



Art After Stonewall — exhilarating New York exhibition charts the fight for gay rights Spanning two Manhattan locations, the show mixes political rage with joyful self-expression

[Ariella Budick MAY 8, 2019](#)

Nobody was plotting revolution on the night of June 28 1969 at the mafia-run gay bar on Christopher Street in Manhattan’s West Village. Mostly, patrons just wanted to be left alone. The police raided the Stonewall Inn, as they often did, but this time they met resistance, and resistance detonated six days of mayhem. Someone uprooted a parking meter and used it as a battering ram. Street kids formed a chorus line and faced down the police with synchronised kicks and a song: “We are the Stonewall Girls, / We wear our hair in curls, / We wear no underwear, / We show our pubic hair.” A fire hose was deployed.

“I associate the whole thing with the police coming there and basically trying to stop us from dancing with each other,” recalls Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, a self-described “gay teenage runaway” who grew up into an artist. But at some point that spasm of violence gathered into a beam of world-changing energy. In his book, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, David Carter quotes a bar patron who instantly transformed into a street fighter: “I was really experiencing liberation and radicalisation and everything — bang! — right then and there.” The shockwaves slammed New York and San Francisco, and 50 years later continue to ripple all over the country. *Art After Stonewall, 1969-1989*, an exhibition that began at the Columbus Museum of Art in Ohio, has now forked into two Manhattan locations: the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art and the Grey Art Gallery at New York University.

It’s not a connoisseur’s selection, but an overstuffed, two-headed, polytentacled portrait of a period’s chaotic variety, as exhilarating as it is dizzying. At its heart “is a suspicion of any

systematic classification or traditional notions of what qualifies as a work of art,” write Anna Conlan and Jonathan Weinberg in a catalogue essay.

Some pieces do fall into familiar rubrics of craft, subtext and beauty: Joan Snyder’s 1975 “Heart On”, for instance — a Cartesian grid overlaid with suggestions of flesh, skin, fluids and scars. Snyder sliced into the canvas and sewed some of the flaps back together, evoking the wounds that go with womanhood. The result is lushly beautiful and almost abstract, the rare precious object in an exhibition that mixes document with desire, spectacle with witness, political rage with joyful self-expression.

Conservative politicians often invoke the spectre of “the gay agenda” as if it were a defined set of policies, pursued by a monolithic interest group. The expandable acronym LGBTQ+ more accurately describes a coalition of individuals, subgroups and factions who join in overarching purpose but define themselves in many different ways. Unity is elusive. Huey Newton declared in 1970 that black, feminist and gay activists all shared a simple, inalienable right: “A person should have the freedom to use his body in whatever way he wants.” And yet even that choice of pronouns has since acquired the power to inflame.

A movement that demanded inclusion into mainstream society could at times be exclusive too. Transgender people fought for recognition within the revolution, lesbians upbraided homophobic feminists, and black activists had to cut through multiple layers of prejudice. The exhibition threads its way among these sensitivities, recognising, for instance, that a 1974 mural by Mario Dubsky and John Button, crowded with bare-chested young men, short-changed everyone who wasn’t.

Peter Hujar’s famous “Come Out!!” photo, in which a group of Gay Liberation Front activists trot down Wooster Street shoulder to shoulder, with wide grins and raised fists, reads as an exuberant display of fearlessness. The text panel lets some of the giddiness out of the scene, though, when it points out that the picture “leaves the impression that gay liberation was primarily for the young, the white, and the cis-gendered.” On top of that, the encouragement to abandon the closet became a command and later a threat, as some people were involuntarily outed.

As Stonewall’s high-kicking rioters implied, going public about sexuality became a kind of performance, and the exhibition brims with poses, costumes, signs and dramatic lighting. The “Gender Play” section focuses on the fusion of activism and theatre, especially by the Cockettes, a San Francisco drag troupe that favoured beads, beards, feathers, fruit, warpaint, silks, hairy legs and bangles. Martin Wong’s poster for the group’s “Pearls Over Shanghai” show is a hallucination full of visual non-sequiturs: a dragon-fanged hippo belching a plume of five-pointed stars in a landscape of Chinese characters.

Sexuality was theatre, theatre was political, and sex itself became a form of civic engagement. One section lingers on the West Village piers in Manhattan, where Gordon Matta-Clark chain-sawed a hole out of the side of a dilapidated shed, producing a gaping mystery that looks erotic alongside a pair of erect smokestacks. The pier became a magnet for men in search of hookups and artists in search of sexual subjects.

Death has always tolled through images of sexual self-discovery, but in the 1980s the ringing got louder. A clangour of dreams collapsed into the central nightmare of Aids. Art and activism focused on a concrete goal: advancing medical knowledge in the face of intransigent homophobia. Clarity of purpose translated into stark imagery: Gran Fury's bloody handprint, the pink triangle with the slogan "Silence=Death"; Luis Cruz Azaceta's acrylic of a shrunken figure lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by a sea of unfeeling numbers. A show that begins in violence and blossoms into elation and anger turns, at the end, to tragedy.

For reasons that are never quite articulated the "After Stonewall" narrative concludes in 1989, which feels arbitrary and abrupt. Right around that time, a movement born from declarations of difference started demanding inclusion in the mainstream's institutions. Activists concentrated their political firepower on winning the most ordinary of rights: to teach, study, work, marry, raise children and serve in the military — all without having to lie. The curators may have worried that the task of broadening the definition of normalcy would be anticlimactic. But just think of what followed their chosen span: Don't Ask, Don't Tell, wedding cake lawsuits, Brokeback Mountain, Ellen DeGeneres, Michael Sam and Obergefell v Hodges. Perhaps a sequel is already in the works.