Painting Identity:
The Disconnect Between Theories and Practices
Of Art by the LGBTQ Community

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Introduction

We live in a period of change in America where there are an increasing number of openly gay and lesbian movie stars and T.V. actors, sodomy laws have been declared unconstitutional, homosexuals may now serve in the military, many jurisdictions have adopted anti-discrimination laws protecting gender preference, and a large portion of the population now supports gay marriage. A number of visual artists also are open about the role that being gay, lesbian or queer plays in their art. However, we also still live in a culture that is deeply homophobic where gay bashing (both verbal and physical) continues, where there is opposition to civil rights for persons who are LGBTQ1, and where gay relationships are considered by many to be abnormal - an affront to “normal” heterosexual relationships. (Strong, 1)

Control over sexuality is a way to maintain a social, political and economic power structure. While progress has been made, artists who are self-identified as gay, lesbian or queer continue to face hurdles in the art world in their ability to have access to galleries, museums, and collectors. Some of these barriers may be based on a perception that artists who are gay, lesbian or queer produce “gay art” which many people may equate with queer pornography. But is it appropriate to attempt to generally categorize the work of artists who are gay, lesbian or queer on this basis? The purpose of this research study is to investigate whether there is a tendency to assess works of art by artists who identify themselves as LGBTQ principally by reference to their identity, and, if so, to consider if that type of assessment limits the significance of their work. How might we inscribe gay, lesbian and queer sexualities, their identities and desires into artistic production and reception?

1 LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer. This terminology seeks to capture every variant of identity. (Katz, 57)
In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007), Darby English directs our attention to “a tendency to limit the significance of works assignable to black artists to what can be illuminated by reference to a work’s purportedly racial character.” (English, 6) English examines select works by “black artists” in an attempt to chip away at the notion that art by black artists ought to represent an essentialized “blackness.” In English’s view, the work of a black artist is generally understood in terms of “blackness” when the viewer has an expectation that the work is representative of his or her race, which limits the possibilities for interpretation and difference. (English, 9) He concludes that the black artist’s work is often called upon to “prove its representativeness” (English, 7) with a result that this limits its “right to difference”. (English, 9)

While many black artists do create their art with a black audience in mind, the work of many contemporary artists reveal that race is just one of the factors that influence or that may be represented in their work. (English, 30 – 31) English essentially submits that black artists and their works should be evaluated less on concepts of race that are “often grounded outside the work of art itself and beyond the … intentions of an artist”, (English, 3) and more on the “meanings deposited and generated in that work”. (English, 19) English opens the door to explore identity politics through art.

If black art can be explored beyond “blackness,” given value beyond how it fulfills expectations of identity, can the art of other marginalized people be explored in the same, more total way? This question is a jumping off point for a discussion of issues concerning power and culture, including gender, identity, and desire, and a consideration of the artistic production by contemporary artists who identify as LTBTQ. Aside from English’s book there is relatively little theoretical or academic work that considers the issue that English identifies, particularly as
concerns the consideration of these issues for other minority groups, such as sexual minorities encompassed within the concept of LGTBQ. Further, there is limited academic study of the relationship between sexual identity and art. However, using English’s work a starting point, it was possible to consider issues regarding sexual identity which help build a perspective on their application to art created by persons who are LGBTQ. As a result, the following discussion utilizes a disparate or diverse combination of research drawn from sociology, philosophy and art history sources.

This research is important on several levels, but most importantly because to reduce or categorize individuals down to a single fragment of their identity operates to damage them. Further, it causes a potential tension between being a successful artist financially and being a successful artist personally and creatively. Finally, the modes of discussing art in the here and now are changeable and therefore timely to dissect; current questions and speculation could morph into an accepted authority. To solidify an inaccurate image of LGBTQ art in the present would have negative ramifications far into the future and must be curtailed.

Methodology

In introducing Female Masculinity (1998), Judith Halberstam, who is both an English professor and a queer theorist, writes that “on account of the interdisciplinary nature of [her] project, [she has] had to craft a methodology out of available disciplinary methods.” (Halberstam, 9) Instead of limiting herself to any one framework, she chooses to employ a “queer methodology,” labeled such because of its flexibility and refusal to follow any single mode of analysis, because any other approach to sexuality, inherently interdisciplinary, would fall short. (Halberstam, 12)
Since this thesis is at once as art historical as it is sociological or anthropological, I have engaged this topic on several levels and in different ways, and have drawn on a broad array of materials. First, I have provided a historical and theoretical background. I have employed, in part, queer theory to discuss art produced by persons with same sex desire and to discuss meanings or definitions of sexual identity, including queer. I explore how codes have been used to construct layered meanings that may form oppositional strategies to the restrictions of gender categories. I have placed this within a historical context, considering the influence of seminal events such as Stonewall, gay liberation, and the AIDS epidemic. I also have engaged theoretically with ideas such as knowledge, discourse, and cultural preference and practice.

To investigate this issue, interviews were conducted with, or questionnaires completed by, four contemporary artists who identified themselves as gay where they were asked primarily about their art work: their artistic aims, strategies, inspirations, and methods. The purpose of this line of inquiry was to gain an understanding of the methods they use and how they categorize the works that they make in terms of broader art movements. One of my objectives was to try to learn how their art intersects with their sexual identity, grounding this in their day-to-day reality, and the questions were purposely left open-ended, so as to not impose my own opinions upon the artists.

Participants were asked about their art works, in light of their artistic aims, strategies, inspirations, methods, and how they categorize their work in terms of broader art movements. The intent is to understand what influenced them to become an artist, their experience as an artist, and if there is any influence of their sexual identity (concerns over whom and what they are) on their art. Did their sexuality provide them with a unique insight as an outsider? Requests to participate were made to persons who had already identified themselves as members of the
LGBTQ community principally based on personal relationships and referrals. I used the snowball or reputational method in an effort to identify participants. Starting with persons that I knew, I attempted to identify artists to ask to participate, and I also asked participants to reach out to other persons in the art community.

The research also was expanded by using published interviews with and/or essays by other LGBTQ artists concerning how their sexual identity is inscribed in their art. Using this method, additional research was developed regarding four more artists (two of whom identify themselves as lesbian, and two of whom identify themselves as gay).

The discussion is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 creates context for this analysis within the production of modern and contemporary art by gay, lesbian and queer artists in the United States, providing an overview of relevant aspects of the sociological-political environment. This discusses how gay and lesbian sexualities and identities have been inscribed in past and current artistic production and reception, and raises issues of power and culture relevant to tying an artist's work to their sexual identity. It presents the arguments in English's work so that they may also be considered within the context of sexual identity, and also discusses certain postmodern concepts of sexual identity. Chapter 3 discusses the interviews that were conducted with or the information that was received from professional artists who are LGBTQ as well as the supplemental research in order to consider whether in their experiences their works have been assessed principally by reference to their identity, and, if so, what that may have meant for the assessment of their works. Chapter 4 presents a discourse analysis within the historical and sociological context to consider if works of art by artists who identify themselves as LGBTQ may be assessed by reference to their sexual identity, and, if so, how might that assessment be impacted by tying their identity to their work. This discussion also considers
whether there are any stylistic parallels (i.e., use of abstraction or realism) between the artistic styles or methodologies of certain of the participants individually or generally, and whether there is any alignment between the importance of the artist’s sexual identity and the use of particular artistic styles.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, reviews the conceptual and practical ramifications of the research results, including any commonalities among those artists who expressed that sexual identity was important to their art, the artists’ views on whether they consider themselves to be a gay artist or an artist who is gay, and the implications of that distinction and whether that limits their possibilities for interpretation and difference.
Perspectives on Racial and Sexual Identity in Modern and Contemporary Art

Art’s job is to engage the viewer. Visual art makes that contact directly through the eyes, without the intermediary of speech. With such a connection the communication can be made on a profound level. If it is good art, it will invite the contemplation of things that cannot exactly be put into words: ambiguities that form the connective tissues in life, passing incidents that may hold great consequence, as well as sheer exhilaration and searing pain. When I recognize such things in a work of art, it helps me to feel less alone. Someone else has lived these things too. The solicitude of individual existence is momentarily broken and the contact provides, as Nietzsche said, ‘...triumph over the frightening depths’. Art allows us to accompany each other. (Faber, 113)

Understanding of Black Art as Inhibited

Darby English, in How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness (2007), submits that our understanding of “black art” in the United States is inhibited by a tendency to limit the significance of works by black artists by reference to their purported racial character. This is driven, in good measure, by the reader’s viewpoint about the nature of the work that black artists do. To acknowledge the existence of this viewpoint is to recognize that it “is often grounded outside the work of art itself and beyond the … intentions of an artist.” (English, 3) In English’s view, the work of black artists is “almost uniformly generalized” and is continually required to “prove its representativeness” with the result that it “gains little purchase on the larger social, cultural, historical, and aesthetic formations ….” (English, 6) The fact that black artists are called upon to respond to “prefabricated questions” about whether their works are appropriately representative can itself be viewed as a “repressive regime” because it targets their “right to difference”. (English, 9)
To appreciate the conditions for the emergence of works by black artists, English introduces the concept of “black representational space.” (English, 9) He says historically black representational space began to take form in early 1900s when black art began as part of a political program of uplift; the idea of black representational space can’t be separated from the forms and goals of black cultural politics. He states that the term “black art” required a certain relationship “between subjects, objects, and culture” to establish the political and social necessity for black art. This required “reference to the same object (... ‘worthy’ work and ‘positive images’); a common style in the production of statements...; constancy of the concepts...; and reference to a common theme (the representativeness of art).” (English, 10) The overriding theme was that black art should serve the interest of the black race.

English disagrees with the view that black artists can or should be discussed or read as if they shared a common enterprise. (English, 11) In this regard, he affirms that black representational space was particularly impacted by the radical social movements from the late 1960s and the resulting creation of “new coalitional political formations.” (English, 16) The developments that were associated with liberation movements of racial and sexual minorities, including women, were particularly influential. (English, 16) English argues that we need to broaden our concept of black representational space to develop a more complete and developed understanding of the “broader field of culture that helps constitute it.” (English, 12) He selects and discusses works whose ambiguity challenges the conclusion or assumption that black artists and their work are “transparent to social identity.” (English, 12)

English acknowledges that artists do choose signs and symbols that they derived from or which are influenced by culture, but which still permits them to imagine a different model of culture. (English, 18) But he proposes a model of disciplined work by black artists that is
premised on “the meanings deposited and generated in that work, and on the possible
relationships to less centralized areas of cultural work.” (English, 19) The submission that
“black art” has come to have a less uniform meaning or descriptive bearing is not to argue that it
has less influence. (English, 27) Rather, it is to expose “black art” as a “residual identity
framework” that was constructed for an earlier era or time to respond to “urgencies that are
simply not those of our own.” (English, 27) Commenting on a 1988 essay by Stuart Hall,
English states:

The emergence of difference into the space of cultural criticism
necessitates the realization that the ‘black subject cannot be
represented without reference to the divisions of class, gender,
sexuality, and ethnicity,’ and that coping with this complication
means destabilizing ‘particular conceptions of black
masculinity,’... as well as investigating class’s discrepant
determination of race and ‘crossing questions of racism irrevocably
with questions of sexuality.’ (English, 28-29)

Black representational space is an effect of the politics of racial representation that has
raged since “blackness” became a starting point for a certain mode of artistic depiction. (English,
29) In English’s view, this space designates a cultural territory which both rewards success in
the struggle to control race representation, and is used to maintain and extend that status. The
imprint of the politics of representation is deep; not only must we consider the “authoritative
representations of black culture and politics”, but also the theories of representation. (English,
30) Has a representative concept of “blackness” itself become an obstacle to progression for
those who consider art to be a function and implement of change? English recognizes that race
is an important mode for artists who are black, and that many may create art directed to a black
audience. However, the “work of many contemporary black artists reveals that, for them, black
is but one mode among the many in which they elect to work.” (English, 30) It is also important
to consider the scene of the viewer’s reception because black representational space, in effect, becomes reconsolidated whenever a viewer’s interpretation supports the idea that “all” black artists make demonstrations of blackness and/or that privilege black viewers. (English, 31)

Can the process of viewing art really be linked to a process of racialization? English states that this is only unlikely if we fail to scrutinize what makes “black art” black. (English, 31) What functions must be “performed … in order to secure that identification?” (English, 31) What “legitimizes” the identification of a work as black art as being positive? (English, 31) Are there other kinds of work that the positive racial identification of art permits you to do? In exploring the subjective ground of black representational space, English (borrowing from William James) states that in order for the concept of black art to serve a practical identification the blackness must “provide the art with a principle of intelligibility, as something that ‘lets us plan our way’”. (English, 34) English addresses the concept and effect of “presumed knowability of identity”, and the way that it affects us on the level of identity by eliminating the differences among us by “domesticating them.” (English, 34) Using a somewhat simplified explanation, in this process the viewer first reads certain signs (e.g., data, particular forms, or subject matter such as racial or sexuality information). Second, we discern relevant external correspondences. Third, we establish equivalences between what we are considering (e.g., the piece of art) and what we “have already considered, suspected, or perhaps just wondered.” (English, 34) Therefore, this operates as a filtering mechanism through which we apply our own views, prejudices, and pre-conceived notions.

English comments that the challenges that black artists face in establishing a place within black representational space is reflected in the dismay that many black artists express about the assertion that they are expected to have a particular obligation to the “black community.” The
"black community" and the black representational space that it implies actually can act as an obstacle for contemporary practitioners to the extent that they are constraining or restricting. This may carry an expectation over into the realm of "aesthetic experimentation" that the artist will adopt the community's priorities as his or her own. (English, 43) If successful, the community achieves power over aesthetic actions as well as in the social and political realms. An attempt by artists to enlarge the space for what may be regarded as "black art" will require strategies and/or tactics of resistance. A discussion of black representational space should consider how works of black art involve some level of confrontation between the contemporary artist and "that historical over-determination of the figure 'black artist' which distinguishes the American context." (English, 44)

English considers how the work of black artists addresses itself in history, and how to articulate its relationship to that history. In considering black art, English finds that "the "‘epidermalization’ of the racial look" has a particularly disruptive effect." (English, 45) In his view, epidermalization "insinuates" itself into looking situations (the viewing or reception of works of art) partly as a result of an "archived knowledge concerning 'artists whose skins are black' which construes such artistic subjects as representative by default and duty.” (English, 46) In his consideration of racism and the environment within which black culture in modern America developed, English notes that the "idea of black culture" reflected aspects of the time ("in the shadow of Jim Crow") where the institutionalization of difference was the prevailing mode for organizing knowledge of the world. (English, 46) As stated by Foucault (in commenting on the period of the nineteenth century), there was a focus on the self-evident nature of differences between things: "A profound historicity penetrates into the heart of things, isolates and defines them in their own coherence, imposes upon them the forms of order implied
by the continuity of time.” (English, 46) English argues that this entailed a retreat from
difference and the development of a concept of identity whose need for survival required it to
deny differences from without or from within. He states that to “abandon the ‘space of
representation’” involves creating a new space in your own image, but this was not a realistic
option for most black Americans. (English, 46) Therefore, it has been argued that a
“bidirectional process” was needed to demonstrate entitlement to representational space (on the
one hand) and to build support for the collective investment in that space (on the other). (English,
46) However, in English’s view, many of the histories of black art focus on the former without
adequately considering the latter.

Black representation has long had to maneuver between issues of “how to give form to
identity” and “how best to manifest presence in a context committed to denying it....” (English,
49 - 50) English argues that the “rhetoric of consensus” operates to reproduce and reinforce
cultural and social limits. In an effort to create consensus and bring everyone under the tent,
there is an “indifference to difference” that actually reserves a place for it, “eliding difference in
the social terrain and thus constituting dissent as enemy to harmony.” (English, 51) Black artists
were seen by some black leaders as being continuous both with the civil rights struggle and with
the destiny of black America. When considering the historical generation of certain of the
“contemporary constraints on artistic freedom,” English concludes that a conventionalism was
imposed from inside the black culture. (English, 59) As commented by Poet Don L. Lee:
“Black art is created from black forces that live within the body .... Black art will elevate and
enlighten our people and lead them towards an awareness of self, i.e., their blackness. It will
show them mirrors ... Black art is reciprocal art.” (English, 65)
English, in paraphrasing Ralph Ellison, asks: “How will the question and its answer change when, not if, we shift our orientation and understanding away from the black artist’s presumed, peculiar representational duties, and toward the other possibilities and practices of representation and affiliation that much creative practice seeks to bring nearer to us?” (English, 67) Art may show the relations (among black artists and black subject matter) without being defined in advance, and serve as a “means of experimentation” and not just a realization of “historical subjectivity.” (English, 67)

Inscription of Sexual Identities in Art

In considering the application of English’s arguments to contemporary art produced by sexual minorities (LGBTQ), and in the absence of significant academic works specifically addressing those arguments within the LGBTQ context, it is useful to begin by reviewing how gay and lesbian sexualities and identities have been inscribed in past and current artistic production and reception in the United States. Then the following discussion will introduce certain concepts of sexual identity that will be relevant in considering the threshold question of how to define gay, lesbian or queer identity before assessing whether works by LGBTQ artists are assessed by reference to their identity and if that limits the significance of their work. One challenge for any study concerning the relationship between art and sexual identity is that works concerning the history of art are often premised on assumptions about continuity, whereas discourse on the history of homosexuality has often been premised on alienation. (Reed, 4)

Historically, there has been a progression where gay and lesbian communities have gone from a condition of isolation to one where they have developed a sense of community, and to where most recently they arguably are experiencing increased integration. (Blake, 4) The artistic works of gay and lesbian artists have been influenced by social and political trends, reflecting or
resisting the “various conditions of being in the world in relation to other persons.” (Blake, 4)

Therefore, to the extent that identifiable gay or lesbian aesthetic sensibilities exist, they do so in a “complex intersection with mainstream art practice.” (Blake, 6) As Nayland Blake comments in *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (1995): “Just as manifestations of sexual desire and behavior are multifarious and mutable, so, too, are the reflections of those desires and behaviors in art.” (Blake, 6)

Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, in *Hide/Seek* (2010), discuss how sexual identities of persons with same-sex desire have been reflected in American art. Looking back at the turn of the century, a painting by Thomas Eakins, the *Swimming Hole* (1885), raises questions about the implications of same sex desire that existed in a period before “homosexuality” became embedded as an available category of sexuality. (Katz, 18) Eakins produced some of the most striking images of the male body of his era. Katz submits that viewers need to consider the “explicit homoeroticism” in Eakins’ art and their understanding of his sexuality. (Katz, 18) One commentator has described Eakins as a “sexual dissident”, but the challenge presented to a contemporary viewer in trying to understand his sexuality is what vocabulary and concept of sexuality and sexual identity to use. (Katz, 18) The heterosexual/homosexual binary that remains prevalent today (even if that were appropriate) was just emerging at the time when this artist worked, and thus would not seem appropriate to apply. Katz comments that, at the end of the nineteenth century, sexuality that was neither marital nor reproductive was considered a violation of “the proper purposes of our sexual being.” (Katz, 20) Katz argues that the distance between sexual pleasures with females with whom you were not married and homosexuality may not have been that great inasmuch as neither would have been marital or reproductive. (Katz, 20)
A print by George Bellows, the *The Shower Bath* (1917), also is noteworthy for its forward homoeroticism which would have been considered unusual in American art at any time before the past two decades. It features, in its front and center, a “thin, effeminate man” who looks seductively back at a muscular built man who is “standing behind him and returning his stare.” (Katz, 11) Instead of viewing this encounter from the perspective of our contemporary expectations, we need to view it from the cultural standards of that era. At that time, only men who were “passively erotically”, which contravened the behavioral norms for their sex, were considered queer. Under those standards, the man who was in the active role would not have been considered “compromised”. (Katz, 11) Katz states that their sexual identity was based not on the sex of the partner, but rather on one’s gendered role in the sex act. Contrasted to contemporary standards, today the identity of both partners (irrespective of their gendered roles) would be considered LGBTQ because we would define their sexual identity simply based on their having sexual relations with others of the same sex. (Katz, 12)

An example of female gender non-conformity from that era is presented in the *Self-Portrait* (1923) by Romaine Brooks. Here her gender non-conformity serves “as a marker for sexual nonconformity....” (Katz, 13) But this was not simply a parallel or the female equivalent to male socio-sexual relations because of the difference in the social paths that were available to men and women at that time. For men, gender nonconformity could damage you socially but for women it actually could move them up the social ladder. Katz comments that for “mannish” women, like Brooks, Gertrude Stein, and Janet Flanner, who were renowned for their talents, “their gender nonconformity was taken as an outward sign of their atypical femaleness.” (Katz, 13) The masculine look of women like Brooks and Stein “was indexed to their assumption of a masculine social role … assuming a public, not a domestic profile.” (Katz, 13)
However, in the early twentieth century life for American homosexuals was not easy. For men, sexual encounters were available but sustaining emotional bonds were less so. For women, it was even more difficult to find other like-minded women because social structures restricted their “movement and autonomy”. (Katz, 14) During that time, being queer meant to be “socially and legally vulnerable” and just a bit abnormal. (Katz, 14) But since this pre-dated the period when sexual difference coalesced as an identity structure and as a force in collective politics, it was subject to less intense sanctions. In this era, the representation of sexual desires in painting, similar to life, was necessarily “communicated through the most subtle gestures, glances, and codes...”. (Katz, 14) These meanings, however, were viewer-dependent where the viewer may or may not have understood the code employed. Further, where the desires in question were actually illegal, the representations and meanings were “all the more fugitive.” (Katz, 14)

Katz comments that the 1920s and 1930s saw effeminate men and masculine women becoming more assertive (at least in certain urban areas). This was also the period of the Harlem Renaissance, known at the time as the New Negro movement, which encompassed a desire for “racial, gender, and sexual equality”. (Katz, 28) White culture began to notice black culture spurred, in part, by Prohibition (1920 – 33). During this era some whites crossed the racial divide to go to clubs, in locations such as Harlem, where the culture was arguably more tolerant of sexual differences. (Katz, 28)

The period following World War II was marked by increasing homophobia where activity against homosexuals was supported by an “official diagnosis that justified and promoted social exclusion and aggressive repression.” (Katz, 32) The United States government acted to “demonize homosexuality as a threat to national security.” (Katz, 34) A report issued by Alfred
Kinsey in 1948, *Sexuality in the Human Male* (the “Kinsey report”), ironically helped to further that process. The Kinsey report tried to displace the then normative heterosexual/homosexual binary through what became known as the Kinsey scale. Under the Kinsey scale, 0 represented absolute heterosexuality and 6 represented absolute homosexuality with the opportunity for gradations in between. Sexuality was presented as a continuum. As stated by Kinsey: “‘[T]he living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects …. A seven-point scale comes nearer to showing the many gradations that actually exist.’” (Katz, 34) The Kinsey report indicated that about half of all men had responded to both sexes at least once, and that more than a third had had a homosexual experience. Katz argues that these conclusions incited fears about the effeminization of men and the masculinization of women. The more widespread homosexuality appeared to be, the greater the motivation to limit it and define it as pathological. (Katz, 34)

During the Cold War, “‘the homosexual’ was transformed … into an increasingly dangerous security risk….” (Katz, 34) The “investigation” of un-American activities that was led by Senator Joseph McCarthy (in 1950-1954) was dedicated to eradicating subversive Communists from our midst. However, it also “promoted the idea that a vast homosexual underground was undermining our national security.” (Katz, 34 - 35) The investigation of specific criminal activities gave way to using government power to intimidate people for their ideas and beliefs as it purportedly attempted to assess their potential for subversion. Once the government’s objective shifted to discovering potential subversives, it was a slippery slope to decide that some people were “un-American”. (Katz, 148) Ultimately, more homosexuals than Communists lost their positions as a result of these activities (sometimes referred to as the Lavender Scare), and many more found themselves blacklisted and publically named. Before
long, homosexuality became articulated as a sexual perversion, and this pathological model found acceptance in “mainstream publications, discourse, and debate.” (Katz, 35) This worked to “isolate, individualize, and pathologize sexual difference as one’s own personal neurosis and private failure – thereby cleaving queer people from one another.” (Katz, 46)

Immediately prior to World War II, art critic Clement Greenberg had postulated a doctrine, which would become known as formalism, which established certain guiding principles for the development of modern art. In his essays Greenberg argued that modern art represented a break with past illusionism and a move toward “purity.” (Heartney, 7) Under his ideal, painting and sculpture would be “pure expressions of their own intrinsic qualities.” (Heartney, 7) As a practical matter, this segmented visual art away from “external, representational references” with the result that paintings should exist as self-contained surfaces. (Heartney, 7) Under these principles of formalism, abstractionism emerged as the highest expression of modern art.

Following World War II, New York emerged as the center of the contemporary art world, in part due to the art of a group of painters who have been labeled as the “abstract expressionists”. Interestingly, there were no gay or lesbians among the abstract expressionists. One of these artists, Jackson Pollock, became popularized (in part possibly due to Cold War politics) as a uniquely American talent whose masculinity was controlled and focused by his domestic life as a husband and family man. The common theme among this collection of painters was “the struggle for self-expression.” (Katz, 36) “[T]he abstract expressionist painters came to recognize that self-expression led both them and the viewer toward the recognition of a broadly shared sense of common emotion and feeling.” (Katz, 36) They implicitly painted the United States as a country with a “freely shared expressive language”, which was contrasted to
the dictatorship of the Soviet Union with its centrally and brutally enforced (e.g., gulags and secret police) orthodox visual language. (Katz, 37)

Another group, who are referred to as the post-abstract expressionist painters, “worked to invert the operations of abstract expressionism.” (Katz, 37) They achieved acclaim for representing some of the commonalities of modern American life (e.g., the flag) and our “commodity culture”. Interestingly, these artists (e.g., Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns) generally were gay. In the view of Katz: “Sexuality turns out to be key to the difference between the abstract expressionists and this post-abstract expressionist generation: while the former were almost exclusively heterosexual, the latter had all, to a greater or lesser extent, been involved with members of their own sex.” (Katz, 37) What was the importance of sexual orientation in the development of post war art? Gay writers and artists “underscored how profoundly ‘the self’ was always a product of interactions with others, that even our own identity was merely catching a glimpse of our reflection in another’s eyes.” (Katz, 38) During the Cold War era of the 1950s, “it was patently clear that gay people did not have the privilege of defining themselves.” (Katz, 38)

Rauschenberg, who developed his “Combine” works during the same time as he was involved in a relationship with Johns, did not seek to make “conventionally expressive art.” (Katz, 41) He did include directly autobiographical materials in his works, but these were carefully obscured. His art was presented on two levels: private and public with multiple audiences. (Katz, 42) Johns also did not want his works to expose his feelings. While his work was a product of those feelings, they may have been covert. Katz demonstrates that the works of both men were characterized as having something being withheld; to show “the play between secrecy and disclosure” which is the essence of the closet. (Katz, 39) Katz posits that “the closet
is never an absolute refusal or silence; for then it would simply be what it proclaimed itself to be. In order to qualify as a closet, a difference must somehow become visible not as silence but as a silencing, a denying, a withholding from view.” (Katz, 39) John’s target paintings are particularly interesting for what they convey about themselves, what they may say about Johns, and how they comment on the socio-political environment of the 1950s. Although they are abstractions with no sexuality in themselves, “the series becomes an allegory to the predicament of gays in a society.” (Katz, 147) Homosexuals may have been tolerated, but they also were repressed. “If everyone had a target on their back during the first decade of the ‘American Century,’ homosexuals were doubly targeted.” (Katz, 147)

During the 1960s, the post-war angst of the 1950s gave way to counterculturalism and increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex. Formalism fell from favor and abstract expressionism gave way to Pop art, Minimalism and performance art. (Mahon, 177) Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenberg took the ordinary experiences and objects from day-to-day “life and recreated them as art.”(Katz, 232) They mined popular culture and daily life for images. Their “ability to address multiple audiences at the same time through the use of the common culture is a hallmark of postmodernism.” (Katz, 232) Warhol is widely regarded as the representative artist of postmodernity. His art was a provocative combination of sexual liberation and commercial exploitation. (Mahon, 187) His use of portraits of cultural icons, such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, spoke directly to the gay community while simultaneously being aimed at a broader, general audience. (Cooper, 28)

The defining and turning point in gay liberation occurred in June 1969 in what is known as the Stonewall riot. Stonewall was the “first overt, public and indeed violent resistance by gay citizens to their marginalization and oppression.” (Katz, 189) The idea of the civil rights
movement already had demonstrated that a minority identity could be a part of the American promise. Prior to Stonewall there had been an ongoing debate within the gay and lesbian communities as to whether civil rights could best be secured through a minority model which articulated sexual difference, or whether they would be best won through a more general liberation that deemphasized those differences – through a “universal humanity”. For many, sexuality was just one of several forms of human difference that had been “suppressed by the dominant straight, white, male majority.” (Katz, 48) This approach had a decidedly “assimilationist and universalist orientation.” (Young, 160) Its goal was to eliminate the stigma associated with being homosexual, eliminate institutional discrimination, and achieve “recognition that gay people are ‘no different’ from anyone else.” (Young, 160) However, the minority identity model also had been promoted, such as in the gay and lesbian liberation journal One and in the book The Homosexual in America (published in 1951). (Katz, 16)

Stonewall was a starting point for “the coalescence of a new political voice based on the assertion of gay identity and culture as a positive force.” (Katz, 189) Stonewall acted as a catalyst for a wider understanding of sexuality based on a model of minority group politics. It ushered into prominence the notion of a gay and lesbian community that is separated from the dominant heterosexual norm; loosely defined around a set of common differences from the straight world. Quiet lobbying on incremental issues was replaced by “confrontational insistence on ‘equality’”, inserting a visibly gay presence into the political sphere. (Katz, 189) It asserted that sexual identity was a matter of both “culture and politics, and not merely ‘behavior’ to be tolerated or forbidden.” (Young, 161)

The post-Stonewall political movement made “coming out” its chief political strategy. This strategy was premised on the idea that prejudice would disappear once everyone who was
LGBTQ came out and were visible as such. But if you have come out, what does that really mean? What is known and what remains concealed? Is it the declaration of a LGBTQ identity? Or does it mean rejecting any pre-packaged identity in favor of one which challenges the "truth claims of any particular identification"? (Katz, 50) Can one be both public about their sexual orientation but refuse to participate in a conceptual framework that separates gay from straight and defines sexuality as the most relevant aspect of their character? In *Imitation and Gender Insobordination* (1993) Judith Butler asks if sexuality can even remain sexuality once it has submitted to transparency and disclosure or does sexuality require that we retain some level of "opacity designated by the unconscious"? (Butler, 309) If you identify as gay or lesbian or LGBTQ, what does that mean inasmuch as the signifier (its meaning) is not something that you control yourself? Also, the specificity of the signifier requires certain exclusions that disrupt its claim to coherence. Even if one comes out of the closet, others may know what they are but not know what that really means. In Butler’s view, the locus of opacity has simply shifted: “before, you did not know whether I ‘am,’ but now you do not know what that means....” (Butler, 309) While post-Stonewall forms of expression may have been clear about the artist’s sexuality, Katz and Ward argue that it has been unclear about what exactly that meant or its significance. The commitment to coming out also served to obscure other issues that existed, such as racism and sexism, even within the gay liberation movement. (Katz, 50)

The 1970s may be seen as the decade when the politics of identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, and community) moved to center stage. (Mahon, 202) It also saw the success of the feminist movement (arguing that women had been excluded from mainstream cultural recognition). The acceptance of the minority group model by the gay and lesbian community produced successes but that came at a cost. As gay and lesbian groups promoted differences in
concert with a minority group model, the heterosexual and homosexual co-existence (to the extent that had existed) further eroded. By the 1980s the promotion of a gay and lesbian population distinct from the “social majority” was in full swing with the effect that a shared history became two separate ones. Then the AIDS epidemic, which began in the 1980s, had a devastating effect on the LGBTQ community and made the existence of two Americas very real. The origins of the virus, at first more widespread in the gay community, “gave the illusion of a biological basis for an essential LGBTQ difference.” (Katz, 17) The minority model that had been successfully promoted by LGBTQ identity structures was used against them by their political opponents.

A culture war had begun which asserted that there was an equivalency between homosexuality and AIDS. Further, Senator Jesse Helms tried to pair homosexuality with AIDS in the context of artistic expression. “Helms pioneered the politics of ‘homovisual’: now the mere specter of witnessing same-sex desire was sufficient to secure its repression, ostensibly as a means of battling AIDS.” (Katz, 17) Battles over federal support for funding of the arts that were focused on sexuality were part of a broader debate of whether the federal government should even be in the business of funding bodies like the National Endowment for the Arts (“NEA”). Content restrictions were imposed on art supported by the NEA with public funding that were based on issues concerning the representation of sexuality, and on a definition of homosexuality as inherently obscene. As the AIDS crisis escalated it became a catalyst for social protest, and the evidence of America’s homophobia was undeniable. (Blake, 24) By the late 1980s a “new era of highly polarized art-making and art-exhibiting had been launched, turning more or less on the question of LGBTQ self-representation.” (Katz, 53) The impact of this increasing homophobia was a chilling effect on the types of art (e.g., the representation of
same-sex desire) that museums and galleries were willing to exhibit. For example, a posthumous exhibit of the work of Robert Mapplethorpe at the Corcoran Gallery, which included his *X Portfolio* containing sado-masochistic gay imagery and his *Y Portfolio* of black men, was cancelled in response to political pressure. (Stychin, 149)

The response from the LGBTQ community took two separate paths: one, directly confrontational or oppositional, and the other, more subtle, seeking to create art that would build a bridge between artist and audience and offer the opportunity for layered meanings. The latter employed a strategy of addressing multiple audiences with different “competencies”, similar to the post-abstract expressionists, but whose clues (e.g., titles, imagery, and other content) made it easier for the audience to identify the sexual politics. (Katz, 54) These “decentered and allusive forms of referencing sexuality” found favor with museums and collectors in ways that the more directly confrontational did not. (Katz, 54) They had an “audience-centered focus on meaning making” that supported multiple meanings/readings with less potential for conflict or controversy. (Katz, 54) This may reflect a shift in goals from changing the system to, instead, getting a place at the table. (Saslow, 274)

For lesbians, the principal challenge was that the male dominated art world wasn’t that interested in the female, especially lesbian, presence. However, the “appropriation and subversion of dominant male images” offered feminist and lesbian artists the opportunity to target gender/power relations in contemporary culture. (Katz, 54) Feminists noted that the “authoritative” catalogue of great works and masters, from which women were noticeably absent, was not neutral and actually demonstrated a male, Eurocentric bias. (Heartney, 9) They rejected the supposedly universal and gender neutral ideal of modernist abstraction. (Blake, 18) Feminist art also served to facilitate the introduction of other identity issues, such as race and
sexual identity, into the art discourse, including the exploration of queer sensibilities. (Heartney, 245) This significantly impacted how art was assessed and interpreted, and how art history addressed "the experiences and contributions of marginalized groups." (Heartney, 245)

By the 1980s twentieth century modernism had run its course, branching out into a "swampy stylistic delta labeled, for lack of a better term, postmodernism." (Saslow, 262) Post-structural theory "challenged artists ... to 'deconstruct' the hidden meanings of mass media and high culture ... to reveal their complicity in coercive power structures." (Heartney, 8) While scholars recognize that it is difficult to provide an adequate and comprehensive definition of "postmodernism", it is generally considered to be a "negation of modernism" and thus a rejection of its principles of "purity, authentic experience, and historical progress." (Heartney, 10) Postmodern artists changed "from making a mere object to making a critique of objects themselves, to 'queering' the process of creating art and history." (Saslow, 277)

**Postmodern Identity Concepts**

Since the late 1980s there has been a persistent conflict over the use of the term "queer" and its meaning which is relevant for the art world and issues of identity politics. The attempt to reclaim what was once a negative term has become a symbol of a generation gap within the gay world. (Davis, 4) The concept of queer encompasses a "variety of desires and hybrid identities, countenancing elements of play and sexual practice, which also transgress the norms of what some have seen as more ostensibly 'politically correct' forms of gay and lesbian identity." (Horne, 1) It has been associated with a willingness to be both "within and beyond the gay movement to recognize diverse and contradictory sexualities and lifestyles." (Horne, 6) Queer has been described as an attitude which is both "aggressive and anti-assimilationist." (Davis, 4)
The concept of “queer art” also presents a paradox. What it is and the forms that it takes almost defy definition – even though its spirit informs the work of many young artists and its existence is concerned with lifestyle. Emmanuel Cooper, in *Queer Spectacles* (1996), states that: “Queer art is part of a widespread ... reaction to a perceived complacency about art which claims to address issues around gay and lesbian identity, and the way this fails to acknowledge the political shift from art directed at lesbians/gays, to that seeking a wider and more general audience.” (Cooper, 13) Much of what queer artists do is to challenge the value of identity politics. (Blake, 10) Queer art is important because it helps to open for debate “how lesbian and gay identity has been theorized and represented in art....” (Cooper, 13) It is part of an ongoing search for a visual language that “expresses the hopes, anxieties, desires” of persons who are LGBTQ. (Cooper, 13) Also, it may help to bridge the gulf that separates heterosexuals and homosexuals, and be part of the discussion about individual and collective identity and the conflict between what concerns us as individuals and what should be public. (Cooper, 13)

Despite the fact that much has been written about queer culture, there really isn’t a simple definition that adequately or completely captures its scope and implications. (Cooper, 14) “[Q]ueer culture is concerned with aspects of social transgression, whether involving a variety of same-sex relationships, and/or cultural confrontations.” (Cooper, 14) A fundamental aspect of queer culture is its questioning and exploration of desire – how it is shaped and perceived, and how and in what form it can be expressed. A disruptive and potentially liberating aspect of queer culture is its “rejection of fixed notions of sexuality.” (Cooper, 14) It challenges fixed notions about gay/lesbian identity and the clarity of the line that separates gay (or sexually transgressive) and straight. (Cooper, 14) In describing the concept of queer, English states:
As Michael Warner has put it, because ‘[q]ueers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer,’ questions of subjectivity and desire are located squarely in the center of the critical consideration of how one finds one’s way to sexual, racial, political, and other social identifications as a subject whose very possibility is denied in normative frameworks. For the far from simple reason that ‘the logic of the sexual order [in which homosexuality is pathologized or altogether vanished] is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard account of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts. (English, 188)

Similarly, Judith Butler also argues against the discreteness of sexual identity categories. She articulates a sense of lesbianism as a contingent category that does not express an inner essence but rather is a “meaning produced in opposition to dominant forms of gender, forms which are given the effect of being natural by virtue of the repetition of their performance.” (Horne, 1) Butler proposes “that an identity is not ‘precisely a possession, but, rather … a mode of being disposed, a way of being for another or by virtue of another.”’ (English, 286) As a practice to connect people to each other, “identity is an instrument with which we submit to, and enter relationships of responsibility with, one another.” (English, 286)

Butler states that to align with a category or assume a homosexual identity may act as an affirmation, but it also may act “to constrain, legislate, determine, or specify one’s identity in ways that support the categories of homophobic and heterosexual thought.” (Butler, 307) She comments that she is not at ease with the idea of gay and lesbian theories because identity categories are “instruments of regulatory regimes” which may be used either to normalize “categories of oppressive structures” or to resist them. (Butler, 308) Butler relies on Foucault’s claim “that individual identity is not so much biological as cultural or ‘socially constructed.’” (Saslow, 275) Foucault argues that homosexuality, like any other sexual or class category, is an
artificial construct whose “definition changes as societies shift their tactics to ‘edit out’ threatening minorities.” (Saslow, 275) Butler argues that “the affirmation of ‘homosexuality’ is itself an extension of a homophobic discourse” but acknowledges that, while it can be “an instrument and an effect of power”, it also may serve as “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.” (Butler, 308) The fact that society may read any of us in a way that may not conform to our own sense of self demonstrates just how little control we actually have over how we are read.

**Conclusion**

English argues that our understanding of black art in the United States is inhibited by a tendency to assess the works of black artists by reference to their purported racial character. This is substantially driven by the reader’s viewpoint about what the nature of black art should be which is often grounded in views, prejudices, and pre-conceived notions that exist outside the actual work of art and not within the intention of the artist. The fact that black artists must continually prove their representativeness operates to restrain their right to difference, and acts as an obstacle to progression for those who consider art to be a function and implement of change. English disagrees that black artists can or should be read as if they shared a common enterprise, and he argues for a broader black representational space to develop a more complete understanding of black culture. English acknowledges that race is an important mode for artists who are black, but states that for contemporary black artists it is but one mode among several in which they elect to work.

When black artists are expected to produce a particular type or content of work to fulfill an obligation to the black community, there may be an expectation that the artist adopt the
community’s priorities. This type of consensus builds community but also operates to reproduce and enforce cultural and social limits. This creates a certain conventionalism from within the black community which constrains artistic freedom. Instead, art should be able to show the relations among black artists and subject matter without that being defined in advance.

When considering the application of these arguments within the context of art produced by sexual minorities, it is necessary to consider how gay and lesbian sexualities have been inscribed in past and current artistic production and reception. Because art reflects society, this requires a consideration of the historical, social and political environments in the United States. Homosexuality previously has been pathologized and defined as a sexual perversion, and homosexuals have been subject to various legal and social risks, including being treated as threats to national security. However, there has been a progression where gay and lesbian communities have gone from a condition of isolation to one where they developed a sense of community to where they arguably have experienced increased integration. Much of the impetus for these changes can be traced to social movements in the 1960s, including the success of the gay liberation movement and identity politics since Stonewall. However, the AIDS epidemic has had a devastating effect on the gay and lesbian communities, and homophobia continues to exist.

These societal changes have been reflected in the art world where there has been increased visibility and inclusiveness for sexual minorities. While “coming out” has been a chief political strategy after Stonewall, there are questions about what that really means. How is sexual identity properly defined? What is the impact of concepts, such as queer, which seek to encompass a variety of desires and hybrid identities, and to reject fixed notions of sexuality?
Influence of Self Identity for Contemporary Artists

Research Methodology

Research was performed to consider whether there is a tendency to assess works of art by contemporary artists (who identify themselves as LGBTQ) principally in terms of their sexual identity, and if that type of assessment limits the possibilities for interpretation or difference in their work. Following the approval of the Institutional Review Board application to conduct interviews, a process was undertaken to identify potential participants using the snowball or reputational method by contacting persons who might be willing to participate and to then ask them to help identify other potential participants. Over the course of more than three months, approximately twenty persons (e.g., artists, museum management, art history professors, and recognized experts), principally in New York City and San Francisco but also in several other regional cities, were contacted directly and indirectly. Four artists, three of whom identified themselves as white males and one who stated that his ancestry was part white and part Asian, agreed to participate. The age of each male participant is greater than 50 years old. Each participant has been successful as a professional artist. Their experiences include solo exhibitions, awards, private and corporate commissions, and public and corporate collections. They all also have degrees of higher education (in art or design) from well regarded institutions and programs. Although the number of interview participants is small, in light of the effort to find participants it may reflect some of the sensitivity associated with participating in research relating to sexual identity.
Due to the relatively limited number of participants and their homogeneous demographics, actions were also taken to expand the research by using published interviews with and/or essays written by other contemporary gay, lesbian or queer artists concerning how their sexual identity is inscribed in their art. Using this method, additional research was developed regarding four more artists, two of whom identify themselves as lesbian and two of whom identify as gay (one of whom is now deceased).

As regards the interview or questionnaire protocol, contact persons and potential participants were contacted by telephone and/or email to find out if they would be willing to participate in the project and/or if they were able to help by introducing other persons who might participate. Each of the artists who agreed to participate elected to complete written questionnaires, in lieu of verbal interviews, and consented to have their responses used in this work. Generally, the participants were asked to discuss the nature of their art work and their influences. They were asked a series of questions (see Appendices A and B) concerning why they became an artist, how long they have worked as an artist, and what that involves (from a working perspective) on a day-to-day basis. They were asked about the types of art they create, their artistic methods and practices, and their artistic aims. They were asked to discuss their influences (i.e., by art movements or other artists), identify other contemporary artists that they find interesting or inspiring, and to describe their artistic style (in terms of broader artistic movements). They were also asked to comment on their thoughts about the impact of their identity on their art. The purpose of these questions was to understand their experiences as artists, and to try to explore the influences, including identity, on their art. The questions were broadly presented so as not to impose my own views on the artists. In order to protect the confidentiality of the artists who participated, the following discussion does not contain any
information (i.e., name or geographic location) that could be used to identify any individual participant. Instead, a fictitious name has been assigned to each artist who participated (John White, Matt Jones, Robert Smith, and James Green).²

The additional research that was performed using publically available information (interviews and essays) concerning selected other artists attempted to generate comparable information (as requested from the artists who participated), to the extent available. Since this information was either already placed into the public realm by the particular artist (e.g., an essay that the artist published) or through a process in which they participated (e.g., an interview), there is no confidentiality issue and those artists (Robert Farber, Harmony Hammond, Sadie Lee, and Matthew Stradling) are identified by name.

A common concern among artists who identify themselves as gay, lesbian or queer is their self-identity – who and what they are and how they articulate their experiences in their art. Does their sexual identity act as an empirical category, and is that relevant to their artistic production? The works of the artists who participated in this project and those covered by the supplemental research may be broadly separated on the basis of either the existence or an absence of an apparent connection between their sexual identity and the works of art they create. This grouping may be based on whether or not the artist has expressed that their sexuality or sexual identity is an important mode in their work, or it may be arguably apparent based on a viewer’s reading of their work. When their sexual identity is considered important to their artistic work, the discussion addresses their views, to the extent expressed, about whether they wish to be viewed as a gay or lesbian artist or as an artist who is gay or lesbian, and the

² Information has also been generated from the web sites of participating artists. In order to protect the confidentiality of these artists their web sites are not listed in the Works Cited.
implications of that distinction. For five of the eight artists, their sexuality or sexual identity appeared to be important to or reflected, often in different ways or for different reasons, in their art work. For the remaining three, their sexual identity, while it might be an influence, appeared to be separate from the content of their work or is not readily apparent.

**Artists’ Questionnaires/Interviews**

John White, an artist who is gay, credits the creative environment of the home life provided by his parents as a major influence in his becoming an artist. He began painting and ceramics at an early age, and was exposed to the visual, musical, and theatrical arts when he was young. He later attended a preeminent art and design school, and has worked as a free-lance artist for his adult life. He has always been involved with some aspect of visual arts and design, and enjoys the creative process (whether that is painting, designing interior space or a garden, photography, or printmaking). He typically works on a theme and produces a series of paintings that relate to each other. He has had commissions for paintings, murals, and decorative paint finishes for residential and commercial clients. Over the course of his career he has had many solo exhibitions and has owned his own gallery/studio. In addition to showing his own work, his gallery has exhibited the work of many young unknown artists. He also works as an art teacher in the public school education system.

White commented that up until recently he had been more interested in process over content. But he has concluded that awareness of content can directly influence the choices that are made in the artistic process. He commented that “Process without content is just technique.” White’s style of art has changed dramatically over his career. Initially, he did mostly representational work (Southern regional) that was inspired by American artists such as Edward
Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood. Following the death of a family member, however, he became more connected with his Asian background and began to do more abstract work that reflects an Asian influence. His principal medium changed as well, moving from working with oil on canvas to mixed media on board (using much collage). His work became more minimal and abstract, although he recently has again begun to use representational imagery in some of his works. Descriptions of his work include elegant, understated, guarded and multilayered. His influences include film, fashion, and Asian philosophy and culture.

During his career he has been afraid of exposing himself, but he is working to overcome that fear. He did not comment that his sexual identity had any particular influence on his art or on his becoming an artist, but he did indicate that he does not consider himself as producing “gay art”. However, he stated that his current work is very autobiographical.

Matt Jones, a painter who is gay and lives in an urban area, principally works in an abstract style but also recently returned to a representational style for a series that he created. In addition to approximately 50 solo exhibits, his work has appeared in many group exhibits and is well represented in many public and corporate collections around the United States. He also will work on a theme or project and produce a series of paintings that relate to each other. Jones commented that he identified his artistic nature at an early age. He grew up in a family where his father was an artist, and he has a sibling (who is heterosexual) who also is an artist. Early in his career Jones taught art in the elementary schools. He thought that art was the most important occupation that one could pursue because it enhances life. He commented that “Creative effort is aimed at counterbalancing the destructivity in which humanity is involved.” He noted that art making in the West has always been tied to commerce. While art of merit has been developed outside of the capitalist system, it “has actually been a pretty good spur to creativity.”
Regarding the contemporary artists that he finds inspiring, he stated that, in his view, Andy Warhol was the most profound artist in the last half of the twentieth century because he returned the artist’s gaze to the outside world. Also, Rauschenberg and Johns were particularly important because they opened the path for Warhol. He recognizes Richard Serra as “the greatest living sculptor, because of a clear-sightedness combined with a bravura confidence.”

Jones’s abstractions are based on a mix of modernism, especially American modernism, and tribal art and design. He has commented that: “My paintings are an amalgam of impressions and memory, which inform intuitive choice-making.” Their references include both nature and man-in-nature. For his abstractions he generally works in oil paint, alkyd, and collage, but he also works in watercolor and gouache. He describes his work as powerful, structural, metaphorical and allegorical, and that his artistic aim is to elevate consciousness and enhance pleasure. He also has a strong background in drawing. While he is most recognized for his work in abstraction, his early works included landscapes, both constructed and flat collages that evolved from narrative realism. These were distilled figurations that drew upon Asian art influences and incorporated influences of cubism. Also, during the midst of the AIDS crisis his abstract works were infused with a sense of mortality shaped by the ubiquity of AIDS.

While Jones is openly gay, there is no indication that sexuality or sexual identity motivates his work. He has commented, however, that the erotic is at the base of creativity. He believes that gays are one of several groups who have been important contributors to contemporary American culture. He noted that, as “outsiders” gays may “see with acuity and relative objectivity, as if from afar, the workings of the society.”
Robert Smith, a painter who is gay and lives in an urban area, describes his artistic style as realism. He works in oil painting, watercolors, and print making. His work has appeared in numerous exhibits, and is represented in many public and corporate collections. He has received a number of awards, and many corporate and private commissions. He commented that his drawing talent was recognized when he was young, and that his work has been favorably received for its color, emotion, and skill level. His style is in the tradition of realist still life, and he includes photo realism, Claudio Bravo, and the Luminists as among his influences. He considers Gerhard Richter to be particularly inspiring.

Working principally with oil paint on linen and canvas, and watercolor on paper, Smith creates beautiful still life paintings and prints of shells, flowers (e.g., dahlias, roses, tulips, orchids), fruits (e.g., lemons, pears, strawberries) and vegetables (e.g., peppers, squash, artichokes), and landscape paintings and prints (e.g., coast lines, fields, trees and streams, etc.). He is inspired by the effect of luminous light and shadow, and the sensuous nature of the objects that he paints which he captures in paint and many layers of glaze. He states that he looks to capture the moment of wonder in everyday objects. While there is a sensuality evident in his works, particularly with his sensitivity to the texture of objects and the impact of light, there is no indication that his sexual identity has been an influence or has any connectivity to his work.

James Green, a painter who is gay and lives in an urban area, works in a straight-forward style of realism. He was raised in a creative environment with an artistic mother who encouraged him to paint and draw from an early age. Although he grew up admiring twentieth century painting, he ultimately had time to study old masters. Because of an injury, Green had stopped painting for several years, but later was influenced by the illness, courage, and deaths of friends to return to painting. He creates oil paintings on wood panels that are based on
photographic studies. His primary motivation in life is to create paintings, and his goal is to have his paintings survive him. Green is not dependent on the sale of his art for income, and so was not concerned about the need, in a consumerist/capitalistic society, to sell his art. For him the fact that we live in a consumerist society is not the issue, but rather “what our culture informs us to consume!”

Green has worked on this same project for some number of years seeking to portray, through his art, the dilemma between death and consciousness. His paintings, “through pictorial metaphor and allegory”, revolve around these themes, and consider the struggles of life (such as redemption, uncertainty, and departure) in the face of our mortality. In his work he attempts to integrate or emulate certain aspects of classical European painting, particularly Italian Renaissance painters, as well as some American painters. He believes that his style of art is somewhat out on sync with the modern world, but he does find the work of Odd Nerdrum inspiring because of his masterful technique.

Green did not comment during this project on whether his sexual identity had any particular influence on his art. However, some viewers may (or may not) read his sexual identity into his works because they are explicitly sexual in the sense that the subjects of all of these pieces are nude men, and always include the artist himself. His reason for including himself in these works relates to the reasons for their creation, which concern directness, honesty and introspection.

English, in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007), argues that our understanding of “black art” is inhibited by a tendency to limit the significance of works by black artists by reference to their racial character, and he argues against the view that black
artists should be read as if they shared a common enterprise. In considering the application of
English’s arguments within the LGBTQ context and as applied to the works produced by these
artists, it appears that the artists who participated in the project do not share a common
enterprise. The potential that their works would be understood by reference to their sexual
identity would depend on whether their sexual identities were disclosed together with, or if they
could be discerned from, their art works. None of these artists commented that their sexual
identity had any particular influence on their art. For two of the artists (Jones and Smith), who
have achieved a high level of professional and financial success (as measured by the number of
works displayed in public and private collections, awards, and commissions), there was a clear
separation of their sexual identity and artistic production. This is consistent with the fact that
their works have been accepted by a broad audience and are not directed at or limited to viewers
who are gay or lesbian. Smith paints still lifes and landscapes in a realistic style which, while
sensuously beautiful, do not contain explicit sexuality. Jones works principally in an abstract
style, and, while his works may avail themselves of multiple meanings (some of which could be
informed by sexual identity), they also are not apparently or overtly sexual.

White’s art, which initially followed an American regional style but has most recently
been in an abstract style, also does not contain explicitly sexual content and would not appear to
reflect his sexual identity. He has described his work as guarded and has acknowledged that he
has been afraid of exposing himself. However, he also indicated that his current art has become
increasingly autobiographical. In our society most people seem to hold the view that persons
have the right to be gay so long as they keep their activities private. But if they call public
attention to the fact that they are gay, it may generate fear in people who are not homosexual.
(Young, 120) Artists who are LGBTQ who make their personal life public risk disapproval from
family and community, or can be subject to discrimination or artistic stereotyping. (Hammond Lesbian Show, 46) Of the four participants, Green's work, which is in a realistic style influenced by the Italian Renaissance, was the only one whose work might be considered to be sexual. It also appears as if it may be autobiographical inasmuch as the artist is the subject in all of the pieces (sometimes together with one other male nude subject). Therefore, a viewer might reasonably read the sexual identity of Green into his work based on its content. However, this effort to discern his sexual identity through his work raises an issue of which functions must actually be performed to secure such identification and reach a presumed knowability of identity?

For artistic, professional or personal reasons, the art works of White, Jones and Smith do not reflect their sexual identity. They have all been financially and professionally successful in their art. White, whose recent work is increasingly autobiographical, also is employed as an art teacher. Green, whose work is the most sexually explicit, does not depend solely on the sale of his art work for his income. Therefore, it would appear that he would be less impacted by any risk that the disclosure of his sexual identity could limit the market for his art. None of these artists labeled themselves as “gay artists” (rather than artists who are gay) nor did indicate that they produced “gay art”. Also, they did not describe themselves as “queer.” Artists may wish or be willing to be known as artists who are gay, lesbian, or queer, but not want to be grouped under the composite terms gay or lesbian artist. (Horne, 4) Just as English has argued (with respect to black artists), if we essentialize an artist or his or her art work by labeling them as gay art or a gay artist, we may deny their right to difference and limit the viewer’s opportunity to find new information and meanings in the works. Whether or not these artists want to be labeled as gay
artists, the identification of their work as the work of a “gay” artist could still determine meanings for some viewers. (Horne, 4)

Three of the artists (White, Jones, and Green) have indicated that their artistic work or style had at some time been influenced by their own health or the health or death of family or friends. Several of the participants appeared to have lost friends who died from AIDS, and the work of Green is expressly devoted to issues concerning mortality. The art of Green may be a vehicle to work through feelings of loss, grief, and a preoccupation with mortality. Interestingly, Green describes his art as somewhat out of sync with modern art styles, with the implication that recent art movements or styles (whether that be modernism, postmodernism, Pop art, Minimalism, conceptual art, etc.) were inadequate for the artist. The artistic styles of the participants varied with two of the artists (White and Jones) working principally in abstraction. The use of abstraction may allow them to exceed limits that may be imposed by “social categories and positions.” (English, 214) Modernist orthodoxy has postulated that in order for art to be meaningful “it should avoid depicting particular events or people, but … seek out some essence which could be conveyed as much spiritually as literally.” (Cooper, 24) However, these styles were not adequate for the other two artists (Smith and Green) who employed variants of realism.

Jones and Smith commented on being different or how being gay may facilitate seeing the world differently. While gay or lesbians may share an outside position, Scholder states that they are still contingent on the signs and narratives of the dominant culture. “They are about being marginalized for a sexuality that deviates from the norm, yet engaging with the world, reading cultural works with a subversive gaze. This position is informed by the knowledge of sex as power, and it is aware of the subversive possibilities of that power.” (Scholder, 178)
While the artists in the project do not represent any sort of statistically valid sample, the sample does add to the demonstration that the art of gay or lesbian artists is not monolithic. While sexual identity is important for LGBTQ artists, it is not necessarily the only mode in which they work. (Scholder, 179)

Supplemental Research

Sadie Lee is a lesbian artist who works in a realism style. She states that her identity as a lesbian is important for her art because she wants to challenge preconceived notions about lesbianism. (Lee, 120) Her paintings are personal and a representation of people around her with whom she has involvement. Most of these paintings are of women who are lesbians who are “aware of their sexuality.” (Lee, 122) However, their sexuality is only part of her interest in them. (Lee, 121) Lee indicates that she wants to explore the relationship between women, and tries to establish a narrative where the subject and the viewer both play a part. She paints “women in a positive, provocative, sometimes even sarcastic way”. (Lee, 124) Lee works with eye contact, color, stance and the size of the figure, and tries to engage the viewer through direct eye contact with the subject. Because of that eye contact, the subject can be perceived as confident but also as a challenging or threatening presence.

Although openly lesbian, Lee does not want to be labeled as a “lesbian artist”. That would risk being seen as someone who produces “lesbian imagery rather than an artist in her own right.” (Lee, 120) She wants for her art to be considered as technically accomplished pieces; she does not want to simply produce works of lesbian propaganda. (Lee, 124) She recognizes that there has been little information provided historically about women artists, so there is good reason to make the public aware of the artist’s gender. However, putting someone
under a category of “lesbian artist” may operate to reinforce a belief that the category is outside the norm. This would show society that lesbians and gays exist, but may “suggest that we wish to separate ourselves from that society by remaining within our separate category.” (Lee, 120)

Lee recognizes that there are certain advantages to being labeled as a lesbian artist, including acting as a positive role model for other lesbians, creating greater visibility for artists who are lesbian, and even benefitting from what she describes as “positive discrimination” where she might be invited to exhibit precisely because she is a lesbian. (Lee, 120) These could be positive benefits for the lesbian community, but she perceives a potentially adverse impact if that makes it more difficult for her (or other artists) to promote a positive image to those viewers who are most likely to be prejudiced. She states that if the artist gives out too much information in advance, then that can pre-determine how an audience may perceive a work before they even see it. In that event, her fear is that audiences may stay away from her art work if they feel some alienation based on her sexual identity or if they are simply not interested because they feel like they have nothing in common with her. Lee states that some of her images are “deliberately ambiguous” with a strong message that can be read on multiple levels which “mean different things to different people.” (Lee, 120) She would prefer for viewers to first look at her work, and then decide if they like it and want more information.

Lee wants viewers to be able to respond to the images she creates without information about her sexuality “determining their reaction.” (Lee, 121) “This is an automatic privilege for most heterosexual artists, but because I am a lesbian I am expected to constantly talk about and justify it, rather than letting the content of the paintings register or not, depending on the viewer.” (Lee, 121) She comments further: “It is a strange feeling that in being a lesbian artist I have become the property of that community who feel they have a right to tell me who I ought to
paint.” (Lee, 124) Lee is not concerned that her paintings always be perfectly understood by the viewer, and recognizes that sometimes a viewer may perceive something that she did not intend or anticipate, and thus add a new dimension.

Matthew Stradling, who is gay, states that it is his duty to declare his sexuality in his work. (Stradling, 139) His sexuality and art are “inextricably linked.” (Stradling, 140) He describes his art as in the tradition of the Symbolists and Decadents, and he rejects Abstract Expressionism. Stradling seeks to achieve craftsmanship in his work, “often mimicking the techniques of the Old Masters.” (Flore, 2) Among his favorite artists he includes Matthew Barney, Andy Warhol, Gustav Klimt, Gustave Moreau, Peter Paul Rubens, Pierre et Gilles, and Jeff Koons. (Flore, 3) Stradling looks to present positive images of homosexual desire, and principally paints nudes. (Flore, 2) He strives to create an element of timelessness in his works; his subjects are ambiguous and don’t have to be situated within a contemporary arena. (Stradling, 139) He explores the links between the spiritual and physical ecstasy, and describes his works as “‘difficult’ and outside the mainstream….” (Flore, 2) Stradling’s works “can be theatrical and luxuriant, sexual and dreamlike, but usually with an edge of fear and repulsion.” (Flore, 2)

In Stradling’s view, the erotic brings us closer to death, and sex makes him more aware of his own mortality and vulnerability. (Stradling, 143) Following the AIDS epidemic, he says that his paintings became “more sober, the imagery simpler and the content more expressive of sorrow.” (Stradling, 143) His nudes became less about sexuality and more about vulnerability. (Stradling, 143) He comments that creating erotic art can be charged with “excitement and liberation” but after AIDS it became “tainted with a sense of anguish and loss.” (Stradling, 143) As a homosexual, he believes that he has an insight on viewing the world that few straight people could have. “As ‘outsiders’, gay people can view society with an eye unclouded by conformity.”
(Stradling, 139) As a member of a minority group, homosexuals “have learned to deal with prejudice, humiliation, frustration, injustice and ultimately the challenge of being honest.”

(Stradling, 139) Painting, despite being viewed as a product for commercial consumption, provides a medium away from the pressures of social convention, where the artist can be completely honest. Painting is a “confessional experience” where the artist bears his feelings, thoughts, desires and fears. (Stradling, 140) However, while painting as a medium permits this, galleries still are reluctant to show works which show sexuality and particularly homosexuality.

Although sexuality motivates Stradling’s work, it is not his only concern. He states he would prefer to be considered an artist who is gay rather than a gay artist because of his fear that being labeled as a gay artist would suggest that his work is only for a gay audience, and because of a concern over the “ghettoization” of gay and lesbian visual arts. In his view, labels would only reduce the potential audience that he could reach. Instead, he would like to promote dialogue, regardless of sexuality, and “break down the prejudices that the art world seems to foster – especially in terms of sexuality.” (Flore, 4 – 5)

Robert Farber was an artist who was gay whose life was claimed prematurely by AIDS. The disease became the subject for his art as he sought to accompany others who were similarly impacted. He indicated that when he was faced with his mortality and knew that his time was limited, it forced him to face the fundamental issues in his life and in his work. One reaction to facing death is that it can cause us to value and fully use the time that we do have. As an artist, Farber stated that he felt that he had a “medium and a forum” where he could “communicate my thoughts about mortality and human frailty” so that this might help others. (Farber, 115) He stated that through his paintings he sought to be genuine. “It’s almost as if I try to give each
painting the gift of my sincerity which in turn brings another aspect to my work.” (Farber, 115)

Further, his work served as evidence that he was still here.

Farber worked in abstraction which allowed him to “communicate things that cannot be described by the linear narrative.” (Farber, 115) Abstraction as a style allowed him to approach his work “more improvisationally and less willfully” and taught him to trust his intuition. (Farber, 116) He used a variety of materials, such as oil, encaustic, and concrete, in producing mixed media works. He looked to find shape and substance to express his experience in living with AIDS, and felt that through abstraction he was better “able to communicate in universal terms the themes of facing one’s own death, the diminishing of possibilities, fear and the search for relief.” (Farber, 119) After his diagnosis he created works whose theme compared the AIDS epidemic with the Black Death or Plague of 1348 that had devastated Europe. In his mixed media work he took visual motifs from the Middle Ages, things like gargoyles, marble, pieces of Gothic architecture, and then juxtaposed them against elements found in “contemporary art such as photographic imagery of all kinds, modernist abstraction, medical paraphernalia and silk screens.” (Farber, 116) Then he inserted texts that he had found from each of these eras. Conceptually, this theme contained an element of battle, against AIDS, against homophobia, and, inside himself, against the disease. He stated that “They all communicate what it is like to face one’s own death with an eloquence and power that could never be captured in an academic account or historical description.” (Farber, 116)

Farber stated that although he was openly gay, he did not consider himself a “gay artist” because he did not view his work as arising from his sexual identity. In fact, he challenged the idea of whether there even was something that properly could be called gay or lesbian art. But he stated that for as long as he could remember he did feel different from other people. He
commented that this feeling of difference did play “a role in my development of artistic sensibility”. (Farber, 115) In his view, artists generally have felt outside the mainstream. “It is a vantage point from which artists can observe and comment on what others take for granted as part of their daily commerce in society.” (Farber, 115)

Harmony Hammond is lesbian artist who helped found the feminist art movement in the 1970s. She is a painter and sculptor, with over 40 solo exhibits, and a write and curator. She helped found the A.I.R., the first feminist cooperative art gallery (in 1972) and was a co-founder of Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics (in 1976). She has worked principally within the boundaries of modernist and abstraction. Among her influences, she includes African, Oceanic and Native American art. Her works are often substantial, ambiguous, and intensely colored, and incorporate a broad array of mediums and materials. Her current works (exhibited in 2011) include a collection of “large, thickly painted, monochrome paintings.” (Hammond Web) These engage with narratives of abstraction and monochrome, but come out of “post-minimalist concerns with materials and process....” (Hammond Web) They “combine oil paint, canvas, wax, tarps, synthetic fiber, metal grommets, pushpins, and staples ....” (Hammond Web) These paintings are wrapped with straps of grommeted canvas which convey a sense of “banding, binding, bandaging and bondage” and allude to the layers underneath the painted surface. (Hammond Web) They reference back to a series of wrapped rag sculptures that she created in the late 1970s and early 1980s that were intended to create a lesbian presence that was sensual/sexual. In those earlier works she combined materials in order to create abstract forms that were intended to be read as body parts and sexual acts. In her works she addresses issues concerning equal rights, intolerance, and freedom of creativity.
In a recent interview, Hammond explains how when she first began working as an artist there were very few lesbians in the art world. Most of them worked abstractly with a focus on materials and process which "brought a gender consciousness to that way of working." (Hammond Interview, 3) The feminist and lesbian organizing efforts at that time wanted to acknowledge and give value to "women's experiences, lives, labor, and culture." (Hammond Interview, 4) In discussing her early organizing efforts, Hammond states that: "For me it was about self-determination, and about being a lesbian artist publically, about getting the two words, 'lesbian' and 'artist' together and understanding that as a political gesture." (Hammond Interview, 5) But she also commented that sometimes her art work has dealt with sexuality and sometimes it does not, and that this has been true over the course of her career.

Hammond discussed the challenges that she faced in trying to get editorial support and contributors when she devoted an early issue of Heresies to art created by lesbian artists. The women who declined to participate had several reasons. Some were concerned that being labeled as "lesbian" would limit how their work was viewed, especially if it were presented in an issue that was devoted solely to lesbian artists. There also were concerns over potential professional impact and whether that might damage their careers. Some did not want to participate because the magazine was a feminist magazine rather than a lesbian one. For others, their art was a safe place for them to deal with their feelings, their private space, and they weren't willing to make that public. After she published the lesbian art issue of Heresies, Hammond curated a lesbian art exhibit ("A Lesbian Art Show") where she encountered similar concerns. In her view, the artists who participated in the show may have felt isolated and vulnerable, but the experience helped to build community and empower them.
Hammond commented on current mainstream LGBTQ politics with its emphasis on sameness and equality.

I believe in equality but not in sameness … I like the notion of “queerness” and a queer identity as a fluid continuum of sexualities. But in the last few years, the notion of “queer” has been co-opted. It has become so open that it undermines its radical potential. (Hammond Interview, 10 - 11)

The sexuality or sexual identity of each of these four artists (Lee, Stradling, Farber, and Hammond) was important and connected to their work, although one (Hammond) expressly stated that she also produced work that was not influenced by her sexuality. Three of these artists (Lee, Stradling, and Farber) stated that they did not want to be labeled as a gay or lesbian artist. Lee expressed the concern that being labeled as a lesbian artist would cause her to be read as someone who produces lesbian imagery rather than an as artist who was technically accomplished in her own right. While being labeled as a lesbian artist would promote lesbian visibility, it could also convey an idea that lesbians sought to separate themselves, or that she wanted to separate herself, from the rest of society. Lee stated that she had a goal to promote a positive image for the lesbian community to persons who may be prejudiced, and that being labeled would make it more difficult to initiate that dialogue. She expressed the concern (similar to the issue English raised) that being labeled as a lesbian artist would require that she justify herself and her art not only to the heterosexual viewers but to the lesbian viewers as well who may believe that they are entitled to dictate to her what she should be painting.

While Stradling stated that his art was inscribed by his sexuality, he did not wish to be labeled as a gay artist because that would suggest that his art was intended only for a gay audience, and reduce the potential audience for his art. His goal was to present a positive image
of homosexual desire, and to initiate dialogue to break down prejudice. He was also concerned
over the ghettoization of the visual arts produced by gays and lesbians. Similarly, Farber stated
that he did not consider himself a gay artist and ventured so far as to assert that he even rejected
the idea of gay or lesbian art. In a variance from the other artists discussed in this section,
Hammond sees herself as a lesbian artist and had spent a significant portion of her life engaged
in political activities promoting feminist identity politics and lesbian artists. While she
recognized some of the same types of concerns as those expressed by these artists, it appears that
her overriding objective was to build community and empower women.

Both of these artists who were gay (Stradling, and Farber) had been impacted by the
AIDS epidemic which directly affected the content of their work. The anguish and loss that
Stradling experienced were infused into the character of the nudes he painted. Farber, who died
from AIDS, committed his art to reach out to others who were also impacted, and created his art
as part of his assertion that he was still alive. Both of these men expressed the importance of
honesty and genuineness in their work. Similar to several of the artists who were participants in
this project, Stradling and Farber each expressed how gays and artists (because they were
different from other people) had a unique perspective on society that was not clouded by
conformity.

Two of these artists (Farber and Hammond) worked in abstraction. For Farber
abstraction allowed him to work more improvisationally and intuitively. He found abstraction
uniquely well suited to communicate in a non-linear way the universal themes in facing one’s
death. Similarly, Hammond also uses abstraction to communicate universal themes. However,
the other two artists (Lee and Stradling) found working in realism (or a variant) to be well suited
for addressing issues concerning mortality and vulnerability.
Conclusion

In considering whether and how these artists’ sexuality may be inscribed in the works of art they have created, it appears that sexual identity was not a significant factor for three (out of four) of the artists who completed questionnaires, but was a significant factor for all of the artists in the supplemental research group. This may reflect that persons who desired to promote the connectivity between their sexuality and art might be more likely to be published. Despite the importance of sexuality (same sex desire) for a majority of these artists, only one of the artists (across both groups) viewed himself or herself as a gay or lesbian artist (rather than an artist who is gay). The artist (Hammond) who did describe herself as a lesbian artist had spent a good portion of her adult life promoting identity politics and lesbian artists.

There were a number of explanations provided by the other artists for rejecting the label as a gay or lesbian artist. These concerned how that might influence how their work is viewed and perceived, and whether that would restrict or constrain the potential meaning that the viewer otherwise might make. Other concerns that were expressed addressed how labeling could restrict efforts to promote positive images of homosexuality, initiating dialogue with prejudiced persons, and the artist’s ability to be different because of pressures to accede to the goals of the power structure of the social group identified by the label.

There was no one dominant artistic style that was used by these artists, although half worked principally in abstraction, and the other four (two from each group) worked principally in realism or a variant thereof. Some of the artists found in abstraction a style that worked to help them communicate universal values, to communicate in a non-linear way, and to exceed limits that may be imposed by categories and limits. Others found different variants of realism more suited to their artistic goals and strategies.
There were several considerations that were relevant for both the artists who participated in the project, and for those whose information was developed from publically available sources. A majority of the artists had been impacted by health issues and the death of family or friends, some from AIDS. Also, half of the artists considered that being gay facilitated seeing the world differently because they had a unique perspective not clouded by conformity.
Discourse Analysis: Art and Sexual Identity

There has been surprisingly little academic study that considers the relationship between sexual identity and art. Any conceptual links between them have been ignored by critics and academics as frequently as they have been assumed by the general public. (Reed, 1) Scholarship has routinely treated art as either “purely aesthetic or an act of individual expression with (paradoxically) universal appeal.” (Reed, 1) When considering whether there is a tendency to assess works of contemporary artists by reference to their sexual identity, questions are presented concerning how we define sexual identity and how gay and lesbian sexual identities have been inscribed into past and current artistic production and reception.

Art and Sexual Identity Intertwined

The argument that the concept of “homosexuality” is actually a modern invention has been most persuasively presented by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* (1976). Foucault posited that homosexuality as a “coherent conceptual category” did not exist before the nineteenth century. (Reed, 2) What men did together with other men was viewed differently from what women did together, and erotic behavior was not classified on the basis of the participants’ biological sex. (Reed, 2) In the nineteenth century theories of personality were developed which resulted in the “classification of ‘people’s pleasures.’” (Reed, 2) According to Foucault, “the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form .... Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions ... less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.” (Foucault, 43)
A comparable progression may be seen in the definition of what is art. Pre-modern definitions focused on the technique or skill of the artist, very much like what we today call "craft". In the thirteenth century Thomas Acquinas wrote about "the arts of shoemaking, cooking, juggling, and grammar, as well as sculpture and painting." (Reed, 2) By the late eighteenth century, however, the fine arts were separated from other professions. By that time they had been reconceived to no longer be a demonstration of learned knowledge or skill, but instead "as outpourings of the innate genius of a specially gifted type of person: the artist." (Reed, 2) Reed, in *Art and Homosexuality* (2011), argues that when these histories came together the names of certain artists (e.g., Michelangelo) and even the idea of art began to be associated with homosexuality.

Within our culture heterosexuality has established itself "as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real...." (Butler, 312) The heterosexual/homosexual binary that was created was intended to secure a group of people as "delimited, visible, and knowable," in part, to penalize and control them. (Katz, 56) As commented by Katz, "the reduction of sexuality into a binary model consisting of the normal and the permitted versus the abnormal and proscribed" formed a basis for policing deviants that was not based on their acts but on their supposed innate nature. (Katz, 66)

The social and civil rights movements in the 1960s demonstrated that minority identity could be part of the American promise. Following Stonewall the gay and lesbian communities increasingly coalesced around a minority model that asserted gay identity and culture. This model promoted a notion of a gay and lesbian community that is separated from the dominant heterosexual norm and defined by a loose set of differences from the straight world. In certain respects, this articulation of sexual difference and separateness actually worked to reinforce the
heterosexual/homosexual binary model. Identity politics, which insisted on equality for gays and lesbians, inserted a gay presence into politics and society with "coming out" as its principal political strategy. The development of more visible gay and lesbian communities provided an opportunity for resistance to the dominant power structure. One consequence of these politics was the enforcement of a conceptual framework that separates gay from straight and defines sexuality as the most relevant aspect of a person's character. It presented issues concerning representation and what being gay or lesbian meant. These "movements have further politicized sexual and erotic experience by resisting notions of 'normal' sexuality and raising issues of decisionmaking rights in matters of love, intimacy and erotic imagery." (Young, 87 – 88)

It may be argued that the concepts of art and homosexuality historically have been intertwined. Under modernist orthodoxy, in order for art to be meaningful it needed to be abstract. It needed to avoid representation (depicting specific events or people), and instead seek out an essence to be conveyed spiritually. (Cooper, 24) Abstraction was used as a mode where an artist could exceed limits and restructure an "image’s familiarity to call attention to the ways that we experience images." (English, 214) Modernist orthodoxy also promoted the primacy of form over content. Gay and lesbian artists responded to this "objectivity" by developing a coded language that concerned identity and desire. (Scholder, 178)

Postmodernism, which is generally considered to be a negation of and a reaction to modernism, is often "characterized in terms of a dislocation or decentering of the major forms of modernist representation...." (Horne, 2) Although perhaps not causal, the development of post-structuralist theory, which challenged artists to deconstruct hidden meanings and reveal coercive power structures, also coincided with the rise of gay and lesbian identity politics.
A significant aspect of some of the more recent art produced by gay and lesbian artists was its alienation from late modernism because of modernism’s perceived inability to offer a wide enough range of meanings. (Cooper, 18) Or in other words, for some artists modernism did not effectively address their issues of concern. As contemporary art has intersected with the social and political world, there has been an evolution from art that has celebrated specific identities to one which reflects a postmodern skepticism about selfhood and promotes a more fluid definition of identity. (Heartney, 12)

Gay and lesbian artistic productions, despite their different expressions, have been linked by a sense of community consisting of a number of different groups including people who considered themselves “queer.” (Scholder, 178) Gays, lesbians, and queers don’t share any set physical characteristics or attributes (like race), and are in a minority because of what they do rather than who they are. (Blake, 12) “Queer”, which is symbolic of a generational gap in the gay world, alludes to a way of life where “sexual freedom and gender transgression are but component parts.” (Blake, 7) The increased use of the term “queer” reflects some level of dissatisfaction with the coherence of a “gay” or “lesbian” identity, and a desire to include a broader range of constituencies “opposed to conventional notions of sexuality and gender.” (Reed, 231) It promotes a fluid continuum of sexualities (which reminds one of the findings in the Kinsey report that presented sexuality as a continuum). Queer is both within and without, and challenges the value of identity politics. However, has it become so broad or inclusive that it loses its radical potential? (Hammond Interview, 10-11)

Iris Marion Young, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), comments that members of social groups have an affinity with each other because they share similar experiences or ways of life. (Young, 43) While they may share objective attributes, it is their sense of
identity which defines the group. She submits that group affinity is characterized by what Heidegger “calls ‘thrownness’: one finds oneself as a member of a group, which one experiences as always already having been. For our identities are defined in relation to how others identify us, and they do so in terms of groups which are always already associated with specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms.” (Young, 46) The logic of identity, however, actually operates to deny or repress difference. Young explains that the “logic of identity flees from the sensuous particularity of experience, with its ambiguities, and seeks to generate stable categories.” (Young, 98) In attempting to bring the object under a concept, thought “denies the difference between the object and the subject” as “it seeks a unity of a thinking subject with the object thought....” (Young, 98) However, any particular entity or situation when compared to another entity or situation may be expected to have some similarities and some differences so that they are not absolutely the same or different. (Young, 99) By trying to bring everything under a common control, and “to reduce the differently similar to the same”, it changes what is merely different into an absolute other. (Young, 99) In Young’s view, this “inevitably generates dichotomy instead of unity, because the move to bring particulars under a universal category creates a distinction between inside and outside.” (Young, 99) As a result, difference gets shoved into a hierarchical opposition. “Difference ... congeals as the binary opposition a/not-a. In every case the unity of positive category is achieved only at the expense of an expelled, unaccounted for chaotic realm of the accidental.” (Young, 99) When the dominant culture defines some groups as the different, or as other, then the members of those groups are devalued and considered deviant to the dominant norm. (Young, 123)

The perspective that identity and culture are nonorganic constructs is an important aspect of postmodernist thought. (Blake, 12) Butler argues against the discreteness of sexual identity
categories that she describes as “instruments of regulatory regimes.” (Butler, 308) She understands herself as someone who is eligible for the lesbian category “because of an attraction to the dissolution of boundaries that identify what is masculine, feminine, or even heterosexual.” (Horne, 1) For Butler, gender is actually a form of performance that can serve as a point of resistance, and that is not an “inevitable expression of an interior essence.” (Reed, 231) In modern culture “the presence and meaning of same-sex desires are inseparable from modes of power, which both censure and produce sexualized identities, whatever their provisionality.” (Horne, 2) Under Butler’s “performance theory,” individuals can actually choose or change identities. Once all gendered categories are seen as performative and transitory, heterosexuals won’t be uniquely separated from either lesbians or gays. (Horne, 1) Butler relies on Foucault’s claim that individual identity is not so much biological as it is cultural or socially constructed. Young similarly argues in favor of a relational model of identity that rejects exclusions with the result that difference would no longer imply that groups would lie outside of one another. In her view, we should focus on what it means to be within a group, not by defining a set of exclusionary criteria but based on an affirmation of their affinity. Jonathan Dollimore extends this and argues that sexuality should be understood relationally, not on the basis of “internal relations of sexual difference” but rather focusing on “the relations between the sexual and the nonsexual....” (English, 252)

Concepts and definitions of sexual identity are evolving. “Queer” challenges the idea that sexual identity is permanently embodied; it rejects fixed notions of sexuality and thus subverts group definitions of homosexuality (e.g., gay and lesbian). Although the concept of “queer” has not served to unite, it has increased awareness or acceptance of the idea that there may be a variety of sexual identities which are fluid, and that sexual identity should not be forced into a
binary model. One of the challenges that such a fluid concept of sexual identity must face is what this rejection means with respect to assumptions about shared feelings and experiences that we may associate with sexual identity. Without them, what is the basis for commonality among those communities? (Reed, 238)

**Inscription of Sexual Identity**

There is an argument that persons who share experiences of sexual desire and social discrimination may develop common thoughts and feelings. A corollary may then suggest that homosexuals may share sensibilities that are manifested in their art. (Reed, 198) The following reviews how sexual identity was inscribed (in the past) into the art of selected influential artists (Rauschenberg, Warhol and Mapplethorpe). This discussion does not attempt to broadly survey the artistic practices of a broader group of artists who were homosexual, but it should serve to identify certain historical aesthetic attitudes as a point of reference to help create a context for considering the practices of contemporary gay, lesbian or queer artists. I will then discuss whether the sexual identities of the artists in the interview and supplemental research groups are inscribed into their art works, and, if so, whether there may be a tendency to assess their art on the basis of their identity.

**Past Inscription.** The period during and following World War II was a time of great societal change in the United States; “homosexuality was both evoked and repressed.” (Reed, 149) Politicians, who wanted the public to see them as defenders of national security, fixed their aim against homosexuals by equating them with Communists and criminals. Public anxiety over homosexuality was further fueled by the Kinsey report, as well as the growing influence of Freudian analysis. Freudian analysis theorized that “homosexuality was a stage of childhood
sexual development in which some adults remained pathologically arrested ....” (Reed, 151) This led to anxiety that homosexuality “was latent in everyone.” (Reed, 151) In this environment, homosexuals “developed an outsider’s skepticism about social and legal norms as well as sophisticated skills of masking and dissimulation.” (Reed, 151)

Postwar art centered on a return to abstraction and away from realist styles (e.g., those that recalled Michelangelo and Renaissance art). (Reed, 152) In theory, abstract expressionists, like Pollock, were dedicated to the “free expression of emotion” but in reality they were careful about which emotions to express. (Reed, 153) Rauschenberg challenged the abstract expressionist belief that art expresses its creator. Rauschenberg actually revealed very little about himself in his art. In his Combines he included an array of personal and autobiographical materials (e.g., letters and photographs), but the sheer quantity of all of the materials in these works operated to obscure or camouflage the meaning of some of these elements. (Katz, 42) Assumptions about artistic self-expression were eliminated, and his Combines put the onus on meaning making directly on the viewers. (Reed, 156) When considering Jasper Johns’ American flag paintings we also see that his “art is less an expression of homosexuality than a deployment of codes that dares viewers to make sense of what they see.” (Reed, 157) The works of Rauschenberg and Johns reflected the sexual secrecy of postwar America, and particularly homosexuality. (Reed, 158) By the end of the 1950s, their art became “the well-publicized artistic expression of a social class defined by its commitment to secrecy.” (Reed, 159)

Those cultural tensions exploded in the 1960s with the advent of Pop art. Pop art’s use of mass media and popular imagery “fundamentally undermined definitions of modern art as self-expressive and abstract....” (Reed, 162) As we look back, some see this as the beginning of “postmodernism”. Andy Warhol was the preeminent Pop artist who turned celebrities and
products into icons of Pop art. (Heartney, 16) This changed the public’s ideas about art and artists. Warhol blurred his life with his art, and the distinction between private and public.

“The ‘look’ of homosexuality in Warhol’s art … is not a matter of erudite codes.” (Reed, 161) Warhol contested what it meant for art to be modern through his “subversive anti-individualism ….” (Reed, 162) His sources in mass imagery, production, marketing, and consumption “also challenged the visual signifiers of masculine heterosexuality.” (Reed, 162)

Towards the end of his career Warhol created his *Torso* (1977) series which repeated images of male nudes that was comparable to the process he used for his Campbell’s soup cans. Warhol asserted that pornography is just like any other commodity when he commented “‘All you had to do was figure out what turned you on, and then just buy the dirty magazines and movie prints that are right for you, the way you’d go for the right pills or the right cans of food.’” (Reed, 175)

“Post modernism challenged modernism’s insistence on abstraction” by employing “linguistic and social theories that emphasized the cultural and historical forces that inform our experiences … and … ourselves.” (Reed, 176) Modernists treated identity as something that was pre-existing that could be intuitively expressed. “[P]ostmodernists saw identity as an ongoing engagement with languages, including visual signs.” (Reed, 176)

The roots of queer art can be identified in the works of several artists, including the sexually explicit photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. (Cooper, 13) One response to the “objectivity” of modernism by gays and lesbians had been to employ a coded language regarding identity and desire. However, that was not Mapplethorpe’s approach. Instead, he called on his own experiences to “communicate his desire to others.” (Cooper, 18) He presented sadomasochistic images and rituals, pictures that displayed his love of black men, and “deviant aspects of gay subcultural life.” (Cooper, 18) His photographs had a “hard-hitting documentary”
feel as well as sensitive content; they transgressed boundaries and were confrontational. (Cooper, 18) As commented by Ligon, Mapplethorpe had, in a way reminiscent of Warhol, "an ability to mirror the doubts and prejudices of his spectators, to make them see what they do not want to see." (Cooper 19)

**Present Inscription.** The artists who agreed to participate in the interview group have similar demographics (e.g., race, sex, age, education). They all have had successful careers as professional artists, and several have been or are teachers. Based on their demographics, they fall on the side of the generational divide where they may be more likely to identify themselves as gay rather than queer. These artists all described themselves as gay. The artists who were the subjects of the supplemental research included two males who are/were gay, and two female artists who are lesbians. In considering whether there is a tendency to assess the works of arts based on the sexual identity of artists, it would be most desirable to conduct surveys and research on viewers to determine the actual viewer reception to specific pieces of art. But in lieu of that, the project attempted to consider how the sexual identity of the artists informed their art based on information provided by the artist and by viewing reproductions of their works.

Sexual identity was important for the art of all four of the artists (Lee, Stradling, Farber, and Hammond) in the supplemental research group (based on their own statements and copies of their works), but only appeared to be important for the work of one of the artists (Green) in the interview group (based on the subject matter of his paintings). For the other three artists in the interview group (White, Jones, and Smith), their sexuality was separate and not apparently discernible from their artistic work. Therefore, for the interview group, who had similarities in their demographics, their sexual identity appeared to have limited impact on the artistic works. There were, however, several commonalities and themes (e.g., mortality, death, honesty,
integrity, etc.) that were important to the art of several of the artists across both groups (the interview group and the supplemental research group) irrespective of the influence of their sexual identity on their works. The way that sexual identity influenced the art of each of the artists for whom it was important also differed for each artist.

There were principally two artistic styles that were used by those artists whose art was influenced by their sexual identity: abstraction and realism/representation. Working in abstraction, Farber used abstraction to produced art to express his battle against AIDS and homophobia. Hammond works in abstraction to address gender related issues. Working in realism, Lee paints women around her who are lesbians and who are “aware of their sexuality.” (Lee, 122) She works to engage the viewer through eye contact with the subject, and wishes to project a positive image of lesbians. Stradling works in a variant of realism where he tries to pattern the technique of Old Masters. He wants to declare his sexuality through his work, and present positive images of homosexual desire. Finally, Green (from the interview group) works in a variant of realism with an Italian Renaissance influence and paints male nudes. There was no uniform, monolithic type of impact that was identified for these artists whose sexual identity was, or appeared to be, important in their works.

In fact, all of the artists across both groups (the interview and the supplemental research groups) principally worked in either abstraction (White, Jones, Farber, and Hammond) or some variant of realism/representation (Smith, Green, Lee, and Stradling). Some of the artists who worked in abstraction recited how as a style it permitted them to work intuitively, and be more improvisational and less willful; communicate in universal terms; and capture impressions and be able to communicate in a non-linear way without the restrictions or limits that could be imposed by other styles. They used a wide array of materials (e.g., oil paints, watercolors, wax,
synthetic fibers, etc.) and created paintings, collages, and mixed media works. They were influenced by a diverse array of different art forms and styles, including Asian art, tribal art and design, and African, Oceanic and Native American art. For those artists who worked in realism, their particular style (which may or may not have been divorced from their sexual identity) facilitated their metaphorical or allegorical themes, fulfilled their desire to paint the human body (e.g., Green, Lee, and Stradling), or was the logical style in which to work to create luminous and textural still lifes. These artists generally worked in oil paint or watercolors, and included, among their influences, the Italian Renaissance, Old Masters, and photorealism.

Whether the artist's style is abstraction or realism, and whether or not sexuality was important for their works, most of the artists described their works as multi-layered. In order to reach broader audiences artists may deploy visual strategies that have multiple meanings, and thus be accessible to different communities. Images may be coded to give one group a more privileged access but still have meanings for broader groups. The use of codes, particularly by gay, lesbian or queer artists, permits the construction of alternative or layered meanings that may form oppositional strategies to the restrictions of gender categories. (Horne, 4)

This is not to say that certain artists don't incorporate tropes which refer to racial, class, religious or sexual identity. Rather, just that there may be multiple or alternative modes in which artists work. One can pick out African American visual artists, such as Kara Walker and Glenn Ligon, whose works were examined through the lens of race content by critics or academics such as Darby English (among others). The works of various artists who are/were gay, such as David Hockney, Paul Cadmus, George Platt Lynes, Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz, and Jerome Caja, among many others, have at times included gay themes. As commented by one of the artists (Jones) in the interview group, "[t]he productions of certain of
these artists could be said to be soaked in gayness.” However, the same artist commented that the vast majority of artists who are gay or lesbian (or black, Jewish, Catholic, female, Christian or Chinese American for that matter) make art which may in subtle ways be inflected by identity, but which in larger measure just tries to be good art.

There were some common elements that existed across almost all of the artists in both groups. The principal commonality was their views on not wanting to be labeled as a gay or lesbian artist. Only one of the eight artists, Harmony Hammond, actually identified herself as a lesbian artist. Given her prominence in feminist and lesbian politics, and her commitment to being seen as a lesbian artist, this is not surprising. The other artists, including those who felt that their sexuality was important (in differing degrees) to their work, did not view themselves as being a gay or lesbian artist, or as making gay art, and explicitly did not want to be labeled as a gay or lesbian artist even though they are/were publically gay or lesbian. Paralleling many of the arguments that were expressed by English, some of these artists expressed concern over how such a label might influence how their work was perceived, potentially in ways that might restrict the readings of a viewer. If the works of the artists became essentialized through an identity label, that might limit the viewer’s opportunity to find new information and connections in the work. (Blake, 10) Some were concerned that a label might convey that they produced art only for a gay audience and invite comparisons with other gay artists, and contribute to the ghettoization of gay and lesbian visual arts. Several of the artists also indicated that their sexuality was not their only concern. Although not expressly stated, there may have been some sensitivity to what the term “gay” art conveys. This term lacks a precise definition. However, it dates back to the 1970s where it was used to describe figurative paintings that mixed academic skills for rendering male nudes with an iconography that was similar to what was seen in
physique magazines. Depending on the viewer and the actual work of art, some might even be concerned about gay pornography connotations.

Several of the artists expressed that they wanted their art work to be able to speak for itself. They were concerned that their art work might be viewed as less than technically accomplished or that the artist was a producer of homosexual imagery rather than an artist in his or her own right. One objected to having to constantly justify her work, rather than being allowed to let the content register (or not) with the viewer. (Lee, 121) Also, being labeled as a gay or lesbian artist could restrict their right to be different and subject them to increased expectations by other members of that group (ceding to a social or political group control over their aesthetics). Concerns were expressed about whether being labeled as a gay or lesbian artist would restrict the potential audience that their art might reach, and limit their opportunity for dialogue with heterosexual viewers that could reduce prejudice and promote a homosexual desire and image. Being labeled a gay or lesbian artist also could suggest a meaning that the artist wished to be separated from the rest of society by being in a separate group, as different from the norm, even if he or she did not want that.

When a person’s sexual orientation or identity is known or suspected, it may affect behavior, possibly in a negative or adverse way. Young discusses the concept of abject as a way of understanding behavior and reactions that express group based fears. Abjection is a feeling of loathing and disgust that a subject has when it encounters certain things, images and fantasies, even though he or she also may find the abject fascinating. (Young, 143) This is not the creation of a subject in relation to an object, but rather concerns the border between self and other and exists as an effect. (Young, 143) “The abject provokes fear and loathing because it exposes the border between self and other as constituted and fragile, and threatens to dissolve the subject by
dissolving the border.” (Young, 144) As homosexuality has become increasingly de-objectified, it has become more difficult to clearly discern the border between homosexuals and heterosexuals, except for their choice of sexual partners. This may create a level of ambiguity, and the subject reacts to the abject with loathing as a way to restore the clarity of the boundary between self and other. (Young, 145) Homophobia, which is partly structured by abjection, represents a deep fear and loathing precisely because the boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is so permeable. (Young, 146)

For the artists in the interview group (as well as the supplemental research group), there also was, at least theoretically, the potential for professional or financial impact if they were labeled as gay or their work as gay art. The production and sale or distribution of art work is an elaborate process that requires the cooperation of various parties whose relationships are often developed over time. (Becker, 28 – 29) On the sale and distribution side, this process often is dominated by art dealers, galleries, and critics. (Becker, 108) The artists in the interview group are represented by a number of different dealers and galleries in several cities. For two of those artists (Jones and Smith), their sexual identity does not influence their work, and there would be no reason to label them as gay artists or their work as gay art. They are both very successful (in terms of financial rewards and recognition). Jones, commenting on producing art in a capitalist society, thought that the capitalist structure provided positive motivation to work regularly and professionally to create his art. He also acknowledged that good art can be created under state supported systems, and that, unfortunately, good art can get warehoused under both capitalist and state supported systems. Of the artists in the interview group, there was only one artist (Green) whose work did not appear to be significantly impacted by our capitalist system. Green, whose works could be read to reflect his sexual identity, does not depend on selling his paintings to
generate income. Therefore, he would be insulated from any potential market impact (either positive or negative) that might result from the disclosure of his sexual identity through his art.

In another commonality, the artists in the interview group all described how their talents in the visual arts had been identified and nurtured since they were young. They grew up in supportive and creative families with artistic parents (architect, artists, and a writer) who encouraged their artistic vision. One of these artists (White) currently teaches art in elementary school, and another (Jones) previously did. So, in that respect, they also have encouraged children to develop their artistic talents. Is it possible that young gay people may be drawn to making art because of some inherent sensitivity? If artistic identity is inherent based on sexual identity, what do we conclude about gay people who show little or no visual acuity? Or is artistic identity something innate which is inborn in a way that is more essential that sexual identity? (Reed, 242)

A number of these artists (across both groups) commented on how being outsiders permitted them to see the world differently. Some of these artists attributed being outsiders to their being gay or lesbian, but others did not attribute it directly to their sexual identity, preferring to view it as part of their nature as an artist. In contrast to other minorities (e.g., racial or ethnic minorities), homosexuals are the only minority whose culture is not transmitted within the family. Also, they don’t share any particular set of physical characteristics. (Blake, 12) As members of marginalized groups, gays, lesbians, and queers have often had less recourse to the support structure for cultural identification that heterosexuals may take for granted: family, religion, heritage, etc. As members of an oppressed group, they may challenge dominant norms and promote their own group definition and norms. (Young, 153) As outsiders, they may be able to see society with improved objectivity and “with an eye unclouded by conformity.” (Stradling,
While gays, lesbians and queers share an outside position, it has been argued that they still are contingent on the signs and narratives of the dominant heterosexual culture.

But are their sexual identities relevant to the production and perception of their art, or is there another commonality that they share that is more relevant? One bond or trait that they all share is that they are creative persons. Is there something either innate or cultured to which their creativity may be attributed? Is it possible that gays or lesbians are drawn to making art because of some inherent sensitivity? If so, how would we explain all of the gay people who show little or no visual acuity? In his comments, Jones posited that it is the erotic that is at the base of creativity. In considering the ramifications of his statement, what exactly does erotic mean? Does that simply mean sexuality or something more? Standard definitions of "erotic" are often premised in terms of sexual desire, sexual pleasure, passion and love, but the original Greek concept (eros) encompassed a variety of notions that ranged from the expression of thoughts and desire and their representation in art and literature to the act of sex itself. (Mahon, 11)

In *Eroticism & Art* (2005) Alyce Mahon states that erotic desire is a fundamental part of our private and public lives, and permeates our culture. In her view, the power of eroticism is particularly powerful when expressed visually in art. Erotic art may bring us face-to-face with love and physical desire, but it also may require us to confront the desires that others might have that we might not like. Sexual desire is intrinsic in human nature, but society imposes social and moral limits through the codes of appropriate behavior that it establishes. Human sexuality is restricted by social customs - by taboos that deem certain acts to be forbidden or lawful. Mahon states that “[t]he essence of eroticism lies in the transgression of these taboos....” (Mahon, 13) She notes with approval the statement of the philosopher Georges Bataille that: “Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal:
reproduction and the desire for children ... eroticism is assenting to life even in death.” (Mahon, 13)

The philosophical and sociological significance of the erotic are also figured in Foucault’s writings concerning the “conflict between desire and power, carnality and subjectivity” which expands “our understanding of the socialization of the sexual body.” (Mahon, 13) Mahon comments that Foucault’s writings help us to see how eroticism and desire can be viewed not only as a site of “knowledge-power but also of resistance ….” (Mahon, 13) Erotic art speaks to our individual notions of sexual desire which also involves a consensus about a work’s aesthetic value (in contrast to pornography). However, the difference between what is erotic versus what we consider to be pornography may principally be a question of intent. (Mahon, 14) Eroticism, when incorporated into art, is not just about sexual desire and pleasure. Instead, erotic art, as a site of resistance, both challenges and produces power.

Conclusion

In exploring whether works of art created by LGBTQ contemporary artists are assessed by reference to their sexual identity, we have first considered how sexual identities have been defined, and then how those identities have been inscribed into past and current artistic production. Foucault has argued that homosexuality was first established as a coherent category in the mid-nineteenth century. The resulting heterosexual/homosexual binary model of sexual identity, which in a simplified way separates everyone into being either heterosexual (normal/permitted) or homosexual (abnormal/proscribed), contributed to the isolation and repression of homosexuals. Socio-political events in the United States, particularly following World War II and into the 1950s, used this binary model as an element of surveillance and to
pathologize homosexuality. However, building on the social and civil rights movements from the 1960s, there has been a progression where gays and lesbians have built visible communities, and have experienced increased integration in society. Also, post modernist thought has proposed more fluid concepts of sexuality that challenge the validity of the binary model. Foucault claims that individual identity is less biological and more cultural or socially constructed. Butler argues that gender is performatively and transitory, and against boundaries that identify masculine, feminine, or even heterosexual. “Queer” also has challenged and rejected fixed notions of sexuality, and subverts group definitions of homosexuality.

These societal and political changes have been reflected within the art world. While art movements are not a neat, linear progression, the dominant artistic style associated with modernism through the 1950s was abstraction. Under abstraction, art sought an essence to convey spiritually. We principally characterize abstract artists from that period as either abstract expressionists or post-abstract expressionists. The abstract expressionists were all heterosexuals. They posited that art expressed its creator, and were dedicated to the expression of emotion. The artists who were post-abstract expressionists, who were generally homosexuals, challenged the idea that art expresses its creator and placed on the viewer the responsibility for determining meaning. By the 1960s, Pop art, which used media and popular imagery, had supplanted abstraction. This period represented the beginnings of postmodernism, which essentially represents the negation of modernism. The development of post-structuralist theory, which challenged artists to deconstruct and reveal coercive power structures, also coincided with the rise in gay and lesbian identity politics. Whereas the work of homosexual artists under modernism was characterized by the use of codes, the sexuality of a number of postmodern artists has been increasingly visible. While there have been various descriptions applied to
different types of art (e.g., Pop art, minimalism, conceptual art, performance art, etc.) since that time, there is not a single style that provides a simple definition for the styles captured by postmodernism.

The research that was performed to assess if the sexual identity of contemporary artists is inscribed into their art utilized an interview group (four male artists) and a supplemental research group (two male and two female artists). The demographics (e.g., race, age, education) for the artists in the interview group are very similar. The sexual identity of the artists was not important for or discernible in the work of three out of four of the artists in the interview group. Sexual identity was important for all of the artists in the supplemental research group. Potentially relevant to this fact is that all of the artists in the supplemental group had published essays and/or interviews concerning the impact of their sexual identity, and therefore their sexuality might be expected to be important to their art. These artists (in both groups) all either worked in abstraction or in some variant of realism. The artistic influences on their works and the mediums that they work in are diverse. There was no uniform impact (regarding artistic style) that was identified for the artists whose sexual identity was important for their work. Whether the artist’s style is abstraction or realism, and whether or not sexuality is important for their works, most of the artists described their works as multi-layered, therefore capable of multiple meanings and reaching different communities.

Although sexual identity was considered important by slightly more than half of these artists, almost all of them did not want to be labeled as a gay or lesbian artist or as a producer of gay art. They expressed concern over how such a label might influence how their work is perceived, and how that might restrict the readings of a viewer. Some were concerned that a label might convey that they produced their art for a gay audience, and contribute to the ghettoization
of gay and lesbian visual arts. Several indicated that while their sexuality was important, it was not their only concern. Concern was expressed that they could be viewed as a producer of homosexual imagery, rather than as a technically accomplished artist. For some, being labeled as a gay or lesbian artist could limit their right to difference, and subject them to expectations by other gays and lesbians about their work. It might also restrict the potential audience for their work, and suggest that they wished to be separated from the rest of society by being in a group separated from the norm.

The research also considered the potential for professional or financial impact if the artist were labeled as gay or their work as gay art, and the extent to which that was relevant for the artists in the interview group. Given that sexual identity was not important for the work of three of these artists, this had limited relevance. All of the artists in the interview group also shared a common experience that their talent had been recognized at a young age, and that they had been supported by their families. Several of the artists in both groups believed that as outsiders they could perceive the world differently. Some of them attributed their outsider status to being gay whereas others did not attribute it directly to their sexual identity.

In considering the commonalities amongst the artists, several artists commented on the importance of the erotic to the creative process. Erotic desire is a fundamental part of our private and public lives, and the power of eroticism is particularly powerful when expressed visually in art. Hunan sexuality is restricted by social customs (taboos), and in the view of one commentator the essence of eroticism lies in transgressing those taboos, Eroticism, when incorporated into art, is not just about sexuality and desire, but as a site of resistance it also challenges and produces power.
Conclusion

This paper has considered whether there is a tendency to assess works of contemporary artists who are LGBTQ by reference to their sexual identity, and if that type of assessment limits the possibilities for interpretation or difference in their work. I investigated questions concerning how we define sexual identity and how gay and lesbian identities have been inscribed in past and current artistic production and reception. Then research was performed regarding if and how sexual identity has been inscribed in the art of selected contemporary artists.

The argument that the concept of “homosexuality” is a modern invention was presented by Foucault when he posited that homosexuality as a coherent conceptual category did not exist until the mid-nineteenth century when certain theories of personality were developed. Prior to that time, what men did together with other men was viewed differently from what women did together, and erotic behavior was not categorized on the basis of the participants’ biological sex. A binary model of sexuality was established which presented heterosexuality as normal and permitted and homosexuality as abnormal and proscribed. This model was used to pathologize homosexuality and isolate and repress homosexuals.

Gay and lesbian identity politics since Stonewall have been premised on the idea of a lesbian and gay community that is separated from the dominant heterosexual norm and defined by a loose set of differences from the straight world. In certain respects this has operated to reinforce the binary heterosexual/homosexual model. Since homosexuals do not share any particular external, visible attributes, the ability to identify whether an artist is homosexual is premised on his or her identity being or becoming visible. “Coming out” has been the principal
political strategy of gay liberation since Stonewall. One consequence of these politics has been to enforce the conceptual framework that separates straight from gay.

Postmodernist thought recognizes identity and culture as nonorganic constructs, and has proposed more fluid concepts of sexuality that challenge the validity of the binary model. The operation of the binary model, which is oppositional in nature, actually represses differences within groups. As a result, this definition of difference (or opposition) operates to deny difference. Foucault has claimed that individual identity is less biological and more cultural or sociologically constructed. Homosexuality, like any other sexual or class category, is an artificial construct whose definition changes as society acts to edit out minorities that it finds threatening. Butler submits that gender is performative and transitory. In her view, identity is less of a possession and more of a way to be, "for another or by virtue of another." (English, 286) In that sense, identity is relational. She argues against the discreteness of sexual identity categories. Young similarly argues in favor of a relational model of identity that rejects exclusions with the result that difference would no longer imply that groups would lie outside of one another. In her view, we should focus on what it means to be within a group, not by defining a set of exclusionary criteria but based on an affirmation of their affinity. Dollimore agrees that sexuality should be understood relationally, but believes that the important distinction for sexual identity is between the sexual and the nonsexual (rather than on internal variants of sexuality).

The concept of "queer" has challenged the idea that sexual identity is permanently embodied, and it rejects fixed notions of homosexuality. Queer encompasses a wide variety of sexual desires and identities and transgresses the norms of gay and lesbian identities. However, there is no simple definition that adequately or completely captures its scope and implications. Queer is concerned with aspects of social transgression, whether that involves different types of
same sex relationships or other cultural confrontations. Queer culture questions and explores how desire is shaped and perceived, and how and in what form it can be expressed. While queer has not served to unite, it has increased awareness or acceptance of the idea that there may be a variety of sexual identities, and that sexual identity should not be forced into a binary model.

One of the challenges that a more fluid concept of identity must face is what this rejection means with respect to shared feelings and experiences that we may associate with sexual identity.

Art reflects society. There also is a relationship between art and homosexuality. However, there has been surprisingly little academic study about what that relationship actually is. Any conceptual links between art and homosexuality have been ignored by critics and academics as frequently as they have been assumed by the general public. There is an argument that persons who share experiences of sexual desire and social discrimination may develop common thoughts and feelings. A corollary to this position suggests that homosexuals may share sensibilities which are then manifested in their art. Whether or not there are gay and lesbian sensibilities in art is a matter of ongoing debate. However, without reaching a conclusion on that issue, it has been argued that any assessment of this assertion needs to occur within the complex intersection with mainstream art.

A common concern of artists who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or queer is their self-identity – who and what they are and how they articulate their experiences in their art. I have surveyed selected artistic practices of the late modern and postmodern movements (within the context of the social and political environments) to consider how sexual identities were inscribed into past artistic production. The period following World War II and through the 1950s was one of increasing homophobia and repression against homosexuals. Modernist orthodoxy held that in order for art to be meaningful it needed to be abstract. Instead of representing
specific people or things, it sought to convey a spiritual essence, promoting the primacy of form over content. Abstract expressionists, such as Pollock, viewed art as a struggle for artistic self-expression and were dedicated to the "free expression of emotion." (Reed, 153) On the other hand, post-abstract expressionists, such as Rauschenberg and Johns, challenged the belief that art expresses its creator. They focused on representing the commonalities of American life and our commodity culture. These post-abstract expressionist artists generally were gay, and they were very careful not to use their art to reveal too much about themselves. Instead, they developed a coded language that concerned their identity and desire. The sexual orientation of the post-abstract expressionist artists was important because it demonstrates how self-identity is a product of our interaction and relation to others and how our own identity can be a reflection of how others see us.

The social movements of the 1960s, including gay liberation, and increasingly liberal attitudes about sex were accompanied by the advent of Pop art. Pop art used mass media and popular imagery to undermine the notion that modern art needed to be self-expressive and abstract. Warhol returned the artist's gaze to the outside world. He blurred the separation of his art and his life, and the distinction between public and private. He did not resort to codes to reflect his sexual identity. However, he was successful in creating works that appealed on multiple levels to audiences with different competencies. This period also coincided with the beginning of what we now call postmodernism which, for lack of a better definition, represents a negation of modernism. Under this umbrella there has been a multiplicity of different movements or styles, including queer art. The development of post-structuralist theory, which challenged artists to deconstruct and reveal coercive power structures, also coincided with the rise of gay and lesbian identity politics. Sexuality became increasingly visible in the art of a
number of the postmodern artists. However, because of the impact of the AIDS crisis and the subsequent culture war, art-making and exhibiting became polarized around the issue of LGBTQ self-representation.

The research that was performed to see if the sexual identity of contemporary artists is inscribed into their work found that their sexual identity was important to the work of some of the artists (including all of the supplemental research group) but was not for other artists (almost all of the interview group). The artists in the supplemental research are/were artists who had all published essays or who had been interviewed where the relationship of their sexuality and art was explored. It seems most likely that artists selected for those publications would be ones whose sexuality was important for their work. The artists in the interview group, however, were identified with the support of contacts. So that would be a function of the potential participants that could be identified, and their willingness to participate in the project. Despite that neither of these is a randomly or statistically significant testing group, the conclusion that sexual identity is important for the art of some but not other LGBTQ artists seems clear. There was no alignment between an artistic style and whether or not the artist’s sexuality was important for his or her work. There were artists for whom sexuality was important who worked in abstraction and some who worked in realism. Also, there were artists for whom their sexual identity was not important to their art who worked in abstraction and some who worked in realism. Therefore, the importance of sexuality did not dictate that one style or the other should be used. Rather, that was a personal choice of the artist based on a variety factors including their artistic influences and motivations. These artists cited an array of divergent influences and worked with a variety of mediums. All of the artists produced works that are multilayered, permitting alternative meanings and potentially speaking to different communities of viewers.
All but one of the artists did not want to be labeled as a gay or lesbian artist or as a producer of gay or lesbian art. Similar to several of the arguments presented by English in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007), they expressed concern about how that label could influence and restrict the reading of their art by viewers, limit the viewers’ opportunity to find new information and connections in the work, convey that the work was intended only for a gay audience, and contribute to the ghettoization of visual arts by gay and lesbian artists. Some expressed concern about restricting the potential audience, or limiting the opportunity for dialogue with heterosexual viewers. This could limit their opportunity to address prejudice, promote homosexual desire and image, and address issues of abjection. Certain of the artists did not want to be viewed as producers of homosexual imagery because that could detract from their being considered to be accomplished artists. Several addressed that being labeled might force identity group conformity and restrict their right to be different. One specifically objected to having to justify her work and to the fact that other lesbians thought they were entitled to tell her what she should paint. She also thought that being labeled as a gay or lesbian artist conveyed the sense that she wished to be separated from the rest of society by being in a group separated from the norm. The fact that these artists did not want to be labeled as gay or lesbian artists is not an indication that certain artists don’t incorporate tropes that refer to their sexual identity. Rather, as English has stated (regarding black artists), their sexuality may be just one of the modes in which they work. As one of the artists in the interview group commented, the vast majority of artists who are gay or lesbian make art that in subtle ways may be inflected by social identity, but in large measure they are just trying to make good art.

Other commonalities that deserve note are that all of the artists in the interview group commented that their talent for the visual arts was identified when they were young, and was
nurtured in a supportive environment. Several others commented on how being different allowed to see the world differently. Among other explanations this might be attributed to their artistic nature, or possibly to their sexual identity. Another common thread may be illuminated by comments made by several artists concerning eroticism, and specifically that the erotic is at the base of all creativity. As Mahon admonishes, the erotic may bring us face-to-face with love and physical desire, but it also may require that we confront desires of others (i.e., Mapplethorpe’s sado-masochistic images) that we might not like. The essence of eroticism involves the transgressions of social customs governing human sexuality, and as Batille comments involves “assenting to life even in death.” (Mahon, 13) Many of the artists in the research addressed themes such as sexuality, desire, death, human frailty, consciousness, and mortality. Therefore, it may be that this recognition of the erotic in life actually is the most important element that they share. As Mahon states, eroticism, when incorporated into art, is not just about sex and pleasure. Instead, as a site of resistance, it challenges and produces power.

While the results of this research strongly align with English’s arguments, there are some differences which prevent all of his analysis from being applied with equal force within the LGBTQ context. Blacks, as a racial minority, are a group that is biologically based (with physical attributes) and therefore visible. In contrast with the changing concepts regarding sexual identity groups, the definition and parameters of racial membership are not changing. Whereas the forging of a group identity for sexual minorities is a relatively recent phenomenon, racial based differences have long been a part of American history. There is a history and a culture for African Americans that runs deeper and is much more visible than currently exists for homosexuals. Also, the existence of a black leadership and black power structure within the black community serves to strengthen the argument, within the racial context, that being labeled
a black artist can require conformity and loss of right to difference. It also may strengthen an expectation by some that the art of black artists should serve the interests of the black race. While this may also be true within the gay or lesbian communities, there is a question whether their identity groups are as structured and powerful and if they have the same authority to leverage their social and political control to exercise power in the aesthetic context.

But despite these differences, there are many similarities between both of these groups who have been marginalized, repressed, discriminated against, and treated as different. These cause the application of English’s arguments to the LGBTQ context to provide valuable insight into the relationship between art and homosexuality. While it is clear that some artists who are LGBTQ certainly incorporate tropes which refer to their sexual identity, it is also supported that artists whose art may be inflected by identity in large part are dedicated to producing good art.
Works Cited


APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

How long have you been an artist?

What makes you view yourself as an artist?

How/why did you choose to pursue art as a career?

How do you sustain a career in art? What are typical weeks like for you?

How would you describe the type of art that you create?

What are some of your recent projects? How did you feel about them, and how were they received?

What are your artistic practices and methods?

What are your artistic aims?

Are there other artists or art movements that have influenced you? If so, what are they? How have you been influenced?

Are there any contemporary artists you find interesting or inspiring, regardless of their influence on your work? Why?

How would you characterize your art or style in terms of broader artistic movements?

How has your art been characterized by others (e.g., critics, purchasers, etc.)?
Having talent as a child, do you think this talent is innate, nurtured, and crucial to have the talent recognized?

Being influenced by either modernists of realism, is there something about these two traditions that informs contemporary artists in the United States?

Selling your art is your livelihood. Do you imagine that this would be different in a non-consumerist/capitalist society? What do you think of art done by people that do not depend upon selling their work?

Many artists do not talk about their art in terms of identity. Many writers talk about being male or female, white, black, or Asian, affluent or working class, Catholic or atheist, gay or straight and how they write with, against, despite those identities. Do you have any reflections on this?