

Big Gay Church: Religion, Religiosity, and Visual Culture

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Abstract

Five academics explore their performed occupations of the National Art Education Association Annual Meetings. They have annually mounted *Big Gay Church* (BGC) services that deconstruct and question the ways visual culture, media representations, scriptural interpretations, and religious teaching have constructed (at times harmful) depictions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ²) subjects. This essay recounts how co-authors have drawn on their multiple experiences with/in churches to play with religious rituals and narratives in ways that queerly comment on the damage or support organized religions offer LGBTQ² students and educators.



Figure 1. *Big Gay Church* 2011. L-R Sister Sanders, Brother Love, Miss Jeanette, & Rev. Rhoades.

The role of religion and religious beliefs in the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ²) people is profound, whether individuals connect with a particular spiritual tradition or not. Though there are many inclusive religious traditions, the lives of queer people are impacted by the religious right in ways disproportionate to the numbers of queer believers who live in places near and far, from Wisconsin to Uganda. Surprisingly, there has been little scholarship connected to this phenomenon; however, a recent volume of the *Journal of LGBT Youth* (2012), 9(3) addressed many of these issues. That volume, however, still left many openings unattended when it came to matters of religion and religiosity. Toward a fuller discussion of the role of religion in art, education, and society at large, the co-authors of this essay re-examine a half decade of presentations they have made as a troupe of performing artist-activist-educators at the annual conference of the National Art Education Association, under the mantle of *Big Gay Church*.

Big Gay Church is a performed interruption of the NAEA conference and an occupation of the church as institution, one that questions how LGBTQ² subjects have (or have not) been addressed in the field of art education. Prior sessions have critiqued queer cultural consumption and naming practices, but most recently troupe members have explored political and social intersections with the church, particularly as it is narrowly imagined by the religious right. Members of the *Big Gay Church* troupe have also shared their personal experiences with religious orders and institutions, those that with few exceptions have seemed to loathe, ignore, exploit, or repress LGBTQ² subjects. The performed provocations recounted here have been occupying the annual meeting space of the National Art Education Association (NAEA) since 2009.

In this article we offer varying descriptions and analyses of our loving and disruptive interventions, those that in part have sought to make a space for developing new ways of thinking about the problematic introduced in the already mentioned, rigorously researched edition of the *Journal of LGBT Youth* (a publication co-sponsored by the LGBT/Queer Issues Caucus of the NAEA). Principally, our troupe has researched the churches' roles in

producing LGBTQ² subjects, research that methodologically differs from the largely quantitative methods employed by social scientists contributing to the *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 9(3).

The presentation of our findings, the pedagogical/presentation approaches, and rhetorical methods we employ are intentionally varied and mirror the range of teaching approaches we use and have individually witnessed in the church services of our youth, ranging from Catholic catechism and Midwestern Methodist Sunday Schools to fundamentalist revivals in the Deep South. These experiences have marked us and occupy our imagination, and our art historical, autobiographical, and philosophical inquiries. In *Big Gay Church* we share multiple forms of queerly embodied research—interventions that have actively engaged audiences and multiple technologies to extend those historic political and social struggles of LGBTQ² populations.

Big Gay Church comments on the teachings of many religious orders, lessons that inform our students' understandings of sexuality and human rights. These teachings are often at odds with the histories we cite and the experiences we have lived. As a group, half of us were raised in devoutly evangelical households, spending most Sunday mornings and evenings in church, singing in choir, and participating in numerous Christian youth groups and accompanying parents as they proselytized door to door or on street corners. Others of us were schooled in Catholic settings and were raised with the pomp and circumstance of that tradition. Some loathed these rituals, and others valued religious rituals as a way of "fitting in" and being socially accepted. There have been many more participants in these presentations than there are authors of the present essay (including non-religious participants, as well as those embracing Buddhist, Jewish, and Indigenous beliefs), but in this essay the co-authors include five who survived Christian childhoods that we attempt to illuminate with our flaming torches.



Figure. 2. Sister Sanders at Big Gay Church 2010. Baltimore.

Invocation: Why *Big Gay Church* Matters

Authors contributing to the *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 9(3) explored how religious teachings shape student attitudes toward Queer Subjects. While we value the knowledge presented within the volume, we argue that the arts offer something that remained largely unaddressed in that issue, which includes the range of political tactics, social change strategies, and media utilizations that characterize more recent occupations (e.g., Occupy Wall Street). These earlier strategies were deployed by groups like the Gay Activist Alliance, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Guerrilla Girls, and Gran Fury among others (see Cahan & Kocur, 1996, or access the new documentaries *How to Survive a Plague*, 2012, or *United in Anger*, 2012).

We model our work after these groups' relational artistic practices, those which reframe discourses, reinvigorate states of political entropy, and engage or incite readers and audiences to contemplate the value of the arts and ritual performances as community-building acts (Bourriaud, 2002). *Big Gay Church*, as a form of occupation, interrogates relationships between queer people and religion in relational artistic practice, operating as an alternative approach to communicating insights regarding conservative religious orders, the role of the church, and/or critiques of homophobic religious doctrine and scriptural interpretation.

Our group has used humor to disarm resistant congregants, advance our ironic insights, and contrast our multiple ways of tackling difficult subjects in school settings while simultaneously having fun in the pursuit of our goals as a group of academics. We consider this scholarship with a sense of humor. We have played a variety of roles over the years, but recurring characters include Sister Sanders, a.k.a. Hermana Harry, a bearded guy in clown face dressed as a nun; Miss Jeanette, a Methodist Sunday School teacher; the Right Reverend Rhoades; and our Music Director, Brother Love (Courtne Wolfgang). Our outrageous performances are in part beholden to the interventionary tactics of the San Francisco Cockettes of the late 1960s and early 70s (see Tent, 2004) and to work that is sustained with missionary zeal today by those in the International Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (an activist performing order of gay men committed to raising funds, spiritual awareness, and fighting for social justice. See oath below). Opening our queer church service with a qualifying clarification about our intent, we annually play for congregants the YouTube remarks of Sisters Merry Peter (SMP) and Reign of Terror (SRT):

SMP: Why is everyone so afraid of humor or laughter? This [performance] is **not** mocking someone but it's [aimed at] opening you up. It's the idea of the holy fool—that ancient idea that there's someone who stands looking completely absurd and gives you permission to say things that are completely true and honest without misperception, covering, avoidance, or hypocrisy.

SRT (reciting the pledge of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence): I, Sister Reign of Terror, as a member of the *Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, dedicate myself to public service, social activism, and spiritual enlightenment. (YouTube edited rebroadcast of the 2009 *In The Life* TV program on The Sisters. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kv2PoetiQ>>)

After sharing the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence's oath, Sister Sanders ritually clarifies that the art historic examination he traditionally delivers as the first service in *Big Gay Church* should not in any way be considered critical of the important work of Catholic Women Religious, nor should it be seen as commentary on the popular televised art critic Sister Wendy. He does not, however, deny taking aim at the hypocrisy of men in the church, though he does add that the troupe hopes to honor those who stand for that which is good in religion.

Hermana Harry's Harangue



Figure 3. Sister Sanders, a.k.a. Hermana Harry 2013, *Big Gay Church IV: The Pancake Supper*. Photo courtesy of Seth Freeman.

In Sister Sanders's 2011 presentation, he lauded Sister Wendy for publicly defending the curatorial decisions of Jonathan D. Katz and David Ward's *Hide/Seek* exhibition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (see <http://arthistory.about.com/b/2010/12/13/on-the-wojnarowicz-controversy.htm>). That exhibition had been attacked by the Catholic League for a 13-second depiction of ants crawling on a sugary crucifix in David Wojnarowicz's unfinished film, *A Fire in My Belly* (1986/87). The video was removed from the exhibition within weeks of its first opening, after the Catholic religious group had complained that the ant-infested sugary *Día de los Muertos* was "hate speech" and an act of blasphemy (Itzkoff, 2010). This complaint incited Speaker of the House John Boehner to threaten a review of the Smithsonian Museum's funding—unless, that is, the work was immediately removed. It was. Had the video remained in the exhibit, it might have interrupted public complacency about a pandemic that even today in 2013 is seen as medically manageable. Instead, however, the U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives intervened in the name of Christian decency (as was earlier done by Jesse Helms in response to Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ* in the 1990s).

Hermana Harry honored Sister Wendy for arguing that *A Fire in my Belly* appropriately referenced the symbolic specter of Christ as the ultimate sign of suffering, and as a reflection of the pain Wojnarowicz endured watching his lover Peter Hujar's demise from HIV/AIDS (which at that time was under-researched and seen as untreatable). Sister Wendy stood up for the lyrical power of the piece and recognized that Wojnarowicz

frequently referenced ants as symbolically representative of man's insignificance. It was with the missionary charity and consciousness-raising work of the Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in mind that Hermana Harry called attention to the hypocrisy of legislators and men of the Catholic League who called for censoring this video provocation. These men deployed their own power and denied the good works that artists and curators had attempted by layering on a sound track from an ACT-UP demonstration Wojnarowicz had recorded onto his previously silent film. Such earlier progressive occupations were mounted in the name of human rights and constituted political actions aimed at drawing attention to a pandemic that threatened the health of populations around the world.

Big Gay Church is an occupation of NAEA, both in the sense of an occupation of good work(s) and of occupation as protest. It is an arts-based political action taken in the context of good will and a gesture of faith in the power of performative action to create change. It is an occupation in which all are welcomed to participate. Honoring delicious deviance, *Big Gay Church* supplicants are encouraged to celebrate their own queerness and the joys shared in flaunting it! (Hallelujah! and a big Amen/fist bump to Sisters Therese Quinn and Erica Meiners, 2009).

In the 2012 *Big Gay Church* Session, Sister Sanders cross-examined Justin Spring's (2010) *Obscene Diary* installation of Samuel Steward's personal effects exhibited at the New York City Museum of Sex and cross-examined it within and against Jonathan Katz and David Ward's *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, an exhibition installation at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (later shown in Brooklyn, New York, and Tacoma, Washington). The question first posed to congregants that morning asked, "Whose forms of love and loving can be considered in our culture?" The second question was which exhibition congregants found the most obscene: an installation explicitly examining the erotic excesses of a mid-century U.S. English scholar, tattoo artist, and "sexual renegade" pursuing prurient interests in Columbus, Ohio, in Chicago (at times with Alfred Kinsey and researchers observing), and in Paris among other cities? Or co-curators Katz and Ward's exhibition, calling viewers' attention to the sexual identities of scores of visual and performing artists (outing some who had never previously been "out" in any public sense during their life times)? The third question congregants were asked to contemplate was what form of violence Katz might have committed by re-editing Wojnarowicz's multilayered silent 8mm film to just over 4 minutes of video onto which he dubbed an audio track from an ACT-UP protest (granted, one initially recorded by the late artist and authorized by his estate executors), but nonetheless a coupling that thereby foreclosed the multiple readings audiences might have otherwise been able to bring to this unfinished film. Our scholarly sister intimated such violations were to him a pornographic affront far more offensive than an ant-creeping crucifix.

Sister Jeanette's Sunday School Lessons

Annually the troupe of *Big Gay Church* performers deliver two Sunday School lessons—the first as described above, being Hermana Harry's reexamination of an art historic subject, exhibition, or publication that could be appropriate and of interest to an adult or older teen population. The second lesson, modeled on lessons for younger audiences, is delivered by Miss Jeanette, a Methodist Sunday School teacher. She uses digital versions of storytelling strategies frequently employed to engage primary age students, such as digital flannel board stories.



Figure 4. Melanie and Miss Jeanette.

Miss Jeanette is the quintessentially patient elementary teacher, a loving missionary of hope and good will, whose lessons apply a comforting salve after the severity of the bearded Sister's critical art-historic sermonizing. With her pin curl wig, appliqued denim jumper, support hose, and Crocs, Miss Jeannette focuses her lessons on queer crusaders. She has taught about contemporary Saints—queer folks who passed on in the late 20th and early 21st centuries but who made strong contributions to the project of expanding what is possible for LGBTQ² people during their lifetimes. For example, when the NAEA conference was in New York (2012), Saint Vito Russo, gay activist and film critic, was honored, and in Baltimore (2010), movie star/drag icon Divine was given her due. These lessons use the tropes of a typical Sunday School lesson from a queer perspective to honor individuals who may have been the subject of derision by the religious right. Miss Jeanette also prepares Holy Cards with the likenesses of such exemplary individuals as an offering to the congregation and as a memorial to fallen activists.

Another focus of Miss Jeanette's lessons has been "Angels who Dwell amongst Us." In this vein, MSNBC anchor Rachel Maddow (2011) was heralded for her fine story on the so-called "Kill the Gays" bill in Uganda and its connection to "The Family," a secret society of American right wing politicians

(http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26315908/ns/msnbc_tv-rachel_maddow_show/_/m42999443#42999443).

Miss Jeannette is not afraid to expose hypocrisy! She uses her lessons to highlight good behavior, but she also warns of wrongdoing on the part of folks who claim to speak for God. Under the guise of simply celebrating Maddow as a guardian angel, Miss Jeanette educated the congregation about the complexities of this secret world. Within the seemingly sweet flannel board lesson was an exposé that linked powerful, evangelical politicians with the murder of Ugandan LGBTQ² activist David Kato, who was beaten to death with a hammer (Sharlet, 2009).

In 2012, Miss Jeanette's lesson focused on a less well-known guardian angel, Melissa Bollow-Tempel, an ally who wrote an article in *Rethinking Schools* called "It's Okay to Be Neither" (2011). The article is about what a first-grade teacher learned from having a gender-variant child in her classroom. That article went viral, making Bollow-Tempel an Internet celebrity among gender queer communities and among teachers who want to help build a more just world for LGBTQ² students. Framing Bollow-Tempel's article within the broader discussion of gender-variant and transgender identity and in relation to media representations of gender queer youth (see, for example, the film *Tomboy*, 2011) allowed Miss Jeanette to expose the dangers inherent in "the specter of the normalizing gaze" (Taylor, 2012, p. 147).

Brother Love's Musical Ministry



Figure 5. Brother Love.

Big Gay Church also includes music as a vital component. Pop songs referencing Biblical beliefs, like Lady Gaga's "Born this Way," often blare as congregants begin entering. More importantly, *Big Gay Church* employs a musical ministry of brotherly love that invites and engages congregants in communal vocal participation that is both spirited, playful, and serious fellowshiping. Brother Love's ministry closely resembles her childhood experiences and affiliations with organized religion. Church, for Brother Love, consisted of specified places for adults and other spaces for children. For a child to have a voice, to be noticed within the walls of the First Methodist Church, s/he must sing, ring bells, play keys or strings. *Big Gay Church* uses music to push boundaries, radicalize and extend what gets voiced, acknowledged, and accepted, and who can be heard. Love has appropriated evangelical shape-note hymns like "Amazing Grace," digitally-projected country western vocalists wearing

double-knit and crooning, "I'll have a new body," and has played ukulele-accompanied renditions of newer hymns like "All God's Creatures Got a Place in the Choir."

With music *Big Gay Church* creates a space to protest practices that marginalize and alienate LGBTQ² people and communities. Music offers congregants the chance to be and act together, creating a unified voice with many bodies. Such choral moments of amplification are politically and personally powerful, voices blending together into a rising sea of song, a tide of swelling connection. Transcendental moments like these can be few for LGBTQ² art educators, allies, and students alike, and the *Big Gay Church* music service creates opportunities for such connections.

Prayerful, Contemplative Interlude before the Right Reverend's Remarks

Hybrid forms and cross-disciplinary investigation constitute *Big Gay Church*, marking it as a provocative performance place and perennial favorite for those who are dutifully committed to occupations dedicated to social justice and scholarly theorizing with a sense of humor. This is a space where participants can tackle subjects most would never consider confronting in their normal day-to-day school setting. That said, the first time *Big Gay Church* was convened, the group anticipated with trepidation a scene in which some attendees might simply be in attendance to gauge how offended they could be. In contrast, however, by the end of the first morning service, most congregants remarked how valuable and moving the session was for them—offering opportunities for sharing strategies for teaching tolerance, combatting hatred, and uniting as a community committed to human rights. Congregants remarked how challenged they had been; now they were inspired to consider how they, too, could begin looking at ways the arts may have silently served as vehicles for the production of the fear and loathing of queer subjects, of LGBTQ² marginality, invisibility, or misinformation about sexual subjects.

It is perhaps because as a troupe we embody a pedagogy of love, as Reta Ugena Whitlock

(2007) discusses in “Queerly Fundamental: Surviving Straightness in a Rural Southern High School,” that we have thus far avoided attack. Our Right Reverend’s sermon clearly communicates a message of love that is repeated in variable ways in each successive year.



Figure 6. *Big Gay Church* 2010. Song Service led by Dr. Debbie and Rev. Rhoades.

Right Reverend Rhoades’ Sermons

The Right Reverend Rhoades’ sermons embody *Big Gay Church*’s earnest efforts to grapple with the deep embeddedness of conservative Christianity and its influence. Using a dramatic inquiry approach where all participants actively co-create an imagined reality (Edmiston, 2011; Heathcote, 1984), the sermons transform the session into a hybrid academic/spiritual/communal church service. The sermons are the most familiar and traditional component of most church services. The Reverend preaches a sermon *as if* all the co-participants (attendees and presenters) were in a traditional church, albeit one that clearly echoes the more conservative Christian ones experienced by the majority of the *Big Gay Church* troupe members. Our goal is to disrupt, subvert, and alter dominant oppressive discourses generated, fed, and justified, however distantly, by conservative Christian doctrine and biblical interpretation.

These sermons offer a performative critique, a queer re-visioning of traditional Church, in multiple ways. As an Internet-ordained minister, the Right Reverend blurs the lines between reality and fiction, critically exposing and exploiting their performative dimensions (Butler, 2004). As a gender-nonconforming lesbian, the Reverend deliberately disregards and dismisses decades of oppressive, misogynistic, homophobic preaching from the male pastors of her youth about proper gender roles that emphasize the requisite subservient roles for women. The sermons also employ an unusual multimodal critical preaching approach, mixing video clips, pop music, arts, and cultural references in combination with historical, religious, and personal contexts and events.

Although the sermons feel familiar on the surface, they are more subversive. Instead of the more literal and fundamentalist translations and interpretations of Old Testament scriptures and practices, the sermons primarily focus on New Testament verses and principles. They emphasize core Christian tenets: love, acceptance, and worthiness;

forgiveness; continued questioning of doctrine and truth(s); living wholeheartedly and connectedly; and suspending judgment and condemnation. These sermons investigate ways dubious literal religious translations and interpretations, along with selective moral judgment and condemnation, persist within Christianity and permeate the legal, social, and institutional standing and treatment of LGBTQ² people in almost all venues of their daily lives (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008). Like Jon Meacham in his April 1, 2010 *New York Times* review of Diarmaid MacCulloch's (2010) *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, the Right Reverend stresses the need to use reason and critical intelligence to challenge the notion that something is true simply because it is written down somewhere or repeated over and over. She further argues that we need critical reconsideration of biblical interpretations and their consequences in the establishment of the acceptance and perpetuation of widespread sanctioned prejudicial treatment of LGBTQ² people in the U.S. and globally.

The sermons include bits on forgiveness, grace, connection, compassion, acceptance, and action, but the focal message is Jesus's focal message: love. *Big Gay Church* urges our congregation to remember and act on love's power to create positive change in the world. The Reverend uses many of the same verses from the same King James Bible used in most Christian fundamentalist churches, and preaches about many of the same ideas using many of the same words, but the messages are completely different. These sermons operate to produce possibilities—*what ifs*: *What if* U.S. culture didn't reflect the most conservative interpretations of Christianity? *What if* we used the arts to raise awareness of and create positive changes around these core Christian tenets? *What if* the whole Christian church accepted and loved LGBTQ² people? *What if* we recognized and celebrated LGBTQ² people and their contributions to their communities, churches, and larger culture? What would it mean to education? To everything? Unlike many traditional services, *Big Gay Church* sermons focus on love, acceptance, support, and community within a more holistic spiritual, personal, academic, and educational framework, one that recognizes and honors queer people, queer theory, and education.

Big Gay Church services conclude with a queer offering, prayers, and benediction. Rather than collect funds from congregants, *Big Gay Church* troupe members gratefully give guests gifts as tangible talismans of gratitude, love, and community. In 2010 and 2011, Miss Jeanette distributed Holy Cards with information about a Saint or Angel introduced earlier in her lesson; Reverend Rhoades gave "forgiveness" and "love" cards. After the offering, parishioners are invited to make prayer requests or ask to have us "hold [someone] in the light," in the Quaker tradition. The Benedictory blessing offers a final expression of love, an invitation to continue fellowship.

Aesthetic Performances that Disrupt Silences

In "Beyond Soldiers in the Closet: Creating Queer Carnival and Aesthetic Dimensions in the Classroom," Yin-Kun Chang reminds readers that, "teachers rarely have a place to talk about eros or the erotic in school" (2007, p. 119). Further, as bell hooks (1994) reminds us, "entering the classroom [we seem] determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind . . . in short confirming that desirous passion hasn't a place in the classroom" (p. 113). Queer subjects are one of the unspeakable taboos that educators are taught to avoid in school settings; therefore, as Chang argues, "finding ways to dig out the queer voices or narratives in schooling becomes the core mission for critical educators" (p. 123). Hallelujah! Amen.

Discussing how aesthetic experiences provide chances for contradicting one-dimensional reality, Yin-Kun Chang (2007) refers to Marcuse, “[who] argues that through the aesthetic experience, art creates an opportunity to recognize a vision of life and reality that diverges from one-dimensionality . . . an image of reality that is independent of normative reality” (as quoted in Chang, p. 129). *Big Gay Church* similarly operates independently of normative academic conference sessions by conceptually occupying the church through NAEA and issuing performed analyses of film and video, art historic documents, cultural practices, and scriptural readings. *Big Gay Church* reexamines the occupational hazards produced through these multiple forms and how they may have (dis)served LGBTQ² educators, youth, and the possibilities of studying queer subjects in schools.



Figure 7. Miss Jeanette and Sister Sanders in NYC 2012.

Deborah Britzman, who explores queer theory in her 1995 essay in *Educational Theory*, asks, “Why is it unthinkable to work with gay and lesbian writing when one thinks about experiences like friendship, community, research methodology, curriculum theorizing and educational theory?” (p. 151). As a *Big Gay Church* troupe, we try to think the unthinkable by questioning the role religion plays in the lives of the students we teach. Simultaneously theorizing and crafting a research methodology that is situated in friendship and community, we support our colleagues in helping to think through how best to determine what sexuality subjects might be (un)suitable to address in the classroom. We further question how art educators could consider the deliberate evasion of sexuality subjects when addressing artworks and artists’ biographies to be an educationally sound and sufficient practice. As Hermana Harry has argued elsewhere, such omission from the curriculum clearly constitutes a deceptive practice and an unethical erasure of Eros.

Blocking and (re)Modeling our Performative Occupations

Big Gay Church contributes to art educators’ rethinking those prohibitions against addressing queer sexuality matters in their classrooms by providing multiple, relational,

artistic ways to respond to religious sanctimoniousness. Our services rethink and challenge many fundamentalist Christian religions' renderings of LGBTQ² subjects and lessons of hatred, those that too frequently seep into our students' classroom discussions. Whether encouraging congregants to use resources like the documentary films *Trembling Before G_D* (2001) with its exploration of LGBTQ² Jews wrestling with interpretations of the Torah, or Sharma's *Jihad for Love* (2009), addressing gay and lesbian Muslims longing for recognition, or the fundamentalist Christian documentary *One Nation Under God* (2003), interrogating the ex-gay ministries in the United States, or the presentation in *It's Elementary* (1996), suggesting ways educators can discuss LGBTQ² issues with younger students, *Big Gay Church* hopes to provide occupational support to its congregants.

Additionally, sharing strategies, attendees regularly relay those approaches each has found most effective for disrupting hatred, whether by using (non)traditional resources, like children's picture books with alternative family narratives, such as *Mommy, Momma and Me* (2009), offering more inclusivity, or suggesting ways of broaching sexuality subjects in the elementary setting. *Big Gay Church* services create annual opportunities for engaging in dialogue about ways of addressing LGBTQ² issues in the classroom. This is a form of occupation we aim to extend through the repeated words of many mouths, and now in online and in print forms that we hope can be used by colleagues toward the end of making social change happen.



Figure 8. Congregants at *Big Gay Church* 2010. Baltimore.

Not settling for routine polished drag shows enjoyed passively by an audience, our *Big Gay Church* troupe instead focuses on ways that, as advisors, graduate committee members, educators, and performing/visual artists, we can employ arts-based pedagogies in our actions and assume stances for human rights. Performing our research about LGBTQ² educational concerns helps us model alternative methods for creating and re-presenting knowledge. *Big Gay Church* honors queer performance practices, valuing our relationships and experiences with camp (see Sontag, 1964), and our faith in the possibility of change. Our queer blending of education, research, and co-participatory performance embodies the fluidity and performativity Judith Butler unpacks in *Undoing Gender* (2004). We repeatedly

reenact and represent our research through multimedia, multilayered, arts-based, queer pedagogies and performances, with attention to our own sexualities as subjects and as fluid identities subject to marginalization and queer concerns. We seek to stimulate critical conversations and change by adopting and encouraging creative, risky teaching as occupational practices of learning in schools, and particularly in arts classrooms.

Final Testifying and Benediction

There is both potential value in and significant risk taken by the *Big Gay Church* troupe's occupational tactics. In working through artistic means and gesturing through a metaphoric church service, as actors we recognize our performances are opened to multiple (mis)readings and political re-appropriations. We have faith, however, that an arts performance intervention can serve as a forum for amplifying our voices and our critiques. Too infrequently are the arts considered a vehicle for political actions, or a medium through which to undertake or present research, engage audiences in social and political debate, or enliven the imaginations of LGBTQ² students, faculty, or scholars. Through troubling and provocative art forms, one may, nonetheless, be encouraged to come to terms with indeterminacy and at times interrupt even one's own intentions and occupations. It is this reiterative questioning, as an act of queer theorizing, that can lubricate congregant scholars' thinking. Our occupations demand that we challenge readers to consider that which they might otherwise have found unbearable to contemplate. Sharing our various approaches to doing this, from gentle, sweetly instructive elementary grade-level morality tales, to musical rendering in lyrical form, or to more confrontational cross analyses of curatorial decision-making, our occupations have attempted to incite contemplation about a subject too infrequently broached in classroom practice.

Ours is NOT a form of evangelical hyper-confidence, nor do we sustain any belief in our own ineffability. We have attempted to avoid claiming that any one of us offers the proper, correct, or righteous reading or interpretation of a scriptural verse or social practice. Instead our *Big Gay Church* services have been grounded in the mysterious assumption that we, too, can speak through queerly god-inspired voices. Participants in annual *Big Gay Church* services are invited to both comically and solemnly consider contesting connections between schooled productions of fear and loathing, whether through visual art forms, filmed, or orally canted rituals. We have loved occupying NAEA through our performance disruptions, and welcome congregants to alternatively offer their own lessons and testimonials, shed tears of laughter, raise goose bumps of joy, and join the revelry in aisle-rolling hilarity at the outrageous silliness of a group of middle-aged academics eager to confront the mistreatments of a population long demonized by many religious teachings.

The *Big Gay Church* troupe aims to disrupt those silent messages and call out those invisible lessons too frequently ignored as problematic subjects in K-12 school settings, art history texts, and social critiques. The *Big Gay Church* is thankful that our audience/congregation has been comprised of those devoutly committed to human rights, social justice, and open to queerly questioning the connections between fundamentalist fearmongering and those ways the arts could contribute to pedagogical possibility and support LGBTQ² liberation struggles through a theatrical interventionary tactics. Each year, *Big Gay Church* sessions have been granted an exceptionally generous amount of time within the NAEA conference program. We are grateful for that and also thankful because year after year we have heard from attendees, both students and professors alike, that they are moved by the shared dialogical space we create through *Big Gay Church*. These congregants mark these

performances as an opportunity for reawakening their own social and pedagogical imaginings of occupational possibility. On a much smaller scale, we feel that we have created a decentralized community, like the larger Occupy Movement, that continues beyond the times when we are physically in the same space.

Big Gay Church occupations intend no harm, but are undertaken as annual performances that are based on a hope of shaking participating subjects free from the bondage of propriety, free from those schooled or religious protocols that prohibit the possibility of researching and speaking from loving and embodied spaces. In short, *Big Gay Church* aims to disrupt those fixed rituals that have long disciplined the discourses scholars have undertaken at annual academic assemblies and instead opens up spaces where, as holy fools, we can play.

Contributors to *LGBT Youth*, 9(3) examined the impacts of religious experiences on the field of education. Studies in that volume examined religiosity and academic success (Gottfried & Polikoff, 2012); Evangelical Californian Christian College students' attitudes toward gay rights (Wolff, Himes, Kwon & Bollinger, 2012); exploration of youth online relations (Hillier, Mitchell & Ybarra, 2012); and the significant contribution to the field of the reading practices of LGBTQ² youth and straight students' interpretations of young adult literature (Bittner, 2012). The risks and values explored by these authors were perhaps consistently far more measured and cautious in their claims than our largely philosophical and theoretical arts-based inquiry has been. At *Big Gay Church* we invite the congregation to witness and testify sharing their experiences as teachers addressing the needs of LGBTQ² youth, or as queer teachers themselves, sharing their experiences. Periodically throughout our services, we offer opportunities for audience members to share or inquire. Some have spoken of their personal experiences with negotiating their own religious beliefs and their teaching responsibilities, and others have raised pertinent questions about how to address the needs of their students when issues arise. We provide a safe and supportive space to discuss these situations and invite input from the congregants to support each other in their struggles. We contend it is important to consider arts-based inquiry and performance as occupations that hold great potential for questioning fundamentalist religious teaching and prescribed church rituals that exclude LGBTQ² populations. Through the arts we contend alternative ways of struggling through the social, legal, and educational skirmishes that face us today, and at this historical juncture, as the Supreme Court tests the legality of 34 states' Defense of Marriage statutes, this is a particularly urgent cause to be sustaining.

With budgetary challenges and slashing of arts programs across the U.S. and abroad, colleagues may question whether or not those queer issues our troupe raises are placing the field at yet even greater risks. We recognize such concerns but contend it is equally urgent for art educators to use whatever means they have at their disposal to confront the current conservative backlash, like the Hide/Seek Exhibition's forced removal of the Wojnarowicz video in 2010. What more opportune occasion could there be for educators in the arts than to question how religious fundamentalist prescriptions promote hatred, intimidate progressive educators from advancing democratic curricula, and misrepresent threats to democratic and inclusive teaching practices in our schools and the constitution of our families? We consider the least we can do at this juncture is to share our research and knowledge about LGBTQ² youth, the strategies and interventionary tactics we have deployed in occupying NAEA. As a *Big Gay Church* troupe we shared our experiences, knowing full well that in doing so we risk being placed in the crosshairs of those who would see schools privatized and evangelicized in ways that *Big Gay Church* has tried to trouble.

It is through the arts as a discipline that *Big Gay Church* has attempted to address identities and identifications of historic figures, cultural practices, and the ways religious mores of various cultures have shaped our field and current struggles. We can only pray that in the future colleagues and peers will be willing to intellectually embrace the messy tenuousness and indeterminacy that artworks offer (be it in film, music, dance, or theater), and perhaps through this messiness, consider new forms of inquiry. Then a new spirit of solidarity will revive our imaginations and moral conscience once more.

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