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LGBTQ+ themed public art: promoting an expanded view on genders and advancing gender education

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This essay explores the transformative role of LGBTQ+ themed public art in promoting an expanded view of genders and advancing gender education. By engaging with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I want to stress how public art both serves as a medium for aesthetic expression and also acts as a crucial participant in the performative act of gender identity construction. From the vibrant defiance of rainbow crosswalks to the poignant narratives of the AIDS Memorial Quilt and the impactful murals by Keith Haring, LGBTQ+ themed public art challenges traditional gender roles and identities, offering alternative visions that resist binary classifications. These public artworks create inclusive spaces that foster community engagement, historical commemoration, and activism, effectively enhancing public pedagogy in gender education. By embedding diverse and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality in public consciousness, such art prompts a reevaluation of societal norms, thereby contributing to a broader understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. This essay emphasizes the potential of LGBTQ+ -themed public art to serve as a dynamic medium for communicative pedagogy, manifesting its significance in shaping social consciousness and advancing the cause of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ art; public art; Keith Haring; rainbow crosswalks; AIDS memorial quilt; gender education

This paper argues that LGBTQ+ themed public art holds significant potential to promote gender education by challenging traditional gender norms and offering alternative perspectives on gender identity. The evolution of the LGBTQ+ movement, from a struggle for basic rights to a global force for equality and inclusion, marks a critical trajectory in social history.

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From the Stonewall riots of 1969, which prompted the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement, to contemporary debates over marriage equality and against discriminatory laws, the progress has been important and transformative (Carter 2004).

LGBTQ+ themed public art contributes to this ongoing discourse by serving as a medium that reflects key concerns, a zeitgeist, of its time and space, communicating the values, struggles, and achievements of the LGBTQ+ community. The essay builds on previous scholarship by examining the intersection of LGBTQ+ themed public art and gender education, particularly through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 1990), introduces the concept of gender performativity, which posits that gender is a socially constructed set of behaviors and performances rather than fixed attributes. My essay engages with these issues to explore how LGBTQ+ themed public art not only serves as aesthetic expression, but also actively participates in the performative construction of gender identity, challenging and redefining normative narratives around gender and sexuality.

Background and essay positionality

To help frame my position, I want to first briefly survey the framework and choices in my approach. This essay employs a research approach based in the field of art studies and based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks (Lord and Meyer 2013). In particular, this is to engage with the analysis of complex issues surrounding the role of public art in LGBTQ+ activism (Dolan 2012).[1]

I am particularly interested in identifying recurring themes, patterns, and theoretical insights across different case studies, which can then be contextualized within broader socio-political discourses (Tyburczy 2016). My case studies includes the AIDS Memorial Quilt, rainbow crosswalks, and Keith Haring's murals. These cases were selected due to their historical significance and, moreover, their public visibility. They have also made significant impacts on public pedagogy – a critical area of study that examines how public art can educate and influence societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality (Lord and Meyer 2013). The cases help illuminate how LGBTQ+ themed public artworks contribute to public pedagogy and the construction of inclusive spaces, as theorized by Butler (1990).

Before the LGBTQ+ movements, gender education had been heavily binary-focused, aligning with societal norms that recognized only male and female genders corresponding directly to biological sex. However, as feminist and LGBTQ+ movements gained momentum, gender began to be critically examined as a social construct influenced by cultural, psychological, and social factors beyond mere biological differences

(Butler 1990). The recognition of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming identities has significantly shaped the need for an expanded view in gender education. Gender education has evolved to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, and queer studies (Kimmel 2008). This has broadened education to include discussions on gender roles, sexuality, power dynamics, and the intersectionality of gender with race, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw 1989). Such interdisciplinary approaches facilitate an expanded perspective on gender, reflecting the diverse influences on gender identity across different societal contexts.

Despite progress, gender education continues to confront challenges, including societal resistance to moving beyond traditional gender norms and the politicization of gender issues. These challenges underscore the need for an expanded approach to gender education – one that fosters dialogue, reduces stigma, and promotes acceptance of gender diversity (Crenshaw 1989). Adopting a broader perspective is crucial for achieving more comprehensive understanding of global gender variations, ensuring educational content that not only acknowledges the existence of diverse gender identities but also provides inclusive and respectful approaches to understanding their experiences and perspectives.

LGBTQ+ themed public art

If public art functions as a mechanism for social activism, this is because it facilitates the engagement of artists and the public in process of social construction. It presents narratives that reflect the complexities and fluidity of identities (Mirzoeff 2015). This form of art mobilizes public sentiment towards enhanced acceptance and understanding, encouraging viewers to reassess their perceptions and attitudes regarding various social issues (Senie 2016). By stimulating thought and dialogue, public art can encourage the collective reevaluation and reconstruction of societal norms (Kester 2004).

Incorporating LGBTQ+ -themed public art into gender education is a powerful tool in achieving this expanded view. Public art that celebrates LGBTQ+ identities and experiences serves not only as a visual representation of diversity, but can also catalyze productive conversation and reflection. These artworks can introduce individuals to the stories and struggles of the LGBTQ+ community, encouraging empathy and a deeper knowledge about gender diversity. For example, rainbow crosswalks and murals depicting LGBTQ+ historical figures or events can transform public spaces into interactive learning environments. In particular, these installations invite observers to engage with the art and its meanings, prompting discussions about inclusivity, history, and the ongoing fight for equality.

The engagement with public art as a means to foster a deeper understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities reflects Ahmed's (2006) concepts of public spaces and cultural objects in shaping our perceptions and interactions with the social world. In this context, the art becomes a dialogue starter, a visual prompt that challenges existing norms and opens up spaces for new conversations. For instance, Keith Haring is a prominent artist whose work intersected with LGBTQ+ themes and activism. Haring's art, characterized by its accessible and often provocative imagery, transcended the traditional boundaries of the art world to engage with social issues directly, most notably the AIDS crisis (Gruen 1991). As an openly gay man, Haring used his art to combat stigma, advocate for awareness and prevention, and express solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, embodying the dual role of the artist as an activist (Burk 2020). LGBTQ+ -themed public art can challenge prevailing norms and perceptions of gender and sexuality, offering alternative narratives and perspectives. It can demystify and destigmatize LGBTQ+ identities, presenting them as integral parts of the human experience rather than as outliers or anomalies (Ahmed 2006). By integrating public art into gender education, educators and communities can leverage the emotional and intellectual impact of art to enhance understanding, acceptance, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. This approach not only enriches gender education but also contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and compassionate society.

In the next section, I want to highlight how LGBTQ+ themed public art has fostered visibility and inclusion, as Butler (1990) might have anticipated. These artworks render queer identities visible in the public sphere, promoting a sense of belonging among marginalized communities. By presenting diverse and non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, public art functions as a performative assertion of LGBTQ+ presence and legitimacy: they engage the public in a dialogue that fosters understanding and inclusivity.

Suburban rainbowization

Queer street art, exemplified by vibrant rainbow crosswalks, serves as a dynamic form of activism that transcends mere aesthetic enhancement to challenge societal norms and champion LGBTQ+ rights. These colorful installations, dotting urban landscapes worldwide, do more than beautify city streets; they signal a profound message of inclusivity and welcome for all identities, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Lord and Meyer 2013).

Far from being just decorative, these crosswalks stand as powerful instantiations of LGBTQ+ pride, visibility, and resilience, representing

community unity and the continuous fight for equality. This call for visibility and support introduces the critical perspective of 'rainbow infra-struggles,' as explored by Bain and Podmore (2023). Their analysis critiques how 'rainbowization' attempts to enhance LGBS visibility within suburban spaces, yet often fall short of offering/receiving substantive community support. This practice, while aimed at signaling progressiveness, may inadvertently align with neoliberal agendas that prioritize the appearance of cosmopolitan diversity over addressing the genuine needs and challenges of sexual and gender minorities. This dichotomy between intent and impact reveals the complex interplay between visibility efforts and the actualization of meaningful support for LGBTQ+ communities.

If we take Butler's theory of gender performativity, we might interpret these rainbow crosswalks and broader 'rainbowization' initiatives as acts that challenge traditional gender norms and binary understandings of identity (see Figure 1). They represent more than just LGBTQ+ identity markers. They actively participate in the social construction of gender, advocating for a fluid and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. In this case, we can sense the transformative power of public art in redefining societal perceptions of gender, showcasing how these installations do more than occupy physical space – they catalyze shifts in social consciousness (Butler 1990).

Consequently, initiatives like rainbow crosswalks can help cultivate a more inclusive society, enlightening the public about the importance of visibility and support for LGBTQ+ communities. This integration of art, activism, and education manifests the transformative potential of public



Figure 1. Rainbow Crosswalk in Washington, DC, June 2017. This crosswalk was part of a community-led initiative to show Washington, D.C.'s commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Photo by Ted Eytan, used under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 License.

spaces to foster understanding, acceptance, and solidarity in the ongoing journey toward equality for all.

The AIDS memorial quilt: stitching together memory, grief, and activism

The AIDS Memorial Quilt, initiated in 1987, is a monumental effort to memorialize the lives lost to AIDS. Featuring over 48,000 panels, it serves as a collective expression of grief, love, and defiance. Each panel, uniquely designed to commemorate an individual, weaves together personal stories of loss, creating a tapestry of collective memory and unity. This artwork transcends conventional acts of remembrance, and has become a platform for LGBTQ+ heritage preservation and a rallying cry for community solidarity and action in the face of the AIDS crisis (Sturken 1997).

The quilt emerged as a profound response to societal and governmental neglect during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. Its production challenged the stigma, fear, and silence surrounding AIDS, transforming personal loss into a public, visual, and emotional plea for recognition, understanding, and change. The quilt's existence and continued relevance underscore the ongoing impact of AIDS, fostering dialogue on treatment, prevention, and the pursuit of a cure (Blair and Michel 2007). The AIDS Memorial Quilt exemplifies Butler's notion of performativity in its public narration, and evocations, of grief and remembrance. Each panel performs a counternarrative to the societal erasure of LGBTQ+ lives lost to AIDS, challenging the public to confront the reality of the epidemic and the individuals it affected. The quilt's collective assembly and display act as a performative gesture of community identity, resilience, and demand for recognition and rights (see Figure 2). The quilt educates and mobilizes the broader community, converting private grief into an instrument for public awareness and activism. It serves as a dynamic form of public pedagogy, encouraging critical reflection on the AIDS crisis, the responses it elicited, and the ongoing needs and challenges of the LGBTQ+ community. By fostering empathy and understanding, the quilt contributes to a broader societal commitment to combating AIDS and supporting those affected (Brier 2009).

Keith Haring's art: embodying the universal language of liberation

My final reflection concerns Keith Haring's murals; with their distinctive style and social messages, they amply demonstrate the power of art to connect, communicate, and liberate (Gruen 1992). His works, especially those commemorating significant events like the Stonewall riots, reflect



Figure 2. Display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt at the 46th Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival, National Mall, Washington, D.C., July 2012. Photo by Elvert Barnes, used under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 License.

LGBTQ+ history in the collective memory of society. Haring's art engages directly with social issues and embodies the universal language of art as a means of liberation and connection among LGBTQ+ communities worldwide (Gruen 1992). Haring's murals, including those at the Stonewall Inn, function as monuments to historical events and enhance urban landscapes through their pictorial and aesthetic qualities. These works are also educational resources, embedding significant moments and figures of LGBTQ+ history within the social fabric.

The mural at the Stonewall Inn, in particular, represents the beginning of the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement and illustrates the importance of public art in commemorating shared history (Buchhart et al. 2014). Haring's *Once Upon a Time* mural similarly reflects LGBTQ+ themes and helps enable community engagement. This work demonstrates Haring's commitment to visibility and support for the LGBTQ+ community (Ziegler 2018; see Figure 3).

Haring's murals provide alternative representations that celebrate diversity and resilience, contributing to the deconstruction of normative gender roles and identities. Haring's art aligns with Butler's model, because works perform gender identity, as is it constructed and enacted within public contexts. I would also underscore that Haring's murals serve as gateways to education and dialogue, inviting observers to engage with the complexities of LGBTQ+ history and the ongoing fight for rights (Kolossa and Haring 2004). They ignite thoughtful dialogues, at the same time they challenge societal norms. As dynamic elements of



Figure 3. Keith Haring, '*Once Upon a Time*' mural, New York City, 1989. This artwork reflects LGBTQ+ themes and highlights Haring's dedication to visibility and advocacy within the community. Photograph by Ziegler (2018).

public pedagogy, these artworks leverage the visual medium to impact perception, inspire action, and effect change, ensuring that the struggles and triumphs of the LGBTQ+ community are remembered and also honored and learned from (Buchhart et al. 2014).

Concluding words

As public pedagogy, this selection of artworks offer accessible venues for gender education outside traditional academic settings. This must remain ongoing. Rainbow crosswalks and 'rainbowization' initiatives, despite critiques, begin conversations on inclusivity and the complexity of LGBTQ+ experiences in public spaces. The AIDS Memorial Quilt is as a poignant educational tool, humanizing the AIDS crisis and eliciting empathy and social consciousness. Similarly, Haring's murals provide historical context and inspire collective reflection on LGBTQ+ rights and identity.

These public artworks catalyze dialogue and critical thinking, inviting individuals to question and learn about the nuances of gender and sexuality. By embodying the principles of gender performativity, they underscore the performative nature of social change itself – how visibility, representation, and commemoration can alter perceptions and foster a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity. The integration of LGBTQ+ themed public art into urban planning signifies a transformative approach toward inclusivity and diversity within public spaces. This strategic incorporation demonstrates municipalities' deep-seated

commitment to fostering acceptance, equality, and unity within their communities. These collective endeavors can generate environments with safety and acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals into the urban fabric. The shift in urban design may facilitate ongoing discussions on LGBTQ+ rights and visibility (Bain and Podmore 2021). By embedding these artworks across cityscapes, urban spaces are reimagined as vibrant platforms that feature diverse narratives and identities within the LGBTQ+ community.

Ultimately, LGBTQ+ themed public art, through its embodiment of resistance, memory, and community pride, is a dynamic domain for gender education. Public spaces as arenas for learning can challenge societal norms and promote acceptance. Artworks depict LGBTQ+ identities and participate in the active construction of gender as a diverse and inclusive category. As such, they provide invaluable opportunities for public engagement with gender education, and can highlight the transformative power of art in shaping social consciousness and advancing the cause of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.

Note

1. An exhaustive literature review is unnecessary here, but I do wish to acknowledge the importance of positionality (Dolan 2012), since contemporary art research and practices need to emphasize reflexivity and the subjective nature of interpretation (Butler 1990). My approach in this position essay aims to be both academically rigorous and also personally resonant.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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