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## Come Together: Queer Art in a Time of Social Distancing

By [Jonathan Alexander](#)

04/14/2020

Like so many of you, I had plans in the before. I was looking forward to my spring break — taking a day when I could train up to LA to visit some of my favorite galleries, plus a few new ones. A day devoted to art, to mingling, an intervening glass of wine and some vegan cheese, then more art, more mingling, ogling as much the others viewing as the work on view.

The usual, of course — LACMA, MOCA — but I also wanted to check out some shows at smaller galleries, especially Xavier Schipani’s “They Laughed with Pleasure” at Lowell Ryan Projects, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s “A conversation ~~about~~ around pictures” at Vielmetter Los Angeles. The latter had particularly caught my eye, given my interest

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in queer photography, and the former was recommended by a publicist who had seen my article on Nayland Blake.

But, best laid plans, etc., etc., the “gang aft agley” this time nothing less than a global pandemic. Both galleries are closed until further notice. The galleries have, at this time of social distancing, made virtual tours available, so I’m sitting at my computer, daily, browsing the gallery sites. The word “browsing,” though, isn’t quite right. I mean, sure, browsing is fine if you’re looking up information on the internet, as I suppose I am, technically. Given the nature of the work on my screens, though, my experience feels more akin to cruising for acceptable porn.

I am neither criticizing nor denigrating by mentioning porn, and I hope neither artist feels offended; their work, while erotic, isn’t pornographic in the sense that the essential rhetorical situation of their art doesn’t conjure a single-minded teleology of arousal, even if erotics constitute part of the overall aesthetics of the work. With that distinction in mind, I have to acknowledge that the sensation of porn surfing while viewing these digital exhibitions (and also sheltering in place) has opened up for me other ways of seeing this work, of appreciating what it offers, of understanding why it is so important *right now*, in a time of pandemic. The exhibits have also prompted me to reflect more generally on queerness in relation to social distancing, however much the latter is needed now — and how queerness has, in some ways, always had a troubled relationship to the notion of “social distancing,” or the various socio-cultural and political mandates to stay apart for one’s health.

Let’s start with Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s “A conversation (about) around pictures,” which lovingly upends the traditions of queer photography by centering not just subjects of color but also by staging the event of being photographed as just as important as what’s rendered in the images. Beautiful and scantily clad black, brown, and tan bodies pose with cameras and cellphones, taking pictures of themselves while also pointing the camera at the viewer. Sometimes the figures are clutching each other, as in “Figure (0X5A0918)” (2019), in which one man (we assume) is pointing his camera directly at us while the other, his back to us, is looking at himself in his cellphone — or is he looking at the man (the artist?) taking this picture? Similarly, in one of my favorites, “Model Study (0X5A4029)” (2017), a brown boy in a plain white jockstrap sits on a wooden stool, looking into his cellphone, where we can also catch a glimpse of someone (again, the artist?) taking his picture in the background, behind him.

The positioning — of us, of the models, of the artist/photographer — is evocative, even provocative, as though the invitation is to creep up behind someone, surreptitiously catching them in the process of looking at themselves. At times, we as viewers are positioned ourselves as the object of the camera’s lens. At other times, we approach from behind, visually eavesdropping.

The obvious juxtaposition here is with the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, whose notorious photographs of black men were justifiably critiqued as appropriative and even exploitive of the black male body. Sepuya takes back the prerogative of photographing

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bodies of color — but more than this: he invites us to reflect on the dynamics of the action of making photos as it has become increasingly democratized, or at least made capacious through a variety of mobile technologies. Mapplethorpe's photos, however provocative, are more akin to glossy ads, all about the demands of consumption. Sepuya's work is far more intricate, teasing with the beauty of bodies, sure, but also refracting multiply our sense of how images are made, with mobile technologies for instance, and who now has the right to make them. In a way, then, Sepuya's queer forerunner is far less Mapplethorpe and more Jean Cocteau, the artistic polymath who mused decades ago that, one day, everyone would have access to film projectors and be able to make their own movies, not only democratizing the production of moving images but radically multiplying the *kinds* of stories that can be told with them.

Cocteau thought movies were dreamscapes made visible. What dreams is Sepuya making visible?

Reflecting on the picture of the jockstrapped boy that I'm so fond of, the online catalogue suggests that "This on-screen image within the photograph opens up the usually closed circuit of mirror and camera in the studio, by pointing not only to a sort of infinity of reflection within this circuit, but also to a way out through alternate modes of circulation." Contra Mapplethorpe indeed. The object — and objectivity — of the gaze is what is most put into circulation in such images. Who is seeing whom? And what does our seeing say about us? Who are we checking out? Ourselves? And who in turn is checking *us* out? Photographic documentation, the supposedly objective gaze, if not of the photographer, then of the process of photographing, becomes intensely subjective. The circuits are softened. We check out what we're seeing. We linger. We cruise.

I am, of course, experiencing these images on my laptop, and then on the larger screen of my desktop to get an even closer look. This "socially distanced" context feels all the more crucial — and restraining — in understanding my reactions to this work. As Sepuya puts it, when I asked him about his own experience of having the exhibit only available online, "I'm experiencing the heartbreak in real time. Of so much work being put into work made to be seen in scale with the body, in sight lines and wandering through space over time. I can't give a statement as an attempt at coherent understanding."

Thinking of Sepuya's heartbreak, I start to imagine myself in the gallery, where I initially hoped to see these images, where I hoped to *cruise* them, and perhaps cruise some of the other viewers as well. Gallery hopping *is* a form of cruising, after all, and, when I can do it, I am inevitably checking out not just the art but also the other people who are checking out the art. And I sometimes get checked out back. In contrast, seeing these photographs in the privacy of my home, I feel more like I'm doing something a little bit dirty — granted, a little bit deliciously dirty — on my computer. I slip into my favorite plain white jockstrap and get a close up of the boy in his, zooming in, zooming out, making notes. I inquire through a built-in chat function about the price of the print and get an immediate reply. Who's cruising whom now?

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I stand up to stretch and catch my reflection in the screen, my jockstrapped ass flexing next to the boy's face. And then I'm suddenly aware how sorry I am that I'm alone. Fundamental to these images is the movement of bodies in relation to one another, our technologies of imaging them a testament less to their individual beauty and far more to the collective beauty of their — and our — movement through spaces, especially through gallery spaces. Sepuya here implicitly calls on long queer histories of sex in public spaces, of cruising itself, of checking each other out, as an animating force of the images, of their staging, and of the activity of looking.

I see my reflection again, knowing no one will see my own ass as I view these other asses, the beautiful photographs, and I am, through the requirements of social distancing, out of circulation, out of the loop.

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In many important ways, queerness has always launched itself against social distancing, worrying most fundamentally over how categories of identity and community create boundaries and barriers — both personally in the bolstering of identity through discursive regimes that interpolate selves as (racially, sexually, ethnically, etc.) “this” because they are “not that,” but also materially as identity-based communities become marketing enclaves and then markers of social order, class, and aspiration within the reigning economic status quo.

A quick and dirty example: the ever-popular “queer eye for the straight guy,” in its capitalist formation based on identity commodification, is often less the contact zone of two different approaches to the challenge of being human and more the antiseptic transference of gay chic to clueless straight boys who need to up their game in becoming worthy mates; the gays, that is, can lend their much vaunted stylistic prowess to bolster the project of maintaining heterosexual relationships, a bolstering that simultaneously valorizes the primacy of those relationships while positioning the queer as subservient to them. And given that it's through the hawking of certain wares and accoutrement that gays gain quite literal purchase on their value to straight people, the intertwining of sexuality with capitalism could not be more obvious. At the same time, such economic proximity trumps any transference of an *ars vita* that might challenge the primacy of certain kinds of monogamous heterosexuality. In other words, the proximity is not proximity at all; it is a social distance maintained by economic exchange. It is the creation of presentable images, ad-ready copy, sterile images.

We can broaden the queering of social distancing out a bit, to include not just personal interactions facilitated through consumption, but the mapping — and disciplining — of social geographies. In his brilliant book, *One-Dimensional Queer* (think Herbert Marcuse here), Roderick A. Ferguson justly laments how processes of gentrification in our nation's urban areas aim to create separations — a form of class-based, racialized, and sexualized social distancing — that keep certain kinds of families and communities “safe,” while segregating out more “dangerous” or unsavory elements. In the process, a queer vision of the city, one that Samuel Delany notes in *Times Square Red, Times*

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*Square Blue* as plural and multiple, and that reaches across lines of class, race, and sexuality, falters and wanes. In Ferguson's words, "This multidimensional vision of the city regards the urban as much more than the fulfillment of jobs and wealth — rather as the possibility to satisfy desires for self-invention and for the invention of new types of communities" (85). As a blunter — and more sexual — example, the easier access to cruising, to hooking up, to coming together that Delany sees as all-but-utopian in pre-Giuliani New York, is all but eradicated through the practices of the social distancing through gentrification.

Even more broadly still, such queer insights pivot toward larger critiques of classed and racialized forms of social distancing. In my enclave, a neat and tidy suburban shelter reserved for employees of the university, a housing project I call "The Compound," some denizens have worried recently that the troops of Mexican folks brought in regularly to maintain our common lawns and gardens might now be tracking in disease. This immediate desire to enact pandemic-driven social distancing is simply a more acute form of the social distancing that has already been well in place in my neighborhood for as long as I've lived here (13 years) — a place where my Mexican-Native husband, walking around the neighborhood, is sometimes confused for a lawn worker.

Indeed, when has social distancing *not* been the primary way of being in the world for the privileged? How have many of us — not just the elite (though certainly the economically elite) but also the readers of LARB, the intellectual elite, and at times even the shrinking middle classes — have been holding on to our privilege, our sense of the world, by keeping our distance from the plight of the poor, the homeless, the indigent, the immigrants? After the virus recedes, we will be left with the damages, not just of a pandemic, but of a social and economic order that has privileged social distancing long before it became a method for "flattening the curve" in order to maintain the viability of an already fragile and over-extended health care system.

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At their best, Sepuya's photographs center diverse, especially non-white bodies in proximity — to each other and to us — and they readily, even greedily, invite the viewer's excitement, all but daring the observer to become implicated in such proximity through the camera lenses pointed directly at you. Even when the models are looking at themselves, the artist's image is reflected back, suggesting that here is a world, a way of being, in which multiple loops can be created, multiple points of entrance, a multidimensional set of possibilities for at least starting to see one another, for getting closer. The possibilities for the satisfaction of desire, self-invention, and communal re-imagining aren't far behind.

Such possibilities are up close and personal in the work of Austin-based painter and muralist Xavier Schipani, whose solo exhibition, "They Laughed With Pleasure," is now housed at Lowell Ryan Projects. Again, of course, you can currently only see this exhibition virtually. Opening up my browser, I can tell immediately that what I'm missing

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(as large as my monitor is) is the size of these murals, which depict cut-outs of many different kinds and colors of naked bodies holding one another, dancing, cavorting, fucking. Gender play is everywhere; one solo figure presents a bare-chested woman rocking back on her heels to reveal her cock and balls. In a group scene, a burly and bearded man sports a strap-on with a large erect black penis. I have to imagine the energy of the space, sitting in my jockstrap in my home office, wanting to be near these murals, near others looking at these murals, near the cute jockstrapped boy from Sepuya's photograph, mutually getting aroused by these images of carefree bodily exploration and play. They laugh with pleasure indeed.

According to the virtual catalogue copy, Schipani was "inspired by the diaries of a gay trans male writer named Lou Sullivan called *We Both Laughed in Pleasure*." Finally feeling "seen," Schipani wanted to create a set of murals that would "hopefully hold space for others to feel inspired to create art that highlights their life and acts as an outlet to connect with themselves and others." In Schipani's murals, the large figures emanate joy, a delight in the body, in others' bodies, in being together. They are childlike, innocent even in their cavorting. For Schipani, the goal is to emphasize the pleasure in "moving freely in a world where nothing is holding them back." Put differently, Schipani imagines a world of radical anti-social distancing, one that vitally and life-affirmingly nurtures conceptions of self *primarily through contact*.

The irony, of course, is that I'm viewing this delight from nearly 50 miles away, in the isolation of my home. I can hear the wistfulness in Schipani's voice as he wrote to me about what he wanted the exhibit to do and what might be lost by only seeing the exhibit online: "I think that a huge part of this body of work has to do with the size and emotion communicated in person, the scale of it is meant to make the viewer feel small, almost childlike in a *Gulliver's Travels* sort of way. There is a great deal of exploratory innocence threaded throughout the pieces and I am not sure how that translates remotely." Indeed, the empty gallery spaces in the online images are begging to be filled, to house the gentle pressure of bodies as they sidle up next to you to check out the many-toned flesh of bodies, their curves, the cocks, the inviting holes. Instead, in their well-lit but empty rooms, the murals look abandoned, all the more desiring of proximity, closeness, even adoration. They offer an incitement to cruise, to explore, to play, an incitement that in our current situation can only turn to solitary fantasies and self-pleasure.

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In their own ways, these exhibits offer a queering of social distancing before we had the term social distancing to know so acutely what we as queers have been working against all this time. With that said, it's one thing to laud cruising, nostalgically pining for the days of carefree contact; it's another to practice such in the time of global pandemic.

When the news of the coronavirus first started heating up in the US, my social media was flooded with friends and colleagues who, like me, had lived through the height of the AIDS epidemic and who were starting to feel "triggered." The quick spread of

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disease without much immediate governmental concern (“We have it totally under control. It’s one person coming in from China. It’s going to be just fine.”) seemed eerily familiar (because that one person, a foreigner, nonwhite after all, is totally expendable, just as gay men and men of color were totally expendable in the 1980s). Other parallels quickly emerged. I found myself talking with friends about how, in the early days of the spread of HIV, we soon became aware that sleeping with one person was also sleeping with everyone they had slept with. When we see our friends now, under the sign of COVID-19, we take their temperature, take our own to show them we are at normal, and inquire about where they’ve been, what they’ve been doing, whom they’ve seen. Part of this feels like intimate surveillance, but another part of it feels like creating intimacy and trust through a recognition and conscious building of an extended “family”; we’re going to be seeing other people, yes, but we also want to keep each other safe and secure.

Such trust becomes a form of polyamory, a way to expand our family while keeping each other safe through the mutually agreed upon monogamy of separate households. We band together with our dearest friends (almost all childless, a range of folks from young to old, near and distant) and agree that we will do our best to limit our contact with others outside the extended family circle so that we can enjoy each other safely. It’s not perfect. It’s certainly a compromise. But the challenge of balancing pleasure in each other’s company with health concerns prompts us to reimagine what family is, what love is, what caring for one another can be — just as gay men in the 1980s and 90s had to start reimagining their sexual communities to keep each other safe.

Sepuya and Schipani have been with me on this journey of reimagination. In some ways, they’ve inspired it. They’ve certainly made it better. Walter Benn Michaels, in an interview about the contemporary importance of photography, argues that, “On the one hand, it’s perfectly true that if what you want is changes in policy, you’re not likely to get them from art. On the other hand, if what you want is a vision of the structures that produce both the policies we’ve got and the desire for alternatives, art is almost the only place you can find it.” If we could be in the same room with this work, it would model and, for some, perhaps for many, suffuse us with the desire to connect; these pieces, these exhibits, would not just gesture to alternatives but rather *enact* the experience of collective reimagining. From afar now, in this particular moment, this work, digitally seen, turns toward nostalgia for what we have (hopefully temporarily) lost. But nostalgia need not be politically stultifying: even if we can’t experience the radical cruising and communal energy these exhibits might enact in person, we can still reflect on what we’ve lost and how we might reimagine capacious connectivity right now. That nostalgic opening holds within it the creative energy needed in this moment to extend ourselves, to experiment with new forms of community, to be with each other in the queerest ways possible.

**Cover photo (left):**

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

“Model Study (0X5A4029),” 2017

Archival pigment print

60 x 40” [HxW] (152.4 x 101.6 cm)

Edition of 5, 2 AP

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Inventory #SEP650

Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles

Photo credit: Jeff McLane

***Cover photo (right):***

Installation View: Xavier Schipani, "They Laughed With Pleasure"