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## **Rejecting Normal: Curating *Queer British Art, 1861-1967* at Tate Britain and *Being Human* at Wellcome Collection, London**

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## Rejecting Normal: Curating *Queer British Art, 1861-1967* at Tate Britain and *Being Human* at Wellcome Collection, London

Clare Barlow

There has been a number of exhibitions in the last five years that have explored queer themes and adopted queer approaches, yet the position of queer in museums remains precarious. This article explores the challenges of this museological landscape and the transformative potential of queer curating through two projects: *Queer British Art, 1861—1967* (Tate Britain, April—Sep-

tember 2017) and *Being Human* (September 2019—present). Drawing on my experience of curating these projects, I consider their successes and limitations, particularly with regards to intersectionality, and the different ways in which queerness shaped their conceptual frameworks: from queer readings in *Queer British Art* to the explicit rejection of 'normal' in *Being Human*.

**Keywords:** activism, British art, curating, contemporary art, disability, display, inclusion, intersectionality, museology, queer

What are museums for? Who do they serve? One peculiarly pervasive myth about European museums casts them as beacons of civilization, preserving objects from the past that are of objective worth. Encounters with these objects and the knowledge they embody, according to this myth, will improve and edify us; by merely perceiving them, we too will be refined. In this myth, the curator becomes a conduit, a portal through which such collective knowledge flows. Or, to use an appropriately loaded term, a gatekeeper: sorting pure gold from dross, deciding what will be added to our collective understanding. Yet, according to this myth, it is only through leaving ourselves and our identities behind and basking in the objects' objective glory that this process of refinement can take place. The museum based on this myth is a bloodless space, in which objects are unmoored from their creators, and even from the visitor, who observes them with cold appraisal. This is, of course, a caricature of that which Mark O'Neill (2006) has described as the 'essentialist' view of the museum—a view that has by now been repeatedly challenged (pp. 96-105). Museums are not neutral, and the perspectives they have historically espoused have been straight, white, male, non-disabled and cis.

In recent years, there has been a wealth of projects that have offered alternative perspectives by foregrounding voices that have hitherto been neglected, and by affirming and welcoming a wider range of visitors. There

has been a surge of engagement with representing queerness in the museum during the last five years, spearheaded in the U.K. by a cluster of projects marking the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalization of sex between men in England and Wales in 1967. Yet, as O'Neill (2006) and others (Middleton and Sullivan 2019: 3) have discussed, 'museums, both in their own terms and in terms of their place in society, are fragmented and not wholly coherent institutions' (O'Neill 2006: 98). This multiplicity of perspectives is worth stating, as it gives the context for the precarious and sometimes contradictory ways in which queer has been foregrounded.

The position of queer in the museum often seems fraught, caught between twin dangers. On the one hand lies the danger of ghettoization; the project in the basement—sometimes literally—that is, temporary, low-status, and separated from what the 'essentialists' present as the 'true' work of the museum. Indeed, as Jonathan Katz (2018) has argued, such projects can serve to reinforce exclusion by allowing museums to complacently feel that they are doing something, while remaining fundamentally unchanged (p. 37). Yet on the other hand, there lies the danger of assimilation: the fear that the only kind of queerness that will be given voice in the museum is the kind that has 'donned a suit and tie,' married its partner, and settled down in the suburbs to live a life of unrelenting respectability. These fears have, of course, mirrored wider debates that have a long history within LGBTQI+ communities, as well as in research on these communities. The slow battle for legal protections in the U.K. and U.S., countries with deeply interlinked cultures and museologies, has been marked by divisive arguments that distinguish between those deemed to be 'good gays' (respectable, monogamous, conservative, seeking to assimilate) and 'bad queers' (promiscuous, kinky, rebellious, and activist) (Warner 1999: 113-114).

Beyond both of these pitfalls, of course, lies another danger: that of silence, in which queerness remains absent, invisible or unacknowledged. From an audience perspective, this is the worst danger of all. As Anna Conlan (2010) has put it, 'Omission from the museum does not simply mean marginalisation; it formally classifies certain lives, histories and practices as insignificant [...] and, thereby, casts them into the realm of the unreal' (p. 257). Museums have begun to address this latter danger in a number of recent shows, including two that I curated, which I will be focusing upon here: *Queer British Art, 1861-1967* at Tate Britain, 5 April-1 October 2017 (Tate Britain 2017) and *Being Human* at Wellcome Collection, 5 September 2019-present (Wellcome Collection 2019). However, as I will discuss, progress remains fragile, and in recent projects some groups within the broad spectrum of LGBTQI+ identities have been more visible than others.

*Queer British Art, 1861-1967* at Tate Britain (figures 1 and 2) and *Being Human* at Wellcome Collection (figures 3 and 4) might, at first glance, seem unrelated. The former was a temporary exhibition focused explicitly on queerness in a limited historical time period, whereas the latter was a new, permanent gallery, which set out to explore the human condition in general terms, and brought works by contemporary artists together with objects connected to science, medicine, and ideas of health. While these projects were only two

years apart, they were shaped by what felt like radically different contexts—social, political, institutional, and museological—which had a profound effect on their aims and outcomes. *Queer British Art* was overwhelmingly popular with its audience, and achieved much in terms of surfacing queerness and presenting it as an unstable quality and emancipatory approach through which to view works. It was, however, flawed in its handling of intersectionality. In this respect, *Being Human* benefited from *Queer British Art*'s lessons. Rather than centring one perspective, *Being Human* aimed to bring together different voices in a genuine polylogue. Perhaps more radically, it explicitly rejected the concept of 'normal' as a standard against which people could be measured, and drew attention to the role of such judgements in legitimizing exclusion and oppression.



Figure 1. *Queer British Art, 1861-1967*, Tate Britain (courtesy of Tate Photography)

Figure 2. *Queer British Art 1861-1967*, Tate Britain (courtesy of Tate Photography)



Figure 3. *Being Human*, Wellcome Collection (courtesy of Stephen Pocock/ Wellcome Collection)



Figure 4. *Being Human*, Wellcome Collection (courtesy of Stephen Pocock/ Wellcome Collection)

Beyond their obvious differences, these projects embody what I will argue are two approaches towards achieving visibility for diverse identities in general, and queerness in particular: reclamation and reinterpretation, in the case of *Queer British Art*, and transformation, in the case of *Being Human*. I will argue that, for the time being at least, both of these approaches are necessary if the presence of queerness within the museum is to be assured.

*Queer British Art* focused on a historical period that extended from the abolition of the death penalty for sodomy in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 1861 to the partial decriminalization of sex between men in England and Wales in 1967. The exhibition unfolded chronologically, with each room bringing a particular group of artists or theme into focus, while also looking beyond them, to situate them within a wider field of artists and social contexts.

The historical period it covered was restrictive, as John Potvin and Dirk Gindt (2017) noted in their review of the exhibition (p. 417). Nonetheless, focusing on the hundred years prior to partial decriminalization offered scope to destabilize some narratives that, as I discovered over the course of our initial audience research<sup>1</sup>, continued to dominate audience perceptions of the queer past. Foremost among these, was a narrative of a past that was universally bleak; a dark age, in which queer people lived in hiding until eventually they fought for their liberation through legal reform. This narrative surfaced repeatedly in comments from research participants. It was clear that if potential visitors had a point of reference for this period, it was that of the Oscar Wilde Trial.

The dominant myth we encountered was that queer people in this period were, for the most part, invisible, with the mass of people living in fear and only a few heroic individuals breaking cover to campaign for equality. Or, as one person who had lived through 1967, put it, 'The trouble is, Clare, they think we all lived with our heads in the gas oven' (2015, personal communication<sup>2</sup>). In contrast to this view, he said that when partial decriminalization was passed, 'I barely noticed it—I was too busy partying.' Of course, the myth of a queer past that was tragic and exceptional is not reflected in academic scholarship, where decades of work has been done to explore the multifaceted lives, cultures, and experiences of queerness and queer people. Such work had, however, rarely made its mark on U.K. museums and galleries and, it seemed, had failed to penetrate far into public consciousness, even within LGBTQI+ communities.

At the same time, recovering a wider range of stories and experiences would not in and of itself have been enough. If that were all that the exhibition had achieved, it would have been another example of what Jonathan Katz (2018) has described as 'covert censorship' (p. 33). In Katz's (2018) words, this is the tendency of museums, 'to frankly address an artist's sexuality as a biographical fact, but allow it no purchase on the meaning of the resulting work. In this way sexuality becomes the functional equivalent of being born in Poughkeepsie, a fact that while true, lacks any substantive interpretive merit' (p. 36). As Katz recognizes, such gestures serve a double purpose for museums, allowing them to present themselves as diverse and open, while preserving the real business of art history as something that happens elsewhere.

Katz's concept of 'covert censorship' chimes with my own experience of the museological landscape between 2014 and 2017, while I was working on the exhibition. When I told people that I was working on a show on queer British art, the most common response I got was, 'Was there any?' I would gently draw their attention to explorations of queerness in works by an artist who might be familiar to them: Aubrey Beardsley, say, or Francis Bacon. Sometimes the speaker would express recognition, but many would go on to question whether whichever work I had alluded to could be perceived as 'queer.' Surely, they delicately suggested, it was a bit cheap to be discussing such works merely through the lens of artist biography? And, in the case of Beardsley, wasn't the biography a bit uncertain? A senior curator whom I respect (and whose name and institution I won't reveal here) felt so strongly about this that

he went so far as to ring me up to discuss it. He had heard I was working on a show about queer art, and while he had no doubt that it was a topic that would attract audiences, he felt I needed to understand that the work of some of the artists I was considering was of universal significance that transcended their particular identities.

Such responses reveal a lack of awareness of the vast body of research into queer art histories and the multiple ways in which works can be illuminated by queer readings. They also reveal a mindset of ghettoization. Queer art, in this view, can only be the product of artists whose lives can clearly be labelled as L, G, B, or T. Moreover, even when such an identification can be made, a distinction remains between 'great art' and 'queer art' that must be preserved and policed.

In contrast to such expectations, in *Queer British Art* I aimed to foreground the rich variety of ways in which both people and works might be interpreted as 'queer' (Barlow 2017: 11-17; Lewis and Stephenson 2017: 100-114). Whereas some of the interpretations referenced the biographies of artists, or, in the case of some of the portraits, the biography of the sitter, the exhibition did not treat contemporary labels such as 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'bisexual,' and 'trans' as fixed historical categories but instead drew attention to the ways in which perceptions and meanings of queerness had changed over time. This aligned with an approach that Robert Mills (2008) has described as 'transforming the question from "Who is queer?" into *why* or *how* one finds queerness historically or culturally' (p. 50).

Alongside this discussion, the texts considered how queer was manifested in the works or had shaped their reception by different audiences. From the first room onwards, visitors encountered works that might be considered queer in their aesthetic; in their approach to their subject; in their reference to touchstones of queer culture; in their function within particular relationships or communities; or, in some cases, in the horror or delight they had provoked among certain viewers or critics. Rather than being an exceptional category, hived off from the mainstream, queerness was presented as something that artists, commissioners, and viewers of all kinds had traced in a wide variety of contexts and settings, often without reference to the work's original intention. By making this range of readings visible, I tried to reverse the power dynamic of the 'essentialist' museum, in which the curator tells the visitor how best to receive the work, and instead to affirm visitors in making their own readings and interpretations of the works on display. In contrast to the essentialist's vision of the museum as a locked safe, containing knowledge that is only available to those who hold the code, I viewed the museum as permeable; a forum in which the curator's decision-making processes should be transparent and space is made for visitors to bring their own perspectives and experiences.

This invitation to the visitor was made explicit by two additional strands of interpretation that were positioned alongside the curatorial labels: a series of labels created by artists, activists, and community leaders, and a series of labels created by the visitors themselves. In the final room of the exhibition, visitors were given pencils and cards the same size as the curatorial

labels, and were invited to write their own captions to the works or to respond in any other way they wanted. They could then add their card to a display on a series of shelves, which lined two of the walls (figure 5). The original idea for these responses was that they would be threaded through the displays. This did happen with a small batch of captions, which we selected to represent a cross-section of options, including responses that were critical of particular works or curatorial decisions. Budget constraints, however, meant that we were unable to update the selection more than twice during the exhibition's run.

The wall of postcards was, however, successful beyond our wildest dreams in giving visitors a space that they could use as they wished in order to share reactions, experiences, and resources. People gave details of phone support networks. Debates broke out across the cards between different visitors about the works that we had included and the curatorial decisions we had taken. Some also used it as a site of queer remembrance: a shrine to which they could add their own experiences. This was brought home to me most clearly by one letter that I received through the post. Although I no longer have the letter to refer to, the gist of it was that the visitor had not filled out a card in the space as they had felt unable to write about their sexuality, particularly in a public forum. On returning home, they had regretted this and so they had found a card of similar proportions to the ones we had on display, had written their story on it, and wondered whether I would be willing to add it to the display, which of course I did. Some cards were joyful, some angry, while others revealed the pain of the closet, or recalled dead lovers or family members. One simply said, 'I think it might be safe for me to come out now.' No further context was given, so it is hard to know whether this was a moment of heartfelt revelation or a comment on the ubiquity of queer culture. Perhaps it was both—or something else entirely.



Figure 5. Visitor postcards at *Queer British Art, 1861-1967*, Tate Britain (courtesy of Tate Photography).



Encouraging visitors to take on the role of curator in this way aimed to draw attention to the transience and partiality that is inherent in any exhibition. Whereas it can be tempting, curatorially, to present an exhibition as an inevitable fact, underpinned by perfect choices that have been made without facing any restrictions, *Queer British Art* tried to draw attention to its own limitations. Resources were tight, the budget was small, and, for most of the exhibition's development, I was the sole curator working on the project. Despite my efforts, and those of Eleanor Jones—a PhD student who joined the project in 2015 to research marginalized identities—we struggled to find sufficient material by women artists, artists of color, disabled artists, and trans or non-binary artists. Such absences were not, of course, entirely unexpected for a historical show. This lack of surviving material reflects power dynamics within society that were replicated in the queer community and the art markets. Long histories of racism, misogyny, transphobia, and class prejudice have not only caused works to be lost but also stifled careers before they could flourish. We tried to make these absences visible, but with only mixed success. Non-binary and gender non-conforming identities were represented through a mixture of artists, sitters, and readings in seven of the nine rooms, but although some visitors appreciated these inclusions, others, judging from some of the comments we received, struggled to relate this material to contemporary trans identities. Further consultation with trans experts might have helped us to better address this problem through the exhibition's wall texts.<sup>3</sup>

Explorations of other intersectional perspectives were uneven. There was, for example, no discussion of disability, except in a passing reference relating to Aubrey Beardsley. We went back and forth over whether or not to surface this identity in relation to Edward Burra, but ultimately decided not to, on the basis that there was evidence he hated his work discussed in these terms and that most of the existing scholarly discussion of Burra in relation to disability was overly reductive (Stevenson 2007: 136; Jones 2020: 139-141).<sup>4</sup> In retrospect, however, I think this was a mistake. Had I had the understanding I later gained during the consultations for *Being Human* of how to write interpretation through the lens of the social model of disability, I might have found a better way to surface this aspect of Burra's identity and, perhaps, to represent the perspectives of other disabled queer people (Barlow 2020: 170-171). No critics that I am aware of highlighted the absence of narratives of disability in the show, which perhaps reveals how little attention has been given to disability within wider discussions of inclusion in museums.

Our ability to represent the experiences, perspectives, and voices of queer people of color was severely limited by the surviving material. We were only able to secure one work by an established artist of color from this period: David Medalla's *Cloud Canyons 3: An Assembly of Bubble Machines* (1961, remade in 2004). In the original plans, this vast sculpture, with its central column of continuously overflowing bubbles, had been situated as a counterpoint to works by David Hockney and Francis Bacon, but the sculpture had to be moved outside the exhibition space due to conservation concerns about the impact of the soap bubbles. This weakened the last room of the exhibition,

although it arguably gave Medalla greater prominence, as the work became the lead object for the show, situated immediately outside the exhibition space as an enticement to visitors.

In the other rooms, however, people of color were only represented as sitters and models. As a curator, I could draw visitors' attention to their individual identities, explore the ways in which imbalances of power were manifested in the works, and, where possible, highlight subjects who had more control over their representation. These included, for example, a photograph of Berto Pasuka, who modelled for his friend Angus McBean, but who also himself commissioned a series of photographs from McBean in 1946 to promote the ballet company he had just founded: the Ballet Negres. We included one photograph from this series in the exhibition, an image that had been published in *Ballet* magazine (McBean 1946).

I also tried to draw attention to the diversity of queer identity today by working with the U.K. television production company Channel 4 Random Acts to commission a series of six film pieces, selected through an open call. Each of these was a collaboration between an LGBTQI+ individual and a filmmaker, and the brief was deliberately left open, allowing the subjects to explore their identity in any way they wanted. For example, filmmaker Mat Lambert and artist David Hoyle evoked the lost spaces of queer clubs in *God Is Watching* (2017); artist, writer, and performer Shon Faye reflected upon labels, hypocrisy, and queerphobia in *Catechism* (2017), directed by Emily McDonald; poet Jackie Kay recalled growing up lesbian in a short film directed by Lindsey Dryden (2017). All six films were shown in the final room of the exhibition, alongside the walls of visitor captions. Although visitors responded well to these pieces, some struggled to identify the works in this room as being part of the exhibition.

To give visitors a sense of queerness in the periods outside the show's limited historical span, we created a trail that offered queer readings of works from every period on display in Tate Britain's permanent galleries. Leaflets containing these readings were placed in holders near the exhibition's exit and at Tate Britain's ticket desks and visitor information points; they were also available to download from Tate's website. This trail foregrounded intersectional identities and offered queer readings of more conventional works, including a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I. Yet while the trail was an important addition, such interpretative tools could not mitigate the absences in the exhibition; all they could do was draw attention to the show's limitations and suggest alternatives. For some visitors, these absences made the exhibition a disappointing experience.

*Queer British Art* did not aim to offer a canon of queer works or queer artists; such a concept would be antithetical to the concept of queer. It did, however, have both the strengths and limitations of exploring queerness in dialogue with an existing art historical canon. It combated ghettoization by drawing attention to the overwhelming impact and influence that queerness has had on British art, its production and reception. Powerfully, the exhibition refused to be confined to a narrow list of artists who could be 'proven' to be queer with an irrefutable piece of evidence, a 'smoking gun.' Although some

critics took issue with this heterogeneity, visitors responded well to this rejection of biography viewed through the selective lens of homophobia. The show was also, at times, radical in its approach; for example, in its affirmation of visitors' own queer readings. Moves such as this helped the exhibition to point beyond its constraints. The constraints were, nonetheless, always present. As an exhibition of contemporary art, *Being Human* did not have the same constraints, and offered instead the opportunity to start from scratch.

I joined Wellcome Collection as project curator for *Being Human* while *Queer British Art* was still open. As a new permanent gallery at Wellcome, the initial aim of the project was to create a gallery that would reflect Wellcome Collection's mission: 'to challenge the ways we all think and feel about health by connecting science, medicine, life and art' (Robertson, Haynes, Stanbury and Scott 2018). Although the initial project brief included some suggestions for potential topics (broad themes within medical research, such as 'communicable diseases,' 'non-communicable diseases,' 'changing populations,' and an encouragement to represent health as a lived experience), Wellcome's staff were refreshingly open to an alternative approach and were willing to let me develop the exhibition with a relatively free hand. There was a budget for consultation, both with disabled experts and with other audiences, and all the works included were to be new acquisitions or commissions. I also joined the team at a time when Wellcome Collection was redefining its collection development strategy and inclusion policy, giving me the opportunity to be part of those discussions. All too often, a curator looks at a museum's collection catalogue only to think, 'I wouldn't have started from here.' Wellcome, by contrast, offered scope to be utopian and to imagine a museum in which works from the widest possible range of perspectives might be brought together and represented in their individuality.

At first, however, I found it difficult to fully embrace this freedom. I carried out my initial research, put together a long list of possible artists, and felt everything was going very well. Yet when I returned to the gallery after the Christmas break and looked again through the list, I realized that it was, yet again, dominated by white, straight, non-disabled artists, whose works, worst of all, were united less by their vision than by their quasi-medical aesthetic. I scrapped the list and started again. This initial misstep reflects poorly on my research but also reveals something of the systemic inequalities that are present in the contemporary art market: it is easy to end up looking at gallery after gallery of works that privilege a white, non-disabled, straight, male and/or cis gaze.

To try to nudge the selection process away from this, I set up regular reviews in which I would set aside my thoughts and feelings about each work; I would, instead, assess the whole list through the cold lens of statistics in order to better discern the balance between artists with different identities and perspectives. In this, I was influenced by Maura Reilly's (2018) account of the bleak data on inclusion in the collections and exhibition programs of different museums: the number of women artists, the number of trans, the number of artists of color (pp. 17-19). It is easy for institutions to articulate rea-

sons as to why the exhibitions they put on are not inclusive, yet with a broad theme and the near-limitless field of contemporary art to select from, such reasons are little more than excuses.

I also assessed the list from the perspective of the stage of each artist's career and the potential impact of each work within the hang. I was aware, following my experience with *Queer British Art*, that if the highest-profile works on display (in terms of artistic reputation, positioning within the gallery—even scale) are from artists who share a single identity, that perspective will begin to dominate. Instead of representing works by artists with intersectional identities as exceptions and positioning their work in relation to a supposed norm (the ghettoizing approach), I wanted to shift the heart of the gallery, to reject the very concept of there being a norm, so that each work could truly be seen on its own terms. The exhibition thus embraced what Reilly (2018) has described as a 'relational approach': the 'exhibition-as-polylogue,' in which traditional hierarchies are upended and rejected (p. 29).

This process of regularly reviewing the content list may sound like a nightmare, perhaps conjured up by opponents to explorations of identity in museums: a hellish vision, in which identity has trumped all other considerations. It may even sound like a nightmare to those curators who are more welcoming towards inclusion; after all, artworks are individual visions, in which the voices of individual artists are heard. Neither artworks nor artists are 'representative' of communities, and the goal was not to create the inclusive equivalent of what Ella Shohat (2001) has described as 'the additive/sponge approach [to feminism], which simply parades the women of the globe in a UN-style "family of nations"' (pp. 1271-1272). Instead, analyzing the exhibition in this way was a strategy to force me to reflect on my research processes; the exhibitions I was looking at, past and present, the galleries I was focusing on: even the search terms I was using.

This process of reflection encouraged me to seek out galleries that represented a wider range of artists, and to consider more artists who were un- or under-represented. I continued to consider each work individually, looking for the same qualities as before—clarity of vision, the artist's approach, the proposition the work offered to the audience, and the questions it raised. Yet reviewing the list in this way helped me to take steps towards changing the more fundamental terms of engagement: the unequal process through which artists come to the attention of curators in the first place.

Beyond the selection of objects, the conceptual framework of *Being Human* set out to explicitly reject the normal/Other binary. While the gallery was overtly organized around four themes (Genetics, Minds and Bodies, Infection, Environmental Breakdown), it was also profoundly shaped by a central proposition: that the concept of 'normal' is a restrictive mirage. In its place, the exhibition proposed three radical principles: we are all different, we are all valuable, and we are all connected. This proposition was explicitly brought into focus in the introductory panel to the Minds and Bodies section, which asked visitors to reflect upon why we continue to judge ourselves and others with reference to a supposed 'normal' when few of us would describe ourselves

in that way. This reverberated through all the sections and became the anchor for the polylogue among different works.

Each work offered different responses to this core proposition and invited different reactions: activism in *Austerity Cu ts* (first performed at *Sick of the Fringe* in 2017) by an anonymous artist, Isaac Mudoch's protest banner, *Water Is Life* (2016), and Dolly Sen's *Help the Normals* (2018, figure 6); reclamation and transcendence in Kia Labeija's *Eleven* (2015) and Cassils's *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011); vulnerability and kinship in Deborah Kelly's *No Human Being Is Illegal (In All Our Glory)* (2014-2018); humour and rage in Katherine Araniello's *Pity* (2013) and *Meet the Superhuman* (2012); dystopian prophecy in Yinka Shonibare CBE's *Refugee Astronaut III* (2019, figure 7); tender intimacy in Basse Stittgen's votive, *Blood Objects* (2019), a work made entirely from HIV+ blood. The authority of a 'transparent woman' anatomical model from the 1980s was immediately undercut by a caption that discussed the limitations of such representations, as well as by the model's juxtaposition with Bob Flanagan's *Visible Man* (this latter—an extract from Kirby Dick's 1997 film, *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*—was played in a loop on a small screen on the model's plinth). In the clip, Flanagan discusses a 'transparent man' model depicting his own leaky body: a sculpture that is constantly dribbling snot and shit and constantly ejaculating. Such juxtapositions and connections aimed to unsettle assumptions. *Being Human* articulated a vision of humanity as frail, leaky, and flawed, yet also infinitely various, creative and, for better and worse, inevitably connected. This is not just a queer vision, but it is also a queer vision, as well as being a vision that affirms queerness.



Figure 6. Dolly Sen's *Help the Normals* (2018). *Being Human*, Wellcome Collection (courtesy of Stephen Pocock/Wellcome Collection)



Figure 7. Yinka Shonibare CBE's *Refugee Astronaut III* (2019). *Being Human*, Wellcome Collection (courtesy of Stephen Pocock/Wellcome Collection)

*Being Human* was a rare project: a well-resourced, utopian experiment in an institution that was committed to celebrating diversity, valued the expertise gained through lived experience, and was willing to support extensive consultation. At a time when funding is ever more squeezed, most museums lack the resources to support such a transformative process. Nonetheless, the restrictions and pressures that the sector is under make it all the more important that we, as curators and museum professionals, do not lose sight of our utopian ideals. The work we have done—even when flawed—is not lost, and contains lessons that we can use to refine our practice. Even without additional resources, *Queer British Art* would have been strengthened by the insights of *Being Human*, just as *Being Human* was, indeed, stronger thanks to lessons drawn from working on *Queer British Art*. If we are to recognize and take measures to counter the systemic inequalities that determine the visibility of different identities in the museum, and the success or failure of artists' careers beyond the museum, we first need to recognize that the problem exists. As Reilly (2018) has put it:

'Until Other artists have a far stronger foothold in the system and have achieved equality in representation, it is important that we preserve these exhibitions, spaces, curatorial positions and labels such as "Black," "woman," or "queer," even though we may recognise that they are inherently essentialist, ghettoizing, exclusionary and universalizing, and fail to account for important differences between and among artists' lived experience' (p. 29).

As budgets fall, jobs become increasingly precarious, and cultural wars break out around us, there is a danger that inclusion will, once again, be relegated to the closet. If we allow that to happen, we will fail our visitors by colluding with oppression and refusing to share our full knowledge of our collections. Looking to the future, I am reminded of some of *Queer British Art's* illustrious predecessors: *Ars Homo Erotica* at the National Museum of Warsaw in 2010, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz, which was protected by the museum's director Piotr Piotrowski against intense pressure from the Polish Minister of Culture (Leszkowicz

2019); *Hide/Seek* at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in 2010, curated by Jonathan Katz and David C. Ward, which was censored; *Hidden Histories* at the New Art Gallery Walsall in 2004, curated by Michael Petry, which had its texts bowdlerized by Walsall Council (Katz: 2018; Petry 2010). Even in, or perhaps especially in, such challenging contexts, exhibitions can serve as beacons. Their light can show us a new way of seeing and propel us further forward.

1. Over the course of the exhibition development process, we carried out audience research through a variety of forums. These included quantitative research of U.K. museum visitors, organized via an independent market research agency; focus groups of exclusively LGBTQI+ participants, also organized via a market research agency; meetings with LBTQI+ charities; presentations to the public of likely exhibition content at LGBTQI+ venues, including the Royal Vauxhall Tavern and Bristol Pride; consultation with academics, who were working in the fields of queer studies, history of art, and the history of sexuality (this latter was, in part, supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art).
2. Anonymous (2015, March 13), personal communication, face-to-face interview.
3. Trans and non-binary people were included in our focus groups, and we balanced numbers to ensure that no single identity dominated these groups, but we did not hold separate sessions for exclusively trans participants. In retrospect, this was a mistake.
4. Stevenson has sourced the 'disabled painter' quotation to a letter from Barbara Ker-Seymer to John Banting (TGA 7791.327, n.d., cit. in Stevenson 2007: 136). For the ways in which disability has been discussed in scholarship on Burra, see Jones 2020: 139-141.

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### Author's bio

Clare Barlow (PhD) is a U.K.-based curator. Her research focuses on gender, sexuality, and disability in visual culture, and ethical approaches to inclusion in museums. She has worked in museums for over ten years as a curator at the National Portrait Gallery, Tate Britain, and Wellcome Collection and is now Curator, Exhibitions at the Science Museum. Among other projects, she curated the major exhibition *Queer British Art, 1861-1967* at Tate Britain



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