

“Is Queer Political?”

The QUEER MUSEUM VIENNA perceives the question of the complex connections between "politics" and "queerness" as one that must be continually posed and discussed from new angles. The meanings of the two terms are also up for debate and are being contested. This is why the collective behind the museum launched its first Open Call, which was addressed to artists from all disciplines.

"Is Queer Political?" opened up a broad field of topics, perspectives and approaches. These include the entanglements between political interests, gender, sex and sexuality, as well as the analysis and destabilization of hegemonic power relations through artistic strategies and activist resistance.

In their response to the call, a large number of international artistic positions negotiate the "political" as a spectrum. In connection with the "queer", this ranges from the governance structures of the nation state all the way to everyday micro-political patterns, embodied experiences and the ways in which desire is regulated.

For instance, in a letter written by a fictional person, **Qafar Rzayev** gives us an insight into the situation of queer people in Azerbaijan and sketches a vision of improved realities of life. **Amirali Bashiri** comments on Iran's repressive system with a sculpture: it conceives the "closet" as a kind of protective space that functions not only for queer people, but also for all other non-conforming and marginalized people. **Mohsin Shafi's** work refers to the intersectional discrimination that queer* BIPOCs are confronted with at border controls. In his large-format collage, Shafi contrasts this burdensome reality with a positive utopia. In "Blue Series", **Krishna Shanthi** questions the Western, White, gay perspective and the associated body ideals in the context of pornography. He appropriates these images by editing them and creating references to the Hindu community. The video work "bio logic techno logic capital logic" by **Oke Fijal** analyses and exposes power relations and historically naturalized logics of capital, technology and the body in connection with a purely biological understanding of gender. **Dejan Klement** deals with superficial expressions of solidarity that, on closer inspection, turn out to be anti-queer statements and criticizes the social compulsion to assimilate. **Polina Zaslavskaya** uses delicate watercolors to depict objects that have been used as weapons in violent attacks and murders of queer people in Russia.

The collective acts from an intersectional queer-feminist understanding and clearly opposes discrimination based on race, class, nationality, religion and other social categories. An important selection criterion for this exhibition is the potential of the selected works to conceive of and strengthen queer* as a space for solidarity between oppressed queer peoples. We recognize the collective challenges faced by queer peoples worldwide, and we support their collective struggle against injustice: It is therefore crucial to show daring art that analyzes and critiques hegemonic power structures, imagines other futures and proposes artistic strategies for their realization.

The Open Call represented a challenge in many respects, particularly with regard to the current wars and international conflicts. The desire for an open, discursive space - in which we can collectively discover how alliances of solidarity can be formed and how we can learn to unlearn - has currently failed. We are therefore only showing seven of the ten artistic positions originally planned in the exhibition.

Despite all this, political issues surrounding hegemonies and the potential of the term "queer" will continue to be negotiated in various formats with the aim of initiating transformation processes together.

CCTV in Operation

Military uniform (name badge, hat, coat, and trousers cut to shorts), 2010

Amirali Bashiri

The outside, a heavy grey uniform; the inside, a display of rich silk lining in fuchsia, floral stitching, intricate beading. Incorporated into the piece are small aluminium renderings of various objects. On the shoulders of the coat sit small sterile chairs, reminiscent of a waiting room, aluminium locks instead of coat buttons, a gun where the name or honorary badge would usually be pinned. In the fuchsia lining, the atmosphere is starkly opposite to objects from daily life: glasses, a watch, a key from a keyboard - all mundane but all movingly personal. The piece explores the duality and conflict in life in Iran. A land where private life and public life are in a never-ending struggle. The public space, an arena in which only heterosexuality is accepted. Any other choice is illegal and death penalty is the punishment. Public space where strict male-female stereotyping is at play. The private space, the only area in which minorities and in fact majorities can truly be themselves. Military forces have always been symbols of safety and protection. Nowadays, whilst the idea is still the same, the reality is quite the opposite:

"I observe the constant presence and contrast of safe and unsafe, intimate and public, protected and unprotected. I feel constantly watched. This often means not feeling secure. I don't feel secure. The result is self-judging, self-censoring and self-othering. Funny, isn't it?"

Amirali Bashiri (b. 1984, Tehran, Iran) is a student of the Master's Program Time-based Media at the University of Arts and Design Linz, Austria. Due to his Bachelor in Sculpture from Tehran University, he has gained professional experiences in Fine Arts (sculpture, drawing, print, video installations) and applied arts (set design for theatre, advertising agencies, and artistic direction), which he uses nowadays to investigate and follow his interest in fields of gender, queer, cultural, and territorial studies. His artistic practices are mainly focused on experiencing duality in life and uncertainty and errors.

bio logic techno logic capital logic

video-installation: 13:42 min., 2022

Oke Fijal

The video work is about the juxtaposition of two species - the Hydra (a freshwater polyp with remarkable abilities) and humans - and their embedding in logics of production and reproduction which construct the (gendered) nature of species. Descriptions of both species are framed by an in- and outro inspired by the 90s television series „beyond belief: fact or fiction“, where within different scary stories the viewers have to decide which of them are true or false. Here, unlike beyond belief, both narratives are based on facts. The video asks questions about logics of biology, which are – when applied to humans - leading to a biologicistic and essentialistic understanding of gender; the logic of capital, which often lays behind the claim of a pure biologic understanding of gender; and techno-logic: not only social aspects of gender are seen as technological construction but also the biology of of bodies.

Oke Fijal [they/ them] is a conceptual and multi-media artist based in Vienna. Their recent works are research based and aim to unmask social phenomena like gender as historical naturalized fictions and products of power structures – like in this work.

YOU ARE FREE, BUT...

video 3:15 min, 2015/2023

Dejan Klement

This work was first time presented as a video performance in 2015 as part of the exhibition during the Belgrade Pride Week. The curatorial group 'Impost' chose it to show at the exhibition dealing with stereotypes about the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia. In the review of the work, they said:

“Through synthesized messages, this video material leads to better, more relevant understandings, which in return lead to empowerment of LGBTQ+ population. To reach individual and collective awareness, this work creates a certain theoretical and didactic interaction between the distorted standards of the local community and defined and correct attitude... It is the passive–aggressive social class that presents itself as tolerant, while concurrently rejecting a consistent integration of the LGBTQ+ population into society. The video work is a performative illustration, a somewhat masochistic way of pulling a sock on top of another, which makes the author hard to breathe, just like the passive–aggressive statements are compelling LGBTQ+ persons to breathe with difficulty in real life. Klement penetrates specific knowledge of social psychology applied to solve practical problems of modern society, such as reducing prejudice and prevention of violence.”

In March 2023, the video was translated into a live performance with the same name. In a new version of the artwork, sentences are not written but narrated by a generic AI voice, which highlights a dark comical aspect of the work. No matter having queerness as a basis for creation, this story is easily readable as a bigger social issue where we are often failing to do anything for “others” except expressing empty statements that are often in complete contradiction with everything we do or believe in. Human rights are important to those who are under oppression, to the rest they are more and more questions of social trends. Trends change, and it’s always the right time to ask yourself who will be the next target. This work is trying to, at least for a moment, ask you to reflect on that.

Dejan Klement (b. 1989, Belgrade, Yugoslavia) was educated at the Marina Abramović Institute and the Faculty of Contemporary Arts in Belgrade, where he graduated from the Painting Department. He is currently on a master's degree at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. He primarily works in the fields of poetry, performance art, pornography, and painting. Since 2008, he has actively exhibited his work in solo and group exhibitions, as well as at art festivals more than 50 times in more than 20 countries.

Letter from Samir

handwritten letter, 2024

Qafar Rzayev

This artwork, presented in the form of a letter, is a deeply personal and political exploration of queer identity in Azerbaijan. It is a testament to the courage, resilience, and creativity of the queer community in the face of societal norms and prejudices.

The letter, penned by an imaginary figure named Samir, challenges the normative structures of society and dares to question the hierarchies that have been set in stone for centuries. It is a silent protest against capitalist structures that thrive on division and inequality.

But beyond the struggles, the letter also celebrates the dreams and visions of the queer community. The artwork is not just a reflection of the realities of queer life in Azerbaijan, but also a beacon of hope for a more inclusive and accepting society. It is a call to action, urging us to question, to understand, and to change.

It is a voice, a statement, and a vision for a better future.

Laboratory 2

Installation with natural material found on Monuments, 2024

Animal Bro & Qafar Rzayev

"Laboratory 2" is an art installation that is the result of a collaboration between the artist Qafar Rzayev and the Queer Museum Vienna curatorial team. It was first created in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2017 and adapted for Vienna.

The installation, consisting of a black table with small pieces of paper and bird droppings in front of it, questions the representation of queer people in our collective historical memory as well as in the current cityscape. The scraps of paper bear the names of well-known queer and non-queer personalities from Viennese and Austrian history, as well as the names of imaginary queer people. The mixture of names on the table stands for the overlapping of different identities in society.

The varying amount of bird droppings collected from the monuments of these people in Vienna serves as a metaphor for society's attitude towards these figures. The absence of droppings in front of the names of queer people symbolizes their absence in the physical monuments of the city and denounces the lack of representation.

Qafar Rzayev: “I was born in Ganja, Azerbaijan in 1993, and currently based there. I started university but left after two years to focus on my art. I learned a lot from the ARTIMLAB studio program in Baku, Azerbaijan from 2017 to 2018. My art has been shown in many places, both locally and internationally. Some of my notable projects include shows at places like Zaratan AIR in Lisbon, Portugal in 2023, Hirvitalo - Pispalan Nykytaiteen Keskus in Tampere, Finland in 2022, Galerie DIX9 in Paris, France in 2019, solo shows in Simia Espacio in Vigo, Spain in 2019, and in the Cultural Center of Nea Ionia, Volos, Greece in 2018, as well as in the "ARTIM" project space in Baku, Azerbaijan.

I've been part of many art events around the world, both online and in person, such as the Jewish Cultural Festival in Krakow from 2021 to 2023, the International Art Camp X&Beyond in Leipzig, Germany in 2021, and the 7th International Public Art Festival Art Prospect Treasure Hunt in Saint-Petersburg, Russia in 2020 (online).

I've also been part of several artist residency programs, including Zarat AIR in Lisbon, Portugal in 2023, Konvent Residency in Barcelona, Spain in 2022, Berlin Art Institute in Berlin, Germany in 2021, and Art Prospect Intensive Program in Odessa, Ukraine in 2019.”

Chal othay chaliye jithay saaray annay,
Na koi saadi zaat pachhaanay
Na koi sanu mannay..
(Lets go to a place where everyone is blind
Where no one knows our caste and
Neither does anyone holds me in high respect)

Artist Proof / Inkjet print on matt Poster printing paper 200g / 5.500 x 1.300 mm, 2024

Mohsin Shafi

The work reimagines the queer currents in Pakistan, by creating a parallel uncensored world. Postulating what would have happened if the British Raj hadn't imposed Western, Judeo-Christian sexual norms on colonial subjects, and section 377¹ was not part of the Penal Code in Indian Subcontinent? The work attempts to capture the power and terror associated with queer experiences in Pakistan, in regards to existing socio-political hierarchies.

"This is an attempt at historizing those encounters so that I may return to them, as may others, and recreate them in a safer environment without fear of repercussion. This is an attempt to claim some manner of agency within an otherwise deeply homophobic world."

The visuals in the image counter the narrative associations taken from the individual prospect and sources to epitomize a broader continuum of interpretations. The metaphors combine realistic portrayals of ordinary events and elements of fantasies and myths. The title of the work has been acquired from verses of Baba Bullay Shah, who was a 17th and 18th-century Punjabi revolutionary philosopher, reformer and a Sufi poet, universally regarded as the "Father of Punjabi Enlightenment". He spoke against powerful religious, political and social institutions.

"The work is probably a vain effort to somehow control the world in which I live, recreating it in a manner that satisfies my sense of what my world should look like and be like."

The affair that inspires this image transforms the common and the everyday into multilayered cocoons that are a haunting and mysterious, perplexing world that is at once familiar yet bizarre." says Shafi.

1: Section 377 of the British colonial penal code criminalized all sexual acts "against the order of nature".

The Joys of being detained at airport border controls

*scribbling, drawings, phototransfers and gouache on inkjet prints on 160g paper,
12.5 x 17.5 cm each / set of 17 / 2015 - on going*

Mohsin Shafi

When it comes to airports, many people of color have similar experiences. It doesn't matter if you're a European, permanent resident, immigrant, or visitor, the reality is that people of color aren't being treated with the same dignity and respect as other passengers. And it's not because they're higher risks in terms of security.

Shafi's ability to frame his queer dialogue within the quintessential Pakistani identity, adds another layer to an already ignored subject matter. The work further unpacks queer brown sexuality, understanding that the latter may not be welcomed at home, while the former may be scrutinized through a post 9/11 lens. The work further unloads "brownness" as located within linguistic, nationalistic and ethnic fault-lines, all the while pulling them apart.

"The trauma of having brown skin, big beard, and south-asian English accent, interrogates at every gate of my entry into the global West, and the memory of it, forms the basis of this project. It is this constant 'random check' at border controls that has informed me that I am, in fact, a dire threat by virtue of belonging to a particular ethnicity, religion and nationality."
says Shafi.

Mohsin Shafi is a South Asian Pakistan based artist, whose work is informed by his born-and-raised-pakistani encounters and dissident reflections. He engages local narratives from the Indian subcontinent, focusing on Pakistan, to examine chronicles of identity conflicts. His work simultaneously approaches queerness, religiosity, politics, society, and the different ways in which these phenomena function within the local and global contexts.

Shafi's work also initiates to articulate queer sexuality within a colonial perspective. Owing to the circumstances plaguing the State of Pakistan, where marginalised communities are forced towards the peripheries and their stories are censored, Shafi's work further moves this dialogue within such notions that perpetuate oppression, suppression and depression. By combining sentiments of tragedy, tenderness and humour, he seeks to create non-colonial gestures to enact healing, rebalance and repair from colonialism.

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becoming blue – Bo Thomas, page 11, MEN Magazine, April 2001

Acrylic and gold ink on magazine, 216 x 280 mm, 2023

Warm & wet with Peter Peter Roth – centerfold, MEN Magazine,
August 2000

Acrylic and gold ink on magazine, 432 x 280 mm, 2022

One man's treasure – Ettore Tosi, cover, MEN Magazine, April 2001

Acrylic and gold ink on magazine, 216 x 280 mm, 2022

darkening

digital collage printed on silk, 100 x 100 cm, 2022

Blue images, men, gods (II)

Digital print book, 2023

Krishna Shanthi

Krishna Shanthi is challenging the Western white gay perspective that has dominated queer spaces for a long time. Tackling themes of race and religion, Shanthi's work reimagines queer pin-ups by transforming bodily objects of desire into mythological figures like Krishna and Vishnu. His homoerotic scenes are also a means of reclaiming his queer identity, not just within the Hindu community that often rejects queerness, but within the hegemonic queer community that has long rejected or fetishised non-white bodies.

Krishna: "From the Blue Series is my exploration of the colour blue as a metaphor for remembering and forgetting queerness relating to my learned understanding of queer identity. Growing up (in Canada) in an immigrant family and Hindu community, I was surrounded by images of incarnations of the blue god Vishnu, including Krishna and Rama. Vishnu and his many stories are ingrained into my identity.

In these stories, I felt a sense of belonging. Vishnu turns into the beautiful maiden Mohini to seduce the demons, take the pot of nectar and distribute it amongst the gods. Mohini also caught the lustful eye of the gods, particularly Shiva, the other Supreme. Shiva's offspring with Mohini (Vishnu) is one of the most significant deities with devotees around the world. In Mahabaratham, Krishna takes the form of a beautiful maiden for one night to marry Iravan, who will die the next day in battle. No woman would marry only to become a widow and Iravan wished to experience the joy of marriage before he died. Queerness exists in these narratives but often fades into a grand narrative of upholding Dharmic values, only to be practiced by the Supreme gods themselves. This dismissal of queer experience – and by extension, me – drove me to produce these images.

Other images I absorbed, secretly and often shamefully, were those of gay pornography. By these images too, I felt alienated. How could I exist in these worlds? Beautiful white men, with chiselled muscles and flowing blonde hair kissing and making love. I found these to intertwine with images of Vishnu, who was often shirtless and muscular, wearing flowing silk dhotis, pearls, golden jewels and playing with male and female friends. In one striking image, a shirtless Vishnu embraces his friend and devotee Hanuman, the monkey god, who himself is shirtless and buff.

My desire to weave these images together was a form of protest and of belonging and a way to exist without shame. From the Blue Series is an amalgamation of gay pornographic images, a single layer of blue on Photoshop with images of pearls, gold crowns, jewels and flowers. The colour blue takes on the skin it embodies, becoming different in tone, but also flattening and washing over the previous image, revealing more. On occasion, the phallus and penetration are hidden as blue blankets on the bodies. Other images feature a large erect blue penis. An interplay of revealing and hiding, these images showcase blue-skinned bodies engaging in lustful human experience. The images aim to make you question whether you are looking at images of blue gods, blue men or something in between.”

Krishna Shanthi (b. 1988, Pooneryn, Sri Lanka) is a queer Tamil-Canadian multidisciplinary artist based in London. In his practice, he uses image-making, research and criticism to visually communicate ideas about everyday human experiences. He creates representations of hybrid identities, mixing concepts and materials coming from Hindu mythologies, comic-book superheroes and Disney princesses. In Tamil culture, the patriarchal surnames were adopted to challenge the former caste-identifiable surnames. Krishna used the same approach to challenge patriarchy by adopting his mother’s surname. He has a Master of Design degree from York University in Toronto, Canada and a Master of Arts degree in Criticism and Curation from Central Saint Martins, University of Arts London.

Physical Evidence

watercolor on paper, 2017

Polina Zaslavskaya

Created based on the research *Hate Crimes against LGBT People in Russia* in 2017 and published by the Center for Independent Sociological Research.

Sociologist Alexander Kondakov and his colleagues conducted a study focusing on counting and analyzing hate crimes against the LGBT community from 2010 to 2015. For this, they studied court rulings on violence against the LGBT community that were publicly available. The statistical data shows an increase in crimes after the Federal Law on the prohibition of the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors" was passed by the State Duma on June 11, 2013 and was signed into law by Putin on 30 June 2013 and came into effect on July 2, 2013.

Physical Evidence confronts viewers with traces of things that were participants, accomplices, and witnesses of crimes. The shadows of things, as embodied on paper, are all that is left of them after the wrongdoing has been perpetrated. They are like memories that leave behind only the outlines of events after violence has occurred. The relations between the people involved do not matter, nor does it matter what function the thing served before the event. Only what is left behind matters, as we reconstruct the calamity for the sake of knowing, based on facts and evidence.

A meat grinder, a shovel, an ashtray, an iron, a nail puller, a chopping board, a belt, bottles, a meat tenderizer, and an electrical cord were what came to hand.

The random list of everyday items testifies to the involuntariness of the crimes, but from the materials of the cases, it follows that the motive for committing the crime is deep animosity and hatred. Under current laws, people become visible to the state only when they are dead.

With the start of the full-scale invasion of Russia into the Ukrainian and the following war, the persecution of LGBT people in Russia has escalated significantly.

On December 5, 2022, Putin signed a law banning the promotion of LGBT issues on the internet, in the media, books, audiovisual services, cinema, and advertising.

On July 14, 2023, the State Duma passed a law banning transgender transition in Russia, approved by the Federation Council on July 19, 2023, signed by Putin, and came into effect on July 24, 2023.

On November 30, 2023, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized the "international LGBT movement" as extremist

Polina Zaslavskaya (b. 1984) is a queer feminist artist, curator, art tutor and an animation production designer. Teacher of DA Animation Studio since 2018, co-founding member of the Unwanted Organization Queer Feminist Art Group since 2014. She was a member of the activist art group Verhotura and Friends (Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad) in 2008-2012. Polina has participated in numerous exhibitions and festivals in Russia, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Her first personal exhibition Utensils.365 in 2016 was dedicated to women's home labour at post-Soviet kitchens. Her personal exhibition Material Evidence, based on A. Kondakov's research in hate crimes against LGBT people in Russia, was shown in Moscow in 2017, Saint Petersburg in 2018, and in Berlin in 2021. Most of her work since 2008 has been in collective projects lying at the confluence of activism and art, engaged in critical reflection of Russia's social and political realities, but also in finding ways to resist.