

The Work of Love, the Queer of Labor

Curated by
Olga Kopenkina

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"If we win, if we win... There is no telling..."
Audre Lorde

Is queer liberation a class struggle? We know from history that Marx and Engels were dismissive at best of their fellow Socialists who were homosexual. But Harry Hay, the founder of the modern gay liberation movement in the United States, and himself a Communist activist in the 1930s–1940s, on many occasions unequivocally stated that gay liberation came from the left and from the working class. "Newer levels of Marxist perceptions...were emerging in me as gay values," writes Harry Hay.¹ However, contemporary representations of LGBTQI+ are usually defined by a decidedly mainstream, middle-class, "classless," or even upper-class glamour perspective, where working-class queer or interconnections between gender, sexuality, and class are rendered invisible or minimized. But what happens when class marks queerness or queerness informs class?

The term "queer," although initially derogatory, was known to artists already in the early 1930s, when **Hugo Gellert** (1892–1985), a radical left artist, made his lithograph *In Unity There Is Strength* (1934). The print depicts two racially diverse workers, white and black, with a hammer and stone pick in their hands, bound together. Their backs are pressed against each other turning them into one unit. Hardly a queer observer, Gellert, who, throughout his career, held allegiances to the American working class, focuses on male bulging physicality conflating—probably without acknowledging it—homoeroticism of representation with the understanding of a political agency coming from the bond (of whatever nature) between working-class men. The print provides a necessary link to the context of the debates in which contemporary self-proclaimed queer artists (since the early 1990s, "queer" connotes a proud defiance of heterosexuality and more broadly, of normativity itself) situate their works.

Yevgeniy Fiks's series of wooden panels, united by the title *Towards a Portfolio of Woodcuts (Harry Hay)*, (2013), traces the connection between the political potential in the queer liberation movement and left activism through the legacy of Harry Hay (1912–2002). A Communist activist and co-founder of Mattachine Society

(the first gay rights group in the United States) and, later, the gay spiritual movement Radical Faeries, Hay authored several manifestos and papers that imagined the history of humankind driven by a homosexual revolution. The wooden panels, featuring scribbles with quotations from Hay, deliver a patchwork of Communist ideology and sexual identification based on the faith that only by liberating both love and labor can people build a self-regulating worker's society.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the Mattachine Society and the **Daughters of Bilitis**, who self-identified as "homophile,"² attempted to create homosexual visibility by linking the identities of gays and lesbians to class positions, both traditional and imaginary. On the cover of the October 1965 issue of the first nationally circulated lesbian magazine *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review* depicting the picket for gay and lesbian rights staged in Washington, D.C., in front of a federal building, gays and lesbians appear as ordinary, middle-class professionals wearing gender-appropriate clothes acceptable to the bystanders. Contrary to these efforts, the iconic 1970 poster *Come Out!!* by **Gay Liberation Front (GLF)**, based on the photo by Peter Hujar, enacts the defiant identification as "gay"—as sexually and socially free, rather than simply as homosexual. The GLF's members, men, and women, appear in a loosely horizontal arrangement, in street clothes, with unkempt hair and raised fists—a new egalitarian class refusing dominant power.

Echoing the GLF's iconic poster, public art projects by **Dyke Action Machine!**, implemented by painter Carrie Moyer and photographer Sue Schaffner on the streets of New York City between 1991 and 2008, mocked the glossy, privatized representations of gay and lesbians by using the language of WWII-style patriotic posters (which often riffed on an image of workers), and commercial advertisements. Their mock advertisements *American Lesbians: Don't Sell Out!* (1998) and *Gay Marriage: You Might as Well Be Straight* (1997) attempted to draw public attention away from normalized representations of gay and lesbians as a consumer group towards one focused on social agency.

In her work *Homage: Congratulations* (2017), inspired by Adrian Piper's historic project *My Calling Card #1 and #2* (1986–1990), **Aliza Shvarts** uses the queer feminist critique to protest against the normativity of gender relations and the very institution of marriage that protects them. Denouncing marriage, both queer

and heterosexual, and its disregard to those who don't benefit, in Shvarts' words, from "the historic networks of gender, sex, class and race-based privilege" in a form of the standard wedding RSVP, she offers a tool of resistance to anyone who is opposed to institutionalized oppression. Shvarts's queer activism pertains to today's struggles, as a wave of anti-abortion laws has swept across the USA undermining the country's progressive movement towards gender equalities, security of privacy and reproductive rights.

The performance *We Will Open a New Front – Lecture by Lee H. Jones* (2019), staged by Swedish team **Åsa Elzén and Malin Arnell** of **YES! Association/Föreningen JA!** on various occasions, imagines a new (queer) class arising from politically marginalized identities, the "leftovers," who embrace differences between races, ethnicities, sexualities, genders, work, lifestyles, and citizenship. Imagined collectively (referred to as "we"), the work is performed in the form of a speech made each time by a different actor under the fictitious name Lee H. Jones. The speech's script weaves together various quotations taken from writings of queer and feminist intellectuals who, in different historical periods, formulated directions and strategies of their struggles, or, what Black feminist and poet Audre Lorde defined as "the edge of each other's battles." *A New Front* is situated clearly in opposition to a classless and white identity of the mainstream LGBTQI+ community that, over the last several years, has been promoted by the corporate elite in numerous images of gay pride celebrations "marked by rainbow flags, vodka ads, and too many floats filled with white men dancing to party music."³ Announcing a new hegemony of the "leftovers," Lee H. Jones urges to start with destruction of old hierarchies of concepts, including those of gender, race, and labor. If "dyke is a new feminist," then queer activist's art is a new type of labor, which breaks with old disciplines and puts aesthetics at the disposal of political practice.

Another YES! work, *New Spelling of a Street – A Tribute to Audre Lorde* (2017), evokes a crucial moment in the post-World War II USA, when identities of working-class women and queer were interlocked. As historian John D'Emilio states in his classic text "Capitalism and Gay Identity,"

"It is a free labor system—that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late 20th c. to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar

men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity."⁴

Dedicated to the celebrated American poet, feminist, queer, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde, the *New Spelling of a Street* consists of pages from a chapter of Lorde's memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*; photographs of the former building of Keystone Electronics factory in Stamford, where Lorde worked in the 1950s; and the artist's-initiated petition to rename One Dock Street (the current street's name) to Audre Lorde Street. Lorde's book—inspiration for the Yes! work—is a historical account of her years in Stamford as a factory worker when she also had her first sexual relationship with a female co-worker.

A New Spelling of a Street recaptures a vision of what John D'Emilio calls "affectionate communities"—a community of working-class gays and lesbians—thanks to a capitalist factory that stimulated the emergence of "free labor" unburdened by family ties and state support—that survives on networks of support "freely chosen and nurtured."⁵ In today's society, this vision still persists within the communities of LGBTQI+ artists who see their work akin to the last century's proletariat, whose life was permeated with both power and precariousness.

Restoring the lost connection between disappearing industrial labor and queer is the focus of *The Gestural History of the Young Worker* (2019–2022) by Dutch artist collective **Werker** and **Georgy Mamedov**. The Collective's publication presents a collage of images and texts, cut from various sources and reassembled into a new visual experience spread across agit-prop-like structures. References to queer overlap with images of labor workers taken from propaganda posters, magazine advertisings, amateur photos, historical photos, and documents. The work exposes subtle connections between the two seemingly incompatible subjects originated from different systems of visualization, creating an image of a utopian future with workers and queer entangled in commonalities of their lives, labor, and desire.

The graphic illustration piece *Evening with the Bros* (2017) by Russian artist **Harga** depicts the joy of a "worker's sex" between three delivery men somewhere in Russia. The story begins with two men glimpsing at a TV report about a gay parade in "decadent" (in words heard on Russian TV) Europe while bringing furniture into an old lady's apartment. "I've been wearing the

same pair of the darned pants for a month now, and they want me to think that someone's gay marriage is more important?"—one of them remarks. After work, they get together, drink, and have a sex party. The banality of life portrayed in Hagra's comics reflects the complexity of sexual expressions in everyday life in Russia, where social acceptance of homosexuality is still low. As a consequence, many homosexual men may not only be reluctant to identify themselves as "gay," but they often deny this right to others. On the other hand, Hagra's work, deriving from their own living experience as a working-class trans man in Russia, presents homosexuality as a tool to restore a social liaison, otherwise lost with the demise of 20th c. industrial capitalism and the lack of political and economic power of the working class after the collapse of socialism.

Will queer love stimulate new social organizations of bodies and create new forms of sustainable life? This question is answered more precisely in photographic works by South African artist **Zanele Muholi**. Their black-and-white self-portraits, frequently containing the references to domestic and industrial labor, suggest a mode of resistance to an oppressive society that systematically discriminates against both queer people and workers. One of Muholi's self-portraits, *Thulani II, Parktown*, (2015), refers to the 2012 Marikana massacre, when 34 striking miners were killed by South African security forces. Viewed together with the portraits of members of the queer community in Cape Town, which mix conceptual and aesthetic frameworks of Black and queer representations, Muholi's self-portraits create a compelling image of a self-sustained community resisting oppression.

In contrast to Hagra's piece, which depicts unrestrained and uncommodified sex of "free workers," and resisting queer body in Muholi's works, U.S. artist **William E. Jones'** video *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998) presents gay sex as commercialized and controlled by media and the sex industry. Based on footage from 1990's Eastern European gay pornography (in particular, the film *Young Russian Innocents*) distributed in the USA, the work shows young men performing sexual acts on camera; their naked bodies intermingle with Soviet attributes, such as military uniforms, red flags, and the portraits of Soviet leaders. The men directly look at the camera, or turn away from it; they enjoy themselves, or demonstrate indifference, or sometimes, even the signs of coercion. In 1990s

Russia, the end of socialism and the beginning of capitalist privatization provoked a rampant commodification of gendered and sexual bodies, resulting in the production of native "queer bodies" for the demands of the international pornographic industry. Jones clearly shows that in a society permeated with economic inequality and identity crisis, love and sexuality are alienated from the site of their enactment. The nude bodies of young Russian and other Eastern European men have been detached from the context of their own life and identity to be placed within Western men's fantasies. In this sense, sex is not a life-enhancing activity. It is an area of endless consumption, in which young people are no longer seen as autonomous human beings in the realm of free sexual expression and choice, but a raw material for capitalism that keeps the latter alive.

When gay producers take control over expressions of sexuality, gay sex leaves the area of consumption and enters the cultural arena from where history is viewed. This is evident in **Noam Gonick's** film *1919* (1997) that undertakes a historical revision of the Winnipeg General Strike (1919), the most famous and influential strike in Canadian history. The film's action is staged in a steamy environment of a Chinese, gay-oriented barbershop and bathhouse, which, during the strike, was transformed from being a cruising site for gay men into "a Communist den." The film quickly evolves and enters the arena of class struggle when a brawl between police and the strikers ends, happily with a signing of the final proclamation that grants the workers rights by the city's mayor. The history in Gonick's video is imbued with a satirical vision where sex, education, hygiene, and class struggle meet in a collective joyful delirium.

Explicit and graphic video depicting moments of a gay man's sexual life is employed by Estonian artist **Jaanus Samma** as a vehicle for his foray into a national history. In his multimedia project *Not Suitable for Work: A Chairman's Tale* (2015), Samma "queers" his national history by engaging the biography of a deeply marginalized man named Juhan Ojaste (1921–90), a Communist Party member and head of a successful collective farm in the Soviet Estonia. Ojaste was accused of sodomy and sentenced to 1.5 years of hard labor—something that caused him a loss of his social status, family, and job. After returning from the labor camp, he heads to the city and joins an underground homosexual community there. His life ends in 1990, one year

before Estonia becomes independent and decriminalized homosexuality, when he is killed by a male prostitute. Samma presents the protocols of Ojaste's sodomy trial, displayed in folders—a chilling record of the prosecution of gay people in the Soviet Union—and also in a series of video episodes, graphically enacting crucial moments of the man's life. The USSR Communist Party, using the mythic allegiances to workers and peasants, casts homosexuals (both workers and peasants) off the social grid. However, joining the gay community in Soviet Tallinn, before meeting his death (which is graphically visualized in the video), Ojaste inevitably becomes a member of a future world, which is yet to come. From today's perspective, his social marginalization makes him an unlikely hero. A man silently staring at us from the screen is ready for the wild and unknown. In this sense, the chairman in Samma's work is a stark contrast to the Russian homosexuals from Jones's video. Legalized and exploited, the post-Soviet queer men appear in front of the camera not only stripped of their clothes but also devoid of their political potential and agency.

Erik Moscovitz's and **Amanda Trager's** multimedia installation *Two Russians in the Free World* (2014) interrogates the possibility of queer love in a class-based society by depicting the life of a gay male couple in New York. In a series of filmed episodes, Manny, a wealthy businessman, and Sasha, a penniless artist, are engaged in a ceaseless dialogue, trying to reconcile their class differences by entertaining the idea of unconditional love, civil union, and the possibility of artistic freedom despite facing inequalities. In late capitalism, queer love seems to be no longer liberating. Likewise, artistic creation becomes more and more dependent on market relations than on networks of friends, fans, and lovers—something Sasha understands better than Manny, who is more hopeful that their relationship can go on. Manny's lifestyle and social obligations impede Sasha's creativity—another cautionary tale we get from the episodes. What is materialized from the love story is the capital that Manny unexpectedly hands out to Sasha as a gift. If capital is an abstraction of value, it may also be a substitute for love and freedom. (Sasha's artistic impotence is mentioned by the narrators.) The theme of abstraction is expressed through various kinds of artistic tropes ranging from avant-garde filmmaking methods, such as stopping the storyline to let filmmakers reflect

on their own work, to those borrowed from ancient Greek genres, such as the chorus deciding the characters' fate, and so on. Another technique uses singing to vocalize the script, which makes human voices sound like they are emitted by emotionless automatons. In a rapidly commodified world, love experienced by biological bodies dies giving way to techno-bodies produced by multimedia technologies and capital relations. But amidst the ruins of both traditional family and queer civil unions, a new kind of family emerges as one of characters concludes in the film, "with no ties other than shared disillusion."

Angela Beallor's film *Producing Comrades of the Future: Tretyakov's "I want a Baby!"* (2017) echoes Moscovitz's and Trager's work while discussing alternatives to a hetero-normative marriage and female reproduction in a classless society. Addressing queer parenthood, Beallor (herself a mother of a newborn child) evokes utopian radicalism of the first decade of post-revolutionary Soviet Union, when the country's intent to build sustainable communities outside of a nuclear family was sometimes taken to absurd levels. This is evident in *I Want a Baby*, a play written by Sergey Tretyakov in 1926 for the Moscow Meyerhold theater that was initially censored by the Soviet government. Beallor's project is an iteration of the second version of the play, meant to be a film script, in which female protagonist Milda, who works in an animal factory, where she takes care of animal reproduction, dreams about having a healthy baby, while avoiding getting into a committed relationship with a man. The Soviet successes in eugenics and the production of crops and animals were seen also as a possibility to breed perfect human beings, suitable for the new life. Beallor revisits the play—which is half-satire, half-visionary tale—in a form of a video-recorded lecture, offering her own ramifications on the meaning of queer conception and communal motherhood. Queer motherhood in her work is seen as an alternative to capitalist differentiation between heterosexuality and homosexuality that assigns the role of procreation strictly to heterosexual bodies.

German Lavorovsky's cyber-child from his video and sculpture *Reborn* (2020) places the narrative of queer parenthood and collective family in the context of digital revolution with its endless possibilities of evolution of species, class identities, and commonality based on productive labor.

In the world, which has witnessed the emergence of the gay alt-right, on the one hand,

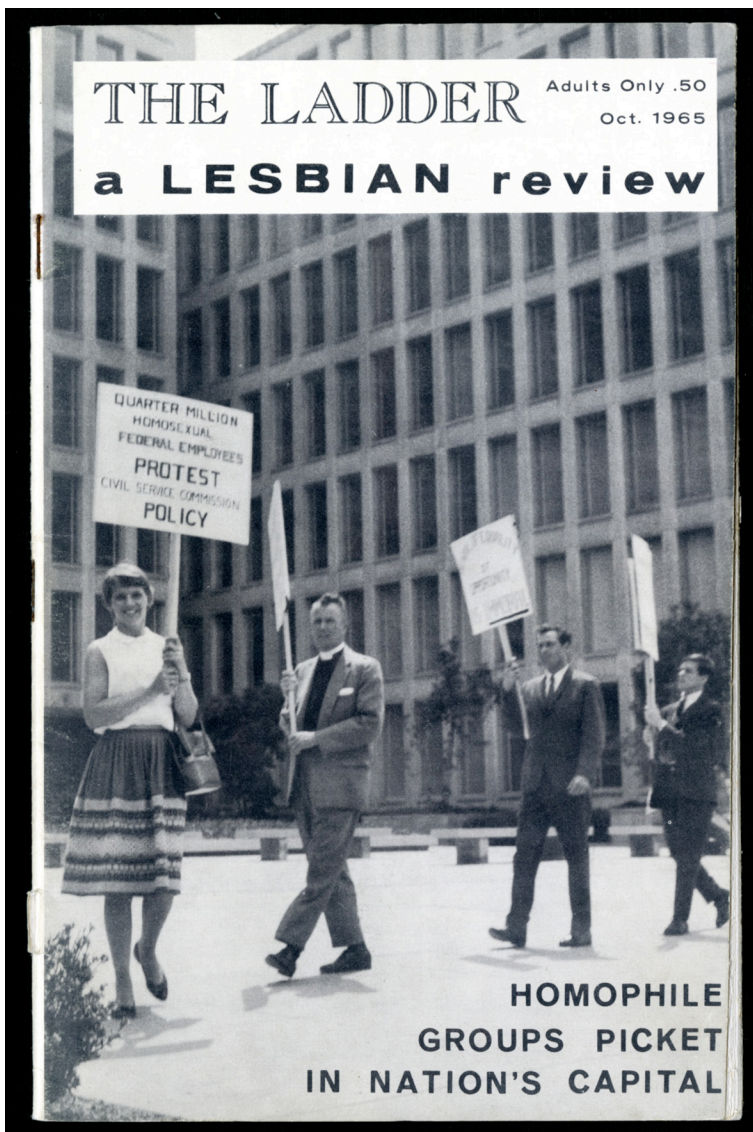
and anti-abortion laws, which allow for more government control over bodies, on the other, we must envision new social organizations of bodies that will also be a future productive force. They would include those who don't deny but act upon their gender, sexuality, and class (real, not fictitious) in their fight against the powers of institutions that disenfranchise them—be they queer, women, or immigrant workers—and who don't fit their agenda. When pondering what the future labor force will look like, we should think of the “queer of labor,” the force that possesses productive power without being consumed and depleted in the process.

OLGA KOPENKINA was born in Belarus and, since 1999, has lived in New York. A graduate from The Center of Curatorial Studies, Bard College, she has worked, since 2001, as an independent curator and art critic. Her curatorial projects and exhibitions include *Feminism Is Politics!*, at Pratt Manhattan Gallery; *Future Queer Perfect* (co-curated with Yevgeniy Fiks) at Station Independent Project gallery; *Lenin: Icebreaker Revisited*, Austrian Cultural Forum NY; *Sound of Silence: Art during Dictatorship*, EFA Project Space, NY, 2012; *Properly Past*, BRIC Rotunda gallery; *It's not paranoia when they are really after you*, film program at apex art, NY; *Russia: The Significant Other*, Anna Akhmatova Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, 2006; and *Post-Diasporas: Voyages and Missions* at the First Moscow Biennale, Moscow, 2005. As an art critic, Kopenkina is a contributor to publications such as *Art Journal*, *Moscow Art Magazine*, *ArtMargins*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Modern Painters*, *Afterimage*, and others. She teaches at the Department of Media, Culture and Communication, Steinhardt School, New York University; and Fordham University.

- 1 Quoted in *The Trouble with Harry Hay* by Stuart Timmons, p. 255. (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990.)
- 2 According to historian Richard Meyer, the term “homophile” was “created to defuse the explicitly sexual force of homosexuality and thereby render it less troubling to the dominant culture.” (Richard Meyer, “Gay Power circa 1970. Visual Strategies for Sexual Revolution.” In: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies. Art Works, Part 2*. Volume 12, #3, p. 450.) (Duke University Press, 2006.)
- 3 “The Other Side of Pride: In the Fight for LGBT Rights, Visibility for Some Doesn't Mean Justice for All” by Dark Matter, at: <http://creativetimereports.org/2015/06/26/dark-matter-the-other-side-of-pride-lgbt-rights/>
- 4 “Capitalism and Gay Identity” by John D'Emilio. In: *Powers of Desire. The Politics of Sexuality*, p. 102. (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1983).
- 5 D'Emilio, Ibid.



Angela Beallor
Producing Comrades of the Future:
 Tretyakov's "I Want a Baby!", 2017
 Single-channel video (15:00 min);
 with giclée prints of text excerpts
 from *I Want a Baby*, a play by
 Sergei Tretyakov, 1926
 Courtesy of the artist



Daughters of Bilitis/Kay Lahusen
 Cover of *The Ladder: a Lesbian Review*,
 San Francisco, October 1965
 Photograph by Kay Lahusen
 Courtesy of ONE Archives at the
 University of Southern California
 Libraries

Dyke Action Machine!
Lesbian Americans: Don't Sell Out, 1998
 Digital recreation of the original poster
 Dimensions variable
 Free downloads from
www.dykeactionmachine.com



*Gay Marriage: You Might As Well Be
 Straight*, 1997
 Digital recreation of the original poster
 Dimensions variable
 Free downloads from
www.dykeactionmachine.com





Yevgeniy Fiks
Toward a Portfolio of Woodcuts
 (Harry Hay), 2013
 Wood, 24 × 18 inches each of 7
 Courtesy of the artist



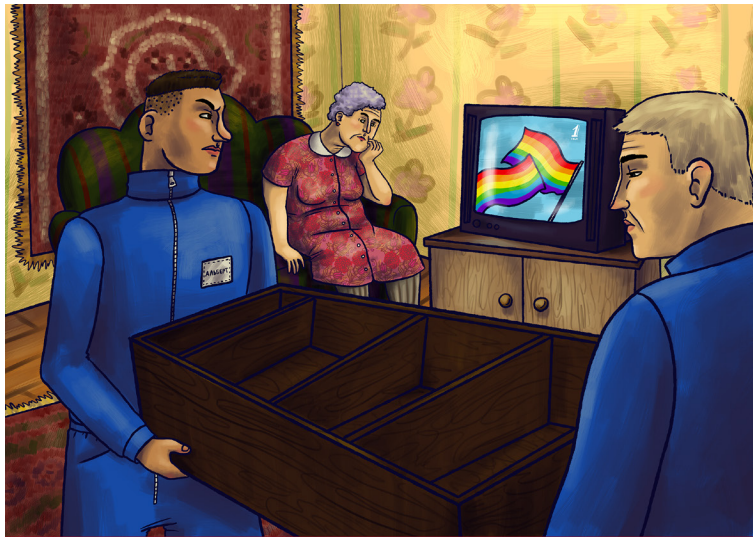
Gay Liberation Front/Peter Hujar
Come Out!!, 1970
 Photography by Peter Hujar
 Poster, 18.19 × 12.44 inches
 Collection Leslie-Loham Museum of Art, New York, Gift of the Peter Hujar Archive, LLC. © 2022 The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Hugo Gellert
In Unity There Is Strength, 1934
 Lithograph, 17 × 11 inches
 Collection of Yevgeniy Fiks

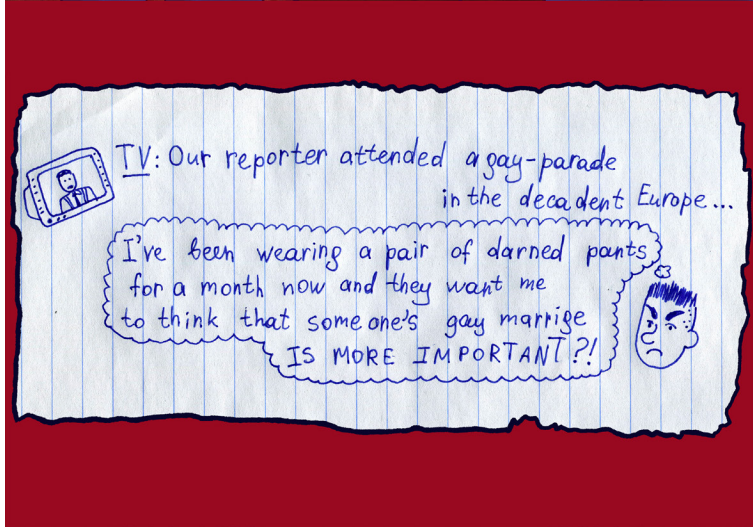


Noam Gonick
1919, 1997
 35 mm film (8:25 min) transferred to digital, single-channel video
 Courtesy of the artist
 Photo credit: Szu Burgess





Hagra
Evening with the Bros, 2017
 Digital prints
 60½ × 72 inches overall, 5½ × 8 inches
 each of 26
 Courtesy of the artist

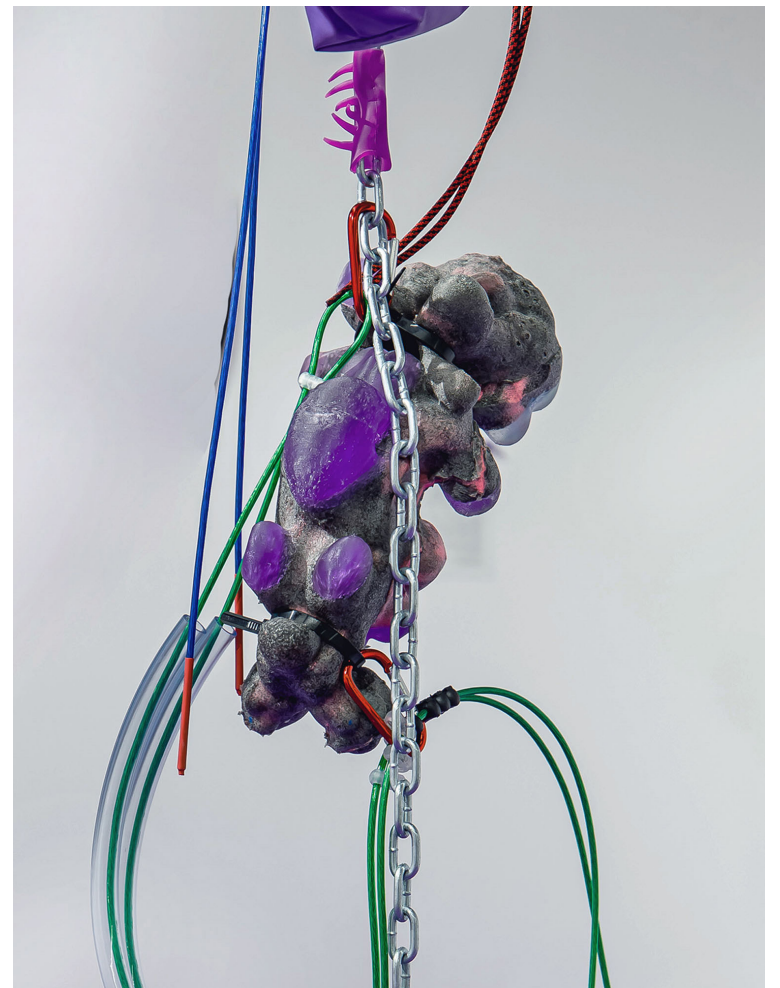


Harry Hay
Harry Hay Papers, circa 1950–1990
 Archival letters, paraphernalia,
 and photographs
 Dimensions various
 Courtesy of ONE Archives at the
 University of Southern California
 Libraries

William E. Jones
*The Fall of Communism as Seen
 in Gay Pornography*, 1998
 Single-channel video (20:00 min)
 Courtesy of the artist and David
 Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles and
 New York



German Lavorovsky
Reborn, 2020
 Installation, variable dimensions
 Courtesy of the artist





Erik Moskowitz + Amanda Trager
Two Russians in a Free World, 2014
 Multimedia installation with video
 (1:08:00 hours), grocery cart, and
 reflective tarp
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy of the artists



Zanele Muholi
Thulani II, Parktown, 2015
 Archival pigment print,
 edition of 8
 19½ × 14½ inches
 © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the artist,
 Yancey Richardson, New York; and
 Stevenson Cape Town / Johannesburg

Additional works in exhibition:
Cebo II, Philadelphia, 2018
MalD x, Durban, 2016
 Archival pigment prints,
 editions of 8 each
 39% × 30½ inches, 19% × 14¼ inches
 respectively
 © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the artist,
 Yancey Richardson, New York; and
 Stevenson Cape Town / Johannesburg

Jaanus Samma
Not Suitable for Work:
A Chairman's Tale, 2015
 Video in four parts
 Single-channel projection,
 court ephemera, desk, lamp, chair
 Dimensions variable
 Video in collaboration with Marko Raat
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Temnikova & Kasela Gallery,
 Tallinn, Estonia



Aliza Shvarts
Homage: Congratulations, 2017
 Embossed wedding RSVP card
 4 × 6 inches
 Courtesy of the artist

Dear Friend,

I regret that I will not be able to attend your wedding.

The legal, economic, and social institution of marriage is premised on the subjugation of women, the codification of (patrilineal) inheritance, the disciplining of the reproductive couple form, and the privatization of care. The perpetuation of this institution enacts tangible violence against those of us who do not benefit from historical networks of gender-, sex-, class-, and race-based privilege. In the past, it has been my policy to be silent as my friends, family, and acquaintances participate in the interdiction of my subjecthood, but such silence has become untenable. Therefore, I have decided to register my objection to my own erasure with this card.

I hope you will endeavor to forgive my absence just as I endeavor to forgive your (hetero/homo)normativity.



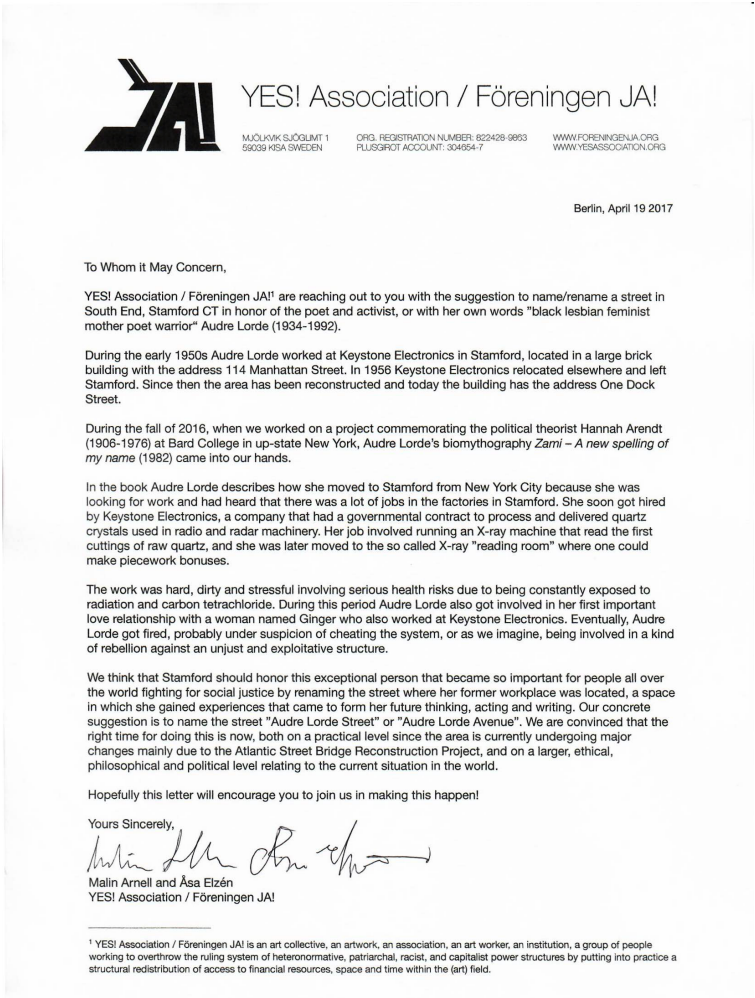
Werker Collective + Georgy Mamedov
The Gestural History of Young Worker,
2019–2022
Prints on MDF board, accompanying
publication, variable dimensions
Photo credit: Exhibition *Rats! Rats!*
Rats! The Poetic Grammar of the Hack
CaixaForum Barcelona, Spain 2022 ©
Photograph: Roberto Ruiz
Courtesy of the artists

YES! Association/Föreningen JA!
We Will Open a New Front – Lecture by
Lee H. Jones, 2010
Single-channel video (25:00 minutes),
and poster
33 × 23¾ inches



New Spelling of a Street –
A Tribute to Audre Lorde, 2017
Letter with copies of chapter 21
from *A New Spelling of My Name*
by Audre Lorde
Dimensions variable

Courtesy YES! Association/
Föreningen JA!



Acknowledgements

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I wish to express appreciation to all the artists and lenders for making work available, and to Olga Kopenkina for curating an engaging and insightful exhibition; and to Yevgeniy Fiks for his efforts in assisting with the exhibition.

We are grateful for the assistance of Loni A. Shibuyama, librarian, ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, Los Angeles; and a special note should go to Franklin Street Works, Stamford, CT, and their Creative Director Terri C. Smith for organizing the first iteration of this exhibition.

I also am remembering with gratitude my Radical Faerie cousin and pioneer member of the Gay Liberation Front Nikos Diamon (1936–2020), and all those who have fought for the rights of women, minorities, and workers. Continue to inspire us!

Nick Battis
Director of Exhibitions

Angela Beallor
Daughters of Bilitis/Kay Lahusen
Dyke Action Machine!
Yevgeniy Fiks
Gay Liberation Front/Peter Hugar
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