The Contemporary Resonance of Celebrating *Orlando at the present time* at Charleston.

Charleston’s *Orlando at the present time* exhibition offers an opportunity to explore the contemporary relevance of both the house and the collection, along with the lives of the creators who produced, imagined, played and loved there. In particular, there are themes and plot twists in Woolf’s *Orlando* that today’s viewer might use modern language to describe as trans, intersex, gender non-conforming or queer.

Woolf’s seminal work provides an opportunity to engage with contemporary gender debates and more broadly, with LGBTIQ+ history and culture. The novel’s identifiable genderqueer narratives offer an opportunity to reach diverse new audiences interested in better understanding how Charleston is steeped in a rich history of artists who not only explored their gender and sexual identities here, but who used these explorations to inform the very best of their creative work.

The exhibition also gives staff and audiences who don’t identify as LGBTIQ+ an opportunity to excavate a more nuanced understanding of the interconnectivity of the artists’ personal lives, their politics and their outputs. Not only do LGBTIQ+ audiences want to ‘see themselves’ on the walls of museums—so do their families, friends and workmates. Finding a relationship between the past and our lives today builds a better understanding of the world we live in, fostering social cohesion and stronger communities.

This exhibition programme is a timely opportunity, as it continues the momentum of the celebration of LGBTIQ+ lives seen in heritage sites, museums, archives and galleries throughout the UK in 2017 that marked the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain and Wales.

**What is LGBTIQ+?**

This acronym is an umbrella term that includes people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, or other sexual orientations such as asexual, and is also inclusive of all gender identities (such as non-binary).

Some of the language used by the LGBTIQ+ community can seem complicated to those not embedded in it. Using it correctly can make people worry about making an unintentional
mistake that might inadvertently cause offence. There are many useful websites that explain complex community terms and issues simply, including Stonewall, Gendered Intelligence, UK Black Pride and the UK Intersex Association. But as any avid Virginia Woolf reader will know, choosing your words carefully is important. When you understand and use queer terminology and a person’s pronouns correctly, your efforts are seen by LGBTIQ+ visitors as a sign of allyship. This perception is a vital part of the process of building a long-term relationship between marginalised groups and your institution that is founded on trust, consistency, competency and accountability. Assuming or misusing somebody’s pronoun, or using language that assumes someone is heterosexual, may be considered disrespectful. Presuming someone is not trans just by looking at them, is referred to as assuming ‘cisnormativity’. Similarly, presuming someone is heterosexual, perpetuates ‘heteronormativity’.

Put simply, you can’t judge a book by its cover. It’s just not always possible to tell a person’s gender identity by their dress or physical appearance. Similarly, with marriage equality and adoption being open to lesbian and gay couples, families increasingly come in all shapes and sizes.
Orlando at the present time

Charleston’s Queering the Museum Guide

Making LGBTIQ+ visitors welcome is actually very easy – just say “Welcome” and leave off the ‘ladies’ or ‘gentlemen’. Remember that it’s also important that this welcome means that all visitors are welcome to be ‘out’ – for example, to be affectionate with their partners, or to competently decide which toilet they may need to use.

Why do we need to include LGBTIQ+ lives in museums and historic houses?

Everyone’s story deserves to be told. Leaving LGBTIQ+ people off the walls of museums renders them historically homeless. It sends the message that queer lives are not worth remembering and that they are destined to be forgotten. It also ignores the richness of diversity embedded in the UK’s history of art and design.

Heritage spaces are places where visitors increase their understanding of the society they live in and the world around them. In this way, museums contribute to perpetuating social norms surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity. Over the past decade, historians and curators in the UK have been making a conscious effort to increase the breadth of representation of the lives that have shaped the nation’s heritage. This has meant including people who aren’t usually mentioned in the historical narratives previously dominated by white, male, elite, heterosexual, cisgender and non-disabled people. Opening up multiple perspectives of the past enriches our understanding of its complexity and reflexivity. A more inclusive and more diverse telling of the past is not part of a political campaign for civil rights, it’s simply telling a fuller version of our shared social history.

The exploration of LGBTIQ+ past lives in museums not only reflects legislative equality, it reflects the UK’s shift in attitudes towards the social acceptance of trans and queer people – they are our family, our friends and our workmates. LGBTIQ+ people have made a tremendous contribution to the UK’s cultural life, not least in art, literature, architecture and garden design. Understanding the way queer lives have contributed to shaping the nation we live in is relevant to everyone.
Loop artist Xana uses drawing, poetry and lyric writing to explore erasure. Photography by Anne Tetzlaff, 2018.

**Queering the Museum.**

The term “queer” not only indicates that someone’s sexual orientation or gender identity is not hetero- or cisnormative, it also asserts a political identity – namely, that the queer individual seeks to challenge or work outside institutional models that have previously excluded LGBTI+ people (such as marriage and the church). Queer and genderqueer people often dress to express their queer politics.
Genderqueer fashion illustrators from the London College of Fashion capture the audience’s queer looks whilst discussing its importance. Photography by Anne Tetzlaff, 2018. The fashion exhibition *Queer Looks* at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery explores the same concept with local members of the community.

The politicisation of the term ‘queer’ relates to the history of the word itself. Once used as a derogatory term, reclaiming it is an act of public pride. This re-appropriation of the term celebrates difference. Its use places faith in the possibility of finding new ways of doing things more effectively, responsibly, accountably, creatively and collectively. The term ‘queer’ has now been adapted by academic institutions that categorise the study of LGBTI+ culture as queer theory and Goldsmiths University, for example, now offers an MA in Queer History. Ceramicist Matt Smith’s innovative exhibition *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in 2010/11 marked a significant development in interventive curatorial methodology that built on the more selective narrative of *Gay Icons* at the National Portrait Gallery in 2009. In 2017, Tate Britain marked the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in Britain and Wales with the exhibition *Queer British Art 1861 – 1967*. In a continuation of the institution’s commitment to stimulating progressive and far-reaching queer programming, this year’s *Queer & Now 2018* one-day festival attracted...
10,000 visitors. Brighton Museum & Art Gallery are currently producing a three year “Be Bold” programme of queer exhibitions and engagement, including Gluck: Art & Identity, Queer Looks, The Museum of Transology and Gilbert & George. Coming Out: Sexuality, Gender & Identity at National Museums Liverpool, Never Going Underground: The Fight for LGBT+ Rights at People’s History Museum and the Prejudice & Pride programme at the National Trust were all shortlisted in finals of the UK’s Museum + Heritage national exhibition awards in 2018.

The Intergenderational Questioning Circle examined what a genderqueer future might look like in the 1840s gallery at Tate Britain. Photography by Anne Tetzlaff, 2018.

To queer the museum refers to disrupting not only hetero and cisnormativity, but also ableism, sexism and colonialism that can traditionally be in operation within the UK’s heritage institutions. This inclusion of decolonisation within queer theory, museology and practice reflects an awareness of the way in which the legacy of colonialism both shaped the UK’s art collections and continues to inform legislation that oppresses queer people internationally. According to Joseph O’Mahoney, Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading, of the 72 countries that continue to criminalise homosexuality in 2018,
at least 38 of them were once subject to some sort of British colonial rule. Similarly, prior to British occupation, many cultures were gender diverse and did not impose heteronormativity. By extension, the term intersectionality refers to an understanding that many queer people face multiple oppressions. For example, fatal violence disproportionately affects trans women of colour with the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia resulting in increased everyday vulnerability, such as homelessness or an inability to gain or maintain employment.

Queering the museum aims to open up collections to be re-read from multiple perspectives. It advocates that demonstrating good practice means ensuring community engagement and consultation is central to the process of developing more inclusive representation. The impact of queering the museum over the last decade can be felt by audiences beyond the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, as it is a process of readdressing how museums operate to appeal to new audiences through creative, dynamic, creative and innovative new approaches.
Trans Identities.

Every fan of literature understands the power of finding a story that ‘speaks to you’. Whilst Woolf’s character Orlando is fantastical, positive expressions of non-conforming gender identities in literature remain particularly important to trans and intersex people, not least because they are frequently invisible in the heritage sector and are often misportrayed spectacularised by the mainstream media.

Queering the archive. Photography by Anne Tetzlaff, 2018.

It is becoming increasingly understood that gender is not a binary system, but rather, a spectrum of different possibilities. The term ‘trans’ is now used as an umbrella term. It is derived from the Latin prefix ‘trans’ meaning ‘across’. ‘Cisgendered’, meaning not trans, is derived from the Latin ‘cis’ meaning ‘same’.

Being trans is a process of self-identification. A trans person’s gender is not the same as their sex or the gender they were medically assigned at birth, but not all trans people find it necessary to undergo medical transition and not everyone’s gender identity can be assumed just by looking at them.
Trans people include trans women (assigned men at birth) and trans men (assigned women at birth). QTIPoC refers to someone who is a queer and/or trans or intersex person of colour. Some people who identify as non-binary also identify under the umbrella term ‘trans’. A non-binary person’s gender identity does not fit into a male vs female system of categorisation. There are a growing number of countries that legally recognise more than two genders, including Germany, India and Australia (but not the UK).
An intersex person is born with sexual characteristics that do not fit typical medical definitions of male or female. The United Nations estimates between .05 and 1.7% of people are born intersex. Intersex people aren’t rare, they’re invisible, including frequently being excluded by the acronym LGBTQ, despite being an active part of the community with shared experiences. The UK Intersex Association is advocating to stop the continued practice of unnecessary, non-consensual surgical intervention used in the UK to physically re-categorise intersex people’s bodies into a binary gender.
According to Gendered Intelligence, good practice as service providers includes:

- Not assuming you can identify that someone is trans or intersex
- Trying not to assume someone’s gender simply by their appearance (such as saying “Welcome ladies” when people arrive at front desk)
- Considering whether or not you actually need to ask someone’s gender (such as when you are collecting audience feedback – why is it necessary or important?), and if you do, allowing people to tell you their gender rather than limiting options to ‘male’ and ‘female’
- Assuming that everyone selects the facilities appropriate to their gender (including toilets)
- Accepting a range of I.D. other than a birth certificate, such as a license or passport, as few people have a Gender Recognition Certificate
- Publicising your good practice and inclusivity to diverse groups

Orlando at the present time

Charleston’s Queering the Museum Guide

Useful Links.

**Gendered Intelligence** is the UK’s leading gender diversity training providers. The website offers excellent downloadable resources, and there are clear explanations of terms and legislation, including the widely debated Gender Recognition Act.

http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/professionals/resources

**Stonewall** provide a simple glossary of terms relating to and used by the LGBTIQ+ community.

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/glossary-terms#q


Brighton & Hove City Council’s **Trans Needs Assessment Report** offers insight into living as a trans person in the area. It was produced by the University of Brighton.


The **Interdisciplinary Conference on Intersex People** brings together leading experts, thinkers and activists. http://eleanorglanvillecentre.lincoln.ac.uk/events/IPI2019/IPI2019

**Brighton Museum & Art Gallery’s Be Bold programme** continues to 2019.

https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/brighton/ with the importance of the Museum of Transology outlined on BBC World Service World Update

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0596k3g

You can download the **Museum of Transology’s** exhibition object catalogue here as a PDF:

http://www.fashionspacegallery.com/exhibition/museum-transology/

**Queer & Now 2018 at Tate Britain** https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/festival/queer-and-now launched **A Queer Walk Through British Art.**

https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/queer-walk-through-british-art

This 6 part podcast series explores queer heritage sites and houses within the **National Trust**, and was downloaded by 20,000 listeners. https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/our-lgbtq-podcast-series-presented-by-clare-balding
The National Trust’s publication *Prejudice & Pride: LGBTQ heritage and its contemporary implications* is downloadable as a PDF. 
https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/publications/prejudice-and-pride