

Queering the Arts Outdoors

Keynote Speech by Phoebe Patey-Ferguson

So, in 1998, George Michael released the anthemic disco romp *Outside*, a celebration of erotic desire without shame, a desire to connect, to consummate, to be together in the great outdoors. *Outside* was George Michael's response to his forced outing, what was then called the most public outing of a queer person in the 20th century.

In April 1998, at 34 years old, George was arrested for cottaging, or a lewd act, in a public toilet in Beverly Hills, in what many considered enticement or entrapment by the LAPD, who, like the police here, frequently sent officers undercover in toilets to proposition men, arresting them if they responded to that invitation. George had long been rumoured to be gay and was out to family and friends, but had not publicly come out, so to speak, until this incident. This attempt, especially the kind of media furore that came after the arrest, was an attempt to humiliate, stigmatise and shame and shut down George, is like really, and that is really clear when you search the archive news stories and see their kind of vicious edges. But he really refused this. He came out and out and then outside. He spoke publicly for the first time about his immense love for his boyfriend, who had died of AIDS-related illnesses several years earlier. He stared down the cameras of interviews, refusing to apologise or peek out behind the Met Curtain, as he put it. There has always been discussions about why he hadn't publicly acknowledged his sexuality earlier, but when he did, it was with a real bang.

At their core, these kind of, this idea of this kind of media furore that happened around this, is an example of what we see often of these conservative right-wing and fascist positions, their kind of approaches, approaches, that attempt to kind of, yeah, stigmatise, shut down queerness or any kind of other, otherness. And these approaches are always profoundly dehumanising. They take people's lives, they take their ideas and expressions, and seeks to crush them, to objectify and humiliate. It seeks to abstract these works from the people and communities from which they emerge. But George then wrote, recorded, and released, *Outside*, the opening original single on his *Best Of* album. It confidently shimmies and spins the attempts made against him with a queer flamboyance. The musical world of *Outside* references 70s cop shows and porn, and you also saw there's a kind of fake porn cottaging, sort of heterosexual version of the incident, which is, you know, this kind of campy turning at the beginning. But the sound itself, that, like, funk guitar is really taken from particularly, like, Isaac Hayes' shaft theme. That was, I was wondering whether I should put a joke about shafts in there, but I didn't. I guess I sort of did without doing it.

And then there's also these police whistles, which are transformed into a carnival parade. And later on in the song, samples of radio broadcasts reporting his arrest are,

like, interwoven into the music. You can, oh, I've got the clicker, haven't I? Sorry, that was what I forgot. Does that, is that work? No. Oh, oh, that way. Oh, I don't know if that's, maybe it's not reaching. I'm pressing, yeah. I might need you to do it for me. Sorry. Oh, there we go. It's just that. So the lyrics are defiant and camp, promoting the joys of outside frolicking and fucking, delivered all with a kind of wink and invitation of let's go outside. And this kind of lyrics, which is maybe my favorite bit of where he says, I'd service the community, but I already have, you see, which he delivers directly to the camera with this kind of wink. The music video similarly subverts and transforms the tropes, opening with the Swedish porn montage that mocks directly the cop who arrested him. So one of the names of the kind of directed by is, takes his name, Marcello Rodriguez, and turns it into, like, Marcello off and wankin, or something like that. And the moment the urinals spin into mirror balls, sexy queer disco choreography in the toilet, in these disheveled LAPD uniforms, with couples of all genders and ages occupying public space, or semi-public spaces, but also under surveillance. So this is really, like, my favorite. Maybe it's my favorite moment in any music video. I'm always drawn back to these urinals spinning into becoming disco, like, disco ball urinals. I'll talk a bit more about that in a moment, actually. So on a day like today, I'm curious to respond to the invitation of Let's Go Outside.

In Outside, we find reference to the risk, publicity, surveillance, stigma that is placed on queer artists, queer lives, and queer people in the public sphere. It shows us one route of what we might do with this, and ways in which we might make really fucking amazing work, one that slips between spaces which speaks back to the kind of structures, or invites queerness into hostile zones. We can't ignore that the outside is tricky, that people would still prefer, often, like, really boringly, that we keep our lifestyles behind closed doors. But this often provides us with more motivation to take that step into the alfresco realm. It only serves as a testament to the importance of what we do. I remember hearing about George's Cottaging as a child, a moment that taught me more about how gay people exist, and what exciting things they might get up to. I remember watching the outside music video on MTV, and, like, feeling its illicit beauty. I remember singing along to it in the, on the radio with my, in the car with my mum on the way into town. These moments of, like, leaky queerness that seeped into my own desires, forging new pathways of possibilities for my life, and where I might be going.

Political discussions of queerness have frequently gotten stuck in the toilet. Toilets with glory holes, numbers scrawled on walls, and intricate cruising etiquettes formed backdrops and fabrics of many of our queer upbringings. But in recent years, the toilet has become the exemplary site in which the politics of queer and trans inclusion, or exclusion, is played out. As queer researchers have observed the complex, abstract, and nebulous concepts of gender and sexuality are often solidified and made visible and communicable through the toilet's infrastructures. The toilet becomes this site of conflict and paranoia, of trans hostility and exclusion, and a focal point for horrific trans

misogyny. Like many trans and gender queer people, I am fucking sick of talking about toilets, but there's also no better place, pragmatically, to be sick. So, we find ourselves returning to toilets. Plants, thanks. So, this strange space, toilets, here we are, toilets, are deeply functional, we hope that they're functional, but also strange, contentious, slippery space between public and private. Nothing is binary, of course, but we often find ourselves navigating these complex entanglements of the public and private. Knowing if you're in or out is not so simple. Privately owned public space, publicly broadcast private locations, code switching, passing, we're rarely entirely in one or the other. Doing something in our private lives can painfully land us in the public eye. The pleasures and possibilities and risks of our work all sit alongside each other in these difficult and brilliant ways. So, going outside or coming out has had an often much wider implications for LGBT plus people generally.

Queer theory is long engaged with the spectre or the construction of the closet. Of course, the closet is nothing but an imaginary space built through heteronormativity. The prevailing assumption, we're all straight until we declare otherwise. In her 1990 book, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick argues that queerness is moved in relation to these ideas of secrecy and disclosure, private and public, which are themselves incoherent supposed binaries, which in practice are impossible to pin down. Often, when we do come out, the relation to the closet does not end. As Sedgwick writes, the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that, like Wendy and Peter Pan, people find new walls springing up around them with every new encounter. The closet keeps reconstructing itself. You're never fully in or fully out. These supposedly clear boundaries are actually unstable and constantly shifting. This connects to how we navigate all of those slippery spaces between public and private, between speaking and saying silent. Sedgwick shows us that these binaries we're meant to believe in, in, out, closeted, open, secret, known, are actually irresolvably unstable, full of contradictions that can't be resolved but can be lived with, navigated, and perhaps transformed. I'm sure all of us have experienced the trepidation of public space from suburbs, city centers, villages, woodlands. These spaces are not stable either. It can depend on the time of day, how we are dressed, who we are with, what we are there for, who else is there. We constantly adapt, trying to smell out the vibes and rolling them across our tongue in an attempt to taste the level of vigilance to adopt. We know, we all know this to some degree, and queer people do, I think, hold it in common.

However, we should also know that the risk isn't distributed evenly. I recognize the safety offered by the whiteness of my skin, my attempt at some kind of butchness, the Englishness of my accent, a partial able-bodiedness, access to enough money to order a taxi home if I need it, and a home to go to where I can close the door and feel safe. We all have a responsibility to acknowledge what privileges our differences carry and take action in solidarity to extend these as far as possible. I often feel like as a scholar and as a researcher, I'm extending a hand to discover what modes of survival, protest,

transformation, and possibility artists have created to draw this strength towards what we need in our current moment.

In telling this story of George's invitation to go, outside, we have to acknowledge that he is a very, very attractive, rich, famous, cis white gay man. He had some resources, he had support and a position that allowed him to make such a stand. This is not to say he didn't have challenges, and we all know too sadly how that story ended, but the 1990s culture wars, which I think we are seeing a repetition of today, saw many queer people's lives and careers destroyed by anti-sex work, anti-pornography, and extreme homophobic and transphobic media and political backlash. These very real bodily effects of this kind of press, media, campaign group, and political batterings don't just negatively impact careers, but are fundamentally inhumane approaches to wreak havoc on a person. And this is not a difference of opinion, and it's not bigotry stemming from ignorance or unfamiliarity, in my opinion, although many people try and sort of argue that.

I would speak with Carol Jacobson, who was a scholar who identified in 1991 that censorship in the arts, anti-abortion legislation, anti-civil rights rulings, stigmas against people with AIDS, and flag-waving hysteria are all interrelated phenomena. Ultra-conservatives are not demonstrating visual illiteracy when they look at a flag and name it freedom, or an image of sexual pleasure or desire for anyone other than a straight arrow white males and name it porn, or a fetus and name it murder. Their strategy is a calculated offensive meant to buttress the masculinist power structure. So for me this feels so crucial in identifying and confronting all of these issues. It's not illiteracy, it's calculated offensive to uphold strict patriarchal heterosexist structures. And so there's this thinking then, if we know that these are calculated, organized, interrelated phenomena, how do we then work together to, I guess, in some way start either dismantling it, navigating it, kind of taking it apart.

So what is important about being here together today is if that we're going to resist, we have to do it together, not just through the informal networks of mutual support queers are so good at, but also through advocating, organizing, and leveraging resources that can comprehensively support artists facing fascist queerphobic backlash. Artists in the 1990s were supported in resistance by a range of anti-censorship organizations, including FACT, which was the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, where an eclectic coalition of feminists, artists, sex workers, academics, lawyers, and activists publicized situations of censorship and brought pressure against those who had wished to see it shut down. And Carol Jacobson, who I mentioned earlier, who wrote a lot about this, said it had an extraordinary impact on the artist's ability to fight back, and the battle generated a national dialogue on the insidious problem of censorship. When FACT was active in the US in the 1990s, the UK had its own version, Feminists Against Censorship, run by a coalition of feminists, including the trans writer Ros Cavney and my colleague,

Rose Bruford, who's about to talk in a minute, Marissa Carnesky, and maybe she'll talk more about that because it's very cool.

And one of the lessons I'm trying to think about this experience and from learning about these radical histories is the different ways in which we can work together with organizations inside and outside of institutions to think about how we talk about this, how do we connect, how do we advocate, and something that would be maybe like queers against censorship, pressure groups. I'm trying to think about all of this right now. So I'm putting that in the room because this is a, I guess it's a desire. There's so much at stake right now. And really, this isn't an attack. I don't think just, I mean, it becomes an attack on the freedom of art and freedom of artistic expression. But actually, the attack is on minority groups and particular groups of people. There is a lot of money. We only have to remember a certain author sat on a yacht with a cigar, who is like funding this effort and organization into trying to annihilate trans people and the kind of residues of queerness from public life in the UK. And therefore, if you try and attack trans people who are tracking, attacking the very core of queerness. While this is a research project, and like this kind of aspects are part of my work, it also feels like the urgent work of the moment to me to figure out what our modes of resistance are, and to share strategies that ensure that we are radically caring for each other, taking action in solidarity, recognizing what the cost might be to do this work, and to try and ensure together that queer art, queer performance, and queerness can continue to thrive on its own terms. So we have some really brilliant people here today who will share their current practice.

But I also just want to take this moment to reach out to some others who aren't with us today, who like George, I hold really close to my heart and who give me the guts to kind of get out and about and find really inspirational. So this is a bit like a kind of the moment that you get to maybe like reference your favorite people, which is one of the best bits of being a lecturer, is you get to find things really cool. And then you're like, look at this, this is cool. And everyone's like, yeah, that's cool. So I wanted to talk about my friend Vabene Elkiem Fiazzi, who also goes by Crazillist Artist. She's based in Kumasi in Ghana, but performs worldwide. I've seen her perform several times in the UK. And I was also really lucky to see her perform in Ghana a couple of years ago. So she's a trans woman, she's an artist, she's an activist, and she's a producer. She runs this really gorgeous residency space in Kumasi, which is an international arts residency. So anyone you can apply and go there yearly, and also check out their work. There's a lot of amazing stuff.

But this kind of outside work that she makes in different countries, but this kind of discussion that she always brings, and you'll find online in her talks, about the particular importance of interventionist performance work on the streets and public spaces in Ghana. So where being gay is illegal, and queerness is increasingly legislated

against in more visible and really violent ways. She steps out and puts her body on the line, using art to connect and spark conversation and togetherness. This is often really, really dangerous. And she's been arrested, but refuses to be silent. She's not arrested at the moment, she's just been arrested after doing work before, but refuses to be silent or apologize for her existence. And again, there's so much I could say, I could do another hour on for Penny's work. But I wanted to just talk specifically about the performance I saw, like I saw her do, and was kind of covertly tried to support, which was, is this work here where you can see the security guard standing with his hand, and for Penny standing there. So this was a photo that I took when I was really lucky to be working at the University of Ghana in Accra, that Penny took this opportunity of an international theatre conference to stage an intervention.

She walked covered in clay, singing a funeral song throughout the event, through the event. So it was kind of like a few hundred people in a hall, and she walked through the middle, singing in this kind of loud mourning that echoed through and interrupted the talks. She moved really slowly, confidently. Some people who the audience was mostly international academics, but also the staff at the university and many students, some of these people ignored her, and others, and then kind of attempted to carry on with how it was, you know, the way, what was going on. But some of us followed her out into the square. We listened to her as she filled her face and mouth with clay to show the silencing of queer existence in the city, in the university and across the country. Security guards came almost immediately, trying to stop the performance. There was confusion over whether it was art or protest, especially because it was at a theatre conference, whether it was legitimate or illegitimate. And the aesthetic, the vocal qualities of the work allowed enough confusion for her to be allowed to continue, with a lot of fierce discussion and a lot of people kind of stood around trying to sort of advocate for it to continue. There is so much more to this story, which I can share later, maybe in one of our kind of conversation bits. But I think what this work, like, again, absolutely just one of the most phenomenal artists. But it was really scary. So I had a really tiny part in making sure that the bag that she needed was in the right place in the back of the hall. Like, it was like, I had no role really at all. But I was terrified. It was really because you're also that there is, you know, there's so much at stake. And it was, you know, that really, like, how much it took to just have the guts to try and support it and try and stand up, let alone, I have no idea where she gets these guts to do these works. And I think Vibene's work is like really, really vital. And as I said, she can present it much better than me. So read everything that she's written. And also, again, to encourage you to explore and support the artist residency in Kamazi, as they seek to make it more secure as a refuge for queer artists.

And then also, I wanted to talk, I just felt like if I was only talking about George Michael, that's quite specific, you know. So I also wanted to talk about Catherine Aranello, who is one of my favorite artists of all time, the late, great Catherine Aranello. These are two

of my favorite works by Catherine. On this one where she's wearing the yellow hat is, as you can see, it says Sick Bitch Crips Pity Charity. And it's a work called Pity that you can watch, again, I wasn't sure if we'd have time. We don't have time. To watch the, you can watch the performance on the internet of Pity. But she is occupying the space, trying to sort of fundraise, but in order to, like, the whole project makes fun of this idea of disabled people being charity cases. And it's really provocative, and quite, like, upsetting, but in a really, like, exciting and thrilling way.

And the other work on the other side is Aaron Williamson and Catherine Aranello, who were together the disabled avant-garde. And this is a stage invasion. They did a Liberty Festival in the South Bank Center. So if you know, the South Bank was on that kind of veranda bit overlooking. And Liberty Festival, this was during the, when Boris Johnson was mayor, and was, you know, part of the Conservative government, who was cutting disability benefits, causing the death and poverty of a lot of disabled people, but they would still fund the, you know, uplifting inspirational disability arts festival. And so they both dressed as the Grim Reaper, performed this series of stage invasions, which kind of highlights this kind of crap, as we think of kind of a radical queer disability perspective into what is kind of the structures of power. And I think there's this really exciting kind of thing where we think about actually what might be the spaces, or this exciting kind of connection where we think about what might be the spaces that are like not are oppositional to us, but are maybe like we can intervene in different ways and think about how, you know, we might change that conversation that is happening in those spaces, how we might draw the attention to people who are funding a certain kind of work that there's maybe another way of doing it. How do we counteract some of the over-determined framings that get put on queer work who want to present it in a simpler way? How do we add that complexity? And I think that's something that all of Catherine's work did. And I just wanted to, again, like on a personal note, reflect on one of my favorite pieces that was in a public foyer, a kind of theater foyer that Catherine performed in her wheelchair, where she basically was trying to block every single person from being able to get through. And it was the most frightening and upsetting performance I think I've ever seen in my entire life because there was no way of getting through except if you kind of tried to like dart one way and then run around her, which feels obviously like profoundly ableist. And she was cackling the whole time because she knew she was making everyone deeply uncomfortable and thinking about how for her as someone, yeah, who was using a power chair to be able to sort of make the space so like frighteningly inaccessible for other people. So again, loads of Catherine's work is online. You can look at it. It's really incredible. The public work was really phenomenal. And yeah, she's really, really greatly missed. There is a memorial event if anyone is in London at the Libar Development Agency on Friday. So you can also find more about her work. And there's a load of archive work at the Libar Development Agency as well, which some of it is online if you're not in London. But if you're ever in

London, the Libar Development Agency study room, which has a lot of these archived works is maybe my favorite place in the world.

So I just wanted to final on our final note to say that for me, George Michael's invitation of let's go outside still echoes. And we're still going, still stepping out, still refusing the neat categories of closeted or open, private or public, appropriate or obscene. Because the outside isn't a destination. It's a practice. Sedgwick was right. New closets keep forming, new walls keep springing up. But so do new discos, new forms of resistance. These contradictions, the messiness, the slipperiness, the difficulty are not problems to be solved. They are part of the point. While other people want to flatten everything out that is not boring and predictable, to erase differences from our streets, to decorate the roads with hideous, ugly, vomit-inducing St. George's crosses in order to indicate their own lack of imaginations and limited horizons, we can offer something more. We don't need to escape contradiction or difficulty or fear them. We should just figure out how to dance in them. Thank you.