

## Queering the Landscape

Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings are reclaiming queer space through their project *@Gaybar* – a blend of parties, reading groups and a warm aestheticism informed by the history of queer art and visual activism. The duo met **Ric Bower** and **Francesca Donovan** in the *mêlée* of *This Is Tomorrow*, an invitational section of the START art fair selected by the fair director, Niru Ratnam.

*@Gaybar* represents a new breed of visual activism. Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings' practice traverses the border between visual art and the traditionally unforgiving realm of socio-political commentary. The duo document their processes of knowledge acquisition and their fight for LGBTQI rights through a range of media, including CGI and installation. What is most important to them, however, is community for its own sake and the development of spaces in which people feel comfortable to express their difference. To this end, they begin by telling CCG how they came to be represented by Arcadia Missa, an emerging art space in Peckham.

**Hannah Quinlan:** I guess it was through making work in South East London. We were living on Peckham Rye and co-running a low cost studio block there called Rye Lane Studios (RLS). We started to put on our own events in different rooms in RLS, which was just around the corner from Arcadia Missa. There's definitely a close knit arts scene in South East London.

**Ric Bower:** What was it about Arcadia Missa, in particular, that made you want to work with them?

**Rosie Hastings:** Arcadia is just flat out the best gallery in London. They mainly work with female or queer-identifying artists, which is really important to us.

**HQ:** Rozsa [Farkas], the gallery founder, has a really political agenda; as she describes it, it's 'contemporary art with intent'.

**RB:** So how do the politics and social factors that concern you fold into a visually-led practice?

**RH:** We do have a formal gallery practice, but we are also pursuing a career in visual activism. We started doing an event called *@Gaybar*. We wanted to re-materialise the idea of a gay bar to be an inclusive queer space for gender non-conforming people, trans people or queer people of colour. These are people who are normally rejected from the gay bar scene and who have also been systematically eradicated from queer history. So it was about reclaiming the gay bar as a politically queer space and making a space for our community to come together. We're constantly drawing new people in, offering a platform where people are comfortable to express their difference.

**RB:** A safe space?

**HQ:** Yes, we wanted to create a space that does not privilege heterosexuality, white supremacy or cis-masculinity. Within this matrix we also want to encourage a discourse that does not censor or police the voices of the community that this space is designed for – a space in which transphobia, homophobia, racism and misogyny are simply not tolerated.

**RB:** Were you evicted from your old studio space?

**HQ:** Yes, we ran Rye Lane Studios for just under a year. It was a massive old business centre. We started off with a group of around eight other artists, musicians and curators. There's a limited amount of space for artists in austerity London and we were able to formalise a large space that housed many artists. By the end, we had over 50 artists working in the building. We knew we would have to leave at one point, because it was being redeveloped as luxury flats; knowing

we would lose the building at any moment gave an intensity to the project. We managed to achieve a lot in a short space of time.

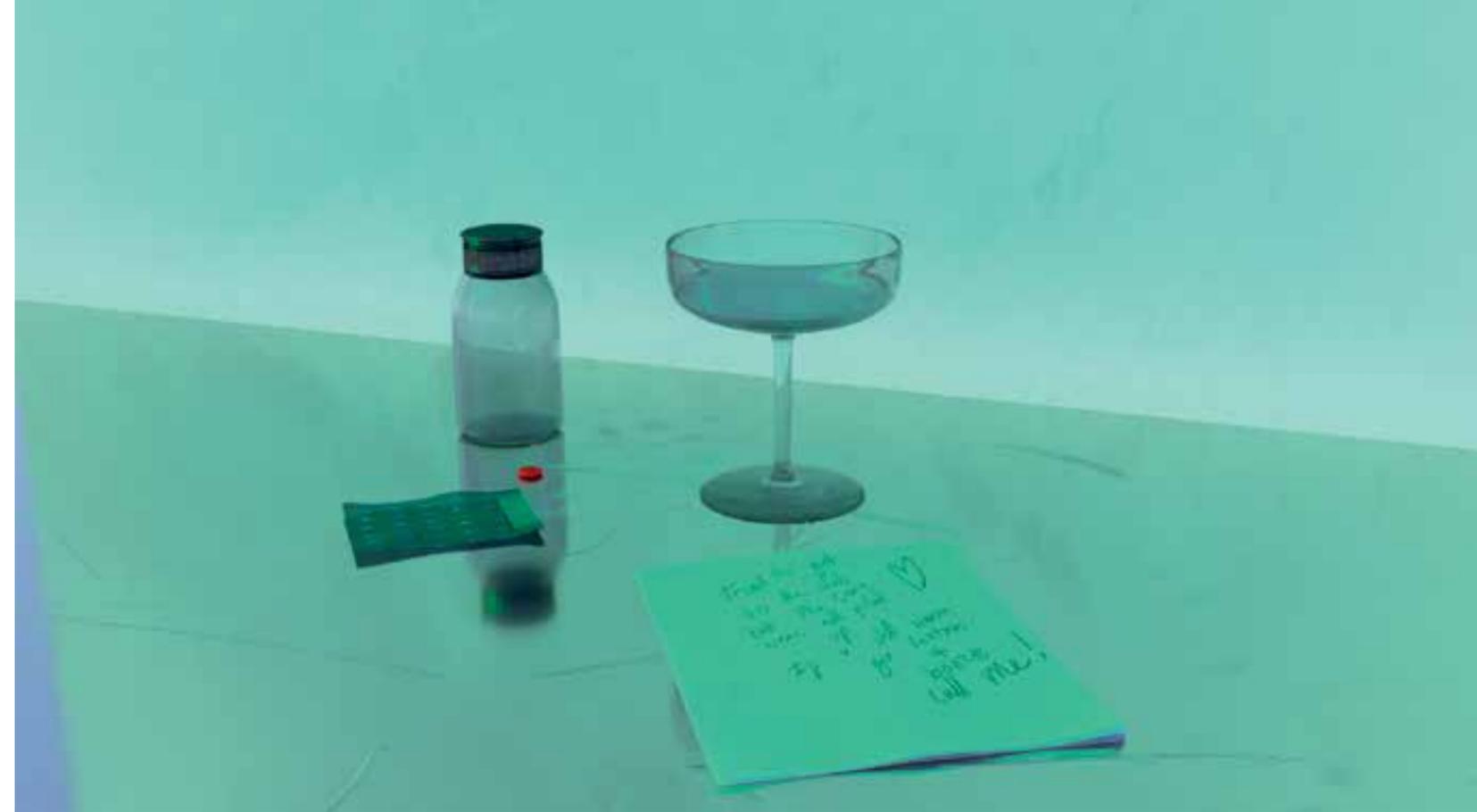
**Francesca Donovan:** Can we talk about the parties and what they mean in relationship to your creative practice?

**HQ:** Almost all of our *@Gaybar* projects take place in spaces outside of institutions: in studios that we were running for other artists, or even in our own bedroom. When you have access to self-led space, you have freedom that normal private views don't afford. People can get fucked up, emotional and make out. It alters the material and meaning of the work. We feel that parties are always political. Often this is overlooked. With our projects we make this explicit.

**RH:** When we have done *@Gaybar* Projects in gallery spaces – like *Cruising Utopia @ Gaybar*, which we were invited to do at the gallery Oslo 10, Basel, Switzerland, during Art Basel 2015 – we were interested in thinking about how we could switch up the queer codes with the more hetero codes of the gallery space without selling out or giving too much away. Next year we will be working with Somerset House on the show *Counter Culture Now*. We want to insert a queer and community-focused space into the intensely classed and patriarchal architecture of the building, which formerly housed the Government Tax Office.

**RB:** Your projects seem often to interface quite pragmatically within existing societal structures and hierarchies.

**RH:** Yes, that's true, but it's really important, in terms of queer space, not to have to operate



in a traditional club management hierarchy either; environments where the buildings are owned by straight men, the staff hate dykes and bouncers are required to police gender non-conforming bodies and gendered ideas of nudity. Unfortunately, that's often been our experience of gay bars. We're really interested in this idea of queer performativity, though; how we can socialise queerness and queer theory, but also how we can socialise queer politics in a different way from the a-typical protest form. That is, how we can bring the protest into the party, so to speak

**HQ:** We've thought a lot about what makes a queer space and whether it's only a combination of certain people, or whether it's tied up in a specific kind of location and whether what surrounds you informs that idea of queer space. We work a lot with gay bars in terms of their aesthetics, how they self-represent as gay male or mixed or trans-friendly, and how that dimension informs the way people feel comfortable to act and whether they feel encouraged to further socialise their politics.

**FD:** How do you bring all this into the art fair, into the Saatchi Gallery?

**RH:** The transition from event to art object feels really natural. When we put on events, we'll custom build all of the furniture. It becomes an installation and we'll photograph it as such.

**HQ:** When we produce work for exhibitions, especially the more sculptural work, we will imagine these objects in the context of the gay bars that we fabricate, or in the CGI landscapes that we produce for our video work. So there is a dialogue between the different parts of our practice that knits them together, both conceptually and thematically.

**FD:** Have you got a good relationship with local gay bars? You must be pushing them in new directions and challenging established power structures within that arena too.

**RH:** Yeah, it's complicated. There's definitely the feeling that we have to remain accountable to the people who we're trying

to make work about. We also want to avoid setting ourselves up as a voice for others. One way we try and avoid this is by not making our work figurative. We never make films with people in them.

**FD:** What made you decide that?

**RH:** The field of representation is inherently problematic and violent. There's always someone who'll be othered and someone who's going to be privileged. Instead of trying to overcome it directly, we try to speak through images and objects of history in a relative way; describing situations or someone's embodied experience to open up this discourse.

**RB:** Your practice challenges perceptions on both sides of the queer divide. Do you find yourself engaging with a process of education in your own queer community?

**HQ:** Definitely. Before we started doing more physical work, we ran a reading group called *Where is The Body?* facilitating readings →



p83: *Cruising Extinction @Gaybar*, (installation view), **Rosie Hastings and Hannah Quinlan Anderson**, Oslo 10, Basel, 2015.

p84: *Cruising Extinction @Gaybar*, HD Image, **Rosie Hastings and Hannah Quinlan Anderson**, Oslo 10, Basel, 2015.

p85: *Tifkas*, **Rosie Hastings and Hannah Quinlan Anderson**, HD video, 00:01:20, video still, Arcadia Missa, London, 2015.

of queer theory texts. We did five texts over the summer of 2013.

**RH:** We did *You're too Much* by Hannah Black and *Against Innocence* by Jackie Wang. We used the group as a space to discuss some really prominent issues that were facing our friends. It was a space to talk about where they were at, in terms of identity and gender; a lot of people came out as trans or as queer then. It was really cathartic. We'd all lie down together in our bedroom. Even though sometimes there were 30 or 40 people, it always felt really intimate.

**HQ:** Many of these people come to our events and we end up collaborating with them too. We made some really close friends over that time.

**RB:** Are you guys together?

**RH:** Yeah, we met at Goldsmiths.

**RB:** How was your time at Goldsmiths?

**HQ:** Mine was quite a closeted experience in relation to my practice, which I think had a lot to do with my own coming out. When I did come out, my practice still remained quite straight. I did not address queer issues in my work immediately, but as soon as I left Goldsmiths I realised I should concentrate on making work about my own embodied experiences.

**RH:** I was lucky enough to study with some amazing tutors, like Bonnie Camplin; but I think there is still an underlying problem

at Goldsmiths. The art faculty, at the time, was predominately white and male. When I graduated, the directors of the course and of the university were up on a stage together; it felt satirical. They all looked exactly the same: straight white men of a similar age and with a similar demeanour. To me it indicated that underneath the Goldsmiths' public persona, which promotes diversity and projects a radical outlook, it's actually organised in the same way as most other institutions and places of learning in the UK are. When you're looking for some kind of reflection of who you are personally in your educational environment, this is deeply troubling.

**HQ:** Basically they educate you - as it seems most educational systems do - in a straight, white way, erasing, in the process, a lot of alternate sources of knowledge.

**FD:** Tell us about your work.

**RH:** We did a lightbox for our solo show, *Tifkas*, at Arcadia Missa. We had started reading this book called *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, a lifelong trans activist, queer rights activist, environmental activist, social rights activist and a communist; it's amazing! They wrote this book which documents the lesbian, butch-femme bar scene in a small town in America, just before the civil rights movement and before the Stonewall riots. The book's no longer in print and, so, for the show we were working through some of the moods, the emotions, the history that was brought up in the book and trying to re-materialise them. We wanted to do this in a way that would teach



people about this moment in time, a time so distorted by normative historical narrative.

**FD:** How do you settle on an aesthetic? What is involved in the process of translation from the political to the aesthetic realm?

**HQ:** We use Blender, an open source animation software. I guess we like to use it because it's not necessarily seen as the process of choice to present something authentic. We're working through issues of historical authenticity, especially in the way the gay rights movement has progressed. There are a lot of myths within the gay rights movement, about origins in particular; we are using Blender to interrogate these myths and imagine new worlds where these histories can belong.

**RH:** We're interested in the idea of the queer sublime. The landscape doesn't just belong to male painters who paint with their dick. We're queering the landscape—**CCQ**

*Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings will be presenting @Gaybar at Somerset House in 2016*

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