

QUEERSPHERE

Essay by Sean Sandusky and Dana Snow

Reluctantly, we admit this show was created out of frustration. As two Queer curators, we struggled to find art exhibitions dealing specifically with the Queer and Trans experience in the arts community of Toronto. It seemed that work from Queer folks existed as a counterpoint to a show, or that we could not exist in the art world outside of pride month. In the trajectory of accelerated COVID-19 closures, we also saw Queer spaces shuttering permanently. With art centres and social spaces decentralizing, we found ourselves turning to social media platforms. There was no sanctuary to be found there either, as posting restrictions and community guidelines impeded on artistic expression: banning the nude body, censoring Queer folks, or reducing them to the “politically radical” or “non-threatening representation” binaries in order for advertisers to feel comfortable. In the time since we proposed this exhibition, we have seen other 2SLGBTQ+ curators and cultural workers carve out spaces for themselves successfully. We would like to recognize Morgan Sears Williams who curated *behind the curtain* at Xspace Cultural Centre, Karina Iskandarsjah, Fallon Simard, Eric Chenyang and Emily Peltier at Gloryhole Gallery, and Justice (aka Jojo Constantine) at the Textile Museum of Canada as contributors and forerunners in exploring Queer and Trans content in the Toronto community at the formative time of the exhibition. We are excited to add to their canon.

QUEERSPHERE is continuing a journey to an “if only” site where 2SLGBTQIA+ imaginations, social groups, and world- building are allowed to flourish outside of the pressures of corporatization and flat representation. Addressing key elements of Queer and Trans life, artists Whess Harman, Keiko Hart, Maxwell Lander, Lucas LaRochelle, and Marissa Sean Cruz craft Queer becoming through land, narrative, history, sociality, and eroticism to tease out a site that fosters and nourishes Queer and Trans togetherness in a time of isolation.

Sitting Here With You in the Future (2019) is a video created using visual and textual output from the artificial intelligence *QT.bot*. Designer Lucas LaRochelle developed *QT.bot* as an expansion of the user-generated counter-mapping project, *Queering the Map*, which allows users to submit and geotag their own place-based accounts of Queer experience. *QT.bot* is trained on the platform’s 82,000 text entries, as well as Google Street View images corresponding to their tagged locations. The result is a video work that collides possible Queer and Trans futures. The work offers a window into a discombobulated place—one that feels uncannily familiar. Seeping portals erode row houses into greenery. Roads melt to rivers. Yellow captions overlay this imagery, their font unpredictably changing from flowing to spiky, denoting a new relation to language. *Sitting Here With You in the Future* confounds its viewer, stitching together land, sound, language, and time to envision a myriad of possible Queer futures.

In Whess Harman’s *Opening Night Playthrough* (2020), the artist creates a performative video tour of an imagined videogame they created. Inspired by YouTube videogame

playthrough videos, Harman plays this game as if for the first time. They introduce a dreamy Queer Indigenous DIY punk art and music venue, based off the pre-existing venue Red Gate in Vancouver, British Columbia. After the choosing a character, outfit, and screen name, Harman launches into a controlled and fictional social scene, wherein the performer must sustain interesting conversations or succumb to failure. Facing challenges like meeting up with your overtalkative cousin, your “art enemy”, and your crush, the game offers the choice of using polite conversation to get by or speaking what’s really on your mind, a situation all too familiar in art spaces. Mixing humour with gameplay, the one goal of the game is to not “pee your pants!”. *Opening Night Playthrough* navigates viewers through a space once fraught with social and career pressures, imbuing both a sense of nostalgia and a desire for connection in a time when art openings are no longer operating. This performance highlights—and even celebrates—the social failures and successes one faces in a community-based setting, bringing a light touch to the solemn reality of isolation. Harman performs as a conduit for those who long for familiar Queer, Indigenous social spaces, pulling in viewers from home who are watching and yearning.

keikobot (2021) is a text-based performance by Keiko Hart that straddles the line between ascetic AI and humanity. Hart poses as a chatbot AI, encouraging participants to instant message with *keikobot* on Discord in real time. The bot undergoes testing and fine tuning throughout the duration of the exhibition, querying users about their responses to artworks in the exhibition and building interactive scenarios. Emulating the ambiguity traditionally found in online chatrooms, *keikobot* presents identity as something that is constantly in flux; *keikobot*’s behaviors change over the course of the performance based on their interactions with participants. The work positions itself against the inherent racial and patriarchal bias of mass-market AI chatbots. Facebook’s *Blender* chatbot, trained on Reddit entries, has responded to users with vulgarity and blatantly false information, while Microsoft’s AI Tay, trained on tweets from both Microsoft staff and improvisational comedians, was pulled from the market after only 16 hours for tweeting racist comments.¹ *keikobot* asks: “as AI is increasingly integrated into technological systems, what are the ramifications of its biases?”² By simulating an AI for Queer and Trans folks to interact with, Hart envisions a future where AI chat is geared toward this exact demographic. Subverting ideals of progress upheld by racially exclusive and male-dominated corporations, *keikobot* experiments with a different model of understanding human/technological interaction.

Max Lander’s *Loop & Scrub* (2021) centres “Queers at play.”³ Harkening back to Tumblr’s porn GIF boom, the work makes Queer sexuality public, playful, and interactive. On December 17th, 2018 Tumblr released a statement that users would no longer be allowed to post adult content on the platform, stating that: “without this content we have the opportunity to

¹ “Facebook uses 1.5bn Reddit posts to create chatbot” *BBC News*, May 4, 2020
<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52532930>

Elle Hunt, “Tay Microsoft’s AI Chatbot, gets a crashcourse in racism on Twitter,” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/mar/24/tay-microsofts-ai-chatbot-gets-a-crash-course-in-racism-from-twitter>

² Keiko Hart, Conversation with artist [February 2021]

³ Max Lander, Artist Statement [February 2021]

create a place where more people feel comfortable expressing themselves.”⁴ Several social media platforms have followed suit—most markedly Instagram.⁵ While Queerness often gets reduced to sexual orientation by a heteronormative standard, communities and viewership of Queer eroticism, sex, and sex work remains taboo, unprofitable, and “uncomfortable” to major social platforms. Instating a playful and interactive approach to viewing Queer eroticism, *Loop & Scrub* approaches “A Queer orientation to pornography involv[ing] analytical curiosity and openness that does not start from or resort to binary models.”⁶ A condensated breath, a hip thrust, a lingering silhouette, and iconic “bisexual lighting” add to an archive that exists publicly and socially, by and for 2SLGBTQ+ folks.

Marissa Sean Cruz’s video *PLAY(ing) IN MY PEN(ding doom)* (2020), combines a dreamscape and a robotic nightmare. Cruz, cosplaying as a high femme, pink anthropomorphic dog, looks coyly at the camera in their canid prosthetics, spliced between images of Boston Dynamics’s infamous and highly meme-able robot dog (colloquially known as Spot). In the video, Demi Lovato’s break up anthem *Don’t Forget*, Snapchat doggy filters, and animated marrow and goo invite new empathy for Spot. Both the animatronic puppy and snapchat filters invite the audience to consider the sinister connotations behind co-opting a cute and relatable technological aesthetic. After the introduction of Spot to the public, it has been revealed that this technology was leased by the Massachusetts State Police department’s bomb squad. Positioned against the utopian Queer visions of the other works in the show, *PLAY(ing) IN MY PEN(ding doom)* warns against the dangers of AI with no criticality or kinship. Echoing the concerns of artists and educators Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis and Suzanne Kite, Spot has become an “extremely powerful [being] that will make the same mistake as their creators but with greater consequences and even less public accountability.”⁷ By bringing empathy into the conversation around militant AI, Cruz outlines an urgent need for a future where relationships between human and AI are decolonized and queered.

QUEERSPHERE is not a first step, nor a finish line. It is the continuation of a many pronged path toward a different future. The artists in this exhibition strengthen bonds and etch out connection laterally, contributing to a rich online tradition of Queer and Trans artists. Transitioning slowly from “if only” to “what if?” we hope to create our own trodden down pathways to possibility.

⁴ “A better, more positive Tumblr” December 3, 2018.

<https://staff.tumblr.com/post/180758987165/a-better-more-positive-tumblr>

⁵ Erin Taylor, “The Vanilla Internet: How Instagram Is Failing Queer Sex Workers” July 30, 2019.

<https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/sex-workers-queer-meme-instagram-censorship>

⁶ John Paul Stadler, “The Queer Heart of Porn Studies” *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, No. 1 (2018): 174.

⁷ Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis and Suzanne Kite, “Making Kin with the Machines” *Journal of Design and Science* (2018) <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/lewis-arista-pechawis-kite/release/1>