporary art, historical objects or artworks, archival records, and ephemera throughout their installations. Both of these exhibitions offer important commentary on the lush queer environment of the Bay Area in 1996 and 2019, respectively. Rinder's original idea for *In A Different Light* was to freeze a moment of the San

⁵⁷ Josh Faught and Glen Helfand, "Light Years: Revisiting in a Different Light," *Art Practical* 5, no. 1, September 2013, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/15633/20210127192124/https://www.artpractical.com/feature/light-years-revisiting-in-a-different-light/>.

⁵⁸ In an exhibition review of *Queer California: Untold Stories*, Matt Sussman briefly compares the exhibition to *In A Different Light* when he writes: "In many ways, Queer California feels like our moment's analog to In A Different Light, the groundbreaking 1995 survey of queer art organized by Larry Rinder and Nayland Blake at the Berkeley Art Museum." See: Sussman, "'Queer California: Untold Stories': a confetti shower of the overlooked."

San Francisco queer art scene in time. Although it evolved from there, its Bay area origins are important to the wider landscape of queer exhibitions. It has had ripple effects throughout the country—as exemplified by Hammond’s responsive exhibition in Seattle, Washington. Diving into this local queer history makes me wonder what other similar stories are out there. What other cities have had queer-coded exhibitions, honoring local queer artists, shedding light on new narratives to be told? I could see Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as another case study for this line of inquiry. Philadelphia is home to the William Way LGBT Community Center, which hosts small art exhibitions and also holds the John J Wilcox, Jr. Archives—Philadelphia’s most extensive archive on the rich history of its queer community. Forming local queer exhibitions across the country could fold into the broader need for queer exhibition history.

By the time we arrive at analyzing *Queer California: Untold Stories*, there’s almost thirty years of exhibitions to sift through to find other exhibitions with similar strategies and sensibilities. *Neoqueer: New Visual Art By Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Artists* was curated by David Lloyd Brown, Maura Reilly, and Craig Houser in 2004 at the Center of Contemporary Art in Seattle—where Hammond’s *Gender, Fucked* exhibition also took place. Hammond was an exhibiting artist in *Neoqueer* as well as Nayland Blake. In 2010 Jonathan Katz curated *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery; he took a similar approach to Blake and Nayland in not naming queerness in the exhibition title. Just two years before *Queer California: Untold Stories*, Johanna Burton curated *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at the New Museum in New York in 2017. This exhibition also featured artists I’ve written about here: Nayland Blake, Chris E. Vargas, and Josh Faught. All of these exhibitions exist in an interlocking web, based on artists exhibited and themes explored. My intervention into this thread of curatorial practice is to put all of these

exhibitions in conversation with each other, citing the queerness that exists in their curation.

Much like the curator's position is to honor and preserve the works of queer artists, I'm hoping to honor and preserve the queer work of curators contributing to this field of exhibition history.

The exhibitions I listed previously and examined in this thesis are a part of a network of large, far reaching, sometimes internationally renowned institutions. As a curator, I hope to bring a certain level of personal activism to this field. I'm invested in understanding the ways these institutions have historically neglected or erased histories of queer artists, and learning how to work with them to give queer artists a platform to reach their targeted audiences, supported by large institutions who can provide that resource. In my interview with Chris E. Vargas, he mentioned he has a responsibility to tell a full story, not just a privileged story through the *Museum of Transgender Hirstory*. Telling a full story may be a goal that evolves over time, but going further than just collecting or exhibiting the privileged works—the ambition to continue to uncover and peel back layers of erased histories are some of the responsibilities of a queer curator. He also says that he wanted to “approach history in creative and generative ways that exploits the gaps,”⁵⁹ which I also think is an obligation of a curator. Vargas is echoing one of Katz and Söll's defining characteristics of queer curating—exploiting these gaps is necessary to question the normative structures of a museum. This toggle between moving forward and looking back to inform our futures is an ever-evolving process that continues to build upon itself. To this end, the possibility of queering the field of curatorial practice is a strategy with infinite potential.

⁵⁹ Vargas, interview.

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Illustration List



Fig. 1. Installation View, *Queer California: Untold Stories*. Photo courtesy of Christina Linden.



Fig. 2. Installation view of Orgy section, *In A Different Light*, Photo courtesy of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.



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Fig. 13. Installation View, *Queer California: Untold Stories*. Photo courtesy of Christina Linden.



Fig. 14. Installation view, Chris E. Vargas, *Museum of Trans Hirstory & Art (MOTHA)* (2018-2019), mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Christina Linden.



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Fig. 20. Installation view, Q-Sides Project in Chris E. Vargas, *Museum of Trans History & Art (MOTHA)* (2018-2019), mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Christina Linden.