

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2023)

Heft: 42

Artikel: Apocrypha, or i just need a good story to keep me going

Autor: Shen, He

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051759>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 18.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

«What if we start to make fake history? [...] An apocryphal story based on a fragmented past not only overcomes its archival absence without overexposing a subculture that was intended to be camouflaged, but also expands the set of affective dispositions and orientations towards the past.»

APOCRYPHA, OR I JUST NEED A GOOD STORY TO KEEP ME GOING 何坤 / He Shen

何坤 / He Shen (he/they) has just finished his master thesis project «Apocrypha» in which he re-designed and transformed the former porn cinema Sexkino Roland into a queer community centre, based on a set of stories he wrote with Zurich's queer past, life stories of his queer community and his own fantasies.

Good stories keep me sustained. While listening to fairy tales as a child, I learned what a world there is or otherwise can be. I did not care so much if those stories were «true», although fairy tales do have the potential to become grand projects of world making or unmaking.

It seems hard to imagine that we do not live in the same world. When confronted by power structures such as cis-heteronormativity and white supremacy, those who do not fit in, those who are multi-burdened more than others, will have to experience not only police raids, refusal by the family and violence in public spaces, but also a series of open questions on love and desire, unspeakable feelings, and other forms of intimacy. Even in such a story, there are opaque moments that can hardly be disclosed to others. It seems that we can only listen to our own feelings ranging from strength to vulnerability, and put ourselves within those stories, if we can, or be honest and aware if we cannot. Still, when a story is told, a crack is chiseled into the barrier between self and others. A good story transports us into a lived experience in a different world.

TIME AND SPACE

If a world is constituted by its time and space, (1) when Jack Halberstam claims that there is such a thing as «queer time» and «queer space», it becomes clear that the world a queer person lives in is somewhat different. In other words, «queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience — namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.» Halberstam points out that not all lesbian, gay and transgender people live a life that is radically different from the social mainstream, but the potential of queerness lies in the fact that it opens up possibilities of alternative life narratives, eccentric economic practices, alternative methods of alliance. (2)

When HAZ (Homosexuelle Arbeitsgruppen Zürich) refurbished the apartment at Sihlquai 69 as their space, the HAZ Centro, it became a home base for many gay men. This self-made interior project contains a simple aesthetic: White wall, dark blue carpet, light blue wood frames and doors, old pieces of furniture found at Brockenhaus and a few nice house plants. For the past year, Levi has been working on their communal kitchen project here, in exchange they take care of the accounting of the community. When they started a transing protocol, they affirmed that feeling at home and being with a family is not quite the same.

According to Jack Halberstam, a «queer» adjustment in the way in which we think about time requires and produces new conceptions of space. This claim points out the crucial entanglement of time and space when understanding non-normative behaviours that have clear but not essential relations to queer subjects. (3) Elaborating the concept of temporality helps to expand the understanding of queer spaces in the sense that those spaces enact events from

queer people who dwell outside the schedule of normative life. Producing those spaces is based on a way of life that deviates from the public, making their life spans often more explicitly related to the communities that dwell in them.

Michael spent a lot of time in the Schwulbliothek, which was part of HAZ Centro on the 3rd floor, Sihlquai 69. For him it was the magazines, books and pictures of male nudes that helped him to overcome the internal homophobia that was growing against himself.

It is not rarely the case that queer people need to find other forms of upbringing outside the family due to the invisibility of queerness in their youth — building a library, forming a reading group, establishing a bibliography have become common forms of practice for peer-to-peer empowerment. This library repurposed a closet as a bookshelf. You will not know what kind of stuff is inside when its shutters are closed, but you can tell by its witty pink and blue colour.

He told me that most people come here to find someone to talk to. A few of them became couples. The community was concerned about this place becoming a dating space, but he saw the generational dissociation as a bigger issue: when they got older, younger people were no longer showing up.

DIMINISHING FUTURE AND FORGETTABLE PAST

The poet Mark Doty who lost his lover in the AIDS pandemic describes his future as constantly diminishing but never vanishing. (4) Likewise, in «In the Interest of Time», Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed address the importance of linking back to the traumatic gay past in the AIDS-pandemic, making a link between the amnesia in the gay community and the establishment of homonormativity in the 1990s. (5) Troubling as it may sound, this comparison draws attention to a challenge that has become more and more visible recently. When queer individuals deviate from the normative life, they do not converge to one alternative way of life. Within the queer community (if there is one), differences in terms of generation, race, sexuality, class, or simply self and other seems to prove that each body possesses their own temporality while still being able to engage a dynamic interaction or entanglement, which Tavia Nyong'o defines as «angular sociality». (6)

Denise has befriended Sherkhar since school. When he was 17, he had a car accident and needs to use a wheelchair. After finishing his studies, he became a lawyer and now lives in a nice apartment. On weekends, he sometimes undertakes a small trip with Sherkhar. They know each other's families and take good care of each other. Denise will drive, and Sherkhar will do the shopping, cooking and washing. Sometimes, Sherkhar's girlfriend will tag along.

The two friends visited this queer community centre. Denise wanted to look at the collection of the magazine

«Der Kreis» in the library. Denise sang «A Sunday kind of Love» to his special friend while the lift was ascending.

A space that inhabits and enacts such an angular sociality engages with the multitude of temporalities. Often, such a space will be described as anachronistic, for it is where the normative time and a non-normative time intersect and oppose each other; or diachronic, for a non-normative does not unfold in a linear manner and can hardly be captured. The complex time-space entanglement calls for a reexamination of spatial and temporal terms such as «inside/outside» or «past/present/future». «The map of resistance is not simply the underside of the map of domination» as Steve Pile puts it.⁽⁷⁾

Besides being a PhD student, Nikita is also an underground queer activist group leader. She organises publicity campaigns against queerphobic and racist violence, e.g., when a radical right group attempts to sabotage a drag queen storytelling event, or a cis-heterosexual person punched a coloured non-binary person into their face at a student party.

She uses different media to reach different social groups. Instagram spreads fast within her friends' circle, flyers are easy to distribute at the reception of different communal spaces. The vitrine from the queer community centre was refurbished by her and two other activists. They peeled off the metal panel that used to hang posters from the porn cinema, penetrated the brick wall behind and mounted a projection from the inside. The video screen becomes a channel between the building and the street, emitting below the flyers from the street and the frame of the ruined wall. She also cruised in the room behind the screen.

«A camouflaged presence is not an absent presence»⁽⁸⁾ as Tavia Nyong'o puts it. Still, through activist archives, marginal lines in the newspapers, oral histories or police records, an encounter with queer spaces might seem rather puzzling. The scarcity of information proves that the record of the history does not serve a minoritarian subculture. What follows is the question if and how lived experiences from such a past go beyond the means of representation and their historical restoration.

It is a territory where disciplinary instruments lose their efficacy, and signs and hints need to be invented.

HINT 1: FABULATING

A radical queer past cannot be part of the history. Stories enacted by underground queer spaces are both overlooked as an exclusion and camouflaged as a tactic. Tavia Nyong'o points out this challenge of the way we engage with queer and trans of colour history: namely, either erasing the negated past as obsolete, or defending the imperfect past representation as «the best we could do at the time».⁽⁹⁾ These two alternatives are then translated into the risk of either letting the past queer spaces disperse into fragmented information and losing their historical presence completely,

or restoring and overexposing them, canonizing them as architectural references, no different than any others.

After entering the ground door, Robi finds themselves in a corridor with a second door beside them. Once they knock on it with the handle, a peep from inside will check if you are suspicious. If not, Mary Lang will open the door and welcome you into her Old-Timers' Bar. Originally for the American GIs, the bar then was transformed to a meeting place for the homosexual men for its discreteness.

If you are a frequent customer, you would know how to enter when Mary is not around, you need to lift the door by the handle while pushing in order to open it.

What if we start to make fake history? Nyong'o proposes to pick up the information from the imperfectly represented past, and inventing or «fabulating» a narrative that finds itself between history and fiction, forging what was and what might have been.⁽¹⁰⁾ By doing so, an apocryphal story based on a fragmented past not only overcomes its archival absence without overexposing a subculture that was intended to be camouflaged, but also expands the set of affective dispositions and orientations towards the past. A queer bar from 1950s' Zurich might have not accommodated a Chinese queer person, but its potential of creating space for minority groups can be revealed through such a story when observed from 2023.

Yaohui teaches Chinese at a school. He loves to spend time in this bar after work, or even during his lunch break. Extravagant people would come along, dragged with glamorous make-up, some would even dare to step onto the bar table top, as if they were on stage. This stage is made of an alcohol pallet and a piece of plywood clamped on the table. The construction was well documented by Levi's camera, together with many beautiful outfits.

But Yaohui is shy. He prefers to sit next to this ad-hoc stage, watch and chat with people. He has not got much money and is too embarrassed to order only one beer when sitting in the bar for the whole evening. He therefore always orders a glass of Fernet-Branca. This liquor is usually only for those who have caught a cold, as it tastes so bitter, hence is not so much favoured. But for him, this bitter drink slows down the sipping and suffices for a whole night. Not quite as planned, people would come and ask how he was doing with his cold, which always used to trigger pleasant conversations.

HINT 2: UNBUILDING

In the Cabin Crew lecture at gta Exhibitions ETH Zurich, Jack Halberstam proposes the cut as a radical aesthetic form. Based on a correlation of architecture and body, he has analyzed how the «Split» from Gordon Matta-Clark can be read as aesthetically related to transgender bodies.⁽¹¹⁾ When making a cut through a building façade, or dismantling the cover of its wall, it opens the concealed layers, parts and

components. The cut exposes the otherwise covered temporality of a building that has materialised through construction. Moreover, this exposure offers a chance to intervene, or disrupt what has been inscribed into the building.

Every time when Sade has a problem with her girlfriend, Yara, she will ask her to share a cigarette on the balcony. Walking together from inside to outside and back again, seeing the light change from the LED to the skylight, and talking to each other while looking at the street flows, this experience somehow helped them to communicate in a different way. This building has a balcony that cuts both its previous plaster relief of the exterior and the scarlet surface of the interior.

They broke up after being together for three years. Although Sade has always been bisexual, hooking up with this guy somehow made her want to try a different relationship. As he also smokes, Sade keeps the habit of sharing a cigarette in her new relationship.

The radical proposal from Halberstam encourages us to think of unbuilding not as opposed to building, which is what architects should be doing, but rather as an equivalent tool for space making. Besides intervening the architectonics, it also engages the body through amplifying the level of visibility. Making a new window, or peeling off a layer from the wall always involves showing certain things while making other things invisible. As for queer bodies, showing and hiding are both crucial: while fighting for visibility is often associated with claiming spaces and subverting the norms, being hidden usually means retreating into a safe space and escaping from the norms.

Soseki met Antoine at a party. He was devastated by the experience of a complicated situationship and would love to escape from it for a while. For him, the option was not going home and facing his emotional crisis on his own, but rather being in a party crowd with strangers. This party space is repurposed from a previous cinema. The former screen is dismantled, leaving its platform as a small stage. The upper floor was previously for audience cabins. Its balustrade is demounted, and a bridge connects the stage and the audience. The spatial directionality is dissolved, and everywhere can potentially be a stage.

But the stage was not for him then. He just wanted to be anonymous in the crowd. While he was making his way to get into the crowd, he saw this person making funny dance moves in the corner.

They made out in the centre of the crowd that night, and unfortunately did draw a lot of attention, even though they were not on the stage.

HINT 3: MUTATING

In the book «What's the use? On the uses of use», Sarah Ahmed follows the word «use» and investigates in detail how much and in what ways we associate with things and objects through the logic of use. «Use bring things to mind» as she writes, it comes with no surprise that assigning an object to a certain use has often imposed a normative temporality to it which, in turn, engages with our bodies in a normative way.(12)

Tania is a pansexual woman with a baby. Queer sexuality and motherhood are both her identities. For her, being a mum and raising a kid does not necessarily have to be tied to a heteronormative nuclear family, or even an exclusive partnership.

She often brings her kid to this queer community centre to read on the second floor. When the baby cries, she will take her to the toilet on the ground floor. This room has black walls and many mirrors. It is refurbished into a barrier-free, gender-neutral toilet where she can also breast feed and change the baby's diapers. The strap of the diaper changing table is also a sex swing suspended from the ceiling, on which she had sex once with another girl she met at a reading event. It was quite stable, and they tried several advanced positions to penetrate each other.

Imagining the mutation of architectural elements would be an attempt to resist this normative temporality. Through making or using architectural elements in a way opposed to what it «normally» intends to be, it destabilizes the association of object and use. The deliberate misuse unburdens the object and its form from its use, which in turn engages the body in a non-normative way.

They found a few vintage light fixtures in this old building and used them as dildos after taking out the lightbulb and mounting them on the wall.