

F*CK! at CCA

PLAYSPACE: Centering
Queer Sexualities



F*CK!

Radical spaces for sex, sexual expression, and sexual experiences are innate to, and often considered inseparable from, the queer experience. F*CK! presents radically

By Emilia
Shaffer-Del Valle

*F*CK!* is an exhibition that seeks to represent radically queer sexual experiences from multiple perspectives, juxtaposing a historical, documentary representation of queer sexual experience with a contemporary art expression of queer kink culture. The exhibition features the work of contemporary artist Chrissa Chorvat (MFA Fine Arts '24) alongside archival material from Auto Erotica, a store in San Francisco's historic Castro neighborhood that buys, sells, and displays LGBTQ memorabilia. Through various mediums, including borosilicate glass, prints, and multimedia sculpture, Chorvat prods the relationship between pleasure and pain and articulates the complexities of desire. As both a store and self-described living museum, Auto Erotica aims to archive and keep alive LGBTQ history and culture through its diverse collection of photography, buttons, posters, t-shirts, early magazines, gay travel guides, artwork, coffee table books, catalogs, journals, and other ephemera. RRR Assistant Editor Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle interviewed the show's co-curators Samantha Hiura (MA Curatorial Practice / MA Visual & Critical Studies '25) and Megan Kelly (MA Curatorial Practice '24) about everything from the exhibition's signature color palette to the significance of engaging with queer culture in San Francisco. The exhibition was on view at CCA's PLAYSPACE gallery from March 2 to April 14, 2023.

Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle (ESD): Can you start off by giving us the basics of how the show came about? What is your relationship to PLAYSPACE and what role does it play for students at CCA?

Megan Kelly (MK): Sam and I were really excited about the prospect of exhibiting with PLAYSPACE since we arrived at CCA. As we got to know each other in our first semester, we realized we're both invested in similar themes and critiques of visual art and the art world. We had some brainstorming sessions to discuss themes and potential exhibiting artists. We landed on a theme about the queer experience and left it broad to allow us to explore what we wanted to say within that theme. PLAYSPACE is a really excellent program CCA has to offer its curatorial practice students. It allows us to experiment, to *play*, to get a feel for all the intricacies of curating a show in a low-stakes environment. It also is a perfect environment for collaboration across departments.

Samantha Hiura (SH): PLAYSPACE had been something that drew me to the Curatorial Practice program when I applied to CCA. Because it's a student-run program, you really have the space and resources to be as experimental and fluid as you want while also gaining the practical experience of working through logistical constraints and running an art experience or exhibition

from the ground up. PLAYSPACE definitely holds a very tender place in my heart, as this was my first execution of a fully-realized exhibition with dynamic ideas, programming, and a lot of little moving details, and it was certainly not without its challenges. I think PLAYSPACE is one of the most vital and quintessential projects to the CCA community, because it really is quite special to have a space that is only brought to life by students. Not only that, but historically it has been a great avenue for student connection across programs and divisions, with many of the past exhibiting artists also being CCA students. So, in that way, it really can be a place for grassroots community support for one another's creative production—and that's what the spirit of CCA is for me.

ESD: I really enjoyed the combination of contemporary artwork with archival materials. What does each type of visual material bring to the show's theme? How do you see the two interacting or working together?

SH: I was really excited about that aspect of the show as well. I think they not only bring two different narrative perspectives to the show's themes, but also work to reinforce and challenge one another's voices in a kind of push-pull relationship. In ways, the pieces from *Auto Erotica* (the ephemera and copy of *Drummer* magazine) lay a contextual ground, which Chrissa's work moves from and within. At the same time, Chrissa's work certainly asserts its own subjectivity in a really independent manner, subverting, leaning into, and pushing the (dis)comforts of queer sex, kink, and fetish.

ESD: Relatedly, did you notice changes—whether thematic or aesthetic—in objects from different eras? What were some of your favorite archival pieces? How did you determine what to use from *Auto Erotica*'s abundant collection?

MK: We first were interested in using pieces from *Auto Erotica* as a way to exhibit the Bull Dog Baths facsimile print by But Whole Press. When we sifted through *Auto Erotica*'s collection, we were drawn to the ephemera—this is where the inspiration for the wheatpaste poster wall came from. The small flyers used as handouts to advertise upcoming events I feel is a huge unexplored material in queer history. These seemingly insignificant flyers are snapshots of the queer community frozen in time. We had free reign to choose flyers and posters from the overflowing buckets of material Patrick had, and chose ones that we were aesthetically drawn to. *Auto Erotica* also has an impeccable magazine

collection, all of which was in pristine condition. That was a facet of queer history I was unfamiliar with, so I was curious to use it as material in the show. It's proven to be quite a hit—some visitors have commented on their relationship to the *Drummer* magazine in particular!

SH: You know how when you're flipping through albums at a records store, you can guess the year something came out because of the design and style of the covers? That was what it was like flipping through Auto Erotica's vast collections of magazines, fliers, etc. I mean, we were literally *digging* through storage bins filled with those little leaflet fliers. There's definitely a masculinist focus across a lot of the ephemera, which I think might be a reflection of the "claims to fame" of San Francisco's own queer history. I would have personally liked to have included more femme-centered history, but historically, as we know, there just wasn't the same visibility for trans, femme, or non-binary-centered nightlife.

The magazine is definitely my favorite of the archival pieces. I wanted to have a way for people to engage with its content because it really was (and remains) the only publication of its kind, which required thinking through different display strategies to do so without compromising the magazine's condition. So we fabricated a vitrine specifically for the purpose of viewing it open, laying flat along with the promise that we would turn the page every day to get the most out of its content. That was really exciting, because it makes the show new and dynamic every day.

ESD: Something I noticed about Chrissa Chorvat's work in the show is the way in which she uses familiar objects to construct a narrative about sexual experience. One of the pieces, for example, is a pink plastic airplane adorned with small silver, white, and gray vibrators. There is definitely an element of humor that the show seems to be going for, but the everydayness of these materials also seems to speak to the show's interest in destigmatizing queer sexualities. Can you talk a bit about this subversion and tell me what drew you to Chorvat's practice?

SH: That's a great question. I think the kind of "everydayness" you point to is a way in for the viewer. She almost traps us in our comfort by allowing us to feel like we *know* these objects intellectually, but inscribes her own expressions of sexuality and what it can look like in the expanse. What drew me initially to her practice was its honesty, which predicates itself on an inherent vulnerability, humor, and celebration. That necessary coexistence

is what the show's ideas are really built on, so you could argue that her work, her narratives, and her themes are really at the core of this show.

Chrissa told me that all the vibrators used to turn on (I think they had to take the batteries out during shipping) and the plane would vibrate like a fighter jet starting up, which I find hilarious and it definitely adds a whole new element to the work. I just had to share that somewhere, ha!

ESD: San Francisco has a long and unique relationship to LGBTQIA+ culture, activism, and history. How does San Francisco figure into the thematic construction of the exhibition? What does it mean to you to be staging this show in this city?

MK: Coming from a small city like Philadelphia, I see a lot of similarities in the queer and activist communities. Exhibiting pieces from Auto Erotica's collection definitely inspired a spark of research in me. I've been deeply invested in the queer community in Philadelphia, and it was important to me to find that community when I became an SF transplant. Finding Auto Erotica was like the golden ticket into researching and becoming acquainted with the rich queer culture SF has had for decades.

SH: I think *F*CK!* unintentionally became a site-specific exhibition of San Francisco's unique and deeply historic queer scene. Auto Erotica as a contributor has definitely pushed the exhibition in that way, because of its rootedness and legacy here. I read somewhere that it was the first shop of its kind in the Castro when it opened, when it was even just selling sex toys and similar items, and it certainly remains such, although in a different form. The show's combination of historical objects and contemporary art that deals with the same subjects definitely feels like an extended conversation with not only other queer shows I've seen here, but also with the city and its history as a whole. In that way, it feels kind of intimate and deeply humbling.

ESD: The color pink is a point of visual cohesion throughout the exhibition. It's used in the show's marketing materials, as the gallery's wall color, and seen in much of the artwork itself. It even influenced the choice of food and drinks at the opening. Why this color?

SH: I think this was where the exhibition design, practical constraints, and curatorial intent coalesced. From a practical standpoint, we needed something that wasn't competitive

with the pieces but was enough to enunciate the PLAYSPACE gallery among the other similarly shaped and colored spaces in its proximity. That led us to light pink. But more than that, pink has this kind of sexy playfulness to me—not quite sultry but not innocent—and maintaining that element of play was important to me. The pink latex that we use for our visuals also embodies this, but coded in a strong visual signifier for BDSM and fetish.

MK: When I close my eyes and think about the pieces in the exhibition, all I see is pink. That pink latex imagery was central to the inspiration behind the show. I also really like the gender play of the color pink. We explore sexuality in a major way here, but I think there's a hint of gender play as well. As Sam mentioned, the majority of pieces we pulled from Auto Erotica speak to a white, cis-male perspective on queerness. I think filling the whole space with pink adds a layer, a balance, of femininity to help drive home our goal to represent multiple perspectives on the queer experience.

ESD: There is a palpable and fascinating play—in the show and in sexual expression generally—between what is explicit and what is suggested. Did articulating this tension influence your curatorial choices?

SH: Definitely. I think it's most pronounced in the decisions to include or withhold didactic information across pieces. I really wanted Chrissa's work to speak for itself, because they proffer an irresistible and situated point of view, and they have so many sticky, little places to explore intellectually. I've found it to be really generative too; people are always excited to share their ideas about her pieces with me, things that I wouldn't have seen myself. On the other hand, I felt it was important to provide contextual blurbs about some of the Auto Erotica works—how they fit into the larger histories that they're a part of. There is definitely a hard balance to strike between providing too little information at the risk of flattening queerness and being overly explanatory, to the point where you lose the invitation to participate.

ESD: In the show description, you talk about representing queer sexual experiences from multiple perspectives. Can you talk about some of the different perspectives you see represented through the objects in the show? Why was it so important to emphasize multiplicity as central to queer sexual experiences?

SH: I think when you engage in conversation on issues having to do with social consciousness and historically marginalized

communities, engaging with multiplicity is not just important—it's imperative. Without actively including multiple perspectives and multiple ideas, you not only stunt the possibilities of your own project, but you also risk framing those ideas or experiences as a monolith. I think it's more than basic curatorial practice; it's a gesture of care. I think a lot of the pieces from *Auto Erotica* speak from a fairly white, cis-male gay perspective, which can be pretty typical of the Castro and its history (this is, of course, not to say that this was the universal experience of the queer community here). With Chrissa's work, I think she touches on a more expansive idea of queerness, and how it filters through her experiences within the kink and fetish communities. I think this unfolds in *SUPERFAM (The Truth is Stranger Than Fiction)*, where, through reading her written words among the print closely, you can see her implicitly explore these different facets of her intersectional identities.

ESD: Thank you so much, Sam and Megan, for your time and thoughtful engagement with these questions!



**Pink paint samples on the PLAYSPACE gallery wall
Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno**



F*CK! installation view, 2022
Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno



Chrissa Chorvat, Safe Word, 2022
Photo by Megan Kelly



Fliers and Posters from Auto Erotica, dates variable
Photo by Megan Kelly



Chrissa Chorvat, The Flowers Bloom Where you Have Placed Them, and the Lady Smiles. Just Like Mom, 2022
Photo by Nicholas Lea Bruno



F*CK! installation view, 2022
 Photo by Megan Kelly



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Megan Kelly (she/her) is the 2022-2023 Graduate Curatorial Fellow at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts and first year student in CCA's Curatorial Practice (MA) program. Megan is dedicated to creating a platform to promote contemporary artists, with an emphasis on supporting queer and BIPOC artists. She holds a BFA in Photography from the University of the Arts and studied Art History in the post-baccalaureate program at the University of Pennsylvania.