

Exhibition essay for
The Gay Mafia is Real
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**WESTERN
EXHIBITIONS**

Our Thing David J. Getsy

It is time to break our *omertà*, the traditional code of silence and conduct that connects our band of outlaws. When I responded to the whispered accusation that queers had accumulated too much influence in the art world, I didn't deny it.¹ Instead, I questioned the question, challenging its anxieties and assumptions. But now we are putting it on the line and declaring: it's real. The queer mafia is a thing. It's "our thing" — *Cosa Nostra*, as another more famous mafia dubbed it.

To call a group a "mafia" is to do two things: to assert its outlaw status and to recognize that it is organized and collective. Both of these are worrying only if you're the one comfortably invested in the status quo. This charge only gets laid onto a group when it is beginning to relocate power and garner influence, and that momentum is cast as illegitimate and shadow. Queer theory has, among other things, taught us to attend to the ways in which legitimacy is dispensed. It asks how the "normal" is constructed through exclusion, how "common" sense is used like a bludgeon, and how difference is subordinated rather than celebrated. It drew upon a long history of resistance by those who were unsanctioned or outcast. Historically, queer culture has found strength in such outlaws. Breaking the law seemed like an acceptable act in order to be with others who love or desire similarly, and transgression was necessary in order to make one's own families, kinships, and communities outside of the ways that society constituted what was "natural." So, when criminality is implied by calling queers a mafia, it's neither novel nor a surprise. Let's take it as a confirmation and a compliment. However, what is most interesting about the panicked conjuring of the image of a queer mafia is not that its members are, yet again, told they aren't playing by the supposed rules. Rather, it is the real fear that they are *organized and helping each other* that drives this particular rhetorical tactic.

Instead of focusing on negating the negativity of the labeling of a queer mafia, I think it's more constructive to focus on what it positively identifies — collective effort. Any mafia is built on a wealth of affection, community, and love. That's why it's so often called a family. Why wouldn't a group of people who find themselves outside of the structures of power and normalcy choose to help others who, like themselves, share the daily experience of being reminded that they fail (however fabulously) to be "normal?"² In other words, why shouldn't people who have struggled with being erased from representation come together to demand it, to infiltrate protocols of legitimacy, and to undermine the camouflaging of power and prejudice?

Queer people are all different, by definition. They don't think the same, don't act the same, don't have the same histories, and don't desire or aspire to the same things. Their experiences of alternative modes of loving and living are balanced with the many other parts that constitute them and that generate their priorities. They are challenged or enabled by other ways in which culture marks them or leaves them unmarked. One reason some parts of this mafia can infiltrate to the extent that they do is that they enjoy the power of other largely unmarked categories like whiteness or maleness. For this reason, one can't be complacent or secure, and the inside of the coterie must also be a place where the operations of exclusion are interrogated and redressed. These necessary conversations about valuing difference and contesting the operations of power are, however, precisely the point of a larger queer critique. Perhaps the one thing that can bring together the many different outlaws of the queer mafia is the recognition that we help ourselves when we help others who also approach the world askew and awry. The queer mafia is one such coterie of outcasts and agitators who think that another's difference is worth safeguarding and who are skeptical of the protocols of power that so readily operate under the cover of the natural, the normal, the common, the traditional, and other fantasies of homogeneity.

This exhibition uses the invested network, the brazenly partial choice, and the shared conversation as its structure. Each artist advocated for another in a way that put on display their preference and their support, bringing their peers into the gallery space and offering them a platform. In this way, this little show replays the conditions for help and

encouragement that, cumulatively, produce what those outside of it refer to as a mafia. It never tried to be comprehensive or complete, and it wears its partiality on its sleeve. Nevertheless, even its limited network can begin to demonstrate how such acts of care for others' work can be ethical and effective. A bit of the ground that was so difficult to achieve is shared. Preference is political, after all.

The tongue-in-cheek title of this exhibition uses the old school terminology on purpose. It plays up its anachronism in the unmodified usage of "gay" to mock the accusation of a mafia and showcase its limitations. In other words, it's not descriptive of the artists included in the exhibition but rather ironic in its harking back to the awkwardness with which queer content gets talked about in the mainstream (from which, of course, the problem of the "mafia" is declared). The terminologies (and the political positions those terminologies reflect) have a long history of lively debate, but what is consistent across these histories is the anxiety voiced about an organized group of outlaws bonding together to support each other and to insure their survival.

Such concerns about coterries of queers controlling cultural life are as old as the modern category of the homosexual. From the context of Aestheticism that gave rise to Oscar Wilde's cultural prominence to the McCarthy Era's warnings of a "homintern" (playing off the abbreviated term for the Communist International), the queer demand for collective presence has repeatedly been registered as a spectral syndicate undermining yet directing culture.³ In a controversial hour-long documentary for CBS in 1967, Mike Wallace summed up the envy that underwrites this accusation, saying "Homosexuals are discriminated against in almost all fields of employment [...] But in the world of the creative arts, they receive equal treatment — indeed, some will say better treatment. There is even talk of a homosexual mafia in the arts, dominating various fields: theater, music, dance, fashion."⁴ Any time a few queer artists seem to be gaining prominence, it is suspect. The prejudicial implication is that they have done this *despite* their difference, and any evidence of collectivity among them is derided as cheating, as illegal, and as corrupting. Again, let us not focus on this as negative, but take these various eruptions of "our thing" into public discourse as testaments to the fact that we are successfully nurturing each other, developing tactics to survive and flourish, being accountable, and producing reparative potentiality that, in turn, becomes infectious and exciting. This accusation will happen again, and I for one look forward to the next waves of mutuality, momentum, and collectivity of which each new re-emergence of the specter of the queer mafia will be the evidence. With regard to such a recurring cycle, I think a good call to action are the words that end one of Sharon Hayes's *Revolutionary Love* performances: "We'll be gay until everyone has forgotten and then we'll be gay again."⁵

David J. Getsy writes about art's histories of the human form and its alternatives. His newest books discuss transgender and queer tactics in late modern and contemporary art: *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (Yale University Press, forthcoming November 2015) and an anthology of artists' writings on queer practices for the Whitechapel Gallery's Documents of Contemporary Art book series (MIT Press, forthcoming 2016). He is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. <http://www.saic.edu/~dgetsy>

¹ Jason Foubert, "Is There a Gay Mafia in the Art World? David Getsy Answers," *Chicago Magazine Online* (March 2014). <http://www.chicagomag.com/arts-culture/March-2014/Is-there-a-gay-mafia-in-the-art-world-SAICs-David-Gettsy-answers/>

² Here, I am thinking of the constructive account of failure provided in J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

³ See, for instance, Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994); David K. Johnson, *The Lavendar Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and with particular attention to the art world of this time Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007) and Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), esp. pp. 38-43.

⁴ Mike Wallace narrating "The Homosexuals" for CBS Reports, aired 7 March 1967.

⁵ From Sharon Hayes's 2008 performance at the Republican National Convention titled *Revolutionary Love: I Am Your Worst Fear, I Am Your Best Enemy*. To be published in David Getsy, ed., *Queer*, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press and the Whitechapel Gallery, London, forthcoming 2016).