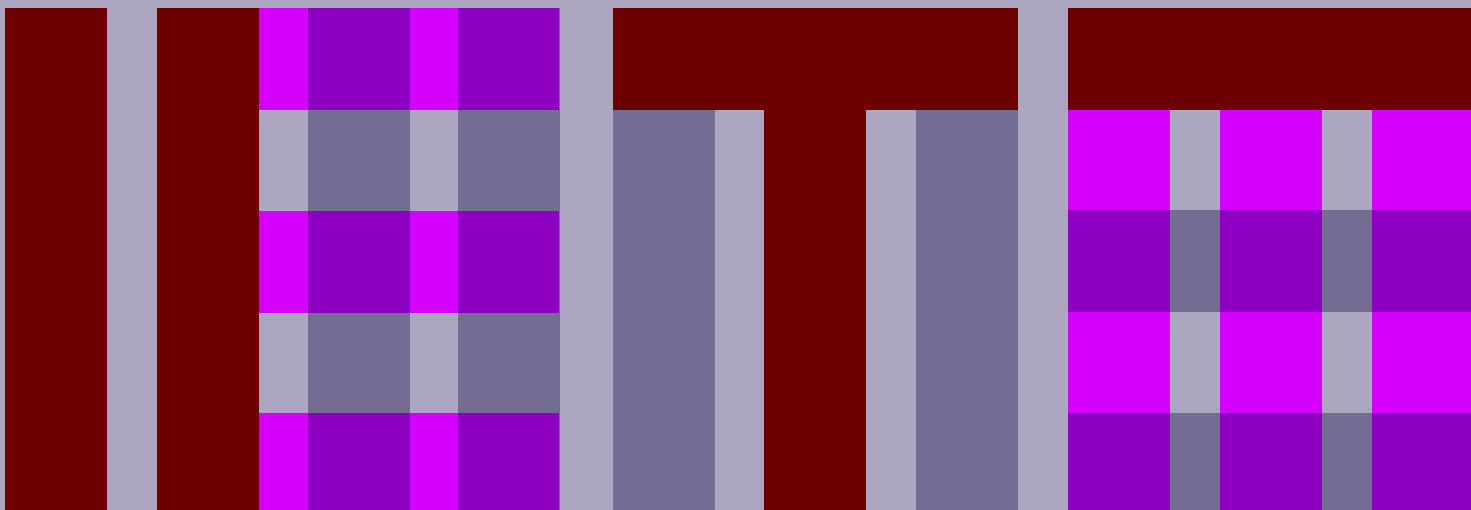


Report

Mapping the Queer International

From the IETM Sofia Plenary Meeting by Ksenija Đurović and Jovana Marković, Bitef, Belgrade, Serbia



**IETM Report:
Mapping the Queer International**

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Summary

The session ‘Mapping the Queer International’ explored the possibilities of global cooperation, support and fostering of queer art and queer artists. An open and anonymised discussion touched on the complexities of perceiving the term ‘queer’ followed by queer identities, in particular those of queer artists and the ways they are reflected in art practices. The discussion centred on the personal experiences of the speakers, who were encouraged to abstain from generalisations and commonplace sentiments and speak from their genuine multilayered viewpoints knowing their identities will remain anonymous. The participants examined different safety concerns specific to queer artists and queer cultural venues, and highlighted the importance of safeguarded networks and interpersonal connections which help queer artists with staying informed while navigating unfamiliar regions.

Divided into break-out groups, the panellists worked through several mapping prompts through open discussions. The groups created maps of the most and least queer and queer-friendly cities and venues, as well as queer-identified performing arts institutions and festivals. The maps created during the session will be made available to IETM members, but it will not be publicly available as it may jeopardise the safety of contributors.

Moderators

Israel Aloni (iL Dance, Sweden), Ted Witzel (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Canada), Martina Apostolova (Artist, Bulgaria) and Marion Darova (Artist, Bulgaria)



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Mapping the Queer International

Introduction

The moderators open the session by announcing that safety of the participants is guaranteed through anonymisation, and the shared (personal) information stays in the room - but what we have learned will leave the room by becoming knowledge of experiences. The moderators pose a seemingly straightforward question: **'What the heck is 'queer'?**' As an answer to that, the panellists provide personal accounts of the term being used as a symbol of revolt and strength, but also as a slur, a verb, a noun, an exclamation and an encouragement. Not by coincidence, the discussion provided as many definitions of the term 'queer' as the number of the people present in the room. The participants discussed whether they personally identify as queer, what makes art queer and who merits the usage of the term, while keeping in mind the possibly elitist sentiment this term can have in some parts of the world (participants shared their experiences of queer being used in the early 2000's and 2010's as a term attached to those privileged enough to be able to travel/live in western European countries).

For some, the queer identity implies resistance in the face of adversity, which is an ever present reality for many queer individuals regardless of the country they inhabit. This strength is an identity marker stretching beyond sexual orientation and influencing the entirety of one's actions - including everyday defiances against the dominant structures creating divisions and repressing the individual. In that sense, anything questioning a certain norm could be considered queer. Among other things, queerness can be reflected in one's artistic expression and form, the methods they apply, their gender expression, the acceptance of one's class background or culture, etc. This persistent fight against the status quo is what, for some, differentiates the queer identity from the more frequently used markers as gay or lesbian. Additionally, as an umbrella term, it provides certain practicalities by implying community and unification that other identities don't inherently do. For this reason, among many others, such as the international acceptance of queer theory as a common academic tool, this is the exact term chosen to be examined for the session.

According to some participants, the term could also be viewed as terminology brought on by the actions of Western colonialism and Euro-centric worldview so the term becomes colonial and privileged. Furthermore, this argument implies an underlying elitism that's contrary to the connotations of the term mentioned at the beginning of the session - meaning defiant and undermining norms. During the session, participants had ongoing troubles with defining certain things as queer, e.g. a theatre company, which is a recurring issue with non-standardised terminology that requires such discussions to be open and not dismissive of people's views and experiences.



Defining or attempting to see what people recognise as queer performance was a point of understanding for the whole group, as it offered a description where queer is used as a verb, so queering the format(s) was recognised as challenging the dominant forms while remaining open and porous.

Participants also shared an experience of cis straight people curating queer art as a situation which does not look after or provides for the queer community, but remains on a superficial level of presentation without providing the means necessary for welcoming queer artists with respect. As with the previous topics, contextualisation is of the utmost importance, so if a context does not welcome queer people, but marginalises them (or worse), it would be good for the local community to represent itself and not be tokenised.

Queering the practice

The globally present need to queer the contemporary artistic practice is recognised and agreed on at the very beginning of the session. To 'queer' something and put this identification in an actionable form would be to persist in keeping one's methods common and open. This is inclusive of grassroots processes, ideas being spread interpersonally and without the open call system, un-venued companies and structures outside of institutions and any practices that deprogramme and decentre the existing structures of power, while promoting genuine diversity. One panellist raises a sentiment that any queer resistance currently happening in active war zones and disadvantaged areas of the globe is far more defiant and deserving of attention than most advances made in queer western art. Different political contexts create different needs of the communities living in accordance with such contexts, but a remaining commonality is the human need for acceptance, community and expression.



The development of queer art and practices in societies that have issues around such expressions plays an undeniably large role in creating safe and inclusive spaces. For example, due to their openness, queer venues are often spaces where intergenerational and intercultural connections flourish. The existence of such spaces is valuable, especially for queer youths, even if they are temporary, underground, or lesser known spaces. Over time, queered practices could be a step towards raising empathy and understanding towards the community, which are essential actions in times of growing political divides.

What makes a city queer friendly

Following the collective discussion, the panellists were divided into three separate groups, each tasked with different mapping prompts. The map representing cities which are generally thought of as queer friendly/accepting of queer performance is largely concentrated in the Western and Northern European as well as North American regions of the world. Partially due to the group's mostly western upbringing, the map is filled with scribbles of the names of large, urban capital cities, generally viewed as art hubs open to diversity. This mapping is reflective of the spaces with implemented policies safeguarding the rights of queer people, regions of mostly capitalist political orientation for several previous decades. Although the chances of queer performance hubs existing elsewhere are considerable, cities with better legislative protection of human rights were thought of as the most frequent locations for queer art.

The group's conclusive maps regarding queer and queer friendly festivals, institutions and un-venued companies generally represented the same aforementioned geolocations. The one factor differentiating between queer and queer friendly institutions was the institutions' mandate defining it as such, as there are numerous companies repeatedly creating a platform for queer art which don't align their identity with queerness. This alignment, established in writing, ensures a continuity of programming centering queerness/queer art practices not present in queer friendly institutions, where programming is open to change with the change in leadership.

Transient bubbles of safety

Additionally, it was discussed which geolocations might be considered safe for queer-presenting individuals. Safety, for queer people specifically, might pose a complex concept due to the same set of behaviours being normalised or criminalised, depending on the cultural concept e.g. two adult men holding hands in India would be characterised as friendly behaviour and completely normalised as such, while some other cultures might see this as a queer-coded action, due to not fully fitting into their expectations of patriarchal masculinity.

The same action could be met with varying levels of safety, depending on the local socio-cultural context, clearly illustrating a need to be aware of such information in advance while navigating the world as a queer artist. The participants agreed on the evident responsibility of the individuals hosting queer artists to minutely inform them of the local socio-cultural context, bearing in mind the logistics of their travels and ensuring all the necessary actions overseeing their safety. The hosts should strive for a broad awareness of the intersectional aspects of ableism and access, including physical and mental ableism, linguistic concerns, etc. That includes the attention to spaces beyond the venue where the performance is taking place, as those are usually well supervised.

In areas generally stereotyped as safe, such as the countries of the Western world, there is a deceptive feeling of security. The panellists unanimously came to a conclusion that no city can be assuredly described as safe, as the levels of safety are circumstantial and dependent on many factors that are changing sometimes daily. Along with that, different individuals may have completely opposing experiences of safety in the same venue or geolocation. Due to the growing acceptance of conservative and traditionalist politics worldwide, a trend that is predicted to keep rising in the near future, the spaces currently considered safe might not remain so for long, additionally highlighting the need for the queering of art practices.

Furthermore, multiple panellists noted the fact that the sheer volume of the city, its urbanity or the number of inhabitants does not necessarily imply safety for queer people, as that heavily depends on local politics, crime rates and socio-cultural norms. Just as well, there are small rural communities that are accepting and close-knit, a participant mentions drawing on personal experience. Omitting the idea of borders, it should also be mentioned that a common sentiment amongst the panellists was the idea of temporary safe spaces being created anywhere a group of queer people is present. This ethereal presence, sensed only by the group members and annulling the hardships of the outside world, exemplifies the indisputable power of queer existence.

Conclusions and future prospects

The panellists shared their final thoughts as the session was coming to a close, emphasising the need for queer art in particular in those areas where it's not yet accepted and common practice. Education was cited as a factor with great transformative potential on the future generations that is not currently being utilised. Concerning art history, art theory, sexual education, etc. - education, as a formal system, was not seen as sufficiently funded, developed nor prioritised, according to the experiences of the panellists. Looking to the future, queering the practices of cultural spaces puts artists and cultural professionals in an informative dialogue with their audiences, creating a safe and educational space not currently provided by the schooling system. Additionally, concerning future actions, a new working group was considered as a useful way to go forward, while the actual map should not be completely public but available through a sign-up method. The moderators noted that depending on what the participants find the best way, this group could also function outside of IETM since it was mentioned several times that some information cannot be public (without explicit consent) due to safety concerns but that individual direct communication is a better way to connect.



The discussion highlighted the transformative power of queering art practice in challenging the power structures that create divisions and further the repression and injustice in society.

Sources mentioned in the discussion:

- [Queering the map](#)
- [The Festival Academy Toolkits](#)
- The participants only being able to talk from personal experience, when it comes to legislation, there already exists the [ILGA annual report](#) which measures that
- [The neighbour survey, declining acceptance](#)

