

ART

A Show About Stonewall's Legacy Falters on Inclusion

While impressive in its scope and engagement with the era's tensions, *Art After Stonewall* fails to adequately represent the roles of people of color, trans folks, and folks with disabilities.

Danilo Machado June 6, 2019



Leslie-Lohman Museum installation view of *Art After Stonewall, 1969 – 1989* (all installation images courtesy the Leslie-Lohman Museum (c) Kristine Eudey, 2019)

This June marks fifty years since [the Stonewall Riots](#), a pivotal moment of LGBTQ activism. Institutions throughout the city are commemorating the anniversary, including [the Leslie-Lohman Museum](#), which was established the same year as the riots. It is currently presenting [Art After Stonewall, 1969 – 1989](#) at their Wooster Street location and at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University. The survey, organized by the Columbus Museum of Art and curated by Jonathan

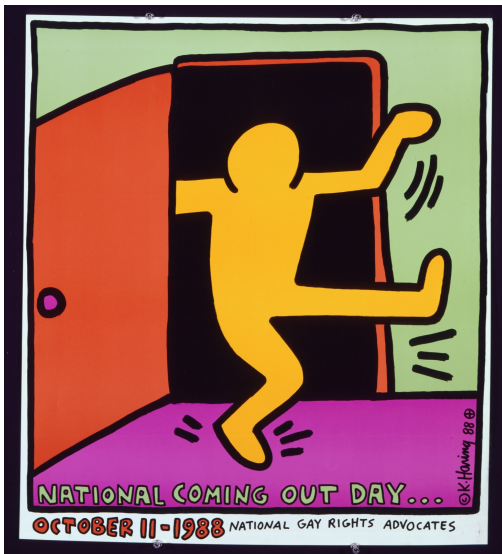
Weinberg, Tyler Cann, and Drew Sawyer, presents 200 objects across media arranged around five themes: Coming Out, Gender Play, Uses of the Erotic, Things Are Queer, AIDS and Activism, and We're Here. While impressive in its scope and engagement with the era's tensions and limitations, the exhibition has left unfulfilled its potential to honor and reflect upon this layered legacy more boldly and inclusively.



Installation view of *Art After Stonewall*,
1969 – 1989

Each section bursts with art both iconic and lesser-known: from Keith Haring’s “National Coming Out Day” poster (1988); to photographs by Catherine Opie, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Peter Hujar; to prints by Andy Warhol; and video by Barbara Hammer. Certain kinds of diversity are clearly represented: diversity of media, of aesthetic and political strategy, and of tone. (The show even makes room for straight artists.)

However, other kinds of diversity are weaker. People of color *are* represented, although sometimes sparingly. Highlights in this genre include the photographs of Sunil Gupta, Laura Aguilar’s Latina Lesbians series, and Judy Baca’s “The Origins of the Gay Rights Movement” (1983), which connects the political legacies of lesbian, labor, and West Coast activism. More lacking is work by trans and disabled artists. “Uses of the Erotic,” for one, is sorely missing non-cis bodies and artists, although it does include Tee A. Corinne’s “A Woman’s Touch #7” (1979), which depicts two kissing figures in wheelchairs.



Keith Haring “National Coming Out Day”
(1988) offset lithograph, 26 x 23 inches
(©Keith Haring Foundation)

Marsha P. Johnson — co-founder of S.T.A.R. (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) with Sylvia Rivera (shown in a photograph by Bettye Lane) — is seen throughout the show. Depictions of the activist range from Warhol’s problematic *Ladies and Gentlemen* series (1975) to photographs by Diana Davis, who captures Johnson in a rally in Albany, and, particularly fitting, at NYU distributing flyers next to another activist holding a sign reading “COME OUT OF YOUR IVORY TOWERS & INTO THE STREET.” Although her presence is needed, the show does not mention her disability and almost implies a shortage of art by and about other trans people (a notable exception being

Greer Lankton’s tender autobiographical watercolor “Coming Out of Surgery” from 1979).



Installation view of *Art After Stonewall, 1969 – 1989*

A standout work in the show is Marlon Riggs's "Affirmations" (1990). The video, comprised in part of outtakes from the iconic *Tongues Untied* (1989), centers black queer voices and the homophobia, racism, joy, and loss that surrounds them. Considering the whitewashing that often occurs around the ongoing history of AIDS/HIV, Riggs's documentation of groups like Minority Task Force on AIDS and Gay Men of African Decent

remain vital.

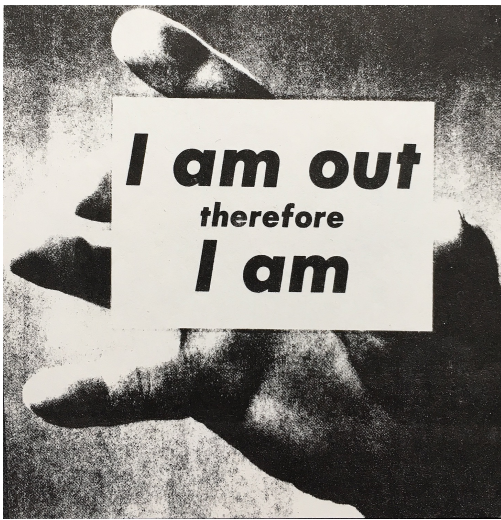
Indeed, *Art After Stonewall* details the way many artists doubled as activists. In the face of exclusion, alternative spaces and platforms were created, including groups like the Lavender Menace, a response to the rejection of lesbians in some feminist spaces, or publications like Harmony Hammond's catalog *Statements by Lesbian Artists* (1978) and *HERESIES: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977–1992), which published issues centering Lesbian Artists and "Third World Women."



Cathy Cade, "Sisterhood Feels Good"
Los Angeles (1972), Digital print, 11 x 16
in (© and courtesy the artist)

Many of these efforts point to tensions in the Gay Rights movement. Misogyny and limitations of representation are detailed in relation to objects like Mario Dubsy and John Button's collage mural, "Agit-Prop" (1971) which was originally installed at the headquarters of the Gay Activist Alliance. The banner, while in many ways narrow in its inclusion, depicts Black Panther Huey Newton, one of only a few works connecting gay rights organizing with the concurrent Black Power movement. Less present is how the gender essentialist view of some feminists (sometimes known as TERFs, Trans Exclusive Radical Feminists) violently rejects trans women.

Fifty years later, issues of police brutality, everyday harassment, and economic instability remain urgent ones to queer and trans people, especially queer and trans people of color. The victories of the mainstream LGBTQ movement have often left out the most vulnerable, for whom the stakes remain high. It is within this context that the exhibition falls short. It is



Adam Rolston, "I Am Out Therefore I Am" (1989) crack and peel sticker, 3 ½ x 3 ½ inches (© and courtesy the artist)

no longer enough for museums to include a handful of people of color, of trans folks, of folks with disabilities in their exhibitions. At this point, there is no excuse not to center them in both the art on display and in the curatorial process. For an example of how this is done brilliantly, see [*Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years after Stonewall*](#) on view at the Brooklyn Museum: It is an exhibition which centers trans artists and artists of color born after 1969 and is curated by a collective from across museum departments.



Installation view of *Art After Stonewall, 1969 – 1989*

Art After

Stonewall highlights invaluable cultural collections and does concede to some structural restraints by discussing the political and representational limitations of historically organizing the art of this era. However, many of these moments rely on wall text and can sometimes get lost in the fullness of the exhibition. Still, the rich research that supports the exhibition and the catalog produced with it will remain critical resources for the study of LGBTQ art, and the show's tour will provide meaningful encounters for audiences outside of New York.



Installation view of *Art After Stonewall, 1969 – 1989*

Of course, no single exhibition can be expected to completely capture a legacy as complex as this one. This anniversary is, in part, a celebration of sustained resilience, but should also be a moment of reflection and radical imagining for the future. How can we build and expand upon the work of LGBTQ activists and artists (globally, and at many intersections) in a way that continues to value community

building, accountability, and care? What is the role of museums in preserving and uplifting historical objects and figures while considering the current needs and livelihoods of the communities they serve? How can we create new models of curation, research, and display? This work has never been easy and, in the spirit of queerness, won't be linear or binary — but it will be worth doing and doing boldly.

Art After Stonewall, 1969–1989 is on view through July 21st at the [Leslie-Lohman Museum](#) (26 Wooster Street, Soho, Manhattan), and through July 20th at the New York University [Grey Art Gallery](#) (100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, Manhattan). It is curated by Jonathan Weinberg, Tyler Cann, and Drew Sawyer.

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