

A Wretch Like Me



Curated by Aviva Silverman

In August Copenhagen2021 takes place. Copenhagen2021 is the most significant LGBTI+ event in 2021 combining WorldPride, EuroGames, a grand arts and culture program, and an historic LGBTI+ human rights forum. Kunsthall Charlottenborg contribution to the event is a film and audio-program that focuses on norms, visibility and diversity. The program, *A Wretch Like Me*, is curated by American visual artist and activist Aviva Silverman.

“The ties that bind us are fragile and often imaginary. Any words available to us are woefully inadequate, produced as they are by centuries of hidden selves and forthright violence. Each individual creature revolts in some way against its taxonomy. Even so we name ourselves — in order to find each other, imperfectly.

As the spectres of corporate Pride and pinkwashing continue to misconstrue the intentions of our revolutionary ancestors, it is all the more crucial to trouble the contemporary forms of “visibility” upon which a greater violence is ultimately enacted. To that end, the films selected here weave through notions of self, community, transparency and opacity — all through a queer lens.” Written by Aviva Silverman and Matty Kodat

The Film Programme is looping throughout the opening hours of Kunsthall Charlottenborg and is free of charge with a ticket for the Kunsthall.

More info is to be found at Kunsthall Charlottenborg’s app



Cheryl Dunye: *Vanilla Sex*, 1992

Video, 3:00 Min.

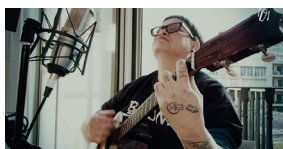
This three-minute experimental documentary features Dunye’s voice in conversation with an offscreen character, played over photography and found footage. Dunye’s narration describes the different meanings of the term vanilla sex which, to white lesbians, meant sex without toys while, to black lesbians, meant sex with white women. Dunye uses the opportunity to explore and discuss the different meanings of such a term in two different contexts between the white and black lesbian communities.

Cheryl Dunye:

Cheryl Dunye (1966) is a Liberian-American film director, producer, screenwriter, editor and actress.

Dunye’s work often concerns themes of race, sexuality, and gender, particularly issues relating to black lesbians.

Dunye began her career with six short films which have been collected as *The Early Works of Cheryl Dunye*. Most of these videos feature the use of mixed media, a blurring of fact and fiction and explored issues relating to the director's experience as a black lesbian filmmaker. These films are early examples of "Dunyementaries," a blend of narrative and documentary techniques that Dunye describes as "a mix of film, video, friends, and a lot of heart." These works, spanning from 1990-1994, explore themes of race, sexuality, family, relationships, whiteness, and the intricacies of white and black lesbian dating culture. Dunye's early works were produced with a low budget and often starred Dunye herself as lead actress.



Yva Las Vegass, Oral History Interview with Aviva Silverman, 2020
15:00 min.

Aviva Silverman has interviewed Yva Las Vegass for the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Las Vegass was born in Venezuela in 1963. They recount their early childhood memories of playing folk music on the cuatro and singing boleros with their mother. Yva moved to the US as a teenager to attend boarding school but never finished and eventually found their way to Seattle where they created a music project called *Sweet 75* with Nirvana's Chris Novoselic. Moving to NYC felt like home with the cacophony of street music, people of color, feminist punk houses, and open mic nights to experiment and play music. Yva speaks about gender violence by saying, "*I can't with the gender binary, it's so constrictive and it's not working anymore in the world that we live in. It gets in the way of everything, in the way of equality, it's horrible for men, and lethal for women*"



Matt Wolf: *Bayard & Me*, 2016
HD film, 16 min.

In the late 1970s Walter Naegle was walking to Times Square to buy a newspaper when he ran into a striking older African American man on the corner. Walter says that "lightning struck" and his life changed forever at that moment. The man on the corner was Bayard Rustin.

Walter knew who Bayard was because he was famous for having organized the March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. Rustin was an influential leader in the civil rights movement. Having studied with the followers of Gandhi, he brought the ideas of peaceful nonviolence to the movement. During the Montgomery bus boycotts, Rustin was dispatched to mentor a young Martin Luther King. He would continue to advise the young activist, but ultimately Bayard's homosexuality pushed him to the margins of the movement.

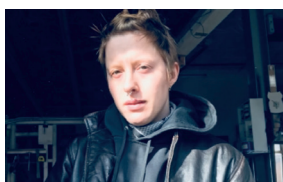
Walter was in his early thirties when he met Bayard, and Bayard was 65 years old— as old as Walter's parents. Walter didn't know any other interracial or certainly any other intergenerational couples, but he and Bayard were deeply in love. As their relationship grew more serious, Bayard wanted to protect Walter's rights in case anything were to happen to him. At that time gay people had no rights and the idea of marriage

was inconceivable. So Bayard decided to adopt Walter to obtain those rights. Bayard had a lawyer who was interested in this type of legal mischief. The next step was for Walter to ask his mother to disown him. She was supportive of their union, so she agreed. Then a social worker had to come visit Bayard and Walter's home as if Bayard was adopting a small child. The social worker wanted to make sure this was not some dotty old man being taken advantage of by a scheming youth, or a naive kid being coerced by some predatory older man. It took a couple of years, but the adoption was approved in 1982. Being adopted gave Walter and Bayard a new kind of confidence as a legal couple. They had already been married in the emotional sense.

The LGBT movement really started to take off in the 1990s shortly after Bayard's death, and Bayard was taken on as a kind of inspirational figure. Today Walter sees intergenerational gay adoption as an example of the creativity of gay people to figure out how to navigate a system that was designed to exclude and marginalize them. Bayard was a trailblazer in finding ways around that.

Matt Wolf:

Matt Wolf is a filmmaker in New York. His critically acclaimed and award-winning films have played widely in festivals and have been distributed internationally in theaters and on television. Matt's first feature documentary *Wild Combination* is about the avant-garde cellist and disco producer Arthur Russell. Matt also makes short films including *I Remember* about the artist and poet Joe Brainard and *The Face of AIDS* for Time Magazine about the notorious 1992 Benetton advertisement featuring the AIDS activist David Kirby on his deathbed.



Matty Kodat, Oral History Interview with Aviva Silverman, 2019.

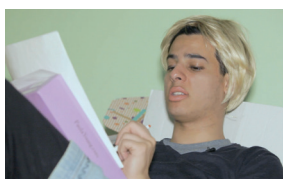
15 min.

Aviva Silverman has interviewed Matty Kodat for the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. Matty Kodat shares his thoughts on the insufficient representation of binary trans people, his own relationship to butch lesbianism and trans-masculinity, and how being trained in classical Ballet influenced his experience of gender identity. Matty, who works between poetry, tattooing, and dancing in the collective Ballez, weaves together these interests as a process of reclaiming one's own body. He unpacks the meaning of trans-panic and the medical ethics of transitioning in one's youth and then elaborates what utopic queer communes could look like influenced by his interests in herbalism and historical record—most recently mining the Lesbian Herstory and Gerber/Hart archives. Kodat ends by invoking the Wittenstein's quote, "*The limits of our language are the limits of our world,*" as an extension of language and poetry's power to affect change within political hierarchies.



Cheryl Dunye: *Greetings from Africa*, 1995
Short film, 8:00 min.

Cheryl Dunye, playing herself, humorously experiences the mysteries of lesbian dating in the 90s.” *Greetings From Africa* (1994) is a narrative short film featuring Dunye as Cheryl, a young adult black lesbian working to navigate the complicated world of lesbian dating in the 90s. The film opens with Cheryl narrating in front of a camera about her efforts to get back into the dating scene while attempting to avoid the common pitfall of lesbian serial monogamy. After this opening, Cheryl meets L, a white woman, at a party. L and Cheryl hit it off, and soon meet for a date. Before their date, Cheryl and a friend discuss L, mentioning that Cheryl’s friend knew someone had recently seen L at the African American studies department office at a nearby school. Later, after Cheryl has not heard from L for a few days, she attends a party hoping to see L there. Cheryl strikes up a conversation with another black queer woman at the party. Cheryl is surprised to find the woman is not L’s old roommate, as L had told Cheryl, but rather her girlfriend. The film concludes with Cheryl reading a greeting card from L with the tagline, ”Greetings from Africa.” The postcard reads that L has joined the Peace Corps and was currently living and working on the Ivory Coast in Africa. This film explores themes of black fetishization as L is depicted to have had multiple relationships with black women, also implied by her presence at the African American Studies Department and her final postcard labelled, ”Greetings From Africa.”



Hazel Katz: *Bubby and Them*, 2017. Short film, 20:00 min.

When Je’Jae is kicked out of their home, attacked on the street, and ostracized by religious leaders, adoptive grandmother Bubby Razi provides a space of refuge and resilience.

Hazel Katz is a video artist. She works with the Parole Preparation Project, an organization that supports people who are incarcerated. Katz’s short films focus on trans experience, employ found footage archives, and use essayistic storytelling. Her 2017 short film, *Bubby & Them* is a docufictional short about the relationship between two liminal members of the Orthodox Jewish community: Je’Jae Daniels, a trans college student, and Razi, their adoptive grandmother.

Filmmaker’s note:

I met Je’Jae in a mentorship program for young filmmakers. We were paired together and I supported Je’Jae in producing *Mx. Enigma*, a personal essay video about their intersectional experience of queer trans arab orthodox Judaism. With *Bubby and Them*, Je’Jae and I wanted to push our eclectic formal style further and provide just enough of a narrative structure for the audience to feel Je’Jae’s trauma of growing up trans in an orthodox Jewish world. We started from the following question: how do we communicate the trauma of systemic transphobia and religious intolerance without continuing to populate the image economy with scenes of trans suffering? We sought to communicate that Je’Jae’s inner power is already a happy ending and that there’s no amount of overcoming or coming out that they need to do in order to prove their humanity. I was also influenced by queer science fiction narratives whose characters’ inner struggles are externalized through magical transcendence, often through humor, sarcasm, and irony. Magical images, like the green-screen scenes in *Bubby and Them* give straight audiences a visual metaphor for trans and POC resilience while keeping the public at a distance from stories that aren’t theirs.