

# MUSEUMS AND HETERONORMATIVITY: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF INCLUSIVE INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES

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## **Museums and Heteronormativity: Exploring the Effects of Inclusive Interpretive Strategies**

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The thesis contends that museums are inevitably bound up with a powerful heteronormative frame and specifically explores promising interpretive strategies that have sought to interweave sexual minorities' stories into mainstream museum narratives and disrupt long-standing heteronormative narratives and practices. Informed by a selection of literature from the fields of museum, cultural and sociological studies, it draws upon broader debates within the profession concerning the social roles and responsibilities of museums with reference to disadvantaged communities and their cultural representation.

In order to investigate the potential for museums to subvert heteronormative ways of seeing through reformist exhibitionary strategies, I explore the process of development (primarily) and reception (secondarily) of two projects: *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* at Sudley House in Liverpool and *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Both exhibitions were appreciated as unconventional examples of museum practice, featuring, respectively, a subtle -thematic and spatial- integration of sexual minorities among regular exhibits.

In line with other researches, the empirical findings of this research respond to the insufficiency of museum literature in critically reviewing a specific set of curatorial methodologies intending to reveal the benefits of a more subtle and inclusive museum practice when previously disparaged groups are portrayed. The thesis concludes with the need for museums to research and employ a range of innovative interpretive devices for exhibiting references to gender, sexual, and other kinds of, difference, refraining from a constant repetition of stand-alone exhibitions. The adoption of a diverse curatorship of difference seems to be the only way for a fairer inclusion of a minority's plurality, and consequently, for practically rejecting restricting fixed understandings of gender, sexual and other types of identity. And, as I argue, embedded exhibits among regular collections are a very promising curatorial method to communicate this plurality to the widest possible audience.

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## List of abbreviations

BMAG: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

HWCC: Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

NML: National Museums of Liverpool

QtM: Queering the Museum

SH: Sudley House



## Chapter 1: Introduction to the (hetero)normative museum

The thesis investigates the potential for museums to subvert heteronormative ways of seeing through reformist exhibitionary strategies that adopt an inclusive curatorial approach, specifically those that have sought to interweave sexual minorities' stories into mainstream museum narratives. Informed by a selection of literature from the fields of museum, cultural and sociological studies, it draws upon broader debates within the profession concerning the social roles and responsibilities of museums with reference to disadvantaged communities and their cultural representation.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century a lively debate ensued concerning the changing social purpose of museums and their responsiveness to contemporary multicultural society. Writers, notably Richard Sandell and David Fleming in the UK, Lois Silverman in the US or Fiona Cameron and Lynda Kelly in Australia, note an expansion of a socially inclusive agenda promoted in the form of either stand-alone projects or even newly developed organisations, all of which are 'pursuing [a] practice that reflects a belief that museums can (and should) act upon their potential to contribute to progressive social change' (Tseliou 2013a: 1).

Simultaneously, both the cultural and media world face an increase in the representation of sexual difference. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) portrayal has been gaining substantial attention notably due to the simultaneous rise in public acceptance and formal recognition of LGBT rights. Museums, along with other public institutions, have, therefore, been occasionally contributing to raising awareness and supporting the inclusion of sexual minorities in their programming and collections. However, such initiatives still remain problematic; LGBTQ culture remains invisible in the majority of museums and, where efforts have been made to include LGBT lives in museum narratives, these very often reinforce normative heterosexual perceptions on gender and sexual identities. Past research sheds light on the reasons behind practitioners' reluctance to display the topic, yet, I would argue, the overarching and predominant cause is the pervasiveness of 'heteronormativity':

Heteronormativity can be defined as the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations. Heteronormativity insures that the organization of heterosexuality in everything from gender to weddings to marital status is held up as both a model and as 'normal' . . . Heteronormativity works . . . to naturalize the institution of heterosexuality while rendering real people's relationships and commitments irrelevant and illegitimate.

(Ingraham 2002: 76)

A large amount of research from queer studies and the media and educational sector has unveiled the unnoticed influence of heteronormativity on people's perceptions of which gender and sexual norms should be regarded as socially acceptable. This thesis contends that museums are inevitably bound up with a powerful heteronormative frame and it explores promising interpretive strategies, inclusive of sexual diversity, that could contribute to the disruption of prevalent and long-standing museum heteronormative narratives and practices.

### **The Theoretical Terrain and Museum Practice: The Representation of Sexual Diversity**

Museums constitute a significant element of culture and society, actively engaged in the construction of identities (Marstine 2006: 4; Newman and McLean 2006: 64, Crooke 2007: 15). Janet Marstine argues that despite claims for a neutral apolitical museum, a significant percentage of visitors, theorists and professionals increasingly recognise them as places that 'don't just represent cultural identity' but 'produce it through framing' (Marstine 2006: 4). In other words, curatorial approaches towards the interpretation and presentation of tangible or intangible exhibits reflect the institutional stance over a topic and are likely to affect audience perceptions and meaning-making processes (Silverman 1995; Golding 2007; Sandell 2007; Sandell and Dodd 2010; Silverman, L. 2010).

Recent years have seen a number of pioneering and experimental efforts to develop programmes that portray sexual diversity in an attempt to influence audience attitudes. Pioneers and active champions of such inclusive projects at well-established museums are predominantly found in progressive environments where substantial action has already taken place in terms of the legal protection of LGBT civil rights. For instance, in Norway<sup>1</sup> the temporary exhibition *Against Nature?* opened in October 2006 at the University of Oslo's Natural History Museum, being the first of its kind considering homosexuality among animal species and aspiring to 'reject the all too well known argument that homosexual behaviour is a crime against nature' (University of Oslo Natural History Museum 2012). Similarly, in Sweden<sup>2</sup> the temporary exhibition *Queer: Desire, Power and Identity* was on display at the National Museum of Fine Arts to coincide with Europride<sup>3</sup> 2008 hosted in Stockholm, in order to unravel the links between sexuality and gender and the production and understanding of artworks and art history (National Museum of Fine Arts n.d.).

At the same time it is gradually becoming more common to see countries that have traditionally avoided the inclusion of sexual minorities in their collections and displays embracing them little by little. For example, recently in Europe two such cases were manifested, one in Poland<sup>4</sup> and one in Greece<sup>5</sup>, both of which achieve annually low rates for formal recognition of LGBT rights (ILGA 2009; ILGA 2010). In Poland, the National Museum in Warsaw presented the exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* in 2010 to coincide with the Europride 2010 and focused on male and female homoeroticism in art (National Museum in Warsaw n.d.). In Greece, the Athens' Museum of Cycladic Art displayed *Eros; From Hesiod's Theogony to Late*

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<sup>1</sup> Norway has legalised homosexuality since 1972 and was one of the pioneers in anti-discriminatory laws for the protection of homosexuals and allowed the formal registration of same sex relationships since 1993 (glbtq; An encyclopaedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, & queer culture 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Sweden decriminalised same sex sexual acts in 1944 and was the pioneer in allowing sex-change by law in 1972 and the first anti-discriminatory laws were in place in 1987 (glbtq; An encyclopaedia of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, & queer culture 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Europride is an annual Pan-European event 1992 (European pride organisers association 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Poland score sheet for 2013 based on the research carried out by ILGA (2013a).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Greece score sheet for 2013 based on the research carried out by ILGA (2013b).

*Antiquity* in 2009, which explored the notion of love in Greek and Roman antiquity as depicted in archaeological material, including a separate section on homoerotic relationships (Museum of Cycladic Art n.d.).

In the UK, where empirical research for the current study was carried out, the vast majority of exhibitions related to sexual minorities occurred after the repeal of Section 28 of the UK Local Government Act 1988 in 2003. The dismantling of this legislation was significant as it had deterred local authorities (and the museums and galleries under their governance) from promoting anything positively related to homosexuality (The National Archives n.d.). Yet, this did not discourage the Museum of London in 1999 from producing *Pride & Prejudice: lesbian and gay London*. The museum risked prosecution by staging this exhibition which aimed ‘to celebrate the diversity of lesbian and gay life in London, to examine the enduring appeal of London to lesbians and gay men from around the UK and the world, and to explore the systems of oppression that lesbians and gays face’ (Museum of London 2005). Since then, sexual diversity has attracted increasing attention across national and local museums and galleries in a range of formats, broadly summarised as follows<sup>6</sup>:

- exhibitions of artists known because of their non-heterosexual orientation and with clear references to this, such as *Hidden Histories* (New Art Gallery in Walsall, 2004) or *David Hockney 1960-1968: A Marriage of Styles* (Nottingham Contemporary, 2009), or of people associated with the LGBTQ community, such as *Gay Icons* (National Portrait Gallery in London, 2009),
- exhibitions on high-profile historical personalities with references to their homosexuality, such as *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* (British Museum in London, 2008) or on aspects of history previously withheld, such as *Hello Sailor! Gay life on the ocean wave* (Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool, 2006),

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<sup>6</sup> This classification of LGBTQ-related projects is only one among several one could use, as they could have been grouped, for example, according to the type of the hosting museum, etc.

- exhibitions aimed at unravelling the personal experiences of the local LGBT communities, such as *Queer is Here* (Museum of London, 2008), *Pride in Our Past* (Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 2012), or *Outside Edge: A journey through Black British lesbian and gay history* (Museum in Docklands in London, 2008),
- exhibitions exploring a broader social history or scientific topic inclusive of same sex acts and relationships, like the *Family Album* (Sunderland Museums and Winter Gardens, 2008) and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* (Sudley House in Liverpool, 2010), or *Sexual Nature* (Natural History Museum in London, 2011),
- trails and performances across museum collections unveiling the hidden references to sexual identities, other than heterosexuality, such as the LGBT trails being conducted at the British Museum in London, the *Queer Perspective* tours (National Portrait Gallery in London) and *Queering the Portrait with David Hoyle* (Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), and finally,
- projects whose format occurred once either with the use of the human rights perspective at *sh[OUT]: Contemporary art and human rights* (Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, 2009), or with the adoption of artistic critical interventions to 'queer' permanent collections at *Queering the Museum* (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 2010).

Despite the different format and content of museum initiatives so far, a number of features are frequently repeated. First and foremost, the inclusion of sexual difference often takes place temporarily, with few exceptions. Two notable exceptions include the presentation of a substantial amount of exhibits related to sexual diversity at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery with its permanent separate display on the local LGBT community and Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool which made *Hello Sailor* part of their permanent exhibitions in 2009. On top of these, the British Museum in London constitutes an exceptional case. With

several objects pertaining to sexual difference in their collections, they launched a paper trail, which was then transformed to an updated web trail, followed by the recent publication of the book *A little gay history* in September 2013, as its author, Richard Parkinson, explains (2013b). This is the first of its kind to be realised by a high-profile national museum highlighting, along with the web trail, artifacts and stories that are integrated within permanent collections as pertaining to sexual diversity.

Internationally, nonetheless, there are some noteworthy 'gay museums', although not state-funded, such as, The GLBT History Museum in San Francisco run by the non-profit GLBT Historical Society, or, the Schwules Museum in Berlin run by the non-profit association Friends of a Gay Museum in Berlin. Others include; the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York run by the non-profit organisation Leslie Lohman Gay Art Foundation and the National LGBT Museum in Columbia, run by the non-profit organisation Velvet Foundation.

Secondly, a tendency towards stand-alone exhibitions with a preference for spatial segregation from permanent and regular exhibits is also repeatedly encountered. This predisposition results in projects being branded as 'gay shows', and perhaps most likely appealing to visitors identified as LGBTQ or to individuals with openness towards sexual difference. Consequently, lack of experimentation in identifying interpretive strategies appealing to the widest possible audience is, I argue, a factor that potentially reduces the positive effect museums might encourage in changing attitudes and fostering social change, as it gradually becomes more recognised by museum practitioners and scholars:

[T]he potential for museums to take up an explicitly activist moral standpoint on human rights issues - one that aims to actively shape the conversations that society has about difference - and to engage visitors in (frequently challenging) debates pertaining to social justice.

(Sandell and Nightingale 2012: 1)

Additionally, perpetuating this preference for spatial or conceptual separatism, I assert, emphasises differences between sexual minorities and the heterosexual majority at the expense of what they might share in common.

The representation of LGBTQ lives and culture has received relatively little attention within the museum studies literature. The only substantive volumes produced to date are the special journal issue *Museums and Social Issues; Where is Queer?* in 2008 and the volume, edited by Amy Levin, *Gender, Sexuality and Museums* in 2010. Journal articles and book chapters addressing the topic are more regularly encountered often produced by a member of staff directly involved in the development of the project under analysis, and authors elaborate on their personal experience of curating sexual diversity to raise stimulating points for consideration for future museum practice. Some of the most well-cited<sup>7</sup> include Michael Petry's article on *Hidden Histories* at the New Art Gallery in Walsall (2010), Stuart Frost on *The Warren Cup: Sexuality in Ancient Greece* at the British Museum (2010) as well as Patrik Steorn on *Show Yourself* at the Nordic Museum and *Queer: Desire, Power, and Identity* at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Sweden (2012). Others include Anthony Tibbles on *Hello Sailor! Gay life on the ocean wave* at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (2011), and, Nikola Burdon about *Pride and Prejudice; Lesbian and gay history* at the Museum of London (2000).

The real merit of these studies lies in the range of suggestions they offer on how museums might be transformed into more socially responsive sites, where the previously disregarded value of the LGBTQ community is established. Through analyses of institutionally or externally imposed hurdles, multiple recommendations and forewarnings for future consideration have been put forward, quite often within a 'queer theory' frame (Mills 2006; Sanders 2007; Mills 2008; Sanders 2008; Steorn 2012). In particular, they all stress the need for museums to revise their practices, summarised under the four following broader categories:

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<sup>7</sup> These are limited to articles written in English, which are available to the majority of scholars and practitioners.

- to seek consultation with the LGBTQ community (McIntyre 2007; Tibbles 2011),
- to reconsider their collecting and documenting strategies (McIntyre 2007; Sandell and Frost 2010; Steorn 2012),
- to work towards a more persistent inclusion of LGBTQ related stories among collections (McIntyre 2007; Frost 2008, 2010; Tibbles 2011),
- to innovatively expand the modes and content of the portrayal of sexual diversity (Liddiard 2004; Mills 2006; Petry 2010; Frost 2008; Sanders 2008; Frost 2010; Sandell and Frost 2010; Steorn 2012).

Nonetheless, research on this specific topic still has a long way to go to advance our understanding of how museums can take significant steps towards a major and permanent disruption of their heteronormative frame. Stuart Frost highlights some pivotal issues that museum scholarship and practice has to address:

How successful were the exhibitions in reaching LGBTQ audiences and what impact did the displays have upon them? How successfully did the exhibitions engage non-LGBTQ audiences? Did these displays and associated events programmes encourage visitors who may be prejudiced to reflect on their attitudes?

(2008: 38)

Thus, keeping in mind Frost's recommendations, some fruitful areas still remain under-researched. Exceptional work has been accomplished on revealing the regularly encountered barriers to increasing LGBTQ portrayal in museum settings, either through articles describing the personal experiences of curators of such projects, or through studies specifically targeted on these issues, such as those by Gabrielle Bourn (1994) and Angela Vanegas (2002). Additionally, the ongoing debate on museums' responsiveness to sexual minorities has been enriched so far by several promising positions considering the work museums can develop in the



future, as previously explained. Even so, there is a gap in our understanding of visitors' level of engagement and response. Certainly, online evaluation reports on specific exhibitions (Burdon 2000; Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2006; Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010) are extremely insightful in terms of audience reaction, helping institutions to improve their facilities and future similar initiatives and publicly justify their inclusive programming by making them accessible to all. But, it is crucial that more in-depth research into the effect on people's attitudes and understanding of sexual difference as a result of attending a museum project is carried out. In addition, more thorough examinations on the full process that museums go through, their aims, their fears as well as the motivations, would be worthwhile as it would shed more light on different approaches to the depiction of sexual diversity, and not predominantly on specifically 'gay-themed' exhibitions. Overall, building a solid case with more rigorous and in-depth studies revolving principally around the impact of stand-alone LGBTQ exhibitions or projects where LGBTQ is not the main theme would allow scholars and practitioners to better justify their struggle for a fairer representation of sexual identities.

### **Research aims and impact**

My interest in exploring the representation of sexual difference in museums began as an attempt to investigate depictions of homoerotic love in Greek archaeological and art museums. However, the research focus was altered during the literature review conducted in the first year of doctoral registration, which led to a realisation that a simple increase in homoerotic references in temporary museum programming and ephemera material was simply one layer of the museums' quest for social inclusion and responsiveness towards the usually invisible sexual minorities. Museum scholars have adopted such an approach in the past, although from a different perspective, like Gaby Porter's study on the representation of women (1994). In her own research, despite her initial belief in increasing the number of women-related exhibits as a way to re-establish the role of women in museum collections, she soon realised that the representation of omitted stories

(women's in her case and sexual minorities' in mine) needs to be analysed at multiple levels (Porter 1996). The volume of exhibits related to minorities is only the surface, while attention to the modes of framing minority lives and experiences and the interpretive devices employed by museums allows for a deeper examination into the underlying factors that have caused the mis- or under- representation of a social group but also provoke thinking on potential recommendations for further development.

Museums are not only heteronormative in terms of the limited way in which LGBTQ culture is represented but also in how they choose to collect, document, interpret and showcase their exhibits. Furthermore, previous research on heteronormativity, for example within the educational sector, has stressed that we must first understand the way it is embedded in people's lives in order to properly tackle the consequences of heteronormative thinking, such as homophobia and bullying (Franck 2002; Ferfolja 2007; DePalma and Atkinson 2009). In other words, a careful reworking of institutional policies and representational practices is the prerequisite for a more effective questioning of heteronormativity. Accordingly, if museums strive to challenge institutional homophobia and contribute to the promotion of respect for sexual minorities as well as aid in tackling discrimination and prejudice against them, they would firstly have to seek holistic ways to unsettle the power exerted by the heteronormative frame upon various aspects of their work. Hence it is apparent that change is required at multiple levels for cultural institutions to challenge heteronormativity.

Informed by a selection of literature from the fields of museum, cultural and sociological studies, this thesis draws upon the broader theme of the social role of museums with reference to disadvantaged communities and their cultural representation. Broadly speaking, it has been developed around the power that heteronormativity exerts on museum practice and its overarching scope is to consider the potential for museums to subvert, at least to some extent, its prevalence. Through a process of rethinking and reinterpreting the concepts of gender and sexuality, I argue that museum professionals have a responsibility to

comply with the changeable meanings attributed to one's gender or sexual identity. Historically, cabinets of curiosities were once created through a Western white male heterosexual gaze (Levin 2010: 1-15). Despite significant progress in raising the inclusion and representation of female, Black and non-heterosexual voices, museums and galleries are still influenced, to a lesser or greater extent, not only by a white, male, heterosexual gaze but more importantly highly infiltrated by monolithic gender and sexual binarisms of male/female and hetero/non-hetero, with all the connotations these might have on what can be perceived as the norm for one's identity roles and expectations. In a way, such limiting understandings produce similar outcomes to the ones that, for example, racism generates, as '[r]acism sees only limited aspects of the other – humanity the whole complex human being in social relationships is reduced to black skin' (Golding 2009: 1). Simultaneously, nevertheless, a long research tradition within the humanities, especially in sociologically driven studies, has highlighted the problems caused when adhering to such fixed and outdated understandings. Similarly, museums have largely conformed to heteronormative ways of presenting their stories with limited experimentation with more radical narratives.

Notably recent museum practice in the UK reveals a set of curatorial techniques seeking to address this situation through the inclusion of revised gender and sexuality interpretations. Yet, the emphasis in this study was placed on exhibitions that aim to challenge dominant heteronormative framing through the integration of non-normative narratives, either spatially or thematically, within exhibits which in other ways, might be read as mainstream or heteronormative. This production of unifying narratives that are inclusive of sexual difference, rather than discrete LGBTQ exhibitions has been welcomed already as a compelling direction for museums to enrich their socially inclusive programming. Richard Sandell (2012) encourages museums to consider the use of the concept of human rights as an alternative frame for their social agenda regarding minority groups, including the LGBTQ community. Stuart Frost and Richard Parkinson at the British Museum are notable in this field. Frost, Head of Interpretation, discusses the huge potential of archaeological collections, especially Greek and Roman ones due to their frequent

depiction of sexuality, to raise awareness about sexual difference and, when appropriate, spark discussions on contemporary issues related to sexuality (2010). Similarly, Parkinson, Assistant Keeper, elaborates on the distinctiveness of the museum's recent publication –*A Little Gay History*– as an opportunity to show through its focus on integrated exhibits that 'history does not belong only to the "mainstream" visitors, and "minorities" should not feel that they are marginal' (2013a: 121).

Consequently in my research I chose to investigate interpretive projects that pursued this inclusive approach rather than those exhibition and display strategies that explicitly and exclusively focus on LGBTQ lives and perspectives.

### **Methodological Outline: The Case Studies and Research Questions**

In search of appropriate case studies, I selected two recent exhibitions with free access for the general public, characterised by the adoption of an inclusive curatorial approach that seek to present sexual minorities' stories on an equal footing with heterosexual experience. Integration of non-normative narratives with mainstream displays, the active participation of members of the LGBTQ community, free access and avoidance of age restriction were the initial criteria for identifying case studies. Two case studies were eventually selected which performed several of the key features of what might be considered a dreamt, non-heteronormative museum. *Queering the Museum* (QtM) at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (4<sup>th</sup> November 2010-27<sup>th</sup> February 2011) and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* (HWCC) at the Sudley House in Liverpool (23<sup>rd</sup> July 2010-2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011) were, then, the two upcoming projects that would allow me through semi-structured interviews with staff members and visitors to explore my main research questions:

1. How and why are museums developing strategies to question heteronormative assumptions on gender and sexuality roles and expectations?
2. What effect do inclusive curatorial practices, featuring a spatial or thematic contextualisation of sexual difference, have a) on museums, b) on audiences, and c) on sexual minorities' representation?
3. What is the potential contribution to museum practice and attempts to advance respect for sexual minorities in general, of these inclusive interpretive strategies?

*Queering the Museum* was a temporary exhibition, without an admission fee, at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in collaboration with the local SHOUT! festival on queer arts and culture, originally set to be on display from November 4<sup>th</sup> 2010 till the end of January 2011, but at the end the museum extended it till 27 February 2011. Funded by the Arts Council, artist Matt Smith was commissioned to intervene in the museum collections and identify ways of creating stories of LGBTQ relevance. The final outcome, co-curated by the artist and Andy Horn, the Museum's Exhibitions Manager, consisted of 19 display cases across ten different gallery rooms on the first floor. Smith, after having looked at the museum stores and current displays, made a number of interpretive interventions using newly created ceramic artefact and removing, adding, juxtaposing and re-interpreting pre-existing objects to introduce LGBTQ narratives within the permanent galleries. Thus, it was an LGBTQ project, yet appealing to the general public as it integrated sexual difference spatially across regular exhibits and not within a confined gallery space.

*Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* was a temporary exhibition, without admission fee, at Sudley House, part of the National Museums of Liverpool, running from July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010 till February 27<sup>th</sup> 2011, but again it was extended till May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011. Across the three galleries of the second floor of the museum, a historical overview of wedding traditions and costumes unravelled from the

Victorian period to the present time. The exhibition consisted of photos, graphic panels and 20 outfits showing marital traditions across different local community groups: white English, Jewish, Chinese, gay, Traveller and Pagan. On that account, it was a social history exhibition on the topic of marriage with strong connotations of heteronormative perceptions on gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, the thematic integration of sexual difference under a universal concept and on an equal footing with traditional views, allowed the exhibition to resist such limited understandings and consequently, challenge the popular belief of weddings consisting only of a male and female pairing.

Each project with its distinctive integration of sexual difference through artistic interventions and under the umbrella theme of weddings was appreciated as a disruptive museum paradigm. I would particularly argue for them to be regarded as examples of good practice because of their depiction of sexual otherness next to other exhibits which conformed to expected social hetero-norms, and more importantly, because of their huge potential to reach visitors who otherwise might not have engaged with the topic. They both managed to do so by avoiding spatial segregation and targeting general audiences, while simultaneously being underpinned by the expectation of communicating their social agenda concerning sexual minorities to the widest possible public. In this respect, research on museums and LGBTQ narratives may be broadened and LGBTQ identities confirmed. The thesis thus demonstrates how diverse modes of LGBTQ portrayal and a more inclusive and subtle curatorship may potentially benefit not only the LGBTQ community but also the wider social group.

This study intends also to contribute to the discussion on the processes museums might adopt to begin a more dynamic questioning of the prevalence of heteronormative ways of thinking. The effects of this type of thinking are evident not only in the depiction of sexual minorities but also of women or people identified as heterosexual who, however, only partially fit into the normative social expectation of their gender and sexuality. In a way, it adds to the critical understanding of museums as sites sustaining normativity in their collection,

interpretation and display practices. Past studies have advanced this dialogue from multiple perspectives ranging from feminist critique, race, ethnicity, disability, or class, including, less often, sexuality. This research, however, concentrates on a particular set of curatorial principles, previously unexplored, as a means to question the negative influence of heteronormativity in museum settings.

Overall, the core argument of the thesis is a call for the necessity of novel curatorial strategies towards the inclusion of sexual ‘otherness’ and other forms of difference. This is not a new expectation for museum practice. Bodo, Gibbs and Sani, for instance, researched projects of intercultural dialogue in Europe appealing for an analogous call regarding multiculturalism in terms of race and ethnicity (2009). Equally, the threads they discovered underpinning the representation of multiculturalism in museums are very similar to the ones appearing in the portrayal of sexual diversity<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, they stressed the importance of long-lasting interpretive devices as well as of further developing museums’ potential through fresh approaches. Simona Bodo, based on a review of how intercultural dialogue is usually advocated, identified a series of repeated elements which led her to report that:

[I]n fact all [policy approaches] are essential, in their own distinctive way, to promote the richness of diversity, create the conditions for the encounter exchange of culturally practices, and help immigrants retain awareness of their cultural background. It could actually be argued that the promotion of museums as places for intercultural dialogue is a gradual process which could be disrupted without first having taken these important, preliminary steps.

(Bodo 2009: 22-23)

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<sup>8</sup> The main observations emerging from their research highlight -among others- how museums ‘target communities exclusively in relation to their own cultures and collections, while cross-cultural interaction across all audience is generally avoided’ and how ‘by keeping “majority” and “minority” cultures or communities apart, and by generally treating the latter as “unified, traditional, unchanging and thereby exotic”, they sometimes end up reinforcing stereotypes’ (2009: 22).

Research on gender and sexual minorities' representation in museums and galleries to date, has focused in large part on the quantity and quality of objects in museum collections. Scholars have produced intriguing articles on sexual difference inclusion, usually maintaining their focus on single exhibitions or type of museums. Thus, in accordance with earlier observations about the reasons behind museums' reluctance when sexuality is under the microscope, the present in-depth empirical research aims to progress more complex understandings of (and alternative approaches to) the representation of sexual difference, which are viewed as equally vital to human rights agendas in museums. Innovative modes of portrayal and integration with permanent and heteronormative exhibits seemed an under-researched area that, in my view, is a very promising area for the advocates of museums as active agents of social values and human rights. Museums are perceived as highly trusted, educational institutions and as such, I will call for the need to search for more accessible initiatives that would engage the general public in contemporary debates. The present study provides additional evidence with respect to sexual minorities' inclusion in museum collections and programming, suggesting an alternative route that eases some of the commonly found excuses for shying away from this topic.

## **Thesis structure**

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 has offered an introduction to the thesis, attempting to pose the questions that inspired this research and provide the rationale for a focus on attempts by museums to disrupt heteronormative approaches to display through specific inclusive curatorial practices. Then the theoretical terrain of sexual difference representation in museum settings was mapped and bibliographic references were provided. This work established a firm ground from which the growing UK and international interest in the portrayal of sexual diversity in museum practice as well as academia approaches the topic. Then a methodological outline was offered to highlight the value of my qualitative case study research. Overall, the gaps in museum scholarship were identified and



the ways in which this in-depth study contributes to the limited knowledge accumulated to.

Chapter 2 seeks to provide the theoretical framework for my study informed by debates within a range of disciplines. Theories and research from museology, cultural and sociological studies were brought together to build a case for the justification of why and how cultural representation of sexual minorities can maintain or interrupt heteronormative perceptions and practices. The chapter is divided in four sections. The first one concerns theories on the social construction of gender and sexuality, key debates related to heteronormativity and examples of how other domains, like education or the media, have sought to question its prevalence. The second presents a number of theories concerning representational practices and their effect on minority identity formation. The third part offers a consideration of the museum world with a focus on on-going debates regarding the social role of museums. Finally, the last part discusses the issues raised when attempts are made to include previously disregarded minority groups in museum projects, analyses the complexity of stereotypes and raises the inevitability of political contamination in cultural representational devices.

Overall, Chapter 2 is structured to allow the main argument to gradually develop. Firstly, I show how heteronormativity is a social construct based on equally socially constructed understandings of male/female and masculinity/femininity binarisms, rendering normal those who perform their socially imposed gender and sexual roles and marking as deviant those who do not. I explore how heteronormativity needs to be maintained through constant practice and representation across all sectors of society: education, media, culture, and so on, resulting in prejudice and discrimination against people who do not fit the social hetero-norms. I argue that these pernicious effects lend support to attempts to challenge heteronormativity. Secondly, I show how cultural and media portrayal of social groups, with all their complexities, actively shape public understanding of communities' identities, thus, depending on the quality and quantity of modes of portrayal, culture, media, or education can have a positive or negative influence on one's perception of the

cultural 'other'. Thirdly, having established that heteronormative ways of thinking of sexual or gender identity are socially constructed (and therefore can be socially altered), I come to my final point regarding the role of museums. Museums, like other cultural and educational institutions in the UK, have been striving for a significant period to become more socially inclusive and representative of previously excluded minorities. So, based on the premise that museums are expected to be socially responsive to the diverse parts of contemporary society and actively contribute to the promotion of social values and to tackling prejudice, sexual minorities should be considered too as they belong among the groups regularly facing discriminatory attitudes. Yet, as previously discussed, there is still a long way to go before museums are recognised as places that significantly embrace sexual difference, especially when the persistent and inescapable complexities of representational practices (stereotypes and labelling) in general are considered. Therefore, together all the strands of my literature review chart the overarching idea fuelling the current study that museums, as part of the educational and cultural sector, can and must take up a more determined and methodical role in the interruption of the heteronormative frame at multiple levels.

Having established the theoretical background, Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework. Starting with a description of my key research aims and objectives, I will argue for the reasons behind my decision to follow the interpretivist qualitative paradigm and examine two case studies in-depth through semi-structured interviews with members of staff and with visitors, and a review of exhibition or museum related official reports and policies. This justification is mainly developed on the basis of remaining consistent with my theoretical framework which rejects attachments to single and fixed understandings of gender and sexual identity, allowing me to explore questions of a 'how' and 'why' nature. Further, I explain how I took advantage of NVivo7 software to assist me in the analysis of my findings, discuss the limitations of qualitative research and identify the challenges encountered and how I overcame them. Finally, I address the ethical aspects of my project discussing the measures I put in place to ensure anonymity, confidentiality and safety both for the participants as well as myself.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the findings from the original research I conducted at both case studies. Chapter 4 considers these two recent exhibitions as examples of projects seeking to disrupt the heteronormative museum. *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* at Sudley House in Liverpool are presented in detail, shedding light on the local museum context as well as on their content and format. Their description will then be followed by a critical analysis of their distinctiveness, drawing on staff members' views, attitudes and perceptions. Thus the second half of Chapter 4 consists of the presentation and discussion of the data I collected through interviews with staff and offers a critical account of the basic qualities underpinning both projects. Based on the themes emerging from interviews and on my own interpretation of these exhibitions, *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* are regarded as examples of museum practice managing to transgress heteronormativity through their particular inclusion of sexual minorities. A sense of normalcy and subtlety in their approach were understood as principles leading to 'unexciting ways' of portraying sexual difference, while a more responsible handling of stereotypes enabled both sites to provide a positive depiction of the previously disregarded LGBTQ community and to foster greater consideration of the diversity within the community itself.

Chapter 5 examines the main driving factors, aims and expectations for developing the exhibitions used in this research based on the analysis of findings primarily from interviews with museum professionals and secondarily from the museums' website and official records. Particularly, I explore the pragmatic side of my case studies: the logistics of shaping and making the exhibitions that eventually opened to the public. The first part of the chapter stresses the important role of the two leading curators (their personal motivation, values and so on) in initiating and developing these projects as well as how integral it was to have secured internal and external support for the projects. In fact, professional integrity and determination, establishment of credible partnerships and consensus among staff were all highly valued as the essential elements for enabling each museum to portray sexual difference for the first time, confirming previous studies indicating

that the inclusion of sexual minorities still remains a matter of personal agenda and initiative. In the second and third part I elaborate on the anticipated effect that each project might bring on museums themselves and their visitors according to staff expectations. From the museum perspective, both exhibitions seemed to fit well within the museums' plans on their sustainability in three ways: raising the museum profile through well-planned partnerships with cultural organisations and external practitioners, diversifying their target groups without abandoning provision for their core audiences (especially because of the distinctive inclusive character of the curatorial approach embraced for each project), and finally, experimenting with new ways of museum work to enrich their socially inclusive agenda. From the visitor perspective, staff sought to produce a meaningful experience with the potential to have an effect on people's attitudes and thinking at multiple levels. The main objectives were not limited to learning outcomes. Rather, according to interviewees' statements and in spite of their awareness of the limitations in causing actual social change through a single museum visit, visitors might be prompted to reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs about the sexual other, while members of the LGBTQ community might build up a sense of cultural ownership and belonging, previously denied to them.

Chapter 6 discusses audience reception and visitors' engagement with the selected inclusive interpretive strategies adopted by the two case studies, based on the audience research I carried out at each place. The majority of interviewees spoke about the exhibitions in supportive terms. A small proportion of interviewees gave responses that were classified neither as positive nor as negative. Yet, these responses are highly appreciated elements of my research, partly because of the potential they hold to understand the complex ways in which visitors engage with exhibitions, but more importantly because it was felt that it is exactly about visitors like these who probably would not have engaged with the topic of sexual difference unless it was integrated under a broader topic or within permanent displays. As for the majority, to begin with, some of them explained how they have broadened their learning horizons on wedding traditions at Sudley House and on LGBTQ history at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Secondly, they also made readings of social

values in relation to sexual minorities, talking about the projects as attempts to raise the visibility of sexual diversity, to promote equality among different groups and to publicly reflect on the societal changing attitudes towards LGBT people. Thirdly, there were manifestations and expectations from each exhibition to act as opportunities to evoke self-esteem and pride among people non-conforming to social hetero-norms, and motivate a revised and more tolerant perception of the sexual other. Fourthly, interesting recommendations for developing a more socially inclusive museum sector were offered by several respondents. Although recognising the potential risk for a cultural institution when sexual difference is on display, some visitors praised the suitability of the museum space for public debates on such contentious topics, calling for an increase of the cultural visibility of sexual minorities in museums' collections and programming and a search for novel and diversified modes of LGBTQ portrayal.

The concluding Chapter 7 will draw together the strengths and reflect on the weaknesses of the research. Chapter 7 highlights the main themes emerging from my study to consider the potential effect of inclusive curatorial practices on museum and representational practices. This chapter will firstly discuss the implications of my study for museum practice and theory concerning the representation of sexual (and other) minorities, followed by a discussion of concerns surrounding the complexities of minorities' portrayal. Then, based partially on the limitations of the current study, I will elaborate on potential directions for further research, particularly in terms of diversifying the cases under study and extending the employed research methods to uncover additional layers of the effect and change museums can bring through similar inclusive interpretive strategies. Chapter 7 will end with a short section with overarching concluding remarks.

## Chapter 2: The pervasiveness of heteronormativity in representational practices: The challenging role and responsibility of museums

Academic study of gender and sexuality especially since the 1970s alongside social movements, notably those organised by the Women's Liberation and LGBT movements, have advanced thinking of what constitutes male and female, what is heterosexuality and homosexuality and so on (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004: 56; Richardson 2007:5; Weeks 2010: 9-10). Nowadays the effect of past and ongoing scholar and activist attempts to promote a more progressive way of thinking about gender and sexuality is evident in the disruption they have caused at "traditional values" and received norms of sexual behaviour, identities and relationships on a global scale' (Weeks 2010: 3).

Therefore, understandings of and attitudes towards these important concepts continuously change, but two facts remain the same. Firstly, despite the differing starting points of numerous studies on gender and sexuality, there seems to be a widely held consensus on accepting these concepts as social constructs with no fixed meaning. It is surprising to see even the scientific world gradually acknowledging the influence of society and culture in how for example people's brains work, highlighting the limitations of those studies claiming that biological factors are the only determinants of male and female gender differences (McKie 2013). Secondly, there may have been substantial improvements in many countries in how women or people identified as LGBTQ are regarded and treated through an increase, at times radical, of civil rights and benefits, previously not ever imagined. Nevertheless, even in places where such progress has been achieved, the institution of heteronormativity still exerts an implicit and explicit influence, extending the idea of heterosexuality through its reference to the whole range of regulatory norms that arrange the way each of us should live:

The privileging of heterosexual relations as the assumed bedrock of social relations without which, it is posited, society would no longer function nor

exist, reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is the original blueprint for interpersonal relations.

(Richardson 1996: 3)

Moreover, it could be easily assumed that there are signs of a weakening of the influence of heteronormativity in countries where significant measures have been taken towards a more democratic and inclusive society by legitimising for instance, the right of equal opportunities in the employment sector or of marriage to any citizen regardless of gender and sexual orientation. To those who might claim this, my response would be in the form of a question: what about the other sectors apart from law? By this, I refer to the domains of education, culture, media and so on. Of course, the securing of legal protections and civil rights is vital, although scholars from queer and feminist studies still regard some legal developments as problematic since '[t]he position of heterosexuals is never called into question' (Phelan 1994: 2). In their view, the equal rights movements implicitly perpetuate heteronormative values, undermining the distinctive features of sexual diverse identities (Warner 1999; Richardson 2005; LaSala 2007; Williams 2008; Santos 2013). This thesis argues that education from both schools and society/culture must strive to be more dynamic and embrace as well as promote the core messages of these laws on equality and respect for difference. The revision of previously discriminatory laws, in other words, especially when sensitive topics like non-heterosexuality is at stake, does not equal actual improvement of people's lives, unless the message of equality, tolerance and respect for difference becomes integrated in the public realm and its representational practices.

Representation nonetheless is a complicated area. Researchers from cultural studies and related fields continue to emphasise the impossibility of the visual world escaping subjectivity resulting in being infiltrated by the views of those who control it. Therefore, the visual means used by mass media, literature, cultural institutions and so on are simply one, yet prominent, part of the world puzzle and as such they could be interpreted as different perspectives from which reality can be felt and understood. More importantly, the modes and content of portrayal are

found to actually have an impact on people's lives, which in turn require our attention especially in relation to disadvantaged minorities still experiencing prejudicial attitudes.

Museums, as educational and cultural institutions focusing predominantly on representational visual devices, face a quite complex situation. Particularly in the last two decades and more specifically under New Labour's government since 1997, as a tendency towards a more socially inclusive and responsible cultural and museum sector has been noted in the UK (Sandell 1998: 401-403; Sandell 2003: 47; Tlili, Gewirtz and Cribb 2007). Further, confidence in museums' ability to contribute to the construction and promotion of equitable social values has been growing among practitioners and audiences, resulting in calls for museums to have a voice in relation to major social issues, such as discrimination against social groups, racism, and so on. Thus, by taking into consideration the socially constructed nature of the prevailing gender and sexual norms, sustained through cultural representational practices, I will argue that museums, as one of the most influential sectors in the portrayal of history and culture, can and must play a key role in disrupting those heteronormative regulatory conventions that affect both the heterosexual majority and sexual minorities.

Chapter 2 explores heteronormativity in relation to the museum world. In the first section, the main focus is the notion of heteronormativity, the key debates related to its meaning as well as studies that have taken place in other disciplines, highlighting the necessity for further exploration within the museum context. Then, in the next three parts, a discussion will unfold on cultural representational practices, some common concerns regarding stereotypes and the contamination of modes of portrayal, as well as current trends in museum theory and practice, by focusing mostly on the promotion of social inclusion and diversity in museums. I will conclude with my argument that museums and their representational strategies have the potential for social change and as such they should be more concerned with the implications of maintaining heteronormativity and seek interpretive devices responsive to society's cultural diversity and not only to the heterosexual majority.



## **On heteronormativity**

Heteronormativity, a concept primarily coined by Michael Warner, a literary critic and social theorist, has been in use since 1991 and yet, it appears to have had relatively little attention beyond academic circles, until recently when its effect on education, media, publications and other sectors of the cultural and public realm eventually received scholarly attention. The next sections will unravel some of the key readings - relevant to the current study - that examine the opposition between naturalistic and constructivist interpretations of gender and sexuality as well as current debates among the LGBTQ community itself, all of which enable researchers and activists to understand, at least to an extent, how heteronormativity is maintained and how it can eventually be challenged.

## ***Gender and Sexuality; A contested area***

Throughout decades of research on issues of gender and sexuality carried out alongside the emergence of new social movements, like the Women's and the Gay and Lesbian rights movements, a development has occurred in the way these notions are regarded. The concepts of gender and sexuality have been defined, problematised and re-defined for so long, and yet, no consensus has been achieved among academic and public spheres. Despite the seemingly obvious meaning applied to them in our daily lives, the majority of research to date indicates the exact opposite, that is, their interpretation and significance is not so simple at all. This reminds us of what some feminists, particularly the ones attached to the values of deconstruction, described as 'discursive reality' (Buikema 1995:11) rendering the use of language responsible for the multiple understandings of the same subject. Hence, how society perceives the reality of gender and sexuality is usually distant from the way it is interpreted in academic theories but also differs between scholars or society itself too.

Scientific and sociological approaches in the past and present have specifically, all designated different ways of exploring these terms, resulting in variations in the disciplines already working on them, such as sociologists moving from an attachment to naturalistic readings of sexuality to a preference for constructivist ones (Seidman 1996: 1) or causing new fields to be explored as, for instance, sexuality studies are increasingly covering new strands like globalisation or the change in the contextual focus moving away from Western to non-Western societies (Martin *et al* 2008; Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011; Aggleton *et al* 2012). For the purpose of the current piece of work, however, I will only focus on the core of the debates on gender and sexual identities which are still evident in prejudicial attitudes against those not conforming to the socially expected norms. Thus, the discussion will mainly develop around the call for embracing a socially constructed reading of gender and sexuality in contrast to their essentialist naturalisation which results in limiting and potentially harmful misconceptions:

The idea of the 'natural' functions for sociologists like that of 'religion' for the figures of the Enlightenment - as an ideology concealing social processes and inequalities.

(Seidman 1996: 1)

Theoretical arguments concern the resemblance or difference of one's gender with his/her sex, a view that is closely linked with one of the most common binaries, that of culture and nature. On one hand, there is a separation between sex, described in biological terms, and gender, described in social and cultural terms (Jackson and Scott 1996:2), a perspective mainly held within classic feminism (Zimmerman 1997: 152). Feminist theorists suggested a disconnection of gender from sex, implying that "sex" refers to the biological difference between women and men, and "gender" to the identity as well as the social position which accompany this biological difference in a particular culture' (Buikema 1995:8). What they call sex is what, on the other hand, is conventionally thought to be one's gender, since in everyday life people seem to confuse these notions assuming their sameness. Such traditional attitudes leave space only for the existence of the male and the

female on the grounds of their biological and physical characteristics. It is what Butler (1999: 9) describes as a 'mimetic relation of gender to sex' that leads to the latter conclusion, the recognition of only two genders.

Another intriguing historical debate was concerned with the differences between the modern and postmodern way of thinking about sexuality as depicted in the dualism of naturalisation and denaturalisation of sex (Simon 1996). Modernist theorists, influenced by the conventional perception of sexuality, tended to equate sexual behaviour with sexuality and conceptualise sex as '[committed] to concepts of the sexual as a matter of organs, orifices, and phylogenetic legacies' (Simon 1996: 27). Additionally, their interpretation of individuals' sexual object choice deceitfully led them to the conclusion that one's alternatives regarding what they might prefer sexually is only about selecting between a male or female, failing to consider other influential factors of people's sexual choices, resulting in a narrow examination of sexuality (Simon 1996: 34-35). Postmodernist theorists on the other hand, support the idea of:

[T]he sexual [being] socially constructed . . . [viewing] sexual desire as the continuously evolving product of human culture transmitted not through our genes but through language or through the coded behavior of others which, in turn, reflects the impact of language upon their behaviour.

(Simon 1996: 31)

This view maintains, at its core, that how individuals perform in their sexual life depends on the social context within which this takes place. It highlights the role of society's orders, perceptions and stereotypes on the development of someone's sexuality. Simultaneously, it denounces the general impression of a naturalised sexuality and consequently weakens the 'natural' disapproval of those falling outside of the so-called 'natural order'.

Additionally, the postmodernist view consists of recommendations conceptualising sexuality as 'not limited to 'sex acts', but [involving] our sexual feelings and

relationships, the ways in which we are or are not defined as sexual by others, as well as the ways in which we define ourselves' (Jackson and Scott 1996:2). It is a call for rejecting popular misconceptions by digging more deeply into its meaning and its multiple effects on people's lives, particularly on sexual minorities. In other words, it appears that this interpretation of sexuality resembles the way of talking about gender as both of them need to be considered as closely linked to the context within which they are exercised (Jackson and Scott 1996: 6).

Contrary to the social constructionism of both sexuality and gender are the advocates of essentialism. A person's sexual practice is thought to be a 'biological drive' rather than a 'social behaviour' (Jackson 1996: 62). The main conclusion is that one difference between essentialist and social constructionist approaches is upon what they prioritise: biology/nature or society/social orders. The second, and of more importance, is the contrasting implications they have for individuals' lives. If, for instance, we accept the essentialist point of view, at that point we recognise the normality of patriarchy and heterosexuality, two notions in which the biological understanding of gender and sexuality is deeply embedded:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire.

(Butler 1999: 31)

Furthermore, as Butler has comprehensively argued, in the sense of an essentialist way of thinking, many theorists attempted to research gender and sexuality by conceptualising the male and masculinity as natural and as given concepts from which the female and femininity were extracted. The female and femininity, in their views, gain their meaning in relation to their opposites. The use of the heterosexual matrix by Butler, to 'designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized' (Butler, quoted in Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2005: 248), is based exactly upon this idea of 'differently

gendered individuals who complement each other, right down to their bodies and body parts fitting together' (Richardson 2000: 26). Therefore, these assumptions were leading to view heterosexuality as the natural and ordinary sexuality, in other words, to equate sexuality with heterosexuality. This conclusion was regarded as the outcome of considering the female as complementary of the male, and femininity as complementary of masculinity. For instance, Freud according to Cohler and Galatzer-Levy, explained female sexuality in reference to biological characteristics, regarding the male biological sex as the foundation for talking about sexuality and, thus, femininity could be described in terms of a sexuality, which does not involve the core element (Cohler and Galatzer-Levy 2008: 3). His famous phrase of 'penis envy' is an illustrative example of his claim when he was talking about the envy that females endure when they realise their lack of penis:

The little girl does not react with similar refusals when she sees the differently formed genital of the boy. She is immediately prepared to recognize it, and soon becomes envious of the penis; this envy reaches its highest point in the consequentially important wish that she also should be a boy.

(Freud 1920: 37)

Moreover, regardless of simply selecting between an essentialist point of view and a social constructionist one, there were voices declaring an alternative way of researching gender and sexuality issues. For instance, Oakley pointed out that dividing sexes instead of bringing them together enhances the position of setting as normal and unchangeable the imbalance between men and women (1972: 210).

Nonetheless, one might still wonder why so many and lengthy discourses about sexuality are constantly being unravelled. The reasoning behind this long-standing 'trend' can be found in its special 'political' role in Western societies' organisation. As Jackson and Scott stress:

Sexuality is conventionally singled out as a “special” area of life: it has been variously romanticized and tabooed, seen as a threat to civilization or the route to social revolution, as a source of degradation and a means of personal growth.

(1996: 26)

Quite similar to Jackson and Scott’s view are those of Richardson (2000: 15) who elaborates on sexuality as ‘a mechanism of social control and regulation’, Weeks’s (2003: 122) understanding of it as ‘a constitutive element in postmodern politics’, or, MacKinnon (1996: 182) who notes that ‘sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society’. All such views attest to the conviction that a thorough exploration of the roots, impacts and meanings of sexuality seem to be a prerequisite for an inclusive society in regard to complex issues, such as gender and sexual identities. As I shall argue later, museums, as a component of the public domain and as institutions striving for social inclusion and responsiveness towards contemporary diversity, should then become concerned with this kind of subjects for the same reason: the political feature of sexuality. Therefore, to erase the discrimination against gender and sexual identities of minority social groups, a revision of their meanings becomes crucial. As Simon commented:

The most important permanent truth about sexuality is that there may be no important truths about sexuality that are permanent. Those of its aspects that appear to be permanent are rarely important and those that appear important may rarely be permanent.

(1996: 142)

Corresponding then to the needs of each period, ideas have to be modified and adjusted to those needs. Still, the public and cultural domain should initially embrace how certain ideas have been nurtured in time and how they need to be

reviewed, if we aim for actual social progress. The justification of this can be traced in the meaning of Delphy's explanation on the implicit connection between these two steps, stating that '[b]elief in the possibility of change implies belief in the social origins of the situation' (1984: 211). Thus, influenced by the demands of postmodernity, struggles towards what Delphy advocates have been initiated in academia more than two decades ago, such as, within philosophical, feminist, women's, gender and more recently queer studies.

### ***Challenging the heterosexual norm***

[M]any of the major modes of thought and knowledge in 20<sup>th</sup> century western culture as a whole are structured by a chronic now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition . . . an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern western culture must be not merely incomplete but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.

(Sedgwick 1994: 1)

The point that Sedgwick very prominently notices is how deeply influential on the ways people regard the world the binary division of sexuality into hetero- and homo-has been. Moreover, this separation into two distinct and fixed categories not only neglects individuals identified as, for example, bisexual, transsexual or transgender, but it also dictates, mainly implicitly, people's perceptions and attitudes across a range of themes, for example, the different toys and games given to boys and girls, the strong bond between marriage and children, the educational system and so on (see, for example, Francis 2010; Kerr, Vuyk and Rea 2012). Both the hetero/homo division and its practical consequences are then understood as the direct product of heteronormativity. Hence while progressing in the examination of heteronormativity, it gradually becomes more than evident, how well and deeply rooted it is in the public sphere 'still subjected to the minoritizing

forces that excluded it in the first place' (Weeks 2007: 12). This situation signifies the high level of difficulty in transgressing the hierarchical and limiting boundaries it imposes:

[H]eterosexuality is, in reality, a highly regulated, ritualized, and organized set of practices, e.g. weddings or proms . . . What circulates as a given in western societies is, in fact, a highly structured arrangement.

(Ingraham 2002: 74)

The very meaning of heteronormativity rests on the acceptance that heterosexuality functions like the set of practices explained by Ingraham in her article. Therefore, an understanding of heterosexuality as a term referring to those who have somebody of the opposite sex as a sexual partner is incomplete. It does not include only this aspect of life, but a lot more, less obvious practices that people usually do not even recognise. Furthermore, thinking of heterosexuality as a generic notion associated partially with sexual practices is held by scholars from a range of different backgrounds, notably Stevie Jackson, despite her objections to some of Chrys Ingraham's assertions, and Carol Smart. Therefore, both Jackson and Smart, while stressing the necessity of recognising that heterosexuality cannot only refer to one thing and cannot have one fixed meaning, nevertheless they both admit that there are some exceptions when the diverse content of heterosexuality should be ignored for a moment (Jackson 1999: 164, Smart 1996: 170). This incorporated variety within the notion of heterosexuality has attracted another scholar too with interest on issues of institutionalised heterosexuality. That was Diane Richardson (1996: 2), who at the time of publishing her work on the critique of heterosexuality emphasised the lack of focused work on the case of heterosexuality on its own, disassociated from notions like gender. Besides, as Rich notes:

Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of



racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness.

(1993: 239)

*Theoretical perspectives on the subversion of heteronormativity*

The abnormal, as ab-normal, comes after the definition of the normal, it is its logical negation. However, it is the historical anteriority of the future abnormal which gives rise to a normative intention. The normal is the effect obtained by the execution of the normative project, it is the norm exhibited in the fact. . . . Consequently, it is not paradoxical to say that the abnormal, while logically second, is existentially first.

(Canguilhem 1989: 243)

In the same way Canguilhem explains the relationship between the normal and the deviant, homosexuality has been mostly promoted as an abnormal activity opposite to the normality of heterosexuality. For this reason at this point, additional emphasis should be then put on the practical dependence of heterosexuality upon homosexuality and how homosexuality came to be considered as the foundation of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality, apart from seeming to be the norm in terms of sexuality, has to be affirmed day by day by various means and through its daily repetition of what makes someone a socially accepted individual appears to be the natural thing (Rich, quoted in Richardson, 2000: 22; Jackson 2003: 80) and sadly imposes stereotypes, all implying that a normal sexual relationship is one between a man and a woman for reproductive reasons. Overall, the public domain adopts '[r]epressive strategies [which] do not aim to eliminate the homosexual, but to preserve the distinction between the pure heterosexual and polluted homosexual' (Seidman 2001: 322). Moreover, even if not explicitly at most times, it intrudes quietly into individuals' lives, such as for instance in the representation of lesbian identities as 'men trapped in the space of women's bodies' or in the need for

distinguishing the roles of a husband-wife and father-mother in a homosexual couple in the case of marriage or parenting respectively (Richardson 2000: 24). Besides, as Butler admits, 'heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself [which] is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it "knows" its own possibility of becoming undone' (2004: 129), rejecting its naturalness, resembling what Fuss (1991: 2) described as 'the language and the law of defense and protection' employed to sustain heterosexuality from its opposite. Yet, broadly speaking, the core argument against the institutionalised character of heterosexuality is well summarised in Richardson's words stating:

Heterosexuality is nothing without homosexuality: it depends on homosexuality as its 'opposite' for its meaning and its coherence. It appears to be 'natural' and 'normal' because it constructs homosexuality as unnatural, as not the norm, as a poor imitation or copy of the 'real thing.

(2000: 40)

Further, a number of scholars noted how the alleged foundational division could not mean anything, in fact could not even be defined as such, without its interconnected binary hierarchical division of male-female gender. For instance, Jackson (1999: 175) argues that 'the very distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality depends upon the prior existence of gender categories without which it would be meaningless to construct sexual categories on the basis of 'object choice'. Otherwise, following Jackson's rationale, how could we explain who is involved in a heterosexual or in a homosexual relationship if we have not already defined who is hetero and who is homo? Nonetheless, other theorists do not maintain the same philosophy. For example, Ingraham (2006: 309), although recognising the link between gender hierarchical division with heterosexuality and consequently heteronormativity, attests to an alternative theory explaining that 'it is institutionalized heterosexuality that is served by dominant or conventional constructions of gender, not the other way around'.

So, broadly speaking, despite the agreement among academics in favour of a socially constructed sexual and gender identity, there are three distinct standpoints all of which follow a similar principle. One belief is that 'sexuality determines gender', presenting sexuality as the powerful tool controlling the process of gendering (MacKinnon 1996: 185), whereas on the other hand the idea of the gender influencing one's sexuality was also introduced by several theorists (Jackson 1999), including representatives of lesbian feminist theory (Rubin 1999: 170) and lastly, the third view that exists is very explicitly illustrated in Rubin's claim that despite the impact on each other 'it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence' (1999: 170).

However, their shared basic idea constitutes an additional argument for understanding these two identities as being constantly developed through social means<sup>9</sup>. Yet, since the scope of this thesis is to explore the notion of heteronormativity in a more general sense, what is really important to hold from the above debate is how closely heteronormativity is linked to the widespread belief among people of hierarchies in gender and sexual identities.

The critique to the key characteristic of institutionalised heterosexuality has its origins at multiple starting points. As such, the usual subjects of queer and feminist studies on heteronormative oppression were, and still often are, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, transsexuals, intersex, as well as women who according to Bunch (1975: 34) are also victims of '[h]eterosexuality -as an ideology and as an institution- [which] upholds all those aspects of female oppression'.

Heteronormativity promotes itself with the aid of several authoritative and powerful means which either implicitly or explicitly impose compulsory heterosexuality on women (Rich 1993: 228, 234). This appears to be the exact reason why Rich

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<sup>9</sup> A cornerstone in the turn away from thinking about gender and sexuality as two notions being universally identical, was some early anthropological work (Oakley 1996: 37; Jackson, 1996: 63). Specifically, the research of Mead (1935), anthropologist, worked as very illustrative example showing that there is no commonly shared and stable understanding of male/female and masculine/feminine.

regards heterosexuality as a political institution (Rich 1993: 232). It is a highly absorbed preconception affecting any aspect of life, from the most personal to the most public. Nevertheless, in the broader body of the 'anti-conformists' to the heteronormative way of living includes a lot more categories, for instance, single parents from both sexes, polygamous, couples living together without getting married, and so on.

Moreover, the framework within which feminist and queer approaches have been working in has, at its heart, the questioning of the naturalness and normality of heterosexuality. That is, to indicate the reasons for not accepting heterosexuality as the norm, as the only natural and normal thing to do. Rather, to show that there are more options out there apart from heterosexuality, options which should be presented equally and be available for anyone who feels like following them instead of the conventional and thought-as-the-only path to decency, happiness and completeness. In more practical terms, this suggests a step forward from conventional perceptions. According to Ingraham (2006: 310), there are three beliefs that scholars should be aware of in order to avoid getting implicated, even unintentionally, in the perpetuation of heteronormativity. Firstly, that the established binary division of gender into the male and the female serves as an arrangement for the connection of these two parts, not members from the same side. Secondly, that the rigid boundaries between male and female sex do not allow for adjustments as things progress or change through time. Thirdly, a point that in fact summarises the previous two, is that the continuous use of antithetical categories, male and female or masculinity and femininity, despite its practicality, does not comply with the flexibility existing in the explanation of other aspects of human behaviour. All of these actions, Ingraham argues, sustain heteronormativity, or, in other words her heterosexual imaginary, a very handy expression with regards to the debate surrounding heteronormativity.

The heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution. The effect of this

depiction of reality is that heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned, while gender is understood as socially constructed and central to the organization of everyday life.

(Ingraham 1994: 203-204)

The illusion described by Ingraham is central to human behaviour and produces a range of problems, which in the worst case results in homophobia and sexism whereas at the best case in the perpetuation of images '[r]omancing heterosexuality' (Ingraham 2002: 77).

Reconsideration then of long-held misbeliefs is required to minimise the pernicious effects of heteronormativity. For this reason, several theorists have made a number of intriguing recommendations highlighting the necessity to dig into what feeds heterosexuality to remain the norm. Broadly speaking, consensus among feminist and queer circles has been reached in identifying 'gender hierarchy' and 'silence about itself' (Jackson 1999: 174) as the underlying factors, yet, it seems that this is not enough. For example, Ingraham's 'thinking bent' theory or Jackson's suggestion for collaboration between feminism and queer theory constitute two theoretical choices for questioning heteronormativity.

Thinking bent, as Ingraham (2006) advances in her work, is the opposite of thinking straight<sup>10</sup>. It is the act of not thinking in a way that favours the male and heterosexual point of view and way of life (Ingraham 2006: 307-308), a view that instead of 'prevent[ing] us from seeing the widely variant social/sexual world', offers the opportunity to 'see that gender and sexuality are historically variable and constantly changing over the lifespan' (Ingraham 2006: 312-313). Furthermore, the significance of behaving according to straight thinking has considerable impact on any aspect of human life (Ingraham 2006: 315) and consequently on how each of these aspects is represented and perceived by the general public. Respectively, an

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<sup>10</sup> A more thorough explanation of the phrase thinking straight can be found in the introduction of Ingraham's book *Thinking Straight; The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality* (2005), where she pinpoints some characteristic examples of thinking straight (2005: 3-4).

alternative route to approaching heteronormativity and unveiling its ambiguities, is the collaboration between feminist and queer theory (Jackson 1999: 161). Since both fields pursue similar scopes, although from different angles, it would be absurd not to combine their efforts to create new promising directions. Few scholars have chosen this path, like Rich for instance, while the majority tend to focus either on the hetero/homo binary or on women's oppression, without realising nonetheless that 'heterosexuality is what [they were] talking about' (Jackson 1999: 163-164).

Caution, however, is required. Simultaneously with the scholars' attempts to critique heteronormativity, there is also reality. My point here is that what is said in academia and theory is often distinct from what is said and experienced in real life. Actually some queer and feminist demands may be distinctive from the beliefs and requests of activists which was exactly the case why Jackson (1999: 162) expressed her concern about some theorists overlooking reality's practicalities, wondering 'whether the theoretical hyperreality inhabited by some of these writers, where the representations they have constructed come to constitute the only "reality" they acknowledge, might indeed be a separate "queer planet"'.

### *Questioning heteronormativity in the public sphere*

Still, the interference of heteronormativity with reality has attracted the interest of several practitioners and academics from various domains increasing the number of studies exploring issues strongly connected to heteronormativity. Especially during the last years the pervasiveness of (hetero)norms has been examined in diverse contexts indicating how heteronormativity has an effect not only on sexual minorities but on heterosexual individuals as well due to increasing understanding on heteronormativity's establishment of 'a moral hierarchy of good and bad sexual citizens' (Seidman 2001: 322). Primarily the educational sector along with the media domain have formed till now two of the most favoured areas for exploring

the effects of heteronormativity and, more importantly, methods and policies to challenge it.

Recently in the UK there was the publication of *Interrogating heteronormativity in primary schools: The No Outsiders Project* (2009) by DePalma and Atkinson, based on one of the most extensive studies in the field lasting for 28 months and including both practitioners and academics for its completion. Having as a starting point the absence of discussion on the variety of sexualities, the project's aspiration<sup>11</sup> was 'to disrupt the apparently seamless nature of such consensual silence and to open up the ground for the exploration of this under-recognised area of inequality within primary schools' (DePalma and Atkinson 2009: 839). Similar approaches to heteronormativity have been followed in other education-related cases too, such as Kevin Franck's study who delivered anti-homophobic workshops at an American urban school at East Harlem, New York, to examine the impact of homophobic attitudes, as the outcome of the prevalence of heteronormativity, on all students regardless of their gender or sexual orientation (2002) or Tania Ferfolja's research on how various institutional schools 'overt and covert practices of invisibility and silencing' in Australian high schools sustain the socially expected hetero-norms and eventually discrimination and prejudice against gay or lesbian students (2007: 147) .

In addition to the studies from the educational sector, there is a significant amount of work in other domains as well. In Australia, Carolyn Tolley and Rob Ranzijn embarked on a psychological study about identifying the steps that should be followed by the staff of residential aged care centres to minimise the levels of heteronormativity and heterosexism concluding that aged LGBTQ people living in these facilities would continue to experience prejudice unless a policy of 'exposure to non-heterosexual older people' and of 'provision of factual information' to staff is

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<sup>11</sup> The aims of this remarkable study were, according to Atkinson *et al* (2009: 19), 'to add to the understanding of the operation of heteronormativity', 'to develop effective means of challenging this heteronormativity', 'to create a community of practice within which teachers can develop effective approaches to addressing sexualities equality within the broader context of inclusive education' and 'to enhance teacher professional development and autonomy through action and critical reflection'.

more dynamically employed (2006: 213). In the media sector on the other hand, Karin Martin and Emily Kazyak at Michigan explored the modes of portraying heterosexuality in popular G-rated children's films produced between 1990-2005 and concluded that they 'provide[d] powerful portraits of a multifaceted and pervasive heterosexuality that likely facilitates the reproduction of heteronormativity' (2009: 333), whereas Brett Mills reviewed wildlife documentaries broadcasted by BBC television in order to examine how the application of socially constructed heteronormative concepts on animals contributes to strengthening the pervasiveness of heteronormativity since 'due to their association with the "natural", narrative of animal behaviour play a telling role in the policing of human behaviour' (2013: 101). These are all important site specific cases that illuminate how theory operates in practice locally.

### **The visual is political**

The way we understand the world around us does not happen in isolation but through our interaction with it with the use of our hearing, speaking or seeing capacity influencing our emotions, actions and thoughts (Chaplin 1994: 1; Roggoff 2002: 25). Further, according to Shohat and Stam (2002: 55) '[t]he visual . . . never comes "pure"; it is always "contaminated" by the work of other senses, touched by other texts and discourses, and imbricated in a whole series of apparatuses'. Yet, cultural representations, particularly when disadvantaged and previously invisible identities are at stake, cannot escape certain complexities. Still, it is widely accepted that our interplay with the visual world usually affects the way we see ourselves and others. This section will shed light on these recurring issues concerning representation.

The issue of 'contamination' seems to be of high relevance to the portrayal of minorities. Richard Dyer from the academic domain of film studies, for instance, examined the complexities of representing queer culture in arts and media, pointing out how 'queerness' turns up contaminated from the stage of production



until its exposure to public view and concluding that 'culture does not give us unmediated access to an uncontaminated queerness' but it 'does however tell us what was available to be thought and felt about being a queer' (2002a: 10). This statement might have wider implications for other disparaged identities. Besides, conflicts over the control of ideas will always be extremely influential for cultural expression and representations, since 'no area of cultural production, whether verbal or visual, is innocent of the play of power relations' (Chaplin 1994: 81). Nonetheless, Dyer extended the concept of contamination to the receivers of visual images, asserting that the creator, place and time of a visual production in addition to the audience's background affect the final interpretation of the communicated message:

[P]eople make sense of [cultural forms] in different ways, according to the cultural (including sub-cultural) codes available to them. We are all restricted by both the viewing and the reading codes to which we have access and by what representations there are for us to view and read. The prestige of high culture, the centralization of mass cultural production, the literal poverty of marginal cultural production: these are aspects of the power relations of representation that put the weight of control over representation on the side of the rich, the white, the male, the heterosexual.

(2002b: 2)

Similar 'constructionist approach[es]' (Hall 1997b: 25) to the way representation works, appreciating the active role of viewers, have been proposed by Stuart Hall, one of the most prominent scholars in cultural studies<sup>12</sup>. Hall actually criticised long-established mass communication theories rendering the audience as passive recipients. Instead he suggested that the intended message of the sender will end up with multiple interpretations by audience members and not in its ascribed

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<sup>12</sup> Hall elaborates on the meaning of a 'constructionist approach to meaning in language' explaining that we must 'not confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate', as the latter mechanisms are the ones which actually help people interpret the world rather the world itself (1997b: 25).

meaning (Hall 1980). Therefore, the visual means are simply one, though noteworthy, part of the world puzzle and as such they could be understood as various angles for sensing the world (Dyer 2002b: 2; Shohat and Stam 2002: 55).

More specifically in the museum sector, as part of the visual machinery 'with their devotion to visualization and the display of knowledge' (Dias 1998: 50), related ideas have been expressed considering the audience to be now prioritised and regarded as active participants in the production of knowledge, which consequently does not allow for secure hypotheses on what visitors will learn and take from a museum programme (Hooper-Greenhill 1999c: 68; Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 4, 139; Sandell 2007: 104-107). As a result there has been some progress in the general perception of learning, moving from a strictly didactic one where the active educator (teacher, museum educator, or anyone in the role of 'educator') transmits knowledge to the passive student (pupils, museum visitors, or anyone in the role of 'student') to a more constructivist one where both the educator and the student are active in the production of knowledge. Also, museums have been increasingly deemed as distinctive informal places for learning and as such they are expected to offer different opportunities from formal education, supplementing the educational agenda of schools, universities and alike educational institutions (Borun 2002: 245; Kelly 2007: 276; Bellamy, Burghes and Oppenheim 2009; Serota 2009). As Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson propose (1999: 148, 150), museums 'must rely almost exclusively on intrinsic rewards' as compared to the focus of classroom teaching on extrinsic ones, because 'unless the interaction with the exhibit becomes intrinsically rewarding, visitors' attention will not focus on it long enough for positive intellectual or emotional changes to occur'. Further, research has shown that what each visitor gets after a visit is unique because it is influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from the reason for visiting the museum, who they visit with, to what their feelings, experiences, thoughts and expectations are, which can altogether affect individuals' mind and heart (Kavanagh 1995: 126; Falk, Moussouri and Coulson 1998; Hein 1998; Falk and Dierking 2000).

Moreover, due to the ambiguous times we live in, there is a tendency to explore more thoroughly the issue of identity (Jenkins 1996: 9) as the formation of a group identity forms the basis for civil and human rights' claims (Woodward 1997: 24). bell hooks (1989: 43), writing from a black feminist perspective, has described the close dependence of identity formation and public representation and recognition, declaring that '[o]ppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story'. Under this prism numerous political struggles have been sparked in recent years. For example, there has been an expansion of LGBT rights' demands in a range of issues after a long-standing activism in Western countries, seeking to collectively raise visibility of LGBT issues and improve the lives of people facing heterosexual discrimination and prejudice.

When talking about gender and sexuality, it is in fact a discussion about identity, and any political claims on the basis of gender and sexual identities fall into the identity politics sphere. Especially in the case of gender, it constitutes the first attribute when a baby comes to life, forming one of its 'primary identities' (Jenkins 1996: 21). It will also have a considerable impact on an individual's life, defining their behaviour and signifying the 'right and normal' way of living according to their ascribed gender.

Yet, the understandings we make of an identity hide great levels of complexity, creating the illusion that its meaning is naturally set and available to everybody. Similarly to the division between essentialist and constructionist understandings of gender and sexuality analysed in the previous section, identity faces an analogous contradiction. From one hand, a group identity is shaped on phenomenological and psychical shared attributes implying a 'natural' and 'fixed' identity whereas non-essentialist advocates basically reject these features (Woodward 1997: 25-28). What is more, 'identity is not "just there", it must always be established' (Jenkins 1996: 4). In other words, for instance, when talking about a group identity we need to clarify the distinction between 'group identification' and 'social categorisation' (Jenkins 1996: 23, 84). Firstly, it is the group members who explore their key

characteristics and what joins them together to identify themselves as a group, and later on the outsiders have to accept them and identify them as a particular group, or their identity will remain ignored. For this reason, Jenkins offers a useful clarification between the first step, which is described as 'group identification' and the second one, which is called 'social categorisation'. Consequently, what distinguishes and classifies an individual or a community of individuals as holders of a specific identity, may not be apparent to the rest of the people. 'The presentation of self', a characterisation that Goffman suggests (quoted in Jenkins 1996: 22), then, has multiple interpretations. Each one makes his own assumptions of what it means to hold a specific identity other than ours, which could be partially or completely right or wrong, independently of the actor's presentation of himself.

Besides, it is remarkable that the pool of interpretations one can make about identities is not only linked to particular beliefs and ways of seeing, but is also closely connected to the modes of its representation, as 'we give things meanings by how we represent them' (Hall 1997a: 3). However, it cannot go unnoticed how sectors like the media and museums, due to their appeal to a wide audience, are so powerful, the content and modes of portrayal they promote can actually influence, at least partially, the public view. Whichever is the source of knowledge, as soon as it is engaged practically in life, then, it is regarded as something normal, since it has 'made itself true' (Hall 1997b: 49). Additionally, past research on race and sexuality has revealed how the extreme pervasiveness of whiteness and heterosexuality in daily life renders them the norm, and eventually invisible and incomprehensible as a specific racial and sexual identity respectively (Seidman 2008: 222-249) resulting in cultural representations highly infiltrated by what Dyer calls 'the rich, the white, the male, the heterosexual' viewpoint (2002b: 2) which minimises the possibilities of a fairer cultural representational practice responsive to cultural diversity.

What is more, the real power of the contaminated messages transmitted through representational practices is exercised predominantly on our perception of ourselves and others. According to (Dyer 2000b: 1), '[h]ow we are seen determines

in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation'. The dominance of the visual world then applies to real life in a positive or negative manner (Hall 1997a: 3; Research Centre for Museums and Galleries 2008) demanding the attention predominantly of those working in relevant domains, such as media or culture. Perpetuating conventional pictures corresponds to an approval of the lack of respect against marginalised groups, like women, queer, ethnic minority groups, due to the fact that '[their] representation . . . was, and by and large still is, a relentless parade of insults' (Dyer 2002b: 1).

Therefore, this implies the major role representation<sup>13</sup> holds in the construction of meanings, but more importantly in the maintenance of social order. According to Hall:

[R]epresentation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process, as important as the economic or material 'base' in shaping social subjects and historical events-not merely a reflection of the world after the event.

(1997a: 5-6)

To be sure, by accepting this, we do accept as well a constructivist/constructionist approach to representation<sup>14</sup>. That is, it is us who 'construct meaning, using representational systems-concepts and signs' (Hall 1997b: 24), a view that resembles Foucault's emphasis on the role of discourse in the construction of meaning (Hall 1997b: 45). For that reason, educational and cultural organisations could help in influencing positively the way of perceiving some crucial identities. By

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<sup>13</sup> More information about the meaning of the term 'representation' is given by Hall (1997b: 15), stressing that '[r]epresentation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things'.

<sup>14</sup> It is suggested that there are three theories of representation, 'the reflective approach', underlining the significance of the entity to speak for itself, 'the intentional approach', highlighting the role of the responsible(s) for the representation, and lastly, the one used in the main body of the paper, 'the constructivist/constructionist approach' (Hall 1997b: 24).

crucial identities I refer to those categorisations at the margin experiencing regular social discrimination and exclusion. Thus, because communities' efforts of presenting themselves are not enough on their own for others to get a valid insight into the meaning of their identification, perhaps a little support from the cultural sector, like museums, could be a useful tool in a more efficient presentation, a role that museums have been gradually adopting more and more as I will discuss in the following section.

Still, before moving onto the discussion about the role of museums in the field of visual culture, a note on the function of art and culture in general as a medium of transmitting ideas has to be made since it is among the key roles of the museum sector:

That critique is social and that it cannot be separated from the practice of art itself . . . suggests the notion of a social grounded critical visual art practice underpinned by a theory of communication informed by principles of semiotics. It is a critical practice which understands the positive political implications of communicating via visual art whilst acknowledging that a social critique must nevertheless involve the verbal dimension.

(Chaplin 1994: 90-91)

Here, Chaplin maintains the social role that art can play because in any form it conveys meanings. Nevertheless, years before Chaplin, Pollock in her work *Vision and Difference* (1988) had already advanced the major impact of the visual despite her starting point being the women's movement. Similar to women's representation and the patriarchal codes which ruled the visual world at that moment - and continue to a lesser degree nowadays - is sexual minorities' representation and the heteronormative codes operating at present.

Thus, it is my strong belief that art and cultural representations should be regarded as one of the methods to communicate messages to the general public. It is the

politicized transition of ideas through visual art to which Chaplin refers in her work, or in Dyer's words:

Culture' is not just the vehicle whereby you win people over to something else that is not culture - culture is politics, politics is culture.

(2002b: 6

Nonetheless, critical and politicised visual culture can actually achieve these characterisations only when it is accessible by a wide range of individuals (Chaplin 1994: 103,109). Sadly, this is actually true from the opposite perspective too, that is when public cultural manifestations contribute to prejudicial attitudes. Nelia Dias (1998), for instance, reviews how anthropological collections 'in large public and *democratic* arenas' lent support to discrimination against racial minorities through their construction on the basis of what differentiates the racial 'other' from the white majority (1998: 50).

Additionally, the feedback mostly from those who appear to be personally associated with a particular production is also very crucial for achieving this critical stance it aims at (Chaplin 1994: 103). All these indications then seem true, considering that creating an artwork or an exhibition dealing with the rights of, for example, asylum seekers would have no success and no fully critical and political status could be attributed to it, if no provision for listening to real asylum seekers' opinions and experiences, no interest on their feedback and no care for reaching

them as the main target group took place<sup>15</sup>. It is supposed to be a work aspiring to bring to light the life and difficulties of asylum seekers, to represent them in a cultural place, to show them that they do have a voice which must find ways to be loudly and properly expressed in order to bring more members of the group together and assist their claims for being offered the opportunity to live a decent life. It is not simply about exhibiting stories about a group for its own sake, but it is about awakening people and making those involved, both directly and indirectly, more aware of the situation.

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<sup>15</sup> An illustrative example of this kind of practice was the project *Staying: Dream, Bin, Soft Stud and Other Stories* by Artangel in London. It focused on the real stories of 12 lesbian asylum seekers who came to London, facing a variety of problems from the moment they entered the country. The artist in charge of the project based her work on her discussions with those women, including lesbian performers as well. The presence of group members, whom this project targets, was from the very beginning engaged. The critical and political standpoint of the artist was manifested through the presentation of first-hand experiences, which would potentially create more opportunities for women experiencing similar problems to become involved, get together and seek solutions not individually but as a concrete group. The artist of this project was Oreet Ashery and the project was launched on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2010. It 'was set up to draw attention and awareness to lesbians who have undergone traumatising experiences in their respective countries due to their visible, or hidden, sexual orientation and who are seeking refuge in the UK in order to save themselves physically, mentally and emotionally' (Artangel 2009). A sample of the responses from participants in the project is very illustrative of the potential positive outcome similar initiatives can produce:

Before the project I couldn't express myself...I knew what I wanted to say but I kept quiet about it. But working with the others has taught me to respect myself. Writing has helped me to rediscover myself.

(Artangel 2009)



## The socially purposeful museum

Throughout the last decade or so there has been a tendency towards a more socially inclusive and responsible UK cultural sector<sup>16</sup>, including museums. Also, it could be safely assumed that the writers of this policies and action plans, as well as museum practitioners and scholars who passionately embrace them, attest to an actual belief in the possibility of social change through their efforts to establish a social responsible museum, not only in terms of attendance profile and numbers but also of promoting social values. In other words, there seems to be a growing confidence that museums can and must play a role in the construction and promotion of social values and have a voice in society. So, linking this trend with the previous discussions on heteronormativity and the role of representational practices in its maintenance or less often in its subversion, my assertion is that museums are one of the key elements that can generate social change.

My intention to explore the notion of heteronormativity in the museum context and particularly its potential questioning through certain inclusive curatorial practices sits therefore well within the present museum world which has been increasingly preoccupied with the portrayal of diversity, the social inclusion of previously marginalised groups and an overall democratisation of the museum. Besides, the sector throughout its diverse programming, including exhibitions, has been practicing relations of power (Dubin 1999) with high significance for social groupings and identities, including those groups usually omitted such as sexual minorities. Carol Duncan's compelling conclusion considering this subject, although with a focus on art museums only, can be applied to any type of museum:

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the following reports: *Museums for the many: Standards for Museums and Galleries to use when developing access policies* (Department for Culture Media & Sport 1999), *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All; Policy Guidance on Social Inclusion for DCMS funded and local authority museums, galleries and archives in England* (Department for Culture Media & Sport 2000), *Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All: Co-operating Across the Sectors to Tackle Social Exclusion* (Department for Culture Media & Sport 2001), *Museums and Galleries in Britain; Economic, social and creative impacts* (Travers 2006).

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths ... What we see and do not see in art museums - and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it - is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity.

(1995: 8-9)

To begin with, museums in the twenty first century can be said to have passed into a new, postmodern era. This transition signified a number of small steps museums have to go through, ranging from education to curatorship and managements, in order to become what Hooper-Greenhill has designated as the post-museum. She argued that the transition from the modern to post-museum does not imply leaving behind all the modern traits, rather critically retaining the positives, avoiding the negatives and adjusting others to the new museum philosophy (Hooper-Greenhill 2007a: 81). In addition, among the post-museum's primary roles it is its regular transformation into contested zones by embracing hot issues, including 'taboo subjects, revisionist histories and political issues' (Cameron 2010a: 1), previously ignored by the modern museum (Marstine 2006: 19). Hence the core meaning for the contemporary and future museum can be found in Hooper-Greenhill's words:

Rather than upholding the values of objectivity, rationality, order, and distance, the post-museum will negotiate responsiveness, encourage mutually nurturing partnerships, and celebrate diversity.

(2007a: 82)

Still, despite the long-standing established history of the postmodern museum, it seems that further work is required as its roles continuously expand and evolve. The passage from the modern belief in universally accepted concepts and understandings to the postmodern acceptance of flexibility and diversity is not always evident. An explanation for this reluctance could be traced in the harsh financial times museums have to go through, according to Ford Bell, President of

the American Alliance of Museums, who feels that '[t]he only element of conservatism [in American museums] comes from financial prudence' (2013). But basically the sector does not fully embrace this socially driven ambition because 'the fear remains that the future may prove more difficult to realise than might be expected, because of our own ghosts, the ghosts of the modernist "myths" that still threaten this future' (Hooper-Greenhill 2007b: 375). More importantly, especially in the past but unfortunately even nowadays, the significance of the postmodern impetus is not welcomed to the same level by all museum professionals and scholars (Sandell 2002a: 18; Hooper-Greenhill 2007b: 371) due to the 'commitment of stasis' that lies at the heart of museums (Knell, MacLeod and Watson 2007: xix). Consequently, broadly speaking, there are voices -fewer than in the past - reclaiming the restricted conventional character and role of the museum in the processes of collecting, preserving and displaying, which are understood 'as outcomes in their own right' (Sandell 2002b: xvii). Such oppositional positions render as 'inappropriate [the] departure from the traditional goals attached to museums' (Sandell 2003: 48) and seek to alert the museum world about the loss of its original character and the sacrifice of advancing knowledge on collections on account of advancing knowledge on visitors (Appleton 2007). Moreover, the list of the ambiguities circling social inclusion and social responsibility has also at its core the uncertainty of how all the different moralities and convictions in each museum personnel can coexist and more importantly, cooperate efficiently for a common scope, as well as how opposite views to the ones of the authorities, on whose support museum work depends to a great extent, can in fact take place (Sandell 2002a: 19).

On the contrary, a substantial percentage of museum people appear to appreciate this social turn, evident both in academia and practice. In fact, there is a worldwide trend in proactively encouraging this view of the socially purposeful museum by several museum associations and organisations, both in the UK, such as the Museums Association<sup>17</sup>, in other countries, for example, the Netherlands Museum

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<sup>17</sup> See for example the recent campaign *Museums Change Lives* (Museums Association 2013).

Association<sup>18</sup> or even globally, like INTERCOM<sup>19</sup> or the Federation of Human Rights in Museums<sup>20</sup>. On top of this, studies on a wide range of topics concerning the potential positive impact museums can bring have significantly increased, rendering as inaccurate the impression of museums as sites being only about collections because 'collections are merely manifestations of human desires' (Knell, MacLeod and Watson 2007: xix). Further, there seems to be a growing confidence in museum studies literature, practice and research that museum programming can actually contribute to the promotion of social values, social justice and human rights (Sandell 1998; Duffy 2013; Sandell 2002; Janes and Conaty 2005; Cameron 2006; Janes 2007; Fleming 2010; Hein, G. 2010a; Sandell 2010; Carter and Orange 2012a, 2012b; Fleming 2012a, 2012b; Sandell 2012), improve audiences' well-being (Silverman, L. 2010; Ander et al 2011; Chatterjee and Guy 2013) and eventually affect individuals and society at multiple levels:

[M]useums can impact positively on the lives of disadvantaged or marginalised individuals, act as a catalyst for social regeneration and as a vehicle for empowerment with specific communities and also contribute towards the creation of more equitable societies.

(Sandell 2002b: 4)

Nonetheless, faith in the possibility of change, not only in regard to the museum itself, but also regarding society, has to be accompanied by careful and well-

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<sup>18</sup> See for example the report *The Social Significance of Museums* (DSP groep 2011).

<sup>19</sup> INTERCOM is the International Committee on Management, closely connected to ICOM. In 2009 its members have created the Torreon Declaration, stating that:

INTERCOM believes that it is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and background.

(ICOM 2009)

<sup>20</sup> The Federation of Human Rights in Museums was initiated by the National Museums of Liverpool, to promote and facilitate the advocacy of human rights in museum work through its members across a number of museums worldwide, including partners in Canada, USA and Africa (Federation of Human Rights in Museums n.d.).

prepared steps which will not force the institution to abandon its original aims of collecting, preserving and educating. At the same time, nonetheless, the institution will be seeking how to approach various communities, participate in the reinforcement of the social capital<sup>21</sup>, explore alternative methods of increasing the falling numbers of attendees and respond effectively to the demands of its funding agencies (Janes 2007: 135-142). Finally, it will also maintain at its heart the vital notions of 'idealism, intimacy, depth, interconnectedness, shared purpose, active experimentation and the taking of risks, and openness' (Janes 2007: 141-142). Thus, communities must be given the opportunity for their voices to be heard simply because museums are not places to represent history, art, science only from a single perspective, which is usually the male, heterosexual, Western one. Rather, they form a sector presumably open to all the members of the society, and consequently, the identities, experiences and history of different social groups all deserve recognition and representation. In particular, since there is a growing belief in the power of the museum to inspire social change, then, it is urged that especially the stories of those minority groups suffering from prejudice and discrimination have to be addressed and not at all to be ignored. Nevertheless, to those critics who could possibly claim that all these expectations are illusive and as such, not a lot of effort should be placed upon these priorities, the answer is given by Janes (2007: 143), who highlighted that 'the choice of a worthy destination is more important than simply settling for what will work'.

From a different perspective, others stressed the necessity of turning museums into more socially responsive institutions for respect for the public funds they receive. The basis for such an argument could be traced in the growing acceptance that the accountability of the contemporary museum is considered not only in the conventional way, but primarily based on a newly established criterion,

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<sup>21</sup> In his article, Janes (2007: 138) elaborates on the museum role in the development of the social capital explaining that '[i]t is the organisations of the non-profit sector, not government or business, which build and enrich the trust, caring and genuine relationships-namely the social capital-upon which the marketplace is based . . . there would be no marketplace without this web of human relationships.'

that of the relationship it builds with the communities (Weil 2003: 42). Falk, Dierking and Adams talk actually about this issue very graphically:

Once upon a time, success could be measured by number of visitors ... In the new learning society, what is important is not quantity but quality, not “numbers of hits” but “lives changed”.

(2006: 335)

On another point, it was mainly political and financial factors that launched this movement in museum sector towards a more socially responsible institution (Watson 2007: 15), resulting in the conviction that ‘[t]he museum that does not prove an outcome to its community is as socially irresponsible as the business that fails to show a profit. It wastes society’s resources’ (Weil 2003: 53). So, Gaither for instance, explains how this particular element is in fact a commitment for an organisation running with public financial support:

Museums have obligations as both educational and social institutions to participate in and contribute towards the restoration of wholeness in the communities of our country. They ought to increase understanding within and between cultural groups in the matrix of lives in which we exist.

(1992: 58)

Finally, an additional supportive argument originates from the key challenges that the postmodern museum<sup>22</sup> is gradually facing. Burton and Scott (2007: 49, 63) outline very conclusively that in a very antagonistic period in terms of visitor numbers for museums and other cultural institutions, the obstacles to overcome

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<sup>22</sup> An explanation about the reasons that brought the museum world in this position of change are described by Burton & Scott (2007: 60) as: ‘ the emergence of a highly discerning and educated public contiguous with the baby boom generation; the development of a consumer- and customer-oriented society, and the integration of principles of customer service into the public sector beginning in the early 1990s; the conceptualization of a ‘new’ museology in which the visitor is recognized as bringing a living reality to the museum experience rather than the morally and intellectually blank slate assumed by museums in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; and the general decline in respect for institutions of authority, public office and professional expertise’.

are significant for 'the museum of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century [which] began to redefine its relationship with its public within principles of increasing equality and democratization' (2007: 60). In other words, museum professionals have the difficult task of identifying methods of increasing attendance, becoming more representative by putting the visitor at the centre of their attention, while struggling to maintain a balance between the traditional and new roles of the museum.

Nevertheless, within the museum circles in favour of a more socially responsible and effective institution, there are many voices urging for adopting a modest attitude avoiding unrealistic expectations. These voices can actually act as a reply to the critics of museums' social role, since they stress that what is proposed is simply to take advantage of the museum potential to affect some people's lives positively. By maintaining a modest stance, it becomes evident that this proposal is not a visionary one of transforming the museum into a completely social institution in which all the other roles not related to its social character will be put aside, as in the past Tucker claimed (1993: 7). For example, Weil asserts that:

Museums might [also] be more modest about the extent to which they have the capability to remedy the ills of the communities in which they are embedded. We live, all of us, in a society that seems determined to lay waste to the planet that is its sole source of support. Museums neither caused these ills nor – except for calling attention to them- have it within their power alone to do very much to cure them.

(1995: xvi)

However, while an idealistic view of a social museum cannot be accepted, similarly the other end cannot be sustained. Besides, as Sandell convincingly argues:

Museums and other cultural organisations cannot be conceived as discretely cultural, or asocial – they are undeniably implicated in the dynamics of (in)equality and the power relations between different groups

through their role in constructing and disseminating dominant social narratives.

(2002b: 8)

But then how do they achieve this? Both the selection of objects as well as their display are the product of some individuals' selection unable to remain totally unaffected, resulting in projects characterised as 'political arenas in which the power of dominant groups is asserted, and where it may be challenged by new and emerging groups' (Kaplan 1995: 55). Likewise, Hooper-Greenhill elaborates on the connection between museum collections and the social meanings they implicitly involve, resembling the discussion which unfolded in the previous section on how cultural representations are always politically contaminated to some extent at least:

The ways in which objects are selected, put together, and written or spoken about have political effects. These effects are not those of the objects per se; it is the use made of these objects and their interpretive frameworks that can open up or close down historical, social and cultural possibilities. By making marginal cultures visible, and by legitimating difference, museum pedagogy can become a critical pedagogy.

(2000: 148)

Essentially hence the mode of portrayal of the exhibited items will have an impact on visitor's understanding. Therefore, an action like this does hold a political significance as it will inevitably promote specific viewpoints. As Sandell (2002: 18) advocates '[w]here [social inequality and cultural authority] are brought together, questions of social responsibility emerge most strongly'. Thus, especially when marginalised groups are related somehow to a project, the political-social aspect of the museum is advanced. As part of culture which should be perceived as 'constitutive' instead of 'reflective' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 13), museums need to support this role responsibly and abstain from these curatorial approaches inclined -intentionally or not- to promote social exclusion instead of raising awareness and



understanding for otherness (Sandell 2007: 139; Hein, H. 2010). Moreover, museums might exploit their distinctiveness as a learning source from schools, media, Internet or books, and form an alternative unconventional source of knowledge where one 'can try on ideas like a costume, study them intently, or give them a cursory glance, without obligation' (Hein, H. 2010: 61). Taking this idea a bit further, it could be suggested that due to being publicly thought of as safe and trustworthy places, as recent studies indicate (American Alliance of Museums 2013; Britainthinks 2013), assigned with the role of acting as 'the cultural authority to depict cultural differences both accurately and fairly' (Sandell 2007: 126) and where '[v]iewers are more likely to accept messages' (Kaplan 1995: 41), sensitive issues regarding under- or mis- represented groups and identities should be discussed in museums. Allowing museums to deal with groups that often face discrimination and prejudice can be considered as a method of increasing awareness among people, since it will offer additional opportunities to the ones offered by other learning sources for those voices to be heard. This suggestion follows Hooper-Greenhill's (2007b: 375) expectation for museums, regarding them as places '[where] there are opportunities to expose the ghosts, to review the hidden histories and to bring to visibility that which has been hidden'.

Hence museums are supposed to represent a variety of cultures and identities and proliferate difference. At least according to Hooper-Greenhill they are so, affirming that:

[M]useums are not understood as monolithic and unchanging, but as sites of multiple and heterogeneous contact zones where different histories, languages, experiences, and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege.

(1999a: 22)

However, despite the efforts of several museums until now, there are a lot that require improvement to overcome their conservatism (Wood 2009: 25). Since transforming the museum to a social institution concerned about social issues and

fighting toward their settlement is a matter of 'an evolutionary or revolutionary idea' (Wood 2009: 25), the pass to success designates many requirements and responsibilities for staff and visitors as well. If the communities are not invited or not willing to participate in any possible way in the process museums exhibit and interpret their collections, then, the efforts to fully transform the museum philosophy will be in vain. Literally, the meaning of a socially inclusive museum declares a strong linkage between the institution and the communities, towards which it intends to be responsible.

Thus, apart from the public, the professional part has to comply with the new situation. The desired change is very comprehensively summarised in the words of Sanders (2008: 22) who talks about educators and curators as 'ethical leaders'. Likewise, Cameron during her discussion of the research findings from *Exhibitions as Contested Sites* refers to museums as 'moral guides', particularly through their exhibitionist programmes which 'act as tools for constructing and justifying a moral system in a tangible form by constructing a field of visibility through the choice of topics, content including material objects, the moral angle and censorship decisions' (2007: 335). In addition, Weil (1999: 253) insists that 'the most important new skill of all will be the ability to envision how the community's ongoing and/or emerging needs in all their dimensions-physical, psychological, economic, and social-might potentially be served by the museum's very particular competencies'. Wood (2009: 27) takes the discussion a bit further, elaborating on how this new responsive role could be more easily incorporated in institutions through the right staff training and revised criteria for new employment. Moreover, she goes on beyond the above statements (2009: 31-39) recommending 'seven rules for the (r)evolution of museums for social change, critical pedagogy and civic engagement'<sup>23</sup>, from which the most remarkable for my research is the one encouraging museums to present any problems, meaning complex issues, as they

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<sup>23</sup> In the article *Rules for the (R)evolution of Museums* (2008), Wood points out the six rules, on top of the one referred in the main text, each of which is followed by an example of good museum practice. These are to 'let everyone have their say', 'not be a know-it-all', 'look at all sides of an issue', 'look at the possibilities, invite change', 'keep it local' and lastly, that 'objects are given meaning by everyone who encounters them'.

truly are. Only by exhibiting the reality of a sensitive and problematic topic, 'underlying conditions that create injustices are brought into the open... [and] visitors can reveal hidden meanings and implications of a variety of cultural practices and assumptions' (Wood 2009: 35). Finally, the emergence of a close collaboration between professionals and an external professional who could bring an alternative perspective from outside the museum field may assist in a smoother and more effective transition from the traditional museum to a more inclusive and responsive one, as Sanders advances (2008: 19).

### **A persistent complexity: Labelling and stereotyping in cultural representations**

Having said all that, one might get the impression that cultural productions must always be intentionally political and bring some form of change. Yet, this is only partially true since politicised cultural products are only one part of the 'cultural puzzle' which broadly speaking consists of creations simply produced for pleasure, entertainment or making a living (Dyer 2002a: 9). Even unintentionally and regardless of their origins, images as well as any other kind of production displayed publicly, convey the notion of 'contamination', particularly when minority groups are involved in any phase of the creative process. Thus, in cases where disadvantaged communities are widely represented in negative stereotypical modes, influencing part of the audience, then, a demand for a more politicised culture is required.

Perhaps one possible approach to this issue is a closer look at what has happened in other domains which are also, like culture and museums, part of the heteronormative representational machinery. For instance, recently the BBC have initiated a survey called '*Consultation on the BBC's Portrayal of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Audiences*', with the main scope being to get a fuller insight into the representation of LGBT culture in their programmes. Their provision for collaboration with the LGBT community was also remarkable, inviting the general public to contribute their ideas through an online questionnaire but also organising

consultation workshops and interviews with representatives from LGB organisations, like Stonewall (BBC 2010). Tim Davies, Director of BBC Audio and Music, stated that:

[A]s a public service broadcaster, we have a responsibility to serve all of our audiences and it's vital that we reflect the differences among all of the UK's diverse communities, nations and regions.

(2010)

Likewise, museums, as public institutions open to the general public, might benefit from the adoption of similar methodologies, especially in regards to their audience development strategies, in order to advance their understanding of their existing audiences but more importantly of the future ones they aim to reach out.

Nonetheless, despite all the good will and effort put into planning an exhibition with references to a marginalised community, the identity that is presented will never be totally representative of the community. As Dyer (2002b: 8) commends, 'there is only a limited extent to which we can make words feel to everyone how we want them to feel'. Even if consultation with community groups has been part of the process, it is impossible to get a full picture of what it means to hold a specific identity since group members think of themselves distinctly and at times not even feel like they belong to a community. Still, this clarification cannot act as an excuse for not seeking to promote the diversity of social identities. Rather, it should work as a motivation to develop a deeper insight into the plurality of meanings diverse social groupings convey, while collaborations with the communities at stake should be sought to avoid labelling based on the makers' assumptions of the key characteristics of a social group.

'Identity can in fact only be understood as a process' (Jenkins 1996: 4), a process to which culture and specifically museums can and must contribute. Their attempts could possibly be focused mostly on careful consideration of those 'lost or confused identities', as Jenkins describes those that do not conform to social

norms. By taking part in representing, for example, sexual minorities responsibly, museums –places usually regarded as temples and authority of knowledge (Wood 2009: 30) – may also be appreciated as a secure place for an alternative representation of under-or mis-represented groups. Additionally, the potential outcomes might be twofold, affecting the way in which members of the group that is portrayed appreciate themselves too:

[A]n understanding emerges of the “self” as an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others.

(Jenkins 1996: 20)

Moreover, a number of scholars have been involved in exploring the complexities surrounding the portrayal of cultural differences as it seems to be a recurring and unavoidable problem museum practitioners face. Marking the differences between the supposedly ‘normative’ majority and the cultural other is useful for understanding an identity other than ours, though in ‘a rather crude and reductionist way of establishing meaning’ (Hall 1997c: 235). Further, it forms a useful tool for advancing identity politics - in that it forms the basis of a collective shared identity upon which rights claims are made - but simultaneously ‘[labels as markers of identity] can stigmatize’ (Graham 2010: 115). In a similar way, Karp and Kratz explore the two possibilities of presenting and therefore constructing an identity:

In museum exhibits as much as in other cultural forms, the construction of cultural identity is achieved through two simultaneously occurring processes: (1) the use of exaggerated differences or oppositions that can be alternately a mode of exploration and understanding or an act of discrimination and (2) the use of varied assertions of sameness or similarity between audience and the object of contemplation. . . . Stressing similarities produces an assimilating impression creating both familiarity and intimacy with representations and their subjects. Assertions of unbridgeable

difference, on the other hand, exoticise by creating relations of great spatial or temporal distance, perhaps the thrill of the unknown.

(2000: 194, 198)

Similarly, identifying someone or something as representative of LGBT culture or, more broadly speaking, of a culture that does not fit into the norm, could enable on the one hand, its visibility, but, on the other hand, it could also perpetuate underpinning and unquestioned assumptions about such norms. Therefore, the way of portraying an identity or a social group in general, and in particular, in a museum context, is an issue still subject to debate based on the premise that since 'a repertoire of signs [of gayness] . . . is . . . the requirement of recognizability in turn entailing that of typicality' then 'all typification is anathema' (Dyer 2002b: 18, 21). Moreover, although Graham refers to the labelling or not of a disability, the same dilemma is applicable to sexual difference.

Furthermore, labels for those who form the majority, for example, heterosexuals, are not even mentioned in contrast to those identified as LGBTQ. If there is no reference to the sexuality of either the artist or the shown person or any related persons, then it is automatically assumed that heterosexuality is the one that characterises him/her, which is exactly how heteronormativity quietly works. However, when an LGBTQ-related exhibit is to be displayed, then curators deal with the dilemma of naming it or not, disputing whether explicit reference is needed.

Besides there is a significant lack of research on the long-term impact of museum projects on people's lives (Sandell 2002a: 17) which might be discouraging for those practitioners that have so actively sought to be socially inclusive in their work. Still, the belief that public opinion is not constructed by one single source of knowledge but rather by diverse means, such as television, internet, newspapers, museums, schools, and so on, attests to the expectation from every single learning source to work towards this direction. For instance, Singh maintaining the above thought, pinpoints that:

It helps no one that young people still grow up looking at the world and themselves through a television screen that hides much of the reality that it does not distort. It is not television's fault that the world out there is infested by racism and discrimination, but television needs to play its part in helping to deal with the problem instead of compromising with it.

(2001)

Accordingly, museums are not responsible for what is happening in the world, but they must have a voice for malfunctions of the society because they consist of part of the mechanism in charge of the construction of meanings. They are considered, nonetheless, as 'harbingers of change' (Kaplan 1995: 42).

### *Stereotypes*

Having said all that, a reference to the role of stereotypes cannot be omitted in a discussion about the visual world and its influence on real life. Since the visual always reaches the public in a contaminated form and the transition of ideas through visual art is always politicised, then, it becomes evident that both the contamination and the politicisation are caused by the variety of personal beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes<sup>24</sup>. In fact, a number of academics engaged in projects on the portrayal of minorities have indicated how museums contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypical images. For instance, studies on disability revealed how the disabled community is either invisible or portrayed mostly with negative connotations (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare 1999; Sandell, Delin, Dodd and Gay 2005). Likewise, the representation of sexual difference has been equally hidden or limited (Levin 2010: 158), resulting in criticism even from visitors to LGBT-related exhibitions who identified as members of the particular community

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<sup>24</sup>The term stereotype firstly appeared in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century 'as a technical designation for the casting of multiple papier-mache copies of printing type from a papier-mache mold' (Gilman 1985: 15). As we see, although it was used to refer to a specialised field, that of printing, it still maintains the same core idea, that of 'impos[ing] a rigid mold on the subject and encourage[ing] repeated mechanical usage' (Enteman 1996: 9).

on display, demanding for example, a departure from conventional, extreme or sexualised depictions (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010: 31, 35). Similar expectations among sexual minorities are shared for media inclusions too, as a recent survey by Stonewall indicated concerning the lives of youth LGBT as promoted on TV (2010), highlighting not only the lack of realistic and positive ways of portraying their lives but also the tendency to focus on dramatic and traumatised experiences. This type of critique from minority perspectives could be interpreted as one of the fundamental reasoning for regarding stereotypes as incomplete portrayals, since their core function is to 'serve as blanketing generalisations for all individuals assigned to such categories' (Pickering 2001: 10).

For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.

(Lippmann 1965: 54-55)

When talking about stereotypes, a range of factors engage in the process of presenting particular ideas and attitudes including the art and educational domain (Lippmann 1965). As a result, museums as part of the art and educational world serve as an integral component of the mechanism which controls the diffusion of ideas to society. But, at the same time, they are found in a quite complex and confused situation. On one hand, there is the demand to operate as an institution in accordance with the already established moral codes and popular beliefs (agent of the governing bodies), whereas simultaneously there is an expectation to serve diverse communities responsibly and be a credible place for learning and productive debate (social agent). This dilemma resembles, and perhaps overlaps, the puzzle of labelling as previously discussed. In each of these two cases the contradictory forces generating this awkward position are similar: the governing bodies, reliant on fixed beliefs and uncomfortable with change because 'any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe . . . of [their] universe' (Lippmann 1965: 63), and the advocates of a more



socially responsible museum, calling for revising long-held perceptions adjusted to the requirements of the present. So, is there a solution or should museum scholars and professionals accept the fact that this problem will continue reappearing?

In my opinion the answer to the above question resides in understanding that it is not the content of the stereotypes that is of high importance, rather 'the character of the stereotypes, and the gullibility with which we employ them' (Lippmann 1965: 60). The way these factors function and affect one's behaviour is associated with a choice one has already made between two distinct philosophies, 'that the world is codified accordingly to a code which we possess' or 'that each man is only a small part of the world, that his intelligence catches at best only phases and aspects in a coarse of ideas' (Lippmann 1965: 60). Thus, what appears to be the basis for working on this persistent complexity is the second philosophy of viewing the world. This looks like a requirement to start working effectively on conflicting stereotypes, but more importantly on revised stereotypes. In other words, museums could serve as offering a reliable environment for the diverse 'small parts of the world' to have a voice, as a place unprejudiced against difference with the excuse of not being in accordance with the socially approved common beliefs and preconceptions. But, how feasible is such an approach, in terms of the dynamics that govern stereotypes?

Stereotypes are not simply ideas one has about the world. They are part 'of the wider process by which any human society, and individuals within it, make sense of that society through generalities, patternings and "typifications"' (Dyer 2002b: 12). Moreover, at their core they maintain the very notion of feeling at ease and secure due to the fact that we have been taught how to think of the world and anything new or contradictory is regarded as a potential threat to our supposedly reliable image of the world (Lippmann 1965: 64; Pickering 2001: 3). However, putting aside the close attachment to them, what would happen if the stimuli around us began gradually to diversify? As it was previously mentioned, the beliefs held by individuals are only the result of constant and deliberate actions by several authoritative institutions. They do not simply occur; instead they are forced to

occur. Therefore, it could be argued, the responsibility for the content and character of widely held ideas lies in those domains involved in cultural representational practices. And this is where museums fit in with carefully developed representations of sexual diversity. As research from the media sector has shown, exposure to positively instilled representations increases the chances of holding a welcoming attitude towards the other. For instance, media studies on the potential impact of gay representations on TV, films or documentaries on public attitudes towards homosexuality have been repeatedly unveiling the link between positive depictions and a trigger in positively revising one's perceptions (Riggle, Ellis and Clawford 1996; Bonds-Raacke et al 2007).

Moreover, another important aspect of stereotypes is located in the cause and reason of their existence (Dyer 2002b: 12) which is true for museum projects, particularly exhibitions, as it seems impossible to refrain from stereotypes, positive or negative. Still, the key issue demanding special attention and responsible decision making by exhibition staff members is which stereotypes will overshadow the others. However, even a boost in the positive portrayal of a previously excluded community does not automatically equal the disappearance of pejorative representation and simultaneously hides a danger of replacing an old simplistic generalisation with a new one (Hall 1997c: 272-274).

In addition, due to common misconceptions, a clarification between stereotypes and categories has to be made if one does not embark on cognitive psychology to explore the role of stereotypes in representational devices:

While we need to understand stereotypes as elements of broad cultural practices and processes, carrying with them quite definite ideological views and values, they are not necessarily integral to our perceptual and cognitive organisation of the social worlds we live in.

(Pickering 2001: 3)

Furthermore, other scholars like Klapp (1962) have taken forward this distinction suggesting two distinct categories of representations, one of those who are welcomed as members of society (social types) and of those who are not (stereotypes) (Dyer 2002b: 14). However, this strict split is not commonly accepted because of its rigidity<sup>25</sup>. Rather, a fluid boundary between these two is usually preferred (Dyer 2002b: 15) because by admitting that boundaries are not fixed, then, the main objective of stereotypes, that of 'maintain[ing] sharp boundary definitions . . . defin[ing] clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it' (Dyer 2002b: 16), loses some of its effectiveness, allowing space for revisions and adjustments. Furthermore, the issue of retaining a more flexible approach in stereotyping is extremely valuable with regard to groups which, in real life, are difficult to be identified as such. So, what is the reason behind this?

The answer is found in the words of Dyer (2002b: 16), who pointed out how much effort society puts into visualising for the general public the groups which are thought to be a threat to public decency in order to impose the images and beliefs that suits its long-established norms. Authorities then render such groups invisible. Therefore, strict divisions prove unsuitable for categorisation once more. Classifications will always exist because they are essential for individuals' lives, enabling people to recognize what is good and bad at first instance (Lester 1996: xi) and make sense of the world around them (Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron 1994: 1). What is not always there is a flexibility and adjustability to reassure that those classifications remain relevant to the present. Moreover, what is not essential, but impossible to be eliminated, is stereotyping, and the reasons for this is that:

Because of laziness, upbringing, or coincidental experiences, the stereotyping of individuals results in harmful generalizations that deny an

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<sup>25</sup> As a result, in this thesis the use of the term stereotype follows Dyer's explanation rather than Klapp's, considering the aim here which is simply to discuss the cause, the key functions and the effects/impacts of regulated ideas which are taken for granted by people, and after all, their relevance with the art and museum world.

individual's unique contribution to humanity. ... Without adequate experiences and educational references, stereotypes lead to prejudice and discrimination.

(Lester 1996: xi-xii)

In addition, when considering the role of stereotypes in representational practices, a note on the boundary between prejudice and discrimination has to be offered (Enteman 1996: 9). This distinction is basically founded on whether a belief, or an act as a consequence of it, is made deliberately with a specific purpose or not. In other words, when a person has a particular preconception about a social group, for example, that men are more capable of having executive and prestigious posts than women, he is prejudiced against women, perhaps because he was taught that way. But if later on, he does not give promotion to a woman simply because of her gender, then, he discriminates against her. This example shows how a socially imposed prejudice can allow for intentional discrimination. Discrimination then becomes a notion extending the idea of prejudice further to achieve specific aims. Nevertheless, prejudiced ideas are cultivated within each society with precise objectives to be fulfilled as well, but the difference resides on whether the individuals affected by all these stereotyped notions allow themselves to be led strictly by them or not. Here is where the suggestion of Enteman (1996) fits in. That is, to turn the focus towards the concepts of choice and commitment. Therefore, he further recommends that we accept the inevitability of prejudices among all of us and understand that the only way to avoid massive discrimination is through a diversity of choices along with a personal responsibility of being morally correct. Or, in other words, again a need for a reliable educational and representational system dedicated to promote morality and not laziness<sup>26</sup>, which forms the key ingredient of stereotypes (Enteman 1996: 9-10).

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<sup>26</sup> Laziness as the cause of stereotyping has a dual meaning. It refers to the unwillingness of seeking more information about the subject one is prejudiced or discriminates, and to the tendency of speculating as the ordinary/as the rule occasional behaviours and attitudes (Enteman 1996: 9, 10).

## Conclusions from Chapter 2

Having discussed the social construction of gender and sexual identities, the political significance of sexuality, its assimilation with heterosexuality and the securing of its status of naturalness through constant repetition, it could be argued that heterosexuality is regarded as the foundation of society, repelling anything that could potentially disrupt it, like sexual diversity. Moreover, this perception of sexuality as a twofold domain, not only resists homosexuality as the exact opposite to the norm, but it also 'suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies' (Butler 1990: 26). Accordingly for gender, if we acknowledge it either as socially constructed or as a performance, then we might end up with the following scenario, Butler elaborates on:

[T]here is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.

(1990: 192)

Lastly, their fluidity indicates that their meanings and significance are subject to constant change, signifying their non-naturalness. Furthermore, since the perpetuation of the conventional, essentialist and, in my opinion, conservative thoughts on gender and sexuality is affected by the social realm, then action is needed towards their alteration. This change will not impose new fixed understandings like the ones it aims to subvert, but, on the contrary, it will be developed to appeal to the current needs of society.

Besides, through a brief look into the world of media, progressive steps have been made to a more inclusive representation, suggesting that similar steps might also be taken within museums. Unless a more methodical effort by those who have the means to do so is empowered, the basic meaning of typically misunderstood

notions will start showing off. Museums, then, belong to the above category according to ICOM's definition of it as:

A non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

(2010-2012)

As per ICOM, the relevance to the actions I am suggesting becomes evident. Museums are here for presenting the tradition of cultures, entertainment and learning. Among their key responsibilities is offering the public an alternative and stimulating approach to learning. For that reason, museums have a voice and a role in the construction of public belief and attitudes. They too are mechanisms of the visual world and as such they have to fulfil their social role responsibly, striving for being socially inclusive of cultural differences. Yet the transition of ideas is never uncontaminated, rather any decision on what and how it is going to be presented aims at achieving something, according always to the ideology and expectations of those in control. In addition, remarkably institutionalised concepts, like heteronormativity, sustained by museums as well, are changeable since they depend highly on daily practice. But, how adaptable are they in terms of getting challenged and potentially modified? This is an issue concerning many scholars within museums, either from a theoretical background or a more practical one and requires further research in order to reach some concrete conclusions. In addition, what practitioners have already given considerable attention to, is the value of including and representing diversity, for example in terms of disability and ethnicity. This constitutes a significant step forward but where are gender and sexuality?

Therefore, if museums' role is to be inclusive towards communities, to promote equality and foster understandings of difference, then why not start considering issues of gender and sexuality more intensively and effectively? Of course the main reason for not doing so is a practical one and is, indeed, in financial terms,

either by losing visitors who may feel insulted, or by putting their future funding at risk.

Surely, as there are many voices arguing for an improved representation of disability for instance, similarly, there are many asking for projects concerned with sexuality. Furthermore, particularly those having a non-heteronormative sexuality, like any community and social group, would like to find themselves and stories, objects, experiences connected straightforward with the history of their culture, their identity and their life. They require more relevance within the museum context, and not the perpetuating situation of being totally or partially ignored or misunderstood. However, how will they be ensured that the new initiatives to be taken will not resemble the few previous ones and that the result will be satisfactory enough? The reason for expressing this worry is because 'identity is often in the eye of the beholder' (Jenkins 1996: 2). That is, there should be a sufficient co-operation between the two parts; museum and social groups, in order to define how a particular identity could be represented more suitably. This view of the subjective approach to the variety of identities resonates with Hooper-Greenhill who states:

Knowledge is no longer unified and monolithic; it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective-rather a cacophony of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences, and values. The voice of the museum is one among many.

(2007a: 82)

Keeping in mind the above statement of Hooper-Greenhill in relation to the issues examined in this thesis, one key conclusion can be drawn. On the one hand, there are generally some perceptions, right or wrong, concerning gender and sexual identities among the public. On the other hand, there is a growing demand for museums to raise their voice too regarding certain sensitive or controversial issues, and do so, as carefully and responsibly as possible. But museums, just like the public, consist of several members who will not hold the same views. So, how

can this recurring gap, not only between museum and public belief, but also within museum itself, be filled? More importantly, where does the truth about those identities most commonly misunderstood and misrepresented lie? That forms quite a complex subject which museums should sooner or later confront, if they are aiming for a socially responsible profile.

At this point, I need to clarify that my intention is not to be read as a romantic utopist. Realising that a major social change is too ambitious, it is my strong belief that at least some minor changes are relatively easily achievable. A dynamic effort could have positive results and improve a social reality as past social movements have shown. Further, culture has the potential to lead this moving towards a more open-minded society, regarding issues of gender and sexuality. It is a sector that could act as a stimulus by representing cultural diversity, offering the opportunity for people to be exposed to, and perhaps reconsider one's views on, identities different from their own. In other words, to treat and represent a fairly wide array of communities to contribute to the elimination of discrimination usually caused by inadequate knowledge. The analysis of cultural representational practices and the persistence of stereotypes and labels indicated the value of securing access to trustful sources of knowledge, since well-informed, socially responsible and unconventional representations are likely to impact positively on people's perceptions triggering a reconsideration of previously held ideas.

As for the concept of heteronormativity and why it is necessary to be further researched, perhaps it could be argued that discussing notions like this is futile, since they are too deeply incorporated in public opinion that is way too complex to challenge them. Still, in my opinion it is not pointless at all. In 2008 Sanders referred to some of the most prevalent museum theorists, including Hein, G., Hooper-Greenhill or Weil as key scholars believing in the museum as an influential institution for social life, yet, stressing the lack in their research of 'how museums fail to address their complicity in the maintenance of heteronormativity' (2008: 17). Several studies have been taking place in the educational sector as well as in the media, signifying the existence of problems caused by heteronormativity that



require our attention. Furthermore, the whole discussion is not about something that always existed in the same way nor is it a universal truth. It is subject to change just like anything that is socially constructed, no matter how easy or complicated it is to create change. The following words of Jackson, words that could be used in similar situations when some people dream of a more equal and responsible society, appear to be more than relevant in this case by giving reason to those believing in social change, yet, acknowledging the inevitability of erasing power relations:

We can resist, subvert and destabilize, but nothing much will change; or, if it does, there will be new deployments of power to be resisted, subverted and destabilized. This is a politics of resistance and transgression, but not a politics of radical transformation...It is ultimately a pessimistic politics...Yet I believe that it is crucially important, both politically and analytically, that we are at least able to imagine social relations being radically other than they are. If we cannot do this we lose the impetus even to think critically about the world in which we live.

(1999: 182)

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Having established the theoretical framework for the current study, the focus is now turned on its methodology. The thesis has been developed around the power heteronormativity exerts on museum practice and its overarching scope then is to consider the potential for museums to challenge persistent heteronormative narratives in their collections and the effect of such actions. On that account, the main research questions were formed as follows:

1. How and why are museums developing strategies to question heteronormative assumptions on gender and sexuality roles and expectations?
2. What effect do inclusive curatorial practices, featuring a spatial or thematic contextualisation of sexual difference, have a) on museums, b) on audiences, and c) on the representation of sexual minorities?
3. What is the potential contribution to museum practice and the lived experience of sexual minorities of more inclusive and subtle interpretive devices, such as, artistic interventions or generic thematic frameworks?

Furthermore, I pursued the following objectives to enable me to get a rounded view of my two central case studies, *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* as two examples of an inclusive and subtle museum practice featuring a rare contextualisation of sexual difference to a substantial extent:

- to review the curatorial tools, the content and the spatial format museums employed to allow for representations outside the so-called acceptable heteronorms to be put on equal footing with regular exhibits,
- to understand the key ideas that were intended to be communicated to the public,

- to gain an insight into the justification of exploring an interpretive approach that seeks to interweave LGBT experiences and perspectives into broader thematic narratives (compared to the presentation of more explicitly labelled LGBT exhibitions),
- to examine the role of the personal, institutional or contextual factors in the facilitation of these initiatives,
- to explore the anticipated impact of this strand of inclusive strategies both internally on staff and museum work, but also externally on audiences,
- to consider the target groups of projects where sexual difference is integrated,
- to shed light on the barriers encountered in the development of these projects, internally or externally, and how they were overcome,
- to gain insights into how visitors responded to the exhibitions and their intended messages.

To better explore the above aims and objectives, I selected an interpretivist qualitative paradigm to frame my research, semi-structured interviews with museum and external professionals as well as visitors who engaged with the projects under study, and took measures to overcome obstacles and ensure ethical considerations had been fully addressed. The following sections will provide an insight into my choices which were employed to get a rounded view on two distinctive museum paradigms.

### **Research methodology; The Interpretivist Qualitative Paradigm**

This study explores the implications for museum practice and visitors when unifying narratives embracing sexual difference are developed. It also attempts to dig into the stages of development for the exhibitions under study, the meaning of

the narratives on display made by both museum staff and visitors, and finally, the societal and museum environment within which each project occurred. Examining elements that seek to comprehend a particular phenomenon fall into the distinctive goals a qualitative study can better explore in contrast to quantitative inquiries (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 153-155; Maxwell 2005: 22-23).

Besides, in order to grasp what form inclusive curatorship can take, how it can be facilitated and what kind of effect it might have on museums and audiences, research was required in the place where such projects emerged. In addition, to use Denzin and Lincoln's term, I conducted this research as an 'interpretive bricoleur [who] understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity . . . and by those of the people in the setting' (2008: 8). In other words, the overarching framework is detached from any positivist trace. Rather the research process is mainly informed by the neglect of one single truth, 'abandon[ing] the claim that cognition is "true" in the sense that it reflects objective reality' (Glaserfeld, quoted in Flick 2009: 70). Hence concepts and meanings turn out to be fluid and adaptable and on that premise museums eventually hold the ability and responsibility to evoke social change. This study then intends to uncover the prospects, the difficulties and the potential impact on social values and beliefs when the subversion of traditionally ascribed roles to one's gender is integrated in a gallery space. This 'preference for an empathetic understanding and an interpretation of human behaviour' (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 10) both from the museum and audience perspective regarding the adoption of inclusive curatorial practices for the representation of sexual diversity designated the interpretivist direction of the study.

Qualitative projects, moreover, are usually perceived as interpretivist approaches to the real world, taking into account contextual factors affecting the focus of their study (Creswell, 1998: 15; Denzin and Lincoln 2008: 4; Silverman, D. 2010: 103-105). Mason (1996: 4) suggested a very conclusive definition of what qualitative research refers to, part of which maintains that it is 'grounded in a philosophical

position which is broadly “interpretivist” in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced. . . . [It is] based on methods of data generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced’.

As a result, qualitative inquiry, as opposed to quantitative strategies inclined towards quantification and positivism (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 14-16), was selected as the most appropriate research framework since it offers the necessary theoretical background and techniques to elaborate on a study with these requirements.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

Qualitative research acknowledges the impact of one’s background, moral system and personal histories on their research motivation, design, analysis and conclusions (Malterud 2001: 483-484; Bryman and Teevan 2005: 16-18; Denzin and Lincoln 2008: 29). Thus, although my aim is to present my findings accurately and research my topic as objectively as possible, my personal experiences and influences cannot be disregarded.

My Greek background acted as the starting point for my interest in how museums represent gender and sexual identities. Due to the prevalence and influence of the Christian Orthodox religion and the rise of far-right political ideologies, Greek museums operate within a conservative environment reluctant of displaying contemporary hot topics, like racism, immigration, homosexuality and anything that does not fit in the misleading popular belief in a Greek identity consisting of three basic elements: nationality, heterosexuality and Christian Orthodox religion (Karayanni 2004; Roudometof and Makrides 2010). As a result, explicit references to those forbidden themes are very rare since they are perceived as threatening for society’s ethical corruption. For instance, despite the fact that homoeroticism in ancient Greece is well documented it is hardly ever depicted in archaeological

museums. The only exception which drew considerable attention to the topic was the exhibition I referred to in the introduction, titled *Eros; From Hesiod's Theogony to Late Antiquity*. The surprising finding was that for the first time there was an extensive public reference to homoeroticism in a well-established Greek museum without drawing the usual negative reactions from religious or racist organisations<sup>27</sup>. A possible interpretation of not having caused major negative publicity and reaction was, in my view, the subtlety in the portrayal of sexual diversity, achieved through the adoption of a broad thematic narrative. Consequently, witnessing homosexuality being explicitly included to a significant extent in a Greek museum without causing any controversy, for the first time ever, is what inspired my research interest in the possibilities and challenges of projects that manage to embrace sexual minorities under unifying narratives.

On this premise, the analysis gave priority to the museum perspective to unveil the reasoning behind similar initiatives in the UK. Furthermore, because of my belief in museums as active contributors in the promotion of social values, my position emphasises the need for museums to dynamically embrace sexual difference in creative ways that will allow their core message of respect for diversity and condemnation of any form of prejudice to reach the widest possible audience. The UK context was regarded as a suitable research setting since a number of mainstream exhibitions in the past had tackled the notion of sexual difference

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<sup>27</sup> In Greece it is a quite common phenomenon to encounter negative and at times violent reactions to the cultural portrayal (both at public or private spaces) of identities that fall outside the socially expected heterosexual Orthodox Christian norm. For instance, far right and religious groups protested violently with insults and bullying against the play '*Corpus Christi*' in a private theatre which depicted Jesus as homosexual, causing its cancellation (Tsimitakis 2013). Another example from the museum context was the censorship of 12 seconds from Costas Gavras video on the history of Parthenon at the New Acropolis Museum due to the inclusion of the historical fact that Orthodox Christian priests caused severe damages on the temple in the past. However, it was only temporary as the museum changed their decision to avoid a potential law suit (Kyriakidou 2009). Finally, it is interesting to note that a lot of controversy was raised before and after the production of Oliver Stone's movie '*Alexander the Great*', where Alexander, one of the most well-known and admired Greek historical figures was portrayed as a man having homoerotic desires. This decision irritated several Greeks to the extent that a group of lawyers was formed to sue the director and the film studio, reversing their decision, nonetheless, with their only demand being that the movie was clearly signposted as 'not historically accurate' (BBC 2004).

directly but only a few adopted an alternative approach. Seeking examples of the latter ones soon became the actual focus of this thesis.

## **Research Tradition of Inquiry; Case Study**

In museum and gallery studies researchers tend to focus on a small number of projects or museums representative of the overarching subject they look at. Yin (2009: 15) stresses 'case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes' undermining in a way the focus on quantity due to the fact that the scope of case studies is to lead to generate context-informed conclusions. Hence, the museum research tradition towards a qualitative study on distinctive cases is maintained in this thesis. My intention thus was to form a 'collective case study' where the production of inclusive narratives across gallery spaces in two to four sites was manifested (Stake 1995: 5-6, 2000: 437-438). The research design however had to be flexible and adaptable to emerging issues, such as barriers to accessing some sites and securing participation. The number of case studies therefore evolved while attempts to secure access were being sought, resulting in two contemporary ongoing projects in non-private gallery spaces, *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* at Sudley House, Liverpool.

The criteria for determining the sites and projects for the study were based principally on the conceptual framework previously discussed and therefore led to a theory-based and purposeful sampling of cases. Such a decision can usually be influenced by the already existing intellectual background (Mason 1996: 93-94; Curtis, Gesler, Smith and Washburn 2000: 1002). Accordingly then both exhibitions I selected stem from this rationale, that was, being assessed as well-suited contemporary UK-based examples of two distinctive strands of inclusive curatorship towards difference that disturbed the prevailing heteronormative framework through their blurring of gender and sexual boundaries. Also, a vital

requirement for the projects under study was the preference towards public museums deriving from the conviction that publicly funded museums, free to visit, demonstrate a more influential role in people's views as they are usually seen as trustful learning institutions. The appealing to the general audience was interpreted as an essential element of the inclusiveness of the projects under study, and consequently, public institutions were sought to carry out the fieldwork. That being the case, the three main choices among many to be prioritised were inclusiveness in the curatorial approach, timing, and public governance, as it was felt that these three criteria were in accordance with the overarching conceptual framework.

Moreover, following Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007: 41-62) advice on securing access to the site of one's fieldwork, the initial approach was made via email communication explaining the scope of my study being the exploration of the opportunities and challenges for museums and their audiences through the inclusion of sexual difference in the form of interventions (*Queering the Museum*) or under the subject of marriage (*Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*). In other words, the first email clearly stated my research question without revealing my standpoint, presented both projects as interesting initiatives worthy of closer investigation to inform museum practice and suggested an informal report on my audience research findings to be provided for their records. As soon as the initial contact with the leading curator was secured and a rapport was established, getting the permission for an interview with other museum staff members, even at senior management level, and for conducting a small scale audience research became very straightforward.

## **Research strategies for data collection and analysis**

The principal method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with museum professionals involved, to some extent, with each exhibition and with members of the audience. Open-ended questions might have given more freedom in what each participant could comment on (Silverman, D. 2010: 131-132), yet, semi-structured



ones appeared more suitable to the nature of the projects, as they would still allow for some flexibility (Bryman and Teevan 2005: 184).

To gain an insight into the practical and intellectual processes leading to the production of the projects I explore, as well as into how visitors engaged and responded to them, purposeful sampling was favoured as ‘a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices’ (Maxwell 2005: 88). Overall, at each site I conducted interviews with 18 members of the public who engaged with the exhibitions (Appendix 1, Appendix 2), with six of them at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery having been carried out through email correspondence<sup>28</sup>. Four interviews with staff members who participated in the production of *Queering the Museum* were conducted at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and four with people who had been involved with *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* at Sudley House. These involved individuals from the following positions:

At Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery:

- Exhibitions Manager, Andy Horn (Interview was conducted on 11/02/2011)
- External professional/artist, Matt Smith (Interview was conducted on 28/02/2011)
- Head of Museum Operations, Simon Cane (Interview was conducted on 09/05/2011)
- Head of Interpretation and Exhibitions, Toby Watley (Interview was conducted on 09/05/2011)

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<sup>28</sup> Visitor interviews at Sudley House were conducted during the following dates: 10-11 March 2011, 2-3, 8-10 and 22-23 April 2011. Visitor interviews at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery were carried out during the following dates: 13-15 and 22-29 January 2011.

At Sudley House, National Museums of Liverpool:

- Curator of Costume and Textiles at National Museums of Liverpool, Pauline Rushton (Interview was conducted on 25/01/2011)
- Senior Exhibition Officer for Art Galleries at National Museums of Liverpool, Myra Brown (Interview was conducted on 18/05/2011)
- Exhibition Officer at National Museums of Liverpool, Linda Pittwood (Interview was conducted on 25/01/2011)
- Visitor Host at Sudley House, Simon Breedon (Interview was conducted on 02/04/2011)

Similarly to past studies, like feminist research (Byrne 2012: 209-210), interviews rather than other techniques such as questionnaires, tend to be welcomed as they are envisaged as a chance for previously disregarded minorities (in this case the LGBTQ community) to express themselves. Interviews hence were seen as promising in opening up discussions of gender and sexual identities and histories with museum staff, a significant section of which appears to be reluctant when similar topics are brought up as, for instance, the past studies, like the survey conducted by Proud Heritage in the UK in 2005 (Sandell and Frost 2010), reveal. From the audience's perspective, reaching out for the general public held the possibility of interacting with people identified as LGBTQ or being LGBTQ friendly and consequently allowing their voice to be heard and to be valued. Similarly from the museum perspective, conducting a conversation with a range of practitioners who were very willing to share their experience during *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* had the potential to reinforce the side of museum practitioners and scholars' call for increased and fairer inclusion of sexual minorities. Sharing their experiences for the purposes of the current thesis, among other similar studies, could further positively inform current debates in the museum sector and potentially foster a more encouraging museum practice on sexual minorities' representation.

Moving on to the research protocols I used, influenced by the predisposition of the notion of subjective viewpoints' (Flick 2009: 161) the questionnaire included a variety of questions, at times being the same but asked differently, to better capture interviewees' feelings and thoughts. Both interview questionnaires attempted to open up the discussion moving from general themes to more specific ones.

The interview protocol for the audience was divided into five sections: a) opening questions, b) reactions to the exhibition, c) messages, d) museums as ethical leaders, and e) visitor background (Appendix 3). The rationale behind this structure was to begin with some generic questions about their visit to the site and their reception of the exhibition, and gradually move towards their understanding of the messages of each project, their attitude towards the idea of the socially purposeful museum, particularly in terms of the inclusion of sexual difference, and finally, end the interview with some information about their personal background. The basic aim was to get a sense of the public's view on the inclusiveness of each project towards sexual difference. For this to be achieved the first set of questions was about their general attitude towards the nature and content of the project while the second one was mainly directed towards the specific inclusion of sexual minorities and how people felt about it. This approach was considered suitable in order to get a sense of how people talk about inclusiveness generally and how they express themselves when inclusiveness is mentioned in reference to non-heteronormative sexual identities. Therefore, contrary to positivist criticism against the fact that one might use different language and expressions depending on the circumstances, the audience research part was developed in a way valuing such a variation, allowing me 'to examine what voices people use, how they use them and with what consequences' (Silverman, D. 2010: 226) when they engage with sexual difference in the selected contexts.

The interview protocol for museum staff was split into three sections but for external professionals there was an additional set of questions: a) general questions about the exhibition, b) specific questions about the sexual minorities'

inclusion in the exhibition, c) general questions about the sexual minorities' inclusion in museums, and d) questions targeted at external professionals (Appendix 4). The design allowed the interview to move from questions considering several stages of the exhibition development to more focused ones exploring the rationale behind the inclusion of sexual minorities in less frequently encountered forms, and closing with some remarks on sexual minorities' visibility in museums in general. Yet, the choice of surveying the key research themes through similar but differently asked questions as well as ensuring several representatives from the same site was deliberately made for the purpose of triangulation. Starting from the point Mason makes, triangulation is interpreted in this study as a technique that 'encourages the research to approach their research questions from different angles, and to explore their intellectual puzzles in a rounded and multi-faceted way' and not as a method to 'get an accurate reading or measurement of [the same phenomenon]' (1996: 148-149). Consequently, the objective was to explore how different members of the staff involved in the project production talk, think and feel about the process, outcomes and impact of the unifying narratives they created in their museum space.

The fieldwork transcription was taking place throughout in order to allow for analysis to begin at an early stage. Although the analytical process can take different formats, the suitable techniques for case studies suggested by Stake (1995) were adopted to fit into my overall research framework. On that account, presentation and interpretation of findings were based on the premise of:

- the 'description' of each exhibition and museum context.
- the 'categorical aggregation' of the points and themes raised in the data sources.
- the establishment of 'patterns' across the issues discussed but also across the two cases, and

- the production of ‘generalizations’ with reference to the lessons learnt from the study for future museum practice.

Rather than discussing each project separately, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 evolved in the form of what Creswell describes as ‘cross-case analysis’ (1998: 63). As a result, Chapters 4 and 5 explore the themes brought up in museum practitioners’ interviews while Chapter 6 examines the issues visitors were concerned with.

During the stage of analysing data, NVivo7 computer software was used to facilitate the process and provide a level of consistency and rigour in the interpretation and discussion of findings (Bazeley 2007: 3). Thus all transcripts and official documents provided by museum staff members were imported and then analysed through a wide range of ‘trees’ and ‘codes’. Specifically, two main ‘trees’ were created, one for the museum and another for the visitor perspective. Then, each one had a maximum of three levels taking into account Bazeley’s (2007: 122) suggestion ‘that trees usually don’t go more than two or three layers deep; it just isn’t possible to subcategorize much more than that without starting to confuse what class of thing you are dealing with’.

Coding of data from interviews with museum staff and audience was shaped partially and gradually as the analysis of interview transcriptions progressed. A certain level of freedom in this stage is expected and seen as valid as long as it is well justified (Coffey and Atkinson 1996: 32; Bazeley 2007: 124; Winsome and Johnson 2000: 394). Thus, interview protocols were organised in particular themes, which then formed the basis for the principal coding ‘organizational categories’ (Maxwell 2005: 97). Even so, the additional layers of coding were mainly informed by the interviewees’ answers and were thus created simultaneously with the analysis of the data. In the end, on top of the initial broader coding, a number of ‘substantive’ and ‘theoretical’ categories were created (Maxwell 2005: 97-98). The former referred to my interpretation of museum practitioners and visitors’ comments, feelings and thoughts whilst the latter were

shaped through theories originating from museum, cultural and sociological studies.

### **Challenges encountered**

One of the barriers encountered at the early stages was that of access. Approaching museum professionals at two additional sites was part of the original research plan, involving four case studies recent and past, temporary and permanent. For different reasons, the permanent exhibition *Every Object Tells a Story* with its inclusion of a bowl with explicit visual and textual references to gay love at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, and the past exhibition *Family Album* adopting a similar approach to *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* with the integration of the portrait of a same sex family at Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery and Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield could not be properly researched. At both cases I managed to secure an interview with one of the leading curators of each project. Simultaneously however, the idea of adding a visitors' layer was gradually evolving as a way to deepen the understanding on the potential impact of the unifying narrative adopted by *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*. Therefore, a decision was made to reduce the case studies from four to two as a way to focus on the particular phenomenon of inclusive curatorial practices from multiple perspectives in more detail in two ongoing –at that time– projects that featured sexual difference to a substantial amount and would offer the chance to carry out an audience research. Due to the word and time limit conducting semi-structured interviews with members of the staff at different job levels as well as with members of the public engaging with the shows, was seen as a convincing technique to get a satisfactory amount as well as quality of data to unveil perceptions and attitudes towards the embraced inclusiveness of two, and not four, case studies.

Furthermore, the tactic of approaching individuals to ask for their permission to be interviewed proved in practice problematic and as such had to be reviewed. The

initial plan was to approach every third visitor but this quickly turned out to be problematic in each site. *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* covered the main galleries on the second floor of Sudley House and due to its location (outside Liverpool city centre) visitor numbers were not at high levels. Accordingly, *Queering the Museum* was well spread across 19 galleries on the first floor of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, making it almost impossible to know who engaged with the project or not, starting and ending in the same space, the Round Room. Despite efforts during the first days on each site to remain consistent with the original plan, the outcome was to get only one or two interviews each day, as among the negative responses there were a few not interested in being interviewed for the exhibition they had just seen. On that account, I sought advice from Mark Harris and Simon Breedon, both working at Sudley House, to suggest dates or periods that the place might get busier, based on their experience. So, subsequent fieldwork visits took place on days when family workshops and public events were scheduled and resulted in asking every person who had spent time on the second floor looking at the exhibits of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*. In Birmingham, on the other hand, it was felt that observing people's interaction with the *Carnation Cape*, the first intervention of *Queering the Museum* in Round Room, and their choice of picking up or not the project's leaflet and map trail could increase chances of reaching out for individuals who might have engaged with it.

## **Ethics and Risks**

The study, influenced by 'a non-consequentialist approach', as Wiles describes it (2013: 14-15), was undertaken within University of Leicester Ethics Guidelines, ensuring that all participants and the data drawn from them were treated responsively. Shaped by the widely accepted ethical standards (British Sociological Association 2002; Silverman 2006: 315-334; Wiles 2013), the fieldwork was driven by the voluntary participation of the interviewees without any financial or other form of incentive being offered, the protection of their names, affiliations, and any other personal information they disclosed (when advised so), and finally, the commitment

of causing no physical or (especially relevant to this research) emotional harm taking place as all were reminded at several instances of their right to withdraw at any point.

On that account, prior to participants' voluntary contribution to the thesis I handed two forms, the Information Sheet forms (Appendix 5, Appendix 6) which clearly stated my research topic, the significance of their participation and their right to withdraw at anytime and, the Informed Consent forms (Appendix 7, Appendix 8) on paper for interviews conducted on-site and via email communication for the questionnaires completed online (Appendix 9). Although museum staff members were fully briefed about the overarching theme and made fully aware of the exact title of the thesis, without however any mentions to my own perspective, informing the audience turned slightly problematic. The audience research part aimed at unveiling people's views and attitudes regarding the content and format of each exhibition with no positive or negative predisposition. Receiving naturally occurring comments on the issues under study was perceived as an effective technique to get unbiased answers, at least in terms of participant-researcher relationship. Recognising on one hand that deception of participants is morally rejected and on the other that under certain circumstances information might be slightly paraphrased (Wiles 2013: 26), visitors were presented with the title of 'Museums and social issues; exploring visitors' responses', compared to the one presented to museum professionals reading as 'Subverting the (hetero)normative museum'.

Anonymity (when required) and confidentiality were maintained throughout the project. All transcripts were saved with code-names in .doc and .pdf format and saved securely in my personal computer and in two back-up external disks, which were locked in a fireproof safety box. Visitors' responses remained anonymous with the use of pseudonyms instead of their names, as explained in their Informed Consent form, whereas museum professionals' answers would be anonymous only if the interviewee stated so in the Informed Consent form where there was an option between anonymity of them and their affiliation or not. Additionally, in the case of email interviews, potential contributors were not approached directly by



me, as this would constitute a violation of their confidential agreement with Birmingham's LGBT centre's database. For this reason, a personal communication with the manager of the database was initiated asking for the permission to distribute a call for participants in the research titled 'Museums and social issues; exploring visitors' responses' within their email list.

Finally, considering the potential risks and safety for both researcher and participants, a number of measures had been set up and contact details of the researcher and the School of Museum Studies Ethics Officer were added in the Information Sheet in case future concerns arise (Wiles 2013: 55-67). Interviews with museum staff took place in their work offices at each site and they were notified of their right to withdraw at any time for any reason that might occur. Interviews with visitors were conducted in a museum gallery where at least one on-duty gallery assistant was present. Additionally, it was felt that references to sexuality and gender might cause some level of discomfort to audience members. On this ground, all contributors were reminded at the beginning and once during the interview of their right to withdraw anytime they wished. I was also ensured alertness to body language and expressions signifying tiredness, awkwardness or discomfort in order to judge when to skip a question or even stop the interview. Furthermore, the option of recording the conversation or not was another measure to reduce the possibility of causing emotional distress to an interviewee, as some may have felt anxious when being recorded.

## Chapter 4: Disrupting normative museum discourses: *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* exhibitions

This chapter will now turn the focus on the main theme of the current study, exploring the distinctive strategies museums might use to question the prevailing normative discourses in their collections.

The first section briefly presents some background information on Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and Sudley House, which will shed light on the case studies of *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* exhibitions. A substantial description of each project's curatorial principles will be made with references to the content on display and the interpretive devices used.

Then, in the second section the discussion starts the analysis of research findings from interviews with museum professionals. A critical analysis exploring the distinctiveness of the case studies will be unravelled, reflecting practitioners' thoughts and partially mine too. Museum staff talked about their projects in ways that suggested two overarching significant features. The first part is about a sense of normalcy and subtlety, which were all understood as principles leading to what might be termed as 'unexciting ways' of including the life, art and histories of sexual minorities. The second feature concerns the use of stereotypes and their contribution in a positive portrayal of people identified as LGBTQ.

In addition, the second part of Chapter 4 also discusses my own understanding of these initiatives as sites that managed to transgress hetero-normative barriers and preconceptions through the specific pre-mentioned elements of normalcy, subtlety and thoughtful use of conventional images. The normalisation of marginalised sexual identities through subtle spatial or thematic integration with what has always been perceived as 'normal' seems to symbolically break down the commonly imposed heteronormative dividing line between hetero vs. non-hetero. Furthermore, their portrayal symbolically appears to reject heteronormative

assumptions of the sexual 'other' as deviant or the negative extreme as opposed to the 'normal' and 'natural' heterosexual majority, due to its refraining from highly provocative images. Finally, staff placed emphasis on positive and more ordinary depictions of sexual difference at Sudley House and on a more rounded portrayal of sexual minorities seeking, to the extent it was possible, to be as representative of the diversity within the LGBTQ community at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. These decisions enabled a more thoughtful use of stereotypes which practically rejected popular prejudices and conventional heteronormative understandings of gender and sexual identities.

Eventually, I would call for considering both projects, and similar future ones, as alternative examples of how the museum sector could contribute in the politics of recognition of sexual minorities as equally valid citizens, and, ultimately, in a gradual subversion of the heteronormative paradigm. Consequently, an analysis informed primarily from the research data and on a secondary scale from my personal judgement evolved. The chapter concludes with a short overview of the two case studies summarising their main features, themes and underlying patterns which highlight their exceptional nature.

Having said that, Chapters 5 and 6 will follow, unveiling the majority of research findings on the process of exhibition production and on audience reception and engagement with inclusivity. The analysis of the principal qualities underpinning the inclusive curatorial approaches of *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* and eventually singling them out as disruptive museum paradigms had to take place early on. Structuring the discussion of my research findings in this way, allowed me to first critically introduce my case studies in depth through a detailed focus on the exhibitions' interpretive devices and conceptual elements, and then move to aspects of exhibition planning and development as well as audience reception, through a consideration of the conditions for developing similar inclusive curatorial practices and the potential effect on museums, staff and, more importantly, on its audiences, new and future ones.

## **Two disruptive paradigms**

In search for cases studies as part of an ongoing trend in advocating museums' social responsibility, especially with regards to previously invisible and excluded minority groups like sexual minorities, the selected projects for the current study were chosen, as previously explained, for their consistency with the overarching conceptual framework of heteronormativity underpinning my research. Certainly, timing played a significant role, yet, the basic criteria for focusing on *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* exhibitions were the fact of being displayed without an entrance fee at the publicly funded Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and Sudley House respectively, and, more importantly, because of their uncommon contextualisation of sexual difference on equal footing with regular exhibits. Therefore, these case studies seemed as suitable examples of two distinctive and less often encountered representational strands: a) the adoption of a form of institutional critique through interventions created by an external artist and, b) the elaboration on a universal theme interpreted from multiple cultural viewpoints.

### ***Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs, Sudley House***

*Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* was the first to be chosen as it was very timely and representative of a relatively unusual aspect of museum practice, that of integrating a non-heteronormative narrative under an umbrella theme. It was a temporary exhibition, without admission fee, at Sudley House, in Liverpool, running from 23 July 2010 till 2 May 2011 (Figure 1, Figure 2). It was also part of the partnership between the National Museums of Liverpool and the North West Touring Exhibitions Group, which resulted in being presented for shorter periods at Astley Hall in Chorley (14 May - 10 July 2011), at Haworth Art Gallery in Accrington (18 September 2011) and at Ordsall Hall in Salford (23 October 2011 - 15 January 2012), attracting 12,000 visitors (National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside 2012 ).

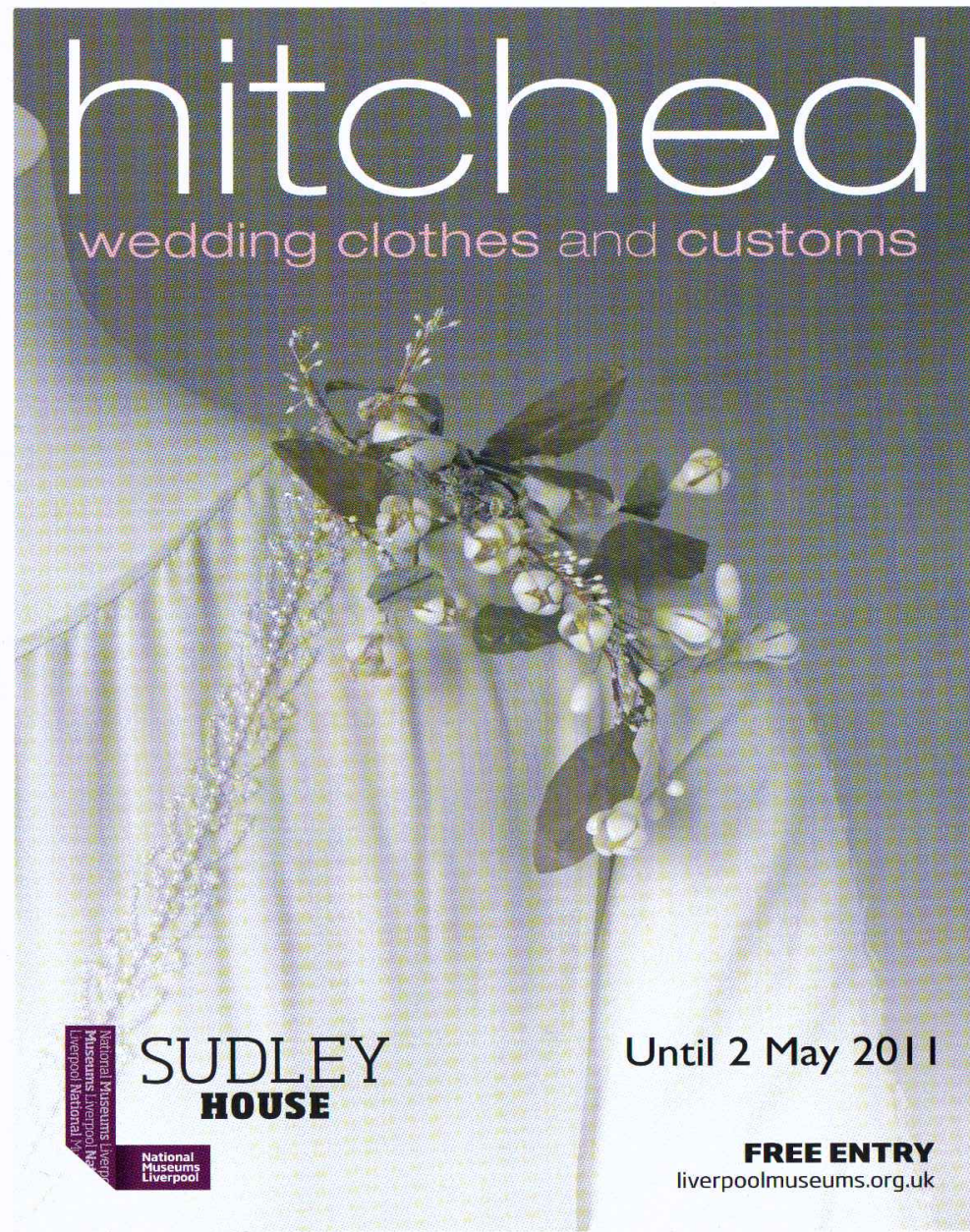


Figure 1: Promotional leaflet of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*.

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Figure 2: Promotional leaflet of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*.

The primary host museum of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, Sudley House, is a historic house belonging to the National Museums of Liverpool (Figure 3, Figure 4), located outside the city centre at Mossley Hill. Its main characteristic is being the place of 'the few period homes decorated in a Victorian style that still has many of its original features [and] [i]t is also the only surviving Victorian merchant art collection in Britain still hanging in its original location' (National Museums Liverpool 2013b). It was built at the beginning of the 19th century for Nicholas Robinson and at the end of the 19th century it became a property of George Holt. The floors present different types of collections. The ground floor consists of an entrance and garden halls, the library, the drawing, dining and morning rooms, whereas the second floor, primarily focused on temporary exhibitions, is slightly different with the childhood, small world and costume rooms. Thus, broadly speaking, Sudley House gives the impression of being a traditional Victorian historic house for people interested mainly in architecture and paintings of the Victorian era.

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Figure 3: Exterior of Sudley House. Photo credit: © R. Towner RIBA architect.

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Figure 4: Exterior of Sudley House (Entrance). Photo credit: © Green Lane.

Nevertheless, as the Curator of Costumes and Textiles of National Museums of Liverpool, Pauline Rushton, disclosed, it was renovated in 2007 and since then a change of focus on costumes became a key objective to raise its visitor numbers. She then explained how beneficial the refurbishment was, since Sudley House used to attract approximately 17,000 people whereas after its redevelopment the figures increased significantly. As part of this attempt, in 2010, an unusual for the place exhibition unravelled on the first floor of Sudley House, which at the moment of the interview with her -25th January 2011- 38,000 people had visited the site since *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* went on display.

The exhibition was structured under 12 themes explored through photographic images, text panels, costumes and garments (Table 1).



|                                            |                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Stags and Hens</b>                      | Graphic panel, the rituals of the stag and hen night, including a loan of hen's T-shirt with logo, and graphic |
| <b>Something Old, Something New</b>        | Graphic panel, the main costume display, garments mounted on full mannequins                                   |
| <b>With this Ring</b>                      | Graphic panel only, covering ideas of exchanging wedding rings and other love tokens                           |
| <b>Daisy, Daisy</b>                        | Graphic panel, cased display of wedding flowers and favours, bouquets, bouquet holders, and graphic            |
| <b>I can't afford a carriage</b>           | Graphic panel only, variety of wedding transport                                                               |
| <b>Get me to the church on time</b>        | Graphic panel only, variety of wedding venues                                                                  |
| <b>'Dearly Beloved...'</b>                 | Graphic panel only, variety of wedding services                                                                |
| <b>A Family Affair</b>                     | Graphic panel only, the wedding group, roles played by participants, Best Man, bridesmaids etc                 |
| <b>'What a Picture, What a Photograph'</b> | Graphic panel, wedding photographs, historic and contemporary, mounted on panel                                |
| <b>A bit of a do</b>                       | Graphic panel only, variety of wedding receptions, the wedding cake                                            |
| <b>Gratefully received</b>                 | Graphic panel only, variety of wedding gifts, historic and contemporary                                        |
| <b>Mr and Mrs</b>                          | Graphic panel only, the honeymoon, going away outfits, honeymoon destinations then and now                     |

Table 1: *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* exhibition themes (Detail from the Exhibition Marketing Campaign).

This outline examined separately the various stages of a marital ceremony, beginning from the events taking place at the preparation stage and closing with the honeymoon.

Across the three costume galleries of the first floor a historical overview of wedding traditions and costumes unravelled from the Victorian period to the present time. The exhibition consisted of photos, graphic panels and 20 outfits showing marital traditions across different local community groups: the white English (Figure 5), Jewish (Figure 6), Chinese (Figure 7), gay, Traveller (Figure 8) and Pagan. On that account, it was a social history exhibition on the topic of marriage, a concept with strong connotations of heteronormative perceptions on gender and sexuality.

Nevertheless, the thematic integration of sexual difference under such a universal topic on equal footing with traditional views, allowed the exhibition to resist such limiting understandings and consequently, challenge the popular belief of weddings consisting only of a male and female pairing. More importantly, references to non-heterosexual expressions were neither poor in quantity nor hidden away. On the contrary, the suits of the two grooms were among the four costumes which were singled out on a plinth in the central gallery space which could be accessed by three different entrances regardless of where one might start their visit (Figure 9, Figure 10). Next to the loans from the Traveller community, including a pink bridesmaid's dress and a white wedding dress, the curator placed the two cotton and synthetic mix costumes, made by Sir Tom Baker, a London-based tailor, which were a loan from Michael Alter and Christopher McDermott who entered into a civil partnership in 2008. Additionally, photos during and after the civil partnership ceremony were on the introductory panel (Figure 11) as well as on the one titled as 'What a picture, what a photograph' (Figure 12), suggesting how highly their inclusion was valued by the exhibition staff.

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Figure 5: *Wedding dress* (1853), White silk taffeta, trimmed with floral silk brocade ribbon and silk Fringing. Photo credit: © National Museums Liverpool.

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Figure 6: *Jewish wedding dress* (1935), Ivory silk crepe with applied gelatine sequins and glass beads. Photo credit: © National Museums Liverpool.

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Figure 7: *Chinese wedding dress* (1966), Wedding dress, silk satin, embroidered with glass beads and sequin, made in Hong Kong. Photo credit: © National Museums Liverpool.

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Figure 8: *Traveller wedding dress* (2010), Nylon and polyester, embroidered with crystal beads and sequins, bought in Wrexham, North Wales. Photo credit: © National Museums Liverpool.



Figure 9: The main gallery presenting the two civil partnership suits and two Traveller wedding dresses. Photo credit: © Author.



Figure 10: The main gallery presenting the two civil partnership suits and two Traveller wedding dresses. Photo credit: © Author.



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Figure 11: Detail from the text panel 'Christopher McDermott and Michael Atter at their civil partnership ceremony, 2008'. Photo credit: © Jim Viney.

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Figure 12: Detail from the text panel 'Christopher McDermott and Michael Atter after their civil partnership ceremony, 2008'. Photo credit: © Jim Viney.

### ***Queering the Museum, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery***

*Queering the Museum* was equally timely and indicative of a newly developed trend, that of installing small-scale interventions across many museum galleries to subvert heteronormative narratives. It was a temporary exhibition, without admission fee, at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in collaboration with the local SHOUT! Festival on queer arts and culture, originally set to be on display from 4 November 2010 till 27 February 2011.

The museum with its classical exterior architecture and entrance (Figure 13, Figure 14) opened in 1885 at Birmingham city centre and since then hosts a great variety of local, European and World art and historical collections. Nonetheless, it is especially well-known for its extensive Pre-Raphaelite collection and its Staffordshire Hoard. It forms part of Birmingham City Council, which partially funds it along with other funding agencies.

Matt Smith, a ceramist craft artist, was funded by the Arts Council and commissioned by SHOUT! Festival to intervene in the museum collections (both on display and in storage) and identify ways of creating stories of LGBTQ relevance, as he initially suggested in his proposal to SHOUT! Festival (2009):

This proposal takes on the idea of the gay gaze and repurposes everyday objects and reinterprets them, stripping them of their heterosexual readings and reclaiming them with new, gay identities.

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Figure 13: Exterior of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Photo credit: © Elliott Brown.

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Figure 14: Entrance of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

His art, as he disclosed during our interview, has been highly influenced by the work of another contemporary artist, keen on museum interventions, Fred Wilson<sup>29</sup>. Wilson 'attenuates a curatorial history, juxtaposing the expected with the unexpected, the ordinary with the unusual, in order to reveal its prejudices and omissions' (Berger 2001:10). Similarly then to Wilson's art, Smith shaped the project under study. The final outcome, co-curated by the artist himself and Andy Horn, the Exhibitions Manager, consisted of 19 display cases across ten different gallery rooms on the first floor (Figure 15), all signified by a green carnation graphic and a text label with a green vertical line on one side. After having looked at the museum storage and exhibitions, the artist proposed the creation of new ceramic artifacts or the removal, addition and re-interpretation of already existing ones to introduce LGBTQ narratives within the permanent galleries (Figure 16). Thus, *Queering the Museum* was an LGBTQ project, yet appealing to the general public as manifestations of sexual diversity were integrated spatially across regular exhibits and not within a confined gallery space. To strengthen this point, the exhibition opened with a highly visible starting point in the Round Room which is the first relatively small space one encounters as soon as they enter main galleries. This intervention made it almost impossible for museum visitors not to view at least this piece of the project and potentially pick up a leaflet of exhibition trail from a stand right next to the display. The permanent statue of *Archangel Lucifer* with a male body and female face, by Jacob Epstein, was decorated with green carnations, a typical signifier of homosexuality in the past among men (Figure 17, Figure 18).

---

<sup>29</sup> Fred Wilson is a contemporary artist who has been working on race and the invisibility of racial minority groups through a range of projects, including ones of an interventional nature. One of his most well-known projects was *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992-1993. One of the basic features of his work is very close to the work Matt Smith produced for *Queering the Museum*. Wilson, in an interview with Steven Dubin explained the philosophy of his art interventions, resembling to what Smith sought to achieve although from the different perspective of sexual diversity:

I disrupt the standard way of looking at museums. . . . Museums pride themselves on being objective, and they don't want you to believe that there's a view that they're producing. And so to sort of pierce that is what they're all afraid of. It's really [about] how it's been done and how they want to keep it.

(1999: 14)



Figure 15: Promotional leaflet of *Queering the Museum* exhibition



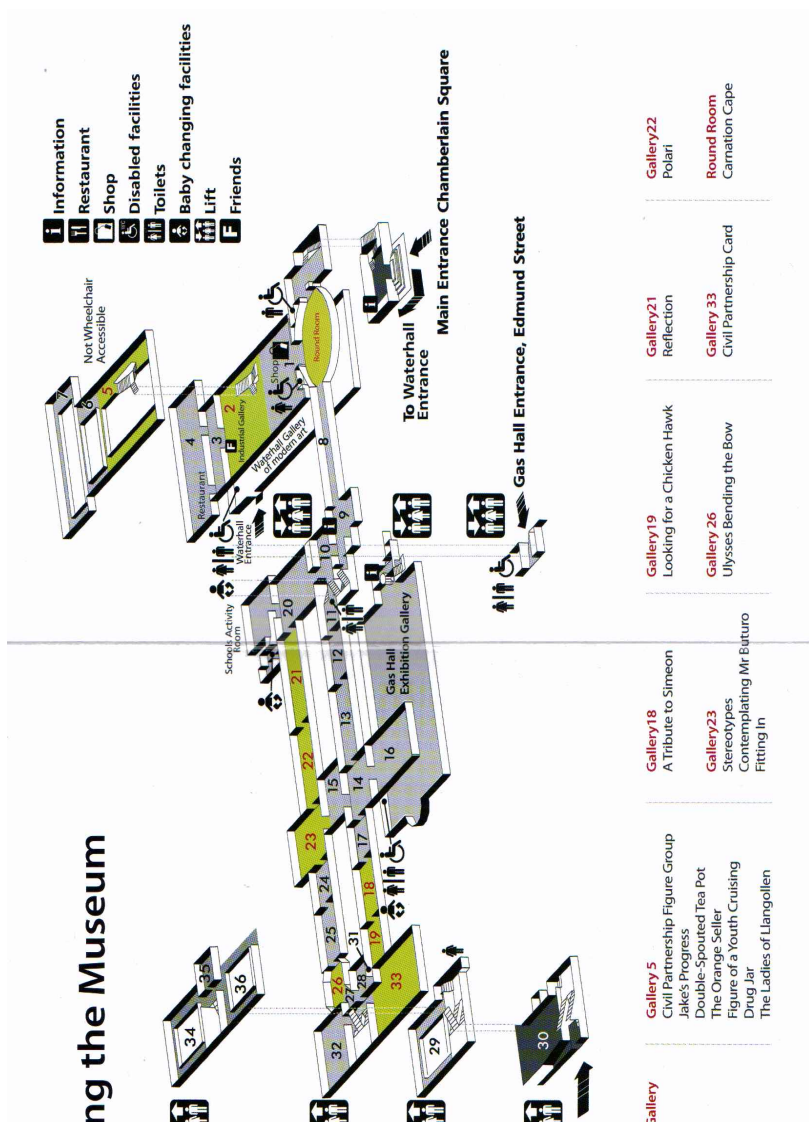


Figure 16: *Queering the Museum* map trail, included in the exhibition's promotional leaflet.



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Figure 17: *Carnation Cape* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Matt Smith (1971 - )  
**Carnation Cape, 2010**  
Green silk carnations, organza

Sexual acts between men were illegal in the United Kingdom until 1967. Therefore gay men had to communicate with each other in covert ways to avoid persecution and prosecution.

Green carnations were worn on the lapels of gay men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to signify their homosexuality. They were often worn by Oscar Wilde.

In 1894, Robert Hichens anonymously published the novel 'The Green Carnation'. Based closely on the lives of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, it was used in the prosecution of Wilde during his trial for Gross Indecency.

The cape is placed on Epstein's sculpture, 'Lucifer'. 'Lucifer' was sculpted with the body of a man and the face of a woman. This merging of genders provides a starting point for 'Queering the Museum'.

**Queering the Museum** is a series of displays which explore Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender themes using the museum's collections. It is funded by Arts Council England. To comment on the exhibition, tweet using the hashtag #queering.



Figure 18: Accompanying label for *Carnation Cape* (2010).

Across the rest of the nine galleries a mix of interpretive devices was practiced to unsettle the prevalent heteronormative narratives of the site's permanent collections. For instance, in Gallery 26, the artist identified one of the most typical implicit techniques reinforcing conventional views on socially accepted gender and sexual roles. One of the paintings on the walls of this gallery thus is surrounded by two statues, a male and a female figure. Matt Smith identified this case as one fitting exactly his scope to question curators' unintentional assumptions on pairing two figures in a heteronormative way. Thus he replaced the female statue of Venus and Child with one from the museum collections depicting a man, titling it as *Ulysses Bending the Bow* (Figure 19).

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Figure 19: *Ulysses Bending the Bow* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

In addition, another form of critique was made against the lack of provision in social history collections for the stories of sexual minorities. Particularly the display case in Gallery 33 featuring as *Why do we celebrate certain events in our lives?* included a civil partnership card from a male same sex ceremony (Figure 20, Figure 21) throughout the duration of *Queering the Museum* whereas in Gallery 5 a newly made ceramic by white earthenware featuring two males as a couple, one in dress and one in trousers, replace the permanent exhibit of a male and female couple to enhance the portrayal of a more diverse picturing of marital ceremonies in contemporary society (Figure 22, Figure 23).

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Figure 20: *Civil Partnership Card* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

## **Civil Partnership Card, 2010**

The first civil partnership took place on 5 December 2005.

Civil partnerships give same sex couples the opportunity to share the benefits given to married couples and provide them with an opportunity to publicly celebrate their relationships.

Civil partnership photographs have increased the regularity with which lesbian and gay male couples are shown in a positive light.

**Queering the Museum** is a series of displays which explore Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender themes using the museum's collections. It is funded by Arts Council England. To comment on the exhibition, tweet using the hashtag #queering.

Figure 21: Accompanying label for *Civil Partnership Card* (2010).

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Figure 22: *Civil Partnership Figure Group* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.



## **Civil Partnership Figure Group, 2010**

White earthenware painted with  
underglaze and enamels

The brides are missing.

Figure 23: Accompanying label for *Civil Partnership Figure Group* (2010).

The project also attempted to shed light on two strands of the LGBTQ community usually disregarded even within the community itself. References to the experiences of lesbians and transsexuals were made, however, it should be noted that the vast majority of Smith's interventions had strong links to the male gay perspective. As a result, in Gallery 21 visitors would come across a stand-alone display case focusing on the hard times experienced by people who are at odds with the gender they were ascribed. Specifically, a ceramic white figure recoiling from her reflection in a white ceramic mirror from the museum collections was placed on a floating shelf along with several colourful ceramic figurines made by Smith at the bottom of the shelf (Figure 24, Figure 25).

As for female same sex desire, the artist created two ceramic female figures on a small ceramic plinth base to make a short reference to Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby who lived together in Wales (Figure 26). Although, as so often with LGBT histories, no consensus has been reached regarding whether the two of them were in a sexual relationship or not (Dixon 2002; Carradice 2010), Smith included their story in the project, managing to overcome the typical complexity of labelling someone in the past with contemporary notions, stating that they 'bonded by "something more tender still than friendship" and lived there together for 51 years' (accompanying label, Figure 27). Furthermore, a second item in the same gallery titled as *The Orange Seller* was installed as a tribute to the lesbian novelist Jeanette Winterson and particularly her award winning novel of *Oranges are not the only fruit* (Figure 28, Figure 29).

Finally, the artist employed the use of humour in order to present specific stereotypes considering gay types. In Gallery 23, a display case with two levels presented on the top two salt-glazed ceramic bears whereas at the bottom a stuffed otter was placed along with a third salt-glazed ceramic bear (Figure 30, Figure 31, Figure 32). Otters and bears were intentionally brought together to illustrate two common male gay types: thin and fat hairy men respectively. Nonetheless, despite the crafty application of humour to portray a couple of gay

stereotypes, the general public, unfamiliar with such classifications, would probably need to read the label to grasp the underpinning humorous tone of the artist.

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Figure 24: *Reflection* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.



Matt Smith (1971 - )

**Reflection (2010)**

White earthenware slipcast figurines, car spray paint  
Ceramic figure and ceramic mirror,  
BMAG collections

"Living in a body that did not fit my self-image  
was like living in a very personal prison".

Lore M Dikey

Few people feel delighted with every part of their  
body. For some, the sex of the body they inherited  
at birth and their innate gender do not match at  
all.

Lore was born with a woman's body, but identified  
as male. He is now living as a man and has  
made the decision to have gender confirmation  
surgery.

**Queering the Museum** is a series of displays which  
explore Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender themes  
using the museum's collections. It is funded by Arts Council  
England. To comment on the exhibition, tweet using the  
hashtag #queering.

Figure 25: Accompanying label for *Reflection* (2010).

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Figure 26: *Ladies of Llangollen* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

## **The Ladies of Llangollen, 2010**

White earthenware, enamels and transfers

Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby ran away together from their aristocratic Irish homes in 1778. They set up home together in rural Wales bonded by 'something more tender still than friendship' and lived there together for 51 years.

They attracted the attention of the outside world and visitors to their home at Plas Newydd included the Duke of Wellington, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott.

Figure 27: Accompanying label for *Ladies of Llangollen* (2010).

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Figure 28: *The Orange Seller* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

## **The Orange Seller, 2010**

White earthenware

In 1985, Jeanette Winterson won the Whitbread Award for a first novel for 'Oranges Are Not the only Fruit'. The book explores the tension between Jeanette's lesbian desires and the rules and regulations she has been brought up to believe in.

Working with opposites: good and bad, friends and enemies, the book explores how Jeanette's lesbianism places her outside the heterosexual male/female norm.

Figure 29: Accompanying label for *The Orange Seller* (2010).

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Figure 30: *Stereotypes* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

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Figure 31: *Stereotypes* (2010). Photo credit: © Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Matt Smith (1971 - )

**Stereotypes (2010)**

Stuffed otter and salt-glazed ceramic bears,  
BMAG collections

Stereotypes and slang abound within the queer community. Twinks, daddies, lipstick lesbians and femmes are joined by muscle marys and rice queens.

Bears are larger, hairy gay men who often have beards. Otters are slimmer hairy gay men. They are sometimes seen playing together in the wild.

**Queering the Museum** is a series of displays which explore Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender themes using the museum's collections. It is funded by Arts Council England. To comment on the exhibition, tweet using the hashtag #queering.

Figure 32: Accompanying label for *Stereotypes* (2010).

## The transgression of normative barriers

The previous descriptive introduction into the particularities of both cases under study and the background of the sites hosting them was the basis for the in-depth investigation on their underlying patterns and overarching ideas. The next discussion develops around two distinctive common threads, underpinning the two case studies, reflecting the way in which *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* were assessed as remarkable examples of sexual minorities' cultural inclusion both by members of the exhibition teams and myself:

- a) a sense of normalcy in that sexual difference is part of ordinary life and as such was treated and subtle inclusions of non-heteronormative aspects of love and partnerships through the adoption of interventions spread across the galleries of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; and use of an 'umbrella' title like 'hitched' instead of words with more explicit heteronormative connotations such as 'brides and grooms' or 'unveiled',<sup>30</sup>
- b) an intriguing manipulation of stereotypes for the benefit of the commonly distorted portrayal of individuals identified as LGBTQ, seeking to escape biased depictions and present sexual difference as a concept with diverse meanings and interpretations.

The specific positive interpretation of these elements was mainly informed by theories considering the key role of genuine representation in the public perception and appraisal of disadvantaged and usually misrepresented community groups. In particular, the ideas of Nancy Fraser, an American critical theorist who has written a substantial amount of work regarding social justice, were regarded as a useful lens to consider the social value of similar projects. She, thus, proposes a very compelling understanding of a social group's misrecognition by replacing the focus of the social struggles from reshaping a group identity to re-establishing its social status quo:

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, a temporary exhibition at Western Australian Museum in Perth took place between 8 December 2012-2 April 2013 with the title '*Unveiled; 200 years of wedding glamour*'.

[W]hat requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction.

Misrecognition, accordingly, does not mean the depreciation and deformation of group identity, but social subordination-in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life. To redress this injustice still requires a politics of recognition, but in the “status model” this is no longer reduced to a question of identity: rather, it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with the rest.

(Fraser 2000: 113)

The application of Fraser’s proposition on the politics of recognition to the museum world could evoke an expectation from museums, as sites of visual culture, to take an active role in the politics of recognition of minorities experiencing discrimination and prejudice. Elsewhere, Crooke (2007: 91) reflects on Charles Taylor’s analysis of multiculturalism association with the politics of recognition (1994) and, influenced by his statements, reaches a similar conclusion, describing museums ‘as places that can provide recognition of worth’. On that account, the particular combination of ordinariness, subtlety and unexpected use of stereotypes in sexual diversity portrayal might attest to a theoretical framework of museum practice within which both exhibition teams worked, resulting in an unconventional portrayal of sexual difference. Re-framing sexual otherness around such notions seems to me as a pivotal strategy to gradually object to and shake the foundations of heteronormativity in museums’ collections and programming. Its actual impact on visitors’ thinking, however, although considered in Chapter 6 at a small-scale, looks to be the next major research step to better investigate the level of influence on how people engaging with a project of this type might reflect on their own perceptions of the sexual ‘other’, especially in less open-minded contexts. That being the case, reviewing *Queering the Museum, Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* and future similar exhibitions through the lens suggested by Fraser, it is argued that innovative, indirect and unprejudiced references to sexual minorities

within museum and gallery collections are promising contributing factors in the re-establishment of non-heterosexual people's status quo as equal and respectable members of the cultural sector, and society in general.

***'A very unexciting way'***

The title of this section is borrowed from a statement made by the artist and curator Matt Smith (BMAG) when he was asked about his expectations on how LGBTQ representation should look in the future:

But I want to see LGBT incorporated with the rest of the population in most exhibitions in a very unexciting way.

The way he imagines the future portrayal of sexual diversity in museum spaces was understood as applicable to both of my case studies. Normalisation and subtlety were qualities raised by staff members and were all interpreted as contributors in 'a very unexciting' depiction of sexual difference. What they also seem to signify is the shying away from the curatorial repertoire of exoticising sexual otherness. In his analysis of how museums construct the 'other', mainly on the grounds of ethnicity and race, Ivan Karp considers the exoticising and assimilating formation of the other, pointing out that:

Exoticizing showcases the differences between the cultural group being displayed and the cultural group doing the viewing, while assimilating highlights the similarities. Whether we are describing a text or an exhibition, otherness is either made strange by exoticizing or made familiar by assimilating.

(1991b: 10)

Interview responses thus suggest a predisposition towards the assimilationist strategy, probably reflecting their own view on sexual diversity and how it should be represented in museums (Karp 1991b: 11). The sexual other is exhibited on an



equal footing along with and not separately from the familiar, that is the heterosexual majority. Apparently, exhibition staff aimed, as their comments reveal, at publicly recognising the sexual and cultural diversity of contemporary society through a more inclusive means. These methods are thought to unite what is perceived as sexually normal and familiar (at least for the heterosexual majority of the public) with the sexual 'other' (sexual minorities), either under a shared exhibition title or in a shared space, without diminishing or over-valuing a single culture or social group, 'to assert that the people of other cultures are no different in principle than the producers and consumers of their images' (Karp 1991b: 11).

### *Normalcy*

The first conceptual element shaping the curatorial strategy was the idea of 'normalising' what is popularly perceived at odds with the social expected heteronorms. Usually museum exhibitions tend to challenge heteronormative narratives very 'locally' through the maintenance of spatial and conceptual distance between exhibits perceived as heteronormative and non-heteronormative. Contrary to this practice, *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* were viewed as opportunities to actually unsettle this persistence and through their distinctive techniques attempt to present a more conclusive suggestion of what is thought as the 'norm'. In other words, rather than producing a special show on and for people identified as LGBTQ, both exhibition teams preferred a less 'exciting' design, therefore, in a way showing a preference towards the ordinary.

During interviews with staff members a direct use of the word 'normal' and its derivatives 'normalisation' or 'normalise' were identified when describing institutional expectations for both projects. In brief, scepticism on practices favouring assimilation and commonly shared experiences rather than stressing differences between heterosexual identities and sexual minorities' distinctiveness, often originates from queer and feminist theorists and scholars. Such positions lead them to express strongly oppositional views against legal advances, like same

sex marriage, which are deemed as attempts to prompt part of sexual minorities population – mainly gay and lesbian persons - to conform to ‘normal’ activities of heterosexuality (see, for example, Ingraham 2011; Conrad and Nair 2010; Reese 2011). Basically, one of their main hesitation refers to the tendency of normalising practices to be primarily of relevance to lesbian and gay people, leaving other segments of sexual minorities outside of claims for respect and equality (Richardson and Monro 2012: 20). In other words, the pool of normalcy appears to open up for certain social groups at a time and not for everybody all at once.

However, considering the utopian expectation of a total subversion once and for all, in the current thesis normalisation has positive implications, corresponding to the definition offered by Seidman, Meeks and Traschen:

Normalization refers to a subjective condition in which homosexuality is described as natural or normal. Homosexuality is said to make the individual neither inherently inferior nor superior to those who identify as heterosexual. Normalizing homosexuality means that while individuals may still feel some shame or guilt, they describe such feelings as the residues of living in a normatively heterosexual society rather than as judgements about the inherently inferior status of homosexuality. Normalization makes interpersonal routinization possible. This concept refers to individual efforts to integrate homosexuality into the conventional social world.

(1999: 19)

Personally, I view the last sentence of the above quote as standing for the whole point of normalcy in the representation of otherness in general, that is, full integration in contemporary society as an equally respectable (and respected) individual. Elsewhere, Japonica Brown-Saracino published a paper based on her ethnographic study on queer women moving to Ithaca, New York, in which she rejected ‘the literature’s suggestion that queers seek either the safety of the “ghetto” or assimilation’ explaining that ‘many see residence in a place where they can be “out” about their sexuality while also living alongside both heterosexual and

queer individuals' (2011: 370). She also reported on the findings of a similar study conducted by Wayne Brekhus, concluding that individuals identified as queer 'value integration over and above two alternate paths: assimilation and ghettoization' (2011: 370). On that account, normalisation can also be acknowledged as a process of portraying non-heterosexual narratives as an integral and valid part of ordinary daily life on an equal footing with the rest of the population.

From this point of view, thus, and with no intention to undermine the potential dangers lying behind the gradual visual legitimacy of certain marginalised sexual identities (male and female homosexuality), normalisation of difference, especially when it relates to marginalised and previously excluded or mis-represented communities, is regarded in this thesis as a positive attitude in the museum sector. Besides, elsewhere, Richard Parkinson, one of the main contributors of the British Museum's trail on same sex desire, justified the museum's decision to plan an initiative 'embedded into the permanent displays' to provide the chance for visitors who might otherwise not engage with a stand-alone exhibition on a gay topic, stating that '[b]y normalising it you stop people reacting badly to it' (2013b). Likewise, a couple of interviewees took the same stance in favour of normalisation. Linda Pittwood (SH) designates 'normalisation' as potentially being 'the strongest message' to come through the presentation of a universal theme, like wedding, through multiple perspectives:

I think just to normalise it and not exclude these stories, this is the strongest message. In a way, we don't want to just sell an exhibition on a basis that might be these stories included, but we just want people to go away understanding that that's part of the story, that's part of the history of weddings or that's part of the contemporary experience of life in the UK.

This view is also supported by Simon Cane (BMAG) who confirms a similar aspiration hidden behind the spreading of artistic interventions across ten gallery spaces open to all visitors, mentioning, however, the possible dissatisfaction of a certain part of the public:

One of the strengths also I think is that it was mainstreamed into the main collections. . . and I think that maybe by representing LGBT issues in that way, it actually meant, it normalises it, it doesn't make it different. It's a normalisation process and some people might not think that's a good thing, they may want to keep it separate, but that for me was one of the benefits . . . What I would say, I think, it's that this approach with interventions has its benefits in terms of . . . slipping into the mainstream, it's normalising a discourse around people's choices. So, I think that's a positive thing . . . I wouldn't say that's the only way to do.

The value of such an interventional character was defended by the artist and co-curator Matt Smith (BMAG) at Museums Association conference in Brighton, stressing their strong preference for integrating his interventions in the mainstream collections:

People could find a trail throughout the museum. It was very important that we didn't have a gay exhibition off in a room to the side.

(Smith, quoted in Kendall 2011)

Regardless of sharing the expectation of normalising sexual difference through integration with the rest of the collection, Linda and Simon's understandings of this feature originated from different starting points and were obviously affected by the nature of *Hitched*, *Wedding Clothes and Customs* and *Queering the Museum*. Linda, on one hand, conceptualises normalisation as the outcome of having included otherness as a significant aspect of the story to be told, as the product of a well-researched project offering an accurate presentation from multiple perspectives of the topic on display. On the other hand, Simon talked about normalisation as the direct result of otherness' inclusion, likewise to Linda's definition, but with an additional meaning attached, that of not displaying otherness as contrasting with the mainstream.

Furthermore, considering what Simona Bodo and her colleagues describe as ‘third spaces’ for intercultural dialogue, a comparison with the format of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* in particular might sound worthwhile. In their study on intercultural dialogue they realised that museums tend to deal with intercultural awareness in certain ways, among which is a persistence of segregation and production of exhibitions on a minority's culture specifically promoted for members of it (Bodo 2009: 22). Their main proposition, as a direct result of their research, was a call for ‘third spaces, unfamiliar to both [sides], in which different groups can share a similar experience of discovery’ (Edgar, quoted in Bodo 2009: 23). Accordingly, the following statements of Myra Brown (SH) and Pauline Rushton (SH) for the exhibition they produced could be interpreted under the prism of Bodo and her colleagues’ suggestions:

I mean it was presented in the way that it was presented respectfully . . . on equal platform with anything else, so . . . you are not singling something out because it's different and that's what we didn't want to do. We wanted obviously to address that there are different ways but they are all equally valid.

(Myra Brown, SH)

Just that same sex people want to get married like everyone else and . . . that same sex couples are just like us but they are just same sex.

(Pauline Rushton, SH)

Despite the lack of direct references to the view of Sudley House gallery spaces as third spaces, their expectation from *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* echoes some of the key features of intercultural dialogue raised in Bodo *et al's* guidelines. Offering the upper floor galleries for exhibiting five community groups and their cultural traditions under thematic divisions, and not based on their cultural dissimilarity, was seen as a chance for the site to be equally respectful of each culture. More importantly, visitors from different backgrounds would inevitably

come across of all five of them due to the thematic division that bridged the distance and differences among these cultural groups.

To conclude, normalising sexual minorities systematically is highly regarded as a positive feature of similar inclusive practices. The museum sector is a special site in terms of normativity, which has been served in museums and galleries since the cabinet of curiosities (Luepken 2011: 157). Especially in the case of the portrayal of the cultural 'other', museums cannot escape delving into normativity because, as Sandell concludes:

Museums shape, concretise and legitimise normative understandings of difference. But museum practices are also, to varying degrees, reflective of and constrained by the normative consensus. The representation of difference in museums is socially *determined* and, at the same time, socially *constitutive*.

(2007: 184)

It is possible then to hypothesise that this condition is more likely to occur in the future too, which would inevitably suggest that normality, in the sense that 'sexual orientation was simply a normal and interesting part of a museum's life and that people didn't get scared that it was all about sex' (Joanna Wade, quoted in Kendall 2011), will be the sought-after element for previously invisible and disrespected social groups. As Timothy Luke concludes regarding the long-established museums' association with normativity:

We must focus museums as sites of finely structured normative argument and artfully staged cultural normalization. Art works, historical expositions, nature interpretations, and technological exhibits, as they are shown in museums, are products of an ongoing struggle by individuals and groups to establish what is real, to organize collective interests, and to gain command over what is regarded as having authority.

(2002: xxix)

Nevertheless, museum scholars and practitioners engaged with projects pertaining to discourses of normativity should be aware of the valid fears of queer and other scholars in that a gradual expansion of norms perpetuates the exclusion of sexual minorities' divisions.

### *Subtlety*

Subtle:

1. so delicate or precise as to be difficult to analyse or describe
2. making use of clever and indirect methods to achieve something

Subtlety was a central element of the *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* formation, which, according to Oxford Dictionaries Online (2013), has a dual meaning as presented in its definition. Interestingly, interviews with museum staff placed the emphasis only on the second use of the notion of subtlety, explaining how implicit references to sexual diversity nicely blended in with the rest of the collections, minimising the risk of causing annoyance to visitors.

In the past, a number of major specifically-themed LGBTQ exhibitions generated controversial feedback from the public and press. Negative comments and reactions often originate from conservative and religious circles. They tend to focus on sexually explicit images, that they find inappropriate especially for younger visitors, or on contemporary art items daring to challenge long-lasting traditional normative attitudes and institutions like the church or other ideas, sacred for a large percentage of the public. For instance, a huge dispute was caused due to the artwork *A Fire in My Belly* by artist David Wojnarowicz for *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* at Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (2010-2011) resulting in the removal of this 'anti-Christian' video (Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery 2010) as the museum gave into the demands of the Catholic League (Manning 2011). Comparable criticism was targeted against another recent

project *sh[OUT]: Contemporary art and human rights* at Gallery of Modern Art (2009) where again not only media but also religious groups condemned *sh[OUT]* mainly because of a temporary exhibition *Made in God's Image* by artist Anthony Schrag, the photograph *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter* by artist Robert Mapplethorpe and the *Bible* exhibit by artist Jane Clarke (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010; Sandell 2012).

Unavoidably then, museum professionals find themselves in an extremely perplexing situation. The fear of sparking substantial negative publicity has been one of the oldest excuses for the persistent rarity in quality and quantity of exhibits related to sexual minorities. In their article, Sandell and Frost (2010: 160) draw our attention to this partially true explanation usually offered by museums, stressing that: '[c]urators and managers sometimes invoke the reactions (both real and imagined) of audiences as reasons for not addressing issues that they believe may cause offence'. Their conclusion resembles the findings of Angela Vanegas, whose research in lesbian and gay representation in social history museums raised similar concerns, signifying many professionals' reluctance only partially based on justifiable grounds:

Some museums have excluded gay and lesbian material in response to real or imaginary local authority pressure. . . . Several [museum staff members] were afraid of complaints from their existing audiences and felt that sexuality was not a suitable topic for a family audience. And yet, social history museums have long been comfortable representing sexuality through objects relating directly to sex itself.

(2002: 105)

Nevertheless, in support of the encouraging evidence recent studies have presented, re-affirming the imprecise perception of the majority of the general public as disapproving of ideas of a more progressive nature (Sandell 2007; Cameron 2010b), this study comes up with an alternative suggestion. Although from a different perspective, it further reinforces the fact that museum visitors are



more open-minded than has been generally thought, and therefore, museums should experiment with various interpretive strategies to promote social values, like respect for sexual difference. Curating sexual difference through subtlety might be the way to move forward for those still reluctant but willing to include non-heteronormative stories in their gallery spaces.

So, starting with *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, the idea of creating an exhibition on wedding traditions from Victorian times to the present day with references to both heterosexual and homosexual couples was a deliberate choice to offer as wide a picture as possible on the topic. In other words, the inclusion of the same sex couple attending their civil partnership ceremony at several display cases, boards and text panels would eventually be characterised as subtle due to the simultaneous existence of other local community groups on display. Since the exhibition's focus was not placed upon one but five communities (including local white English people), then, all the different sections would equally contribute to the final outcome, provisionally getting the same amount of visibility in two of the three gallery spaces (as the third one only addressed historic women's wedding dresses). Though segments of the Sudley House core audience might find it offensive or inflammatory, particularly with regards to same sex and pagan ceremonies, from the museum perspective it was not regarded as such:

I don't think we wanted the exhibition to be especially inflammatory or challenging. But I think that people, that visitors would leave with a slightly broader definition of the wedding ceremony.

(Linda Pittwood, SH)

A similar attitude emerged at Birmingham, despite its different format. Its conception by Matt Smith as a non-provocatory project (Kendall 2011), developed across the museum in the form of interventions, with the use of humour occasionally and the intention of provocation only in terms of encouraging the audience to question museums and their own thinking, offered a tone of subtlety in it:

The artist approach was a very subtle approach, had a mix of humour, of education. It was very visual and very playful and we felt that worked extremely well.

(Andy Horn, BMAG)

There was a subtlety in his approach as well.

(Simon Cane, BMAG)

This perception of the approaches adopted in both cases as subtle were further illustrated in two quotes, one from Simon Breedon (SH) and one from Toby Watley (BMAG), who pointed in another direction. In particular, implicitly and explicitly respectively, they compared their projects with specifically-themed exhibitions evolving strictly around sexual difference. Simon (SH), thus, thought of the multicultural framework as an element directing visitors' attention on multiple communities and therefore avoiding the potential controversy in case an unfamiliar cultural practice had been singled out:

But this isn't concentrating on, it's not bringing a massive amount of attention in one particular thing. It's being broader, it's being general and it's covering everything which I think that's the way to do. So, no. I don't think there's anything provocative.

Toby (BMAG) made an analogous comment through his direct comparison with a recent portraiture exhibition *Gay Icons* at National Portrait Gallery, appreciating the subtlety of the project as a significant factor in promoting their project not as strictly an LGBT exhibition, explaining that:

I never wanted it to be . . . 'Oh, this is our LGBT exhibition'. I've never seen it like that . . . In terms of the museum, we never saw it like that. It was a contemporary arts intervention project, bringing contemporary issues into the museum installed collections. They happened to be gay issues and that was great, it was a bit more edgy and a bit more caught you by surprise . . .

But it wasn't the LGBT exhibition in a way that Gay Icons in London was specifically branded . . . like that. So, I think . . . our approach is a bit more subtle, is a bit more considerable of the collections we've got and kind of maybe trying in such a way that it appeals to a wider audience.

In short, both projects were created as two distinctive exhibitions with no intention to cause public controversy. Their overall scope was to visualise from different perspectives and aspects of the diversity among social groups without, however, drawing too much attention on the less conventional cultures. Although the value of such subtle framings of sexual difference rests in that they contribute to what Matt Smith championed as 'unexciting ways' of exhibiting sexual diversity, they might render sexual minorities invisible and hidden in the mainstream. For instance, a research that was conducted in the Netherlands in 2008 on the effect on the LGBT community of their growing formal recognition revealed the ambiguity integration might bring. In particular, the researcher, Brandon Andrew Robinson raised his concern, based on his study, that what he describes as assimilation can result in contradictory outcomes for the LGBT community, claiming that:

The Dutch LGBT community may think that by assimilating they have achieved acceptance, but the community, through assimilation, has been required to become invisible in order to be recognized-a conundrum in itself and not genuine equality.

(2012: 332)

Eventually, nonetheless, if the museum sector aspires to the inclusion of the history of sexual minorities on an equal footing with permanent collections ascribed the same value like any regular exhibit in display cases, then, *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* communicate two patterns for this achievement.

### ***A critical approach to stereotyping***

The findings of the current study regarding the treatment of stereotypes on gender and sexuality are consistent with museums' social purpose to work towards the promotion of positive representations of disadvantaged groups. This also accords with earlier observations, which showed that the decision to work within a unifying narrative in combination with the content of exhibits on display can actually contribute to the positive depiction of a community which often tends to draw negative or stereotypical publicity. It is interesting, then, to note that in both cases under study the principal scope was to challenge conventional perceptions on gender and sexuality attributes and roles, despite the distinctiveness of each implemented technique. In fact, their careful handling of stereotypical images might be recognised as two versions of how generalised stereotypes on those not abiding by the heteronorms can be thought-provoking for those people holding such views. Broadly speaking, there seems to be three general promising methods of tackling stereotypes, as Charles Stangor, a well-known professor of psychology with a significant amount of research on stereotypes, has been proposing (Stangor 2000; Stangor, Sechrist and Jost 2001; Stangor and O'Brien 2010). For instance, Stangor elaborates:

In general, there are three types of change in beliefs that can help reduce negative intergroup encounters. Perhaps the most obvious change involves creating more positive perceptions of the group as a whole. . . . If we change the perceptions of the variability of a group such that the individual no longer believes that all of the group members are the same, we have also reduced stereotyping . . . Finally, we will have been successful if we have been able to reduce the tendency for an individual to use social categories when judging others, with the result that they are more likely to individuate others instead.

(2000: 15)

Likewise, scholars from cultural studies suggest similar counter strategies for conventional generalisations about members of minority social groups. Stuart Hall's examination of racial stereotyping, for example, explains how the positive reconsideration of widely held negative beliefs or the persistence on positive depictions instead of detrimental ones might contribute to the unsettling of popular stereotypes (Hall 1997c: 270-274).

Surprisingly, then, interview data with staff members detected evidence of two of the most common processes, that of focusing on positive portrayal and on unsettling the falsely applied one-dimensional 'truth' about all members of the LGBTQ community. Contrary to public expectations on what an exhibition on marriage traditions and costumes might cover, *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* sought to surprise its audience from the very first moment. The unconscious immediate male-to-female perception of forming a formal ceremony to publicly state a couple's relationship is symbolically subverted before the exhibition even took its actual form. This finding is evident in the neutral title of the project avoiding the use of gender-based phrases, and instead, promoting as an exhibition about getting 'Hitched'. This was justified by Pauline Rushton (SH) as follows:

The last time we did an exhibition on wedding dresses here at Liverpool was in 1993 and I think it was called 'Brides'. So, that tells you it's just about traditional women, clothes for women in weddings. And it wasn't even about grooms; it was just about brides. So, this time now I choose -and it was funny- I only chose it as a kind of joke 'oh, we can't use brides, we can't use anything to do with the female side of things', because I intended from the beginning to do gay weddings as well. So, I had to think of a title that covered everything without being specific to anyone . . . and that's why I thought . . . about it 'Oh I know, what about 'Hitched'?' because all five can get hitched. And they liked it and in the end the marketing department just told me 'oh we like that title so let's stick with it.

The right choice of a title is a quite common technique for a museum to clearly set from the beginning, even implicitly, its overarching scope. For instance, as Nelia

Dias explained, the Musee du Quai Branly in Paris adopted a name based on its location, resembling the alternative naming of the Musee de l'Homme, in order to demonstrate its dedication to cultural diversity and refrain from public perception of it as just an ethnographic institution:

Dedicated to the display of cultural diversity, this new museum explicitly aims to be distinct from an ethnographic museum-thus its name, reflecting its own geographical location and not any specific ethnographical focus-as well as from the embracing view of the study of man-incorporating physical anthropology, ethnology, and prehistoric archaeology-pioneered long ago by the Musee de l'Homme.

(Dias 2008: 125)

But, an alternative title was not the only indicator of avoiding the inclination to think of marriages as an institution mostly appealing to women, and obviously to heterosexual ones. This message was further reinforced by the deliberate inclusion of a male same sex couple instead of a female one. The curator's expectation was not about producing a one-dimensional show with the focus lying only on the female heterosexual perspective of a wedding or civil ceremony. Rather, she shared her ambition to challenge the conventional view of a wedding as a notion mainly appealing to women, in terms of gender, and to heterosexuals, in terms of sexual orientation. For this exact reason, as she explained, same sex civil partnership inclusion was about two men getting hitched instead of two women, because the latter might be perceived as a downside inhibiting gender diversity. Especially when this choice of a male same sex couple is examined together with the selection of an abstract term in the title, the main curatorial strategy seems very methodical in terms of meticulously attempting to reconfigure the heteronormative institution of marriage, at least to some extent:

I didn't want to have women really, so I didn't want to do two lesbians because we already had a lot on women in the straight side if you like. So, there are a lot of dresses. I wanted to do suits to even up a bit more. So, I

didn't look at gay women . . . I did toy with it for a short period and there were a couple of lesbians I could have their wedding outfits from, who are local but in the end I didn't go with that. And they were friends of members of staff or relatives. It would have been easy to get them, but I wanted to persist with looking for gay men because I wanted two grooms, to even up the show because there were a lot of women represented in the show and not enough men. So, that was the first decision.

(Pauline Rushton, SH)

Interestingly, data from several studies in the past have reported the slightly different attitude of heterosexual people towards male and female homosexuals, particularly when it comes down to civil rights and especially same-sex marriage (Madon 1997; Herek 2002). A good illustration of how the public perception of same sex marriage differs depending on the couple's gender is the study carried out by Moskowitz, Rieger and Roloff (2010) whose recommendation for those fighting for gay rights was to be aware that '[t]he resistance is likely to be much greater for [gay male marriage] than [for lesbian marriage]' (2010: 333). The curatorial preference for a male same sex civil partnership, thus, unintentionally engaged in redressing another negative widely held idea of gay men as 'inappropriate' for entering granting an expansion of their civil rights, including entering the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, it seems that there was still room for a more radical consideration of how to balance the presence of female heterosexuality across the displays, without at the same time undermining the significance of this curatorial decision. For example, one could potentially use the outfits of two lesbians getting hitched in a less anticipated way, such as two women dressed up in male-like costumes and not in dresses. Such an inclusion might have offered a more radical questioning of the prevailing heteronorms concerning gender and sexual roles.

Still, the implication of this finding is compelling as it provides some support for the conceptual premise that meticulous attention to cultural representations of sexual minorities can be positively influential at many levels. This is further reinforced by

the selection of male suits that would not have been 'flamboyant'. Considering hence the curator's view of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* as an inclusive, diverse and above all non-traditional approach to such a universal theme, this additional preference occurred naturally too. In other words, in order not to fall into the trap of commonly found negative stereotypes perpetuating gay men with certain traits, the exhibition followed an alternative path refraining from one of these regularly applied characteristics:

I think the costumes we were able to secure were really nice because obviously the couple had put a lot of thought to their wedding outfits, like any couple would. But they weren't a particularly flamboyant couple, so in that respect it worked out really well. Because I think if it had been that the case, a couple that we came in contact with were more like those stereotypes, were more like visitors' expectations of a gay wedding, then, perhaps it may not have worked so well.

(Linda Pittwood, SH)

One issue that I did consider was, what I wanted to avoid, was doing a pastiche of what people think gay weddings are about . . . I was finding it difficult to track down anybody and I didn't want anybody who would had overall a flamboyant wedding . . . because I didn't want to reinforce stereotypes . . . about gay men and weddings generally. So, I think that's an important issue for you to know, that I was aware from the beginning I wanted to do something that celebrated their partnership in the way they felt it was appropriate but without sort of adding to the negative publicity that had been around gay weddings and reinforcing stereotypes . . . So, I just thought they were a perfect couple they looked very good together and the suits were just right . . . but they didn't . . . become a pastiche of what people think gay men are dressed like and so for me that was ideal to show. And they had the Liverpool link as well.

(Pauline Rushton, SH)



Not having indulged in 'flamboyance' could also be interpreted as an unexpected positive quality of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*. A recent survey conducted by the BBC concerning the depiction of LGB people in its programmes, revealed that LGB individuals felt that BBC shows promoted a 'visual identity [that] was biased towards stereotypes, in particular camp or flamboyant gay men' (BBC 2010: 176). Although such an impression is based on the media sector, it should not go unnoticed how discontented parts of the LGB community are with the persistence of 'flamboyance' in their public portrayal. Thus, it could be safe to assume that even though interviews with staff did not bring out this perspective, their decision might have an impact not only on the general public but also on visitors identified as gay. At the same time, it should not go unnoticed the danger lying behind similar decisions on avoiding 'extreme' depictions.

By the same token, a supportive but slightly modified pattern was applied to the case of *Queering the Museum* where stereotypes held a vital role in the general concept. That is, stereotypes were presented as part of a wider picture hoping to reveal a range of LGBT identities that even within the community do not carry the same meaning for everybody:

I think my overall aim is to try and show that LGBT is very fragmented that for everybody is a different thing. That there isn't a right way or wrong way, there's also different ways . . . My strategy I'd say, I guess would be that LGBT is very huge, very diverse very messy and it's ok. It's gonna mean different things to different people and I'm very pleased about it . . . I think the exhibition relied to a large extent on stereotypes. But I think it relied on . . . different stereotypes. So, already it's breaking up there's one stereotype being a gay woman or a trans. And it's saying there are. We are all working on stereotypes to some extent but actually it's a very fragmented world. So, I don't think that it's one size that fits all.

(Matt Smith, BMAG)

Presenting a 'fragmented world' was the principal objective at Birmingham holding onto certain well-known conventional understandings of LGBTQ culture and history, but at the same time acting as a stimulus for revisiting one's own perceptions in a way 'that the perceiver believes that the stereotypes although perhaps true of some group members, are far from true for every group member and thus not very diagnostic for use in social judgement' (Stangor and O'Brien 2010: 860). In other words, this deliberate choice, made primarily by the artist and co-curator Matt Smith, over which familiar and uncommon aspects of expressions of sexual difference would be included in the final display, was potentially an asset in the museum's attempt not only to be inclusive of sexual diversity, but more importantly, to practically reject static and limited understandings of it. It is precisely this fixation on a reduced impression of a certain minority group, like the LGBTQ community, that leads to stereotyping and ultimately to prejudice. In Katz and Braly's view 'a stereotype is a fixed impression, which conforms very little to the fact that it pretends to represent, and results from our defining first and observing second' (1935: 181). On that account, putting on display the histories and experiences of sexual minorities with respect on their variety (and always to the extent it is directed by the exhibition's theme, gallery space, and so on) is a promising curatorial technique for museums mindful of their social role. This was also highly appreciated by staff, like Toby Watley (BMAG), who explained:

Yes, at points [the exhibition was using stereotypical images of LGBT people], but I think that was on purpose. I think Matt would say 'but isn't that the whole point?' . . . It's kind of making you rethink that because it's showing how absurd this imagining is.

Moreover, another remarkable suggestion of dealing with stereotypes was that of inserting a humorous tone. A representative example of this was the intervention with the Otters and Bears, with clear references to homosexual men labelled as 'bears'. Despite the lack of consensus on whether visitors' amusement is a valid interpretive device, the creators of *Queering the museum* defended their choice, stating that:

What it did do was presenting completely stereotypical images but with humour.

(Andy Horn, BMAG)

Besides, Simon Cane (BMAG) praised the use of playfulness in some of Matt Smith's interventions, a feature not welcomed by all in the museum sector. For instance Heumann-Gurian (1991: 183) talked about the institutional reluctance to instil a humorous tone in museum projects, whereas, on the other hand, work like Fred Wilson's has been praised, among other reasons, for his humouristic approach (James 1998; Berger 2001) . However, in the case at Birmingham, humour was well-received:

I think it's the right way to do it, to work with the collection as to . . . very varied and very diverse content of material and also I think the way we did it with the light touch at some areas, it's very humorous. So, I think humour is good but that doesn't mean to demean the quality of the message or the seriousness of the message in a sense. So, it was quite playful and those interventions were quite playful but also I don't think . . . it allowed to be quite daring in his approach so there was a subtlety in his approach as well.

(Simon Cane, BMAG)

Perhaps from an outsider's point of view one might ascribe to such a humorous tone an underlying irony of museum practice and its unfair treatment of sexual diversity through the particular handling of stereotypes in Smith's exhibition. In a way, the discreet interventions and humorous references to a number of 'gay stereotypes' across a number of gallery spaces form a kind of ironic critique. Museums, on the one hand, tend to omit these stories or maintain a distance between them and the histories of the heterosexual majority; while on the other hand, a large percentage of the public still holds on biased preconceptions about the sexual 'other'. It could be then argued that such a reading of *Queering the Museum* objective resembles Henrietta Riegel's study (1996) on *Fluffs and*

*Feathers; An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness* exhibition back in 1992 and how it embraced irony to redress the distorted portrayal and public understanding of native Indians within ROM. Similarly to the attempt through *Queering the Museum* to question the heteronormative prevailing frame, *Fluffs and Feathers* aimed at challenging popular prejudices against native people in ROM and Western, white-class run institutions. Both projects were critical of the prevalence of hetero-norms and white-norms respectively through an indirect form of irony. The following comment by Riegel -that could also be applied to *Queering the Museum* - explains this exceptional mode of interpretation:

The strategic use of irony makes the exhibition relational and dialogic. Instead of merely telling visitors that stereotypes are dangerous to those groups who are stereotyped, the exhibition invites visitors to enter into a dialogue with another identity in order to experience these messages on their own. In doing so, it does not revert to an essentialist position on identity. It does not construct native people and white people as polar opposites.

(1996: 98)

And she goes on to talk about:

[A] form of irony that juxtaposes, that arranges objects into disorder, that goes beyond what visitors expect from museums. It is thus able to establish a space that is more dialogical. This has to do with the use of an irony that does not critique directly; rather it mocks, and throws our representations back into our faces. We lose, in a sense, the stability of a fixed subject position.

(1996: 99)

Yet, a number of important limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, a complexity considering the representation of difference, repeatedly faced by curators, could not have gone unnoticed during fieldwork. Complications and

difficult decisions are almost unavoidable when minority groups and marginalised identities are part of a museum project (Crooke 2007: 93). The lack of objectivity in the formation and understanding of identities causes confusion among professionals as they are forced to make choices on fluid concepts like sexual, gender, class or racial identity. Besides, staff usually have an additional task to complete in terms of the portrayal of 'otherness', as they must engage with what the 'other' shares in common with and what distances it from the so called norm (Karp 1991a: 374-375). Andy Horn (BMAG) emphasises these matters, arguing that the decisions on if and how one should recycle conventional images is a very challenging and demanding task for museums which is interwoven with the discussions of the previous section on normality and subtlety:

A lot of references in this work were around stereotypes, so there were stereotypes represented and also one of those big messages about how do you represent difference, what the difference is, if most people were . . . very similar to everybody else . . . So the question comes down to what does make people distinct. And as one of the difficulties is that if your identity becomes completely integrated and completely normalised, what is there that's different and how is that represented? . . . Then is that all that you have? Whereas at the past when people were more oppressed, they had to work harder to make themselves more distinctive and . . . more strategies for doing that. And also what we did include in this exhibition were some of these strategies about dressing up, that language about those things.

Secondly, an issue that was not addressed in the interviews conducted with staff was whether their authority influenced their choice of which conventional images would be selected and left out in the portrayal of sexual difference. This 'hegemonic' role of those in charge of Others' representation has been reported in literature several times. For instance, Michael Pickering (2001: 75) from communication and media studies, reflected on the complexities emerging from the fact that '[t]he Other is constructed in and for its subordination, in and for its

“inferiority” to the self-in-dominance who has produced it’. Likewise, Kitzinger and Wilkinson, from sociological psychology and women studies, dedicated a substantial compilation of articles concerning this topic in their *Representing the Other* in 1996, proclaiming the inevitability of avoiding this obstacle and stating that ‘[c]laims to objectivity and universality of representation have been shown to be the alibis of the powerful’ (1996: 10).

Correspondingly, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, from sociological and global studies, in one of his articles criticises Ivan Karp distinction between ‘assimilating and exoticizing strategies’ as separate techniques for displaying otherness but with a single major commonality, affecting either strategy:

Upon closer consideration, the two exhibiting strategies outlined by Ivan Karp, the assimilating and exoticizing strategies, are both hegemonic strategies, both defined from the point of the view of the centre: both are instances of “discourse about the other”.

(2005: 185)

Therefore, even though both case studies handled stereotypes around sexual minorities in a sympathetic and constructive manner, contributing to the much needed positive cultural representation of them, caution must be applied. Especially when these findings are examined along with the notion of normality applied at sexual difference in both projects, one should not forget that despite all the good will to visualise sexual difference in positive ways, either by someone supportive of celebrating society’s diversity (that was the case in *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*) or by someone who is a member of the represented minority (that was the case in *Queering the Museum*), an all-embracing image of sexual and any other minority groups would remain incomplete.

## Conclusions from Chapter 4

This chapter gave an account of the two case studies under research, informed both by a literature review and interviews with museum staff. In conclusion, both case studies were two recent UK-based ambitious projects introducing rarely encountered approaches to sexual difference which both embraced what Matt Smith expected from his own project, 'that there are queer histories everywhere - you just need to look for them' (Moss 2010). In other words, the interventional character of *Queering the Museum* and the umbrella theme of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* were selected as two exceptional case studies of an under-researched museum trend, an empirical study of which could contribute to ongoing debates of museum theory and practice in relation to the cultural representation and inclusion of sexual, but not limited to, otherness. Furthermore, each site managed to portray aspects of the LGBTQ community through a less controversial and provocative way.

Moreover, comparable museum initiatives emerged in the past and as Sandell and Frost observed 'a more inclusive approach of minorities does not always require a large number of objects or a separate, specifically-themed exhibition' (2010: 169). Nonetheless, the analysis of my two case studies results in a more extensive research into this type of exhibition and adds substantially to our understanding of how museums and galleries might review their tactics towards the inclusion, representation and interpretation of sexual difference in their collections and programming. Two distinctive curatorial schemes were then presented and closely looked at:

- the use of a unifying interpretive framework and of a generic title, avoiding direct connotations to gender and sexual hetero-norms,
- the use of institutional critique in the form of artistic interventions through juxtaposition, re-interpretation, addition of new exhibits, created through a close partnership between museum staff, external artists and a well-established festival.

These ideas about alternative inclusions of sexual otherness corroborate the findings of other studies, exploring attitudes towards a range of forms of prejudice, like Richard Sandell's on St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art (2007), further stressing the possible positive effect of inclusive curatorial practices organised around notions of interest for diverse social groups:

[T]he use of universalising, thematic narratives is one interpretive strategy which museums might purposively pursue in order to explore cross-cultural differences in ways which enable and support non-prejudiced text and talk.

(2007: 86)

But, as was also brought up by Andy Horn, staff involved in projects related to minorities and marginalised social groups will always face the problem of how to handle difference regardless of the curatorial approaches they follow. For instance, Ivan Karp in 1991 drew our attention to the complexities of difference, which is still an issue as this research showed:

No genre of museum is able to escape the problems of representation inherent in exhibiting other cultures. The two perils of exoticizing and assimilating can be found in the exhibitions of virtually every museum that devotes any part of itself to exhibiting culture. Nor are museums that restrict themselves to examining diversity within their own societies able to escape the difficulties described above.

(1991a: 378)

In addition, as a number of scholars worldwide might argue, as previously discussed in Chapter 2 and this chapter too, when gender and sexual difference is the subject of representations, the decision of presenting them in a way that integrates the sexual 'other' in the public domain as ordinary, is potentially risky. Such inclusions, promoted from most LGBTQ organisations concerned with the human and civil rights of the LGBTQ community, are understood by these scholars as initiatives resulting in full assimilation of sexual minorities in heteronormative



practices, minimising the chances for a radical subversion of the prevalence and regulative force of heteronormativity.

Bearing that in mind, dominant institutionalised paradigms affecting the representation of under- or mis- represented communities, like heteronormativity, should then be questioned by various means as there is not, and probably never will be, one way of offering a truthful account for any kind of difference, and more importantly, pleasing everybody. Heteronormativity, the centre of interest in this thesis, is based on the essentialist belief in gender and sexual binarisms, setting the heterosexual majority as the norm and leaving sexual minorities as the unfamiliar or negative 'other'. Museums, as part of society's cultural sector, could not have avoided the trap of the white, male, heterosexual, middle-class norm. They have, however, been managing to gradually subvert this situation, although largely in local and temporary ways.

The two interpretive modes adopted at the particular projects examined at Birmingham and Liverpool carried on museums' attempt to provide positive depictions of people identified as LGBTQ from a less frequent standpoint. As Chapter 4 showed, a combination of certain qualities distinguished them from the majority of past projects on LGBTQ culture. These features were appreciated as compelling elements working together for a more thorough subversion of the prevalent heteronormative thinking in exhibition making, at least symbolically. Unexciting ways of portrayal with an emphasis on normalcy and subtlety and clever use of stereotypes were understood as two principles for questioning the very core of heteronormativity: the inexplicable fixation on binarisms rendering the so-called two oppositional sides as conflicting areas between right=heteronorms and wrong=non-heteronorms. Thematic or spatial integration literally appears to break down the commonly placed dividing line between the norm and sexual 'others' by bringing them together on an equal footing.

In conclusion, a tone of normality and ordinariness in making references to sexual diversity is one way to question heteronormativity. The tendency of presenting sexual otherness as deviant and extreme in opposition to the normal and natural

hetero-norms is rejected and is replaced by depictions of ordinary people's experiences that happen to simply be different, not dangerous or immoral. This is further reinforced by a second type of opposition to normative standards through a focus on intelligent uses of stereotypes in order to unveil positive depictions but also those that will manage to reflect the widest possible diversity within the LGBTQ minority. Moreover, contextualising sexual difference among permanent and mainstream collections or in projects on themes of a broader nature with no immediate associations to non-heteronormative sexualities is acknowledged as a third form of resistance. Due to the predisposition of museums to present exhibits on LGBTQ histories traditionally within confined spaces separately from the mainstream displays, it seems like one of the core elements of heteronormativity's foundation remains intact. Heteronormativity is based first and foremost on the strict binary distinction between heterosexuality and every other expression of one's sexuality not conforming to the hetero-norms. Consequently, the subtle integrative approach exercised at Birmingham and Liverpool, although from different starting points, is valued in the current study as the third level of unsettling the heteronormative paradigm through its clear rejection of rigid dividing lines between diverse social groups.

The next two chapters will delve further into the particularities of the two case studies. Chapter 5 discusses the motivations and expectations held by staff involved in the production of the two main exhibitions this research focuses on. Chapter 6 analyses the findings from a small scale audience research at both sites to get a sense of public reception of those interpretive repertoires, distinctive for the history of sexual diversity's representation in museum galleries.

## Chapter 5: Contextualising sexual difference: The preconditions and the anticipated impact

Having analysed the principal contributing intellectual factors appearing to unsettle the commonly found heteronormative framework in museums and galleries, the focus is now turned to the practical side of my case studies. Chapter 5 unravels the specifications of the process adopted by the curators at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and Sudley House to develop a temporary exhibition which would encompass sexual diversity through spatial and thematic integration respectively.

Therefore, this chapter is split into three parts by drawing upon the findings revealing the prerequisites of enabling the inclusion of sexual difference in these two distinctive formats to take place, the expected effect on museums' sustainability (that is, on the museum itself and on its staff) and finally, the anticipated impact on museum audiences. The findings I collected primarily from interviews with members of staff and secondly from the museums' website and official records/reports, revealed three major themes, presented separately in three sections.

The first part of this chapter highlights the vital role of the two leading curators in initiating and developing these projects as well as the centrality to each project's development of having secured internal and external support. Firstly, professional integrity and determination, mainly from the leading curators, was understood as another essential ingredient. Particularly, Pauline Rushton (SH) and Andy Horn (BMAG) clearly explained what role their own motivation played in initiating, managing and ultimately making these projects happen that would address the usually omitted stories concerning sexual difference. Secondly, internal and external support was mentioned significantly by several interviewees. It was then concluded that unless they had secured support from the staff involved directly or indirectly with the projects and established credible partnerships, *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* might not have been accomplished, at least in the final shape they got.

The second major theme emerging from the research I conducted was that of institutional sustainability. This was understood in the present study as both a precondition and an anticipated outcome, resulting in being discussed separately from the rest of the ideas analysed in this chapter. Both exhibitions then were perceived by a number of respondents as opportunities for their institutions to raise their public profile through key partnerships, to expand their target audiences without, however, overlooking their existing ones, and, to strengthen their socially responsive agenda.

Finally, the last part, concerns the anticipated impact of these exhibitions in relation to the expected learning, emotional and attitudinal outcomes on audiences. Museum professionals revealed their expectation that visitors at both sites might end up with a meaningful and insightful experience. Obviously, learning outcomes were an understandable objective. But, it seems that they were not simply a social history and a contemporary arts exhibition. Consequently, the main objectives at both cases were not limited to learning, as staff had certain social values in their minds as well. Eventually, the particular treatment of sexual diversity through spatial or conceptual integration with regular exhibits might have triggered some visitors to rethink their own value system and attitude towards sexual minorities.

Overall, Chapter 5 will shed light on the motivations, aims and ambitions at each site – as well as the conditions which helped or hindered each project's development - which, most of the time, were discussed by interviewees with reference to the deliberate use of integrating sexual difference within their regular normative narratives.

### **The essential elements: The role of the curator and the significance of a supportive working environment**

Nowadays the cultural sector, including museums and galleries, faces considerable financial challenges affecting some of the core educational and social aspects of

their work, and at times forcing them to prioritise the securing of income and funding over their educational and social role (Newman and Tourle 2011; Evans 2012). Besides, the introduction and maintenance of a socially responsive agenda aiming at increasing visual representation and cultural inclusion of disadvantaged and previously excluded social groups becomes problematic especially if one considers the lack of relevant tangible objects from certain minorities, such as the LGBTQ community. Nevertheless, highly motivated leading curators and innovative thinking in exhibition planning and development signify one direction museums could move towards. This urge becomes imperative notably in working environments where there has been a significant record of internal and local support for socially driven initiatives. Certainly, additional parameters must be put in place to overcome the frequent lack of funding and artifacts. But, the combination of current findings provide some extra support for the conceptual premise that museums might need to think 'outside the box' with determination and creativity at multiple levels, instead of merely undermining their social and educational programming.

### ***The personal factor***

To begin with, interviews with staff members evidenced very clearly that if it were not for the leading curators' determination, then the projects might not have taken place at that time. This finding has important implications for museum practice, particularly with reference to LGBTQ inclusions in gallery spaces, and apparently is consistent with previous studies on sexual minorities' representation in museum displays. Institutional homophobia is widely regarded as a negative determinant in museums' reluctance to initiate a project in their spaces related to sexual diversity (Vanegas 2002; Petry 2010; Sandell and Frost 2010).

As a result, the straightforward confession that both exhibitions were the direct outcome of Pauline Rushton (SH) and Andy Horn's (BMAG) motivated work was interpreted as a sign of LGBTQ inclusion still being a matter of 'the initiative, drive

and commitment of determined and resilient individuals' (Sandell and Frost 2010: 160).

At Liverpool, the exhibition was a personal suggestion of Pauline Rushton, the Curator of Costume and Textiles at the National Museums of Liverpool. Specifically, the inclusive approach towards the changing traditions and perceptions of marriage was the product of her personal insistence on a depiction of an all-encompassing as well as on the creation of an imaginative picture of the topic that would eventually act, in her view, as a success factor. Her academic background in Social history in combination with her dynamic understanding of her work corroborates the ideas of Mark Liddiard, who stressed how one's academic qualifications and personal attitudes act as two of the potential factors influencing a museum practitioner's job, especially in terms of exhibiting sensitive topics like sexuality (Liddiard 1996). As Pauline Rushton hence highlighted:

My approach is also to look at the broader social background things, because I was trained as a historian originally . . . and always looking at the historical background of things . . . I like to place them within the broader socio-historical overview which is what we've done with this one, at this particular show.

This was similar to the situation at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, despite the fact that the original suggestion came from outside the museum. *Queering the Museum* was presented as part of the local *SHOUT! Festival* in spite of previous unsuccessful attempts in the past to bring this cultural event inside the museum. Rather, on this occasion Andy Horn, the museum's Exhibitions Manager and member of the Visual Arts Steering Group of SHOUT! Festival at the time, facilitated this long sought partnership. Furthermore, his Museum studies training and academic background and his disclosure during the interview of his sexual identity accord with the earlier observation on Pauline Rushton's (SH) drive and Mark Liddiard's research findings, acting as an additional explanation of his commitment to the project. In Andy Horn's (BMAG) words then:

The idea originated from the artist, but he approached us through the SHOUT! Festival, which is the LGBTQ culture festival in Birmingham, and I was already in the visual arts steering group of the SHOUT! Festival. So, there was somebody from the museum . . . which probably made [it] easier for somebody coming through the SHOUT! Festival to work with us. Because when they previously contacted members of staff, [it] hadn't necessarily led anywhere, and we need somebody within an organisation in order to champion it.

His critical contribution was further supported by the artist and co-curator Matt Smith (BMAG), who stressed how Andy Horn worked so effectively within the museum to make this partnership work and bring SHOUT! Festival inside the museum space for the very first time:

I couldn't make that happen without Andy backing it. So, Andy managed it inside the museum and made that happen.

Nonetheless, contrary to expectations, personal morality was brought up once as a determinant by Linda Pittwood (SH), when she was asked to comment on the same sex civil partnership costumes and photographs. She confided that unless this cultural tradition had been included, she would not have consented to display her own photographic memories from her wedding day:

Exclude any mention of civil partnerships would have gone against my personal moral codes. Because, I think, that's one of the most important issues of the recent times around marriage, really, and the redefined contemporary ideas about marriage . . . I wouldn't have wanted to be personally involved in such a way, if I'd felt that this exhibition wasn't telling the full story of marriage . . . If we hadn't any reference in the interpretation of same sex marriage / civil partnership, I don't think it would have been an accurate representation of the modern experiences of wedding and marriage.

It is interesting to note that such an encouraging comment was received by a person identified as heterosexual, and, despite being only one such response, its value is striking in the current research. Firstly, this finding corroborates Sanders' proposition regarding one of the facilitating factors for museums which strive to become genuinely inclusive of sexual minorities, calling for 'cooperation and collaboration across queer and straight communities if progress is to be made' (2008: 25). It also demonstrates how morality might be used in favour of increased representation of sexual minorities in museum collections resisting prejudicial understandings of morality as the monopoly of heteronormative attitudes. Actually, it could be also argued that Linda Pittwood's (SH) explanation on how her own morality influenced her decision to participate in the production of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, as a lender and exhibition planner, reflects in practice the growing concern in museum studies literature exploring the complex role of museums in mirroring in their programming and shaping social moralities through their projects (Sullivan 2004; Cameron 2007; Sandell 2011).

To sum up, the findings provided a set of significant triggers inspiring professionals to get involved in a socially inclusive exhibition with clear links to the potentially contentious topic of sexual diversity, involving professional development, personal morality and personal background.

### ***The precondition of external and internal support***

Under the circumstances presented in the previous subsection, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and Sudley House had to overcome budget constraints and the frequent lack of material within existing collections that could be used to represent diverse experiences, two of the most typified reasons for a cultural institution to seek for external partners (Kavanagh 1996: 126). Undoubtedly, the leading curators' contribution was considerable in initiating both exhibitions, but, as findings showed, their actual impact was extended on a communicative level too.



Their role unravels as two-fold: managing external support through partnerships and nurturing internal support from all staff involved.

### *External support*

Regarding the first point, the careful selection of the right partners and the establishment of strong foundations for future collaborations were basically a personal success of Pauline Rushton for *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* and Andy Horn for *Queering the Museum*. In the end, the loans of costumes and other wedding materials from individuals of various local communities enabled Sudley House to develop a multi-cultural depiction of traditional and contemporary marital ceremonies, whereas at Birmingham the artist and co-curator Matt Smith had been granted the appropriate funding by the Arts Council to develop *Queering the Museum*, and SHOUT! Festival was in charge of advertising the project.

In Birmingham, Andy Horn, a member of the visual arts steering group of SHOUT! Festival, was approached about the possibility of having one of Matt Smith's artworks in the museum galleries. The process, therefore, was easy to progress as two of the three parts of that partnership were already familiar with each other's work. When Matt Smith was asked to elaborate on the first stages of the project, he explained:

It happened quite organically. So, SHOUT! Festival . . . advertised . . . commissions for artist to apply. I applied for [and I was] given the commission. They asked me where I'd like to show my work in Birmingham and I said I'd like to show it in the museum. And so, SHOUT! Festival talked to Andy at BMAG and Andy agreed to meet with me and then, later on, it grew into doing cases throughout the museum. So, it's a really slow process and it grew as time went on.

After all, the idea of one single intervention turned out to become a much larger exhibition of 19 display cases across the museum. SHOUT! Festival agreed to

cover the marketing budget while the artist received an Arts Council grant to generate his project, ensuring that the financial hurdle would be overcome. As a result, the institution, through its Exhibitions Manager, expressed their interest in developing new collaborations both with a local well-established festival and with an external professional, in order to open up new possibilities for their programming, which otherwise would be impossible due to budget shortage:

[We] really [had] two partnerships . . . the part with the artist Matt and that enabled the exhibition to go ahead, like being funded, because Matt got funded from the Arts Council . . . We couldn't fund it from our own funds and also Matt came as an artist and curator in that process and he also helped lead the project, because he drove it through his own needs . . . And then, the SHOUT! Festival partnership gave us . . . a framework in marketing the exhibition, it gave us another reason for why we would do it at this time of the year . . . So, I think through the SHOUT! Festival we did a lot of things for us and also enabled us to reach out to or at least be promoted to LGBT audiences in a way that we don't have that. And If we didn't have the marketing budget, we wouldn't be able to do anything at all.

(Andy Horn, BMAG)

A final but equally significant strength of having secured a local festival's support was the reassurance staff members, like Toby Watley (BMAG), got in reducing the risk of the exhibition being perceived as a provocative. As previously stressed, practitioners' reluctance to portray stories related to sexual minorities is partially based on their fear of the public criticism. Yet, the recent example of the long standing partnership between the Gallery of Modern Art and Amnesty International in Glasgow, shows in practice how museums and galleries might benefit when they choose to collaborate with organisations positively viewed by the public (Sandell 2012). Accordingly then, collaborating with an already established and popular local festival promoting LGBTQ culture, might ease such fears since the project would be part of a broader cultural event according to Toby Watley (BMAG):

But again, I don't think there's any controversy in the exhibition . . . because it was part of the well-established SHOUT! Festival. It's been going on for many years, [it has] got a strong reputation.

Nonetheless, despite the undisputable positive impact such partnerships might have on multiple levels (which will be discussed extensively later), LGBTQ themes still belong to potentially contentious topics. Some visitors were indeed annoyed by the content of the exhibition regardless of forming part of a local festival and not being a regular temporary exhibition (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery 2011). Perhaps museum collaborations with a festival (as in the case at Birmingham) or with an organisation not solely focussed on LGBTQ issues (as in the case of the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow) might be beneficial in the way Toby Watley (BMAG) suggests. Nonetheless, it is my impression that reducing the risk of the public perception of an exhibition on sexual difference as controversial, requires a number of elements, ranging from the decision on external partnerships to the content, format and overall framework of the project.

Regarding Sudley House, the situation was slightly different in terms of the external support required. Here, unless costumes, marital items and photos of members of the local communities had been secured, the inclusion of a same sex narrative would have been rendered impossible and, more importantly, the multicultural perspective on wedding traditions would have remained highly heteronormative. Staff members knew that the process of identifying potential partners to lend the museum their outfits would probably be challenging and in the worst case scenario, end up with no available costumes from a same sex civil partnership. Linda Pittwood (SH) commented on the process of reaching out to the communities and searching for the material that would fit into the exhibition:

We were shaped by the loans that we could secure. So, if we have been approached with other costumes that they represented other groups in the North West, but we haven't be able to source a good example of a costume of a same sex couple, then, there may be nothing that we could do. But we were really happy to include them . . . But at the end of the day, the content

of the exhibition was shaped by what was out there in the community and who was willing to lend us and be involved in the exhibition. So, I think in that respect we were letting that dictate to us rather than us going out there to try and find a thing which represented an idea that we already had about how a civil couple, a same sex couple conducted their wedding ceremony.

In the same way, Myra Brown (SH) further expanded on some of the specific communities they approached and focused on the sensitivity the curator, Pauline Rushton, maintained at all times to make things work with those individuals:

I think the few challenges probably were to identify where we could borrow material. I have to say Pauline is very proactive in that . . . The challenges that you've got to work with people . . . more sensitively when dealing with these issues, if people lending things putting their personal things on display in your venue. So, things had to be handled sensitively because you want people to feel comfortable, happy about doing that . . . You can't just suddenly go in oh we want to borrow a dress, you've got to handle it in the right way.

The issue emerging here in respect to the high levels of sensitivity and communication skills when collaboration with communities is being sought, accords with museum scholars and practitioners' call for establishing 'mutual understanding' among collaborators as 'a genuine aim from the outset' (Kavanagh 1996: 133). Furthermore, the leading curator stressed how demanding her task was in identifying a suitable same sex couple who would also agree in actively participating in the production of a museum exhibition. Consequently, Pauline Rushton (SH) had to identify ways to approach potential lenders with a certain concept in mind: a male same sex couple who would definitely not reinforce stereotypical images but at the same time would not seem too ordinary. For this challenge she noted that:

Initially, the only issue I had was finding somebody suitable to use . . . from the gay community who was actually married . . . One issue that I did

consider was that I wanted to avoid . . . a pastiche of what people think gay weddings are about . . . I didn't want anybody who had an overall flamboyant wedding . . . That was the issue for me, to find somebody who was suitable . . . At the end . . . through a member of the staff who is gay, a friend of his was one of the grooms . . . that's how we've managed to track down the two suits.

### *Internal support*

The findings of this study stressed the positive impact of institutional support too for developing an exhibition with a socially inclusive agenda, especially with its focus on a potentially contentious subject. At both sites employees made references to the underpinning philosophy of their organisation, with its foundations on social inclusion and respect for society's diversity, and expressed their thoughts on how this inclusive environment facilitated the positive reception by the rest of the staff. Both institutions are shaped by policies advocating support for equality, diversity and inclusivity, and as such, their projects are meant to reflect these ideals too. Thus such findings provide additional evidence with respect to the critical role of clear and well-communicated policies on equality and diversity in advancing museums' social agendas (Janes and Sandell 2007; Fleming 2012a).

National Museums of Liverpool are among the most proactive cultural institutions in the UK in terms of the high volume of social programming that they continuously produce. Very illustrative examples of their bold socially purposeful philosophy are, among others, the International Slavery Museum being a site for the active promotion of human rights and the coordination of the Federation of International Human Rights Museums since 2010. Obviously, their social agenda is not limited to human rights campaigns but is extended at every single part of the National Museums of Liverpool with a range of projects and events, all targeting at the organisational overarching mission 'to change lives by enabling millions of people, from all backgrounds, to engage with world-class museums' (National Museums

Liverpool 2013a). On that account all three staff members working on exhibition development talked about the inclusion of a same sex couple at *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* as a direct outcome of the broader organisational policies.

Myra Brown (SH) made a very significant point, applicable to museum practice in general, stressing the comfort and reassurance of the aforementioned policies bring to staff members, especially at times when novel ideas and practices like *in* the specific exhibition under examination are being considered:

Because we've got a very strong inside policy of being diverse and inclusive, that has pushed things through . . . to back you up. It's maybe hard for some organisations to do that but we've got a really strong base where the Director, the trustees, the staff, are all signed up for that, in a sense and that gives you that sort of back up to try to do something new and not feel afraid.

Along the same lines, Linda Pittwood (SH) emphasised the inconsistency in the aims and objectives of the National Museums of Liverpool that would have been caused if same sex civil partnerships were excluded from an exhibition on past and contemporary wedding traditions:

Well, NML is committed to diverse representation in everything that we do. So, we think to omit the discussion of civil partnerships, the representation of same-sex marriage would have been misleading and against our odds of what we are trying to achieve as a museums service. So, when Pauline said that she wanted to include the representation of a same sex couple's civil partnership in the exhibition, the project team was really supportive.

A similar opinion is echoed in Pauline Rushton's (SH) comment, raising the issue of appealing to diverse visitor groups as one of the principal objectives for *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* but also for all the work produced in other sites of the organisation. For this reason, specific focus groups, including an LGBT one, are coordinated by the National Museums of Liverpool as programming

consultants, establishing links with the relevant community. She also situated institutional ambitions within the broader climate museums in the UK have been working in the last decade:

So, in everything we do, is always . . . looking at ‘are we making this offer as broad as we possibly can to bring in the broadest possible audience and include as many parts of the community that we can?’. So, I think that’s the driver, that’s the general thing in museums in the UK, I think, certainly in the last 10 years, and also there are more focused staff groups that deal with those different areas. So, we have our own LGBT focus group within our house who pick up the issues. They weren’t involved in this exhibition in SH but they do pick up at issues about what’s going on in the programme and they can give advice or they can put you in contact with other people.

Birmingham, on the other hand, as a multicultural city with approximately 30% of its population being non-white non-British, values the promotion of equality of diversity. Its city council is bound by the Equality Act 2010 (Birmingham City Council n.d.2) and regarding the LGBT community has been very productive. Birmingham City Council’s proactive role in LGBT rights is manifested, for instance, in their active participation since 2006 in Stonewall Workplace Equality Index (Birmingham City Council n.d.1) or their enlightened decision in April 2010 to commission Birmingham LGBT (Community Trust) to carry out a research on the well-being of people identifying themselves as LGBT and the daily issues they might encounter (Birmingham LGBT (Community Trust) 2011). Therefore, it comes naturally to listen to Simon Cane (BMAG) explaining how being governed by the social objectives of Birmingham City Council facilitated the production of an exhibition on LGBT topics:

The issue for BMAG is that it is part of the city council. Birmingham City Council has very clear policies in place in relation to LGBT issues and its policy is absolutely an issue of equality: equality of opportunities, equality of employment. So, there shouldn’t be really an issue.

Interestingly, Andy Horn (BMAG) highlighted how the welcoming reception of other staff members actually affected the format of *Queering the Museum* itself for the better, as their supportiveness allowed for transforming the original concept from one single intervention to 19:

Probably [there] would be a varied reaction to it across the museum depending on whether people's area of work is familiar with issues around outreach and exhibitions, and also people's familiarity with LGBT issues. But my colleagues on my level were really supportive of this exhibition and . . . we [found it a] great idea which is why we wanted to pursue it and also why [it] grew from being something that might be one or two cases across the museum.

This level of confidence in both projects also derived from the influence exerted by two charismatic individuals who managed to communicate each exhibition concept effectively to staff, reinforcing the possibilities of securing their approval. At Sudley House the leading curator Pauline Rushton had this 'inspirational' role according to her colleague Myra Brown (SH):

I have to say Pauline was very inspirational . . . She really was keen . . . to get assigned the whole team to work towards all that we want and it's been a really positive experience.

While at Birmingham this task was mainly undertaken by the artist whose 'engaging character' transmitted the value of producing an exhibition like *Queering the Museum* according to Simon Cane (BMAG):

I thought [*Queering the Museum*] was quite critical. It was in terms of the staff connection done in a very local way, engaging people along the way, bringing them on board . . . So, it wasn't an issue, I really don't think it was an issue for most of the work. I think there are people who may have found it amusing, other people . . . maybe looked why we are doing this and how it's gonna work. So, there it was about selling it to the staff from the first



instance and I think that that was done in a very clever way. Matt is [a] very engaging character, so people saw that he was very nice guy, very serious about what he was doing . . . [with] humour. He respected the work that other people did. So, he kind gained support from the process.

However, such encouraging feedback on the internal support both projects received should be interpreted with caution. One comment made by Andy Horn (BMAG) confirms that sexuality and particularly non-normative sexualities are still associated, in people's minds, with fearful reactions. A sense of uncertainty manifests itself in his words when he talks about having 'a lot of people on board in the organisation' as his primary concern with respect to the project development:

There are a number of challenges. I think one was to ensure that we had a lot people on board in the organisation who would support it. There are everyday challenges: we took the project in a relatively short notice, six months, it was on top of our existing commitments which are already very thorough and very stretched. So it put pressure into resources that we already have. I was then uncertain how it would be received in the museum, so I made sure that the liaison with the staff would move quite quickly and so that I could indicate the level of support which showed that it was integrated into, it was strategically valuable as a project.

Similarly at Liverpool, briefing sessions took place before the final plans of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, which is a common measure the National Museums of Liverpool are adopting, at least when issues of sexuality are on display (Tibbles 2012: 168). The scope of this move was to ensure that staff from various posts engaged with the exhibition would be on board and fully equipped in order to be able to interact with visitors and particularly with those who might complain:

I think we are quite lucky here because the curator of the particular exhibitions is very proactive and [she is] coming to the venue here on a regular basis and she very much keeps people informed verbally. For

instance, [for] the next exhibition, she informed myself and the manager, probably 6 to 8 months ago, what the idea was and then kept us updated. That was the same [with] Hitched exhibition. She told us a long time in advance verbally and as it was getting closer she gave us more information. We then got involved with some of the initial meetings. . . . We know a lot of time in advance, which I think it's [the] best . . . At least we've got an idea to tell people.

(Simon Breedon, SH)

A similar response was received by Linda Pittwood (SH) too, commenting:

We could have complaints, we could have had publicity, so I guess, part of mitigating these potential problems is to make sure that all in NML staff are kind of signed up to the same agenda really, that . . . we are debriefed in how to deal with any complaints that would presenting a unified front. If we are choosing to put on these exhibits it would undermine us if our press team was saying something different.

### **Museum sustainability**

Museum sustainability is currently becoming acknowledged as one of the fields museum practitioners and scholars should pay attention to. Although there have been numerous attempts to define it, a concise account offered by Ambrose and Paine is used for this study:

Museums, as public institutions concerned with change and continuity in the cultural and natural world, are well placed to promote the principles of sustainability or 'resilience' - namely balance, diversity and long-term thinking.

(2012:18)

The data drawn from interviews with staff members at both sites indicate, though indirectly as no straightforward references to the concept of sustainability were made, the belief among museum staff in the potential of *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* respectively to contribute to their museums' sustainability to a certain degree. This was identified under three thematic schemes:

- a) Raising the museum profile and changing public perceptions of these particular cultural institutions mainly through initiating new partnerships and strengthening old ones with external organisations as well as individuals
- b) Diversifying the target groups and simultaneously maintaining the core audiences
- c) Establishing new approaches to museum work

Needless to say that the desired impact on the institutions themselves in the long run does not refer to all three dimensions of what is commonly perceived as museum sustainability. The Museums Association in the UK advances the concept of sustainability in the museum sector as three-dimensional: environmental, economic and social (Davies and Wilkinson 2008). They even suggested a list, although not conclusive yet, of more specific forms of action that need to be followed by these institutions caring for their future sustainability (Davies and Wilkinson 2008: 6). From this list of eleven different steps, a number of them were viewed as projections of related ideas articulated by several interviewees during my fieldwork:

- Strive for excellence, building deep long-term relationships with a range of audiences
- Consider responsibly to the social, cultural and economic vitality of the local area and the wider world

- Respond to changing political, social, environmental and economic contexts and have a clear long-term purpose that reflects society's expectations of museums
- Plan long-term, take full account of sustainable development in all their activities and policies and work within available resources
- Join with other museums, and other organisations, in partnerships and mergers, where it is the best way of meeting their purpose in the long term

(Davies and Wilkinson 2008: 6)

### ***Raising the museum profile through well-thought partnerships***

A noteworthy finding emerging from the data on both projects was the expectation to challenge a monolithic public view of each institution and replace it with a more diverse one. Broadly speaking, *Queering the Museum* and the partnership with the local SHOUT! Festival might have helped Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery to raise its contemporary art and socially inclusive profile while *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* and the loans secured through its network with several local communities might have strengthened the socially inclusive profile of Sudley House and the National Museums of Liverpool. Even though such remarks were only made by a couple of interviewees, it was, nonetheless, intriguing to see how much value was placed by some professionals on the impact of these external partnerships upon the final outcome and success of both projects.

At Birmingham, Andy Horn and Toby Watley raised an interesting point about the nature of their exhibition and the role of the partnership with the local SHOUT! Festival. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is considered to be a place primarily famous for its Pre-Raphaelite art works due to the substantial amount of its collections related to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Pre-Raphaelite Online

Resource n.d.). Nevertheless, the two interviewees revealed an institutionalised hope of promoting the museum as a more diverse place. Having noted the regular link in local people's minds between the site and Pre-Raphaelites or other forms of traditional art, they both valued the change that might occur due to the radical craft interventions created by a contemporary artist and, more importantly, in partnership with a contemporary arts festival. Hence, Toby Watley (BMAG) recognised the effect of the interventional and contemporary tone prevalent in *Queering the Museum*:

[It] certainly helped to raise the profile . . . Partnership working within the city and others is raising our contemporary art profile which is definitely ... a big significance of the project . . . One of our initiatives is to raise our contemporary art profile at local level rather than at national level . . . Locally there's the perception we are the place that has Pre-Raphaelites and nothing else. And so, asking working with contemporary art organisations in the city and around the city is a brilliant way of bringing to the people's attention that there is a lot of contemporary practice that goes on within this museum, even though we look really old from outside.

Likewise, Andy Horn (BMAG) confirmed Toby Watley's words in that the links with the world of contemporary art might raise the institutional profile as a site for lovers of both old masters and contemporary artists' pieces of work:

It also enabled the museum to have a profile within the city in reference to other art organisations and cultural organisations. We would be seen to be doing something different than we might normally do.

On top of that, the distinctive 'queer' character of a partner like SHOUT! Festival was praised too. The museum was introduced with the prospect of establishing a long term partnership with a local festival on queer arts and culture through Matt Smith's exhibition. Such a possibility was welcomed as a chance for raising the museum profile in the eyes of a section of the local community, that of the LGBT audience. In other words, *Queering the Museum*, and potentially future similar

attempts, could open up museum spaces as of relevance to the audiences of already well-established cultural events and organisations. If one considers studies showing a typical negative perception of museums as highly heteronormative sites among sexual minorities (Sanders 2007; Levin 2010; Steorn 2012), then, it could be argued that people's views might change for the better if a museum displays an exhibition not only related to sexual difference but also in collaboration with a popular queer arts festival highly appreciated by the local LGBTQ community. According to Toby Watley (BMAG), the contribution of SHOUT! Festival as an official partner was absolutely essential for the promotion and success of their project:

[It] most definitely helped bring the project to the attention of a very specific audience. So, lesbian, gay, bisexual audience. It was a festival specifically for that, so, it helped in that way. I think, if we've been doing it without SHOUT! Festival's involvement, it might pass a lot of people, [it might have] passed by lots of people attention. So, got the attention it deserved really.

In fact, the partnership did continue the year after, confirming one of the primary institutional objectives as stated in their Audience Development Strategy 2009-2013 (Birmingham City Council 2009: 24):

We will seek to maintain existing partnerships and build new ones to support relationships with a broader range of communities. We recognise that partnerships require a lot of time and care, ensuring effective communication, trust, commitment and mutual benefit.

With a similar event in terms of its concept, *Queering the Portrait with David Hoyle* on 19 November 2011, the enthusiasm and determination of staff was manifested by both organisations to maintain their collaboration in order to allow for the usually forgotten stories and voices of sexual minorities to be heard in the museum space.

But, at Liverpool too, an analogous expectation for widening public view of the National Museums of Liverpool as 'an inclusive organisation' was manifested by

Myra Brown (SH). The curator's desire was to display wedding traditions and costumes from four local communities of Liverpool, including people identifying themselves as homosexual. Due to the usual lack of relevant material in museums' collections, the curator had to seek for alternative sources for the same sex civil partnership she wanted to present. For this reason, she contacted a local same sex male couple who had already done their civil partnership ceremony to ask for a loan of their suits and pictures of their 'wedding' day. Luckily for the museum organisation, the curator established a very successful contact with the lenders, but also with the lesbian and gay community in general, which could potentially lead to a future collaboration again. Thus, the conclusive and up-to-date representation of wedding traditions in addition to the civil partnerships, developed and sustained across several local communities, were presented in her view as encouraging for further participation of local groups through loans in the production of future exhibitions:

I think it made a better exhibition and I think it also gave Pauline the opportunity to build contacts with different people who may potentially lend material in the future or feel that NML is an inclusive organisation. So, I think it helps change perceptions of the organisation but also, you don't really know what the impact [is]. But I think it was a very important thing to do and it was great she got [these suits] and hopefully, that relationship that Pauline got [with] the lenders . . . carry that through in future exhibitions in terms of building up those contacts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that establishing external partnerships with local communities and festivals run by culturally under-represented social groups is promising in a number of ways. Yet, a plan of sustaining these relationships is encouraged and regarded as vital. Awareness is raised about the museum amongst members of these communities, as institutional openness and responsiveness to a diverse audience group is shown practically not only in terms of cultural representation but also of a more direct involvement in exhibition development. In other words, building long lasting and trustful connections to

communities or organisations is perceived as one way of rejecting a view shared among several people that museums are for the few.

### ***Diversifying target groups***

The results of this study show that the core audiences at both places under study were essentially the target groups of their projects. It is somewhat surprising that, throughout their interviews, the staff emphasised the importance of appealing to the regular visitor primarily and secondly, to the minority groups represented in the exhibits. A safe hypothesis about who is most likely to visit exhibitions specifically developed on the notion, e.g. of homosexuality, is that people identifying themselves as such or 'gay-friendly' individuals will probably form the vast majority of the audience. Well-known scholars in the museum field have been involved in surveys explaining how one's personal background has an impact on whether or not to visit a museum and on which exhibits they will engage with. For example, Lynda Kelly, the Manager Online, Editing and Audience Research at the Australian Museum concluded from her research that:

People wanted information from exhibitions that was relevant to them, enabled them to feel connected to the world around them, in order to become more knowledgeable about issues that will impact on them personally.

(2001: 5)

In addition to this, two of the most influential scholars in museum learning, Falk and Dierking, insist on the viewing museum visitors as individuals whose choices are affected by a wide range of determinants:

Visitors to museums do not come as blank slates. They come with a wealth of previously acquired knowledge, interests, skills, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences, all of which combine to affect not only what and how they



interact with educational experiences but also what meaning, if any, they make of such experiences.

(2000: 87)

Both case studies resisted common practice and contextualised gender and sexual difference within a framework that could appeal to a wider mixture of people as the format and content of each project were developed to match this objective. The potential gains of engaging visitors consciously or not with the implicit social issues evident in *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* seem to have been highly appreciated internally. Contrary to expectations for an exhibition focusing on LGBTQ life and arts, interviews with staff in Birmingham indicated the priority given to the general museum visitors over the target group of sexual minorities. Even though the obvious focus was on a specific cultural group's histories, getting to the regular visitor was the key objective:

Actually the target groups as far as I am aware was really the general public . . . because of . . . bringing these issues of sexuality . . . out to a more general audience.

(Simon Cane, BMAG)

You could say one of the target audiences most definitely would have been the gay community. But I think just say it was the primary audience may be misleading. I don't think it was really

(Toby Watley, BMAG)

Due to the nature of the topic at Sudley House perhaps exhibition makers had in mind the background of their regular visitors, which is people in their middle or advanced adulthood, and particularly women because of the widely accepted assumption that an exhibition on wedding might be more appealing to females, as Pauline Rushton (SH) admits:

First and foremost the target audience is the core audience at SH which is the older age groups because Sudley House tends to attract the older age groups. It is orientated towards females rather than males I think.

Furthermore, in their Exhibition Marketing Campaign document (Flenley 2010) the theme is clearly described as an asset as it could captivate the interest of the majority of their regular visitors:

A hugely popular topic incorporating both historic costume and weddings – this should appeal to our existing core audience of whom over 66% are female who stereotypically are more likely to make a decision to visit Sudley and particularly a wedding themes exhibition.

Ultimately, several interviewees praised the conceptual integration of various local groups under the common thread of 'getting hitched' at Liverpool and the spatial integration of LGBTQ voices across permanent collections in Birmingham. From their perspective, their projects empowered both places to cope convincingly with the limitations posed when a special social group is targeted, such as the genuine risk for museums and galleries of overlooking a percentage of visitors' population as opposed to another, during the process of identifying their target audiences (Reeve 2006: 57). This finding was thus confirmed by staff at Liverpool, further stressing that ideally their project would manage to strengthen their relationship with existing audiences and simultaneously open up to new audiences, such as the communities on display. Although staff did not hold any data of whether members of these local communities actually visited the site, the overarching intention of intelligibly displaying some aspects of Liverpool's diversity in order to avoid the limiting focus on one single cultural tradition is noteworthy:

We always do define our target audiences that we are looking for when planning for exhibition. So, in this case we wanted to appeal to our traditional Sudley House audience . . . We hoped it would attract our core audience and also a new diverse audience.

(Linda Pittwood, SH)

Myra Brown (SH) further stressed the value they tend to place on producing inclusive and promising projects, like *Hitched*, *Wedding Clothes and Customs*, based on novel ideas without having to conform to their regular curatorial approaches:

We are looking to developing new audiences . . . Obviously, we want to keep those people who are interested but we wanted to develop new audiences and . . . I think to make it more relevant to perhaps the younger audience. It's good to do that. . . . Just not going on the same route all the time. We are able to think more broadly and [we] want actually [to] address all these issues and make people feel more inclusive in that venues.

Moreover, this particular case was perceived as an opportunity to actually raise visitor figures of site due to the popularity of the subject among their core audiences but also through the window it opened to under-represented social groups. In other words, the popularity of an umbrella theme emerges as an appropriate element for future similar attempts aiming at promoting certain social messages with respect to disadvantaged communities through a subtle contextualisation of difference. As Pauline Rushton (SH) and Simon Breedon (SH) pointed out:

We also try to appeal to a broader audience than we have done before by addressing some of the smaller cultural groups in Liverpool. . . . So, it's doing what we wanted it to do, bringing people through the door and that was the reason for choosing that subject matter. But equally, it was to do with bringing in new audiences to a degree as well, so what we chose was

the Jewish community, the Chinese community, which is one of the oldest in Liverpool, the Traveller and Gypsy community and then, something about the gay community. So that's how we decided we were going to broaden out the visitor sample.

(Pauline Rushton, SH)

So, in terms of getting visitors here, you think that's the kind of exhibition people want regardless of whether it is about same sex, Traveller dresses. [It] doesn't matter. It's weddings. We all have experiences of weddings and we all like to see this kind of things. So, I think it's a positive one because you know that visitors are gonna come in.

(Simon Breedon, SH)

Speaking along the same lines, Toby Watley (BMAG) commented on the potential of *Queering the Museum*, as a project integrated within the permanent collections, to create the chance of core and non-regular visitors to come together in the gallery spaces, where Matt Smith's interventions were spread:

It's bringing current and new audiences together . . . I think the issues raised were more of a general nature than it would just be about gay issues and I think, it's bringing together current non-represented audiences into the museum setting. It's a big thing.

Nevertheless, his most intriguing comment was centred around the difference between the interventional style of an LGBTQ exhibition and a stand-alone project like *Gay Icons* at the National Portrait Gallery. In particular, he raised a number of persuasive points considering the likelihood of a topic like sexual difference to be appealing to a wide audience. Hence he elaborated on the potential gains of an approach like Matt Smith's as compared to that utilised in *Gay Icons*. In his view, which reflects one of the basic arguments of the current study, an exhibition on LGBTQ issues might get the attention of a wider range of individuals if its main objective is not simply to raise these stories. Alternatively, an approach like Matt

Smith's interventions has additional distinctive features other than the focus on sexual minorities as several single-focused museum initiatives adopt, such as the fact that it is about contemporary art and it is a form of institutional critique unsettling the museum's ways of collecting, displaying and interpreting. Therefore, as Toby Watley (BMAG) suggests, the potential people who might have been interested in the show would include persons self-identified as LGBTQ, contemporary art lovers, people fascinated by art shows featuring a form of institutional critique and individuals interested in historical collections:

I mean the *Gay Icons* show . . . you are badging [it] up specifically for a certain audience. I think [Gay Icons is] different from this . . . In a way that now would appeal to a wider audience . . . [In] this kind of projects there are people coming who weren't interested in the gay issue but would be very interested in Matt as a contemporary maker and how, what kind of stories he . . . pulled out from these historical collections. There will be people coming who love our historic collections and just interested to see how an artist has responded to them and there will be others coming specifically because he has got LGBT issues there, contemporary gay culture as a theme. So, I think this kind of approach is of interest to a much wider and more diverse audience . . . I never wanted . . . 'Oh, this is our lgbt exhibition', I've never seen it like that.

In other words, the integration of diverse cultures under a universal theme or within the permanent exhibits, was perceived as an opportunity to boost an institution's audience development through the provision for the visitors already holding a relationship of trust with the sites and simultaneously catering for people who have not been previously given a compelling motive to engage with the programming offered either at Sudley House or Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Still, the expectation of reaching out for the general public also emerged from another angle. Due to the spreading of 'queer' interventions across ten gallery spaces, Matt Smith's artworks could be noticed both from individuals following the trail but most importantly from people coming for a general museum visit, enabling

members of the audience to engage at least to some level with them. Interestingly enough, the displays were located across different thematic galleries, which in the view of the co-curator might have resulted in more people noticing the project, at least in the gallery of their personal interest. However, Andy Horn (BMAG) drew the attention to the danger of having more visitors engaging with the exhibition but at the expense of their experience value, explaining:

It gave a very strong trail through the museum galleries that enabled audiences at different points in the museum, depended on what they do to come across that kind of work, rather than in one gallery space. They could talk to people in different ways . . . If it's integrated in a setting . . . where a range of people would be going through whatever happens, you are going to get a wider range of response, [a wider] type of visitors connected to it but possibly in the price of the depth of engagement to it.

Further, Simon Cane (BMAG) brought up the idea of 'tricking' their audiences into prompting them indirectly to engage with part or parts of the *Queering the Museum* trail. Certainly, interventions on any sensitive topic like any form of sexuality non-conforming to social hetero-norms, among permanent collections and without any signposting other than a green line on the labels of the exhibits would still irritate some people due to their religious or personal beliefs against such acts. Nonetheless, in combination with the qualities of subtlety and normalcy discussed in the previous chapter, the lack of substantial attention on the topic might have encouraged a more modest reaction to those uncomfortable with it:

If you have put it in a gallery space, then people have a choice whether they are going in to this gallery space and they may look and go 'oh what's this about? It's about, sexuality it's about lesbian, gay, queer, whatever, I don't wanna get involved with that'. So, they can make a conscious choice to avoid that gallery whereas an intervention in this way creep in up to people to some degree and again that was really good about Matt's interventions out there, because there is somebody who may not agree with it but because it softens, it makes it easier to take him on board.

(Simon Cane, BMAG)

Finally, a similar aspiration was evidenced in Myra Brown's (SH) feedback as, in her view, the creation of unifying and inclusive narratives could attract people unfamiliar or unwilling to engage with part or parts of the themes on display if presented separately:

There's room for both [stand-alone and integrationist exhibitions] because I think if it's just separate all the time, that can actually act as a barrier but if it's interwoven as part of the bigger picture, I think that's kind of beneficial thing because people who may just go to more traditional exhibition, they wouldn't go to something 'oh, I wouldn't want to go on that, but actually I want to go to this one'.so in a way it provides a routine for people . . . So I think both are valid when it's finding a subject matter [that] works within each properly.

However, these kinds of projects where people might unconsciously come across exhibits related to a topic that is still perceived as sensitive and controversial, should be prepared with caution and good planning. It is very likely that such inclusions might cause discomfort to some visitors and consequently, have a negative impact on future visitation and appreciation of the site (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010). Further, the role of media publicity was also discussed as another potentially influential factor affecting public reception of an exhibition touching on sexual identities. It is true how controlling mass media can be, especially when

homosexuality or other marginalised sexual identities are on display in publicly funded museums and galleries, hence, the manifested anxiety of media reception being an anticipated finding. For instance, in 2009 the *sh[OUT]* project at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow received a substantial amount of biased opposing articles, mainly written for the Daily Mail, which actually shaped a lot of people's reception of the project, even if they had never visited GoMA themselves (Sandell 2012: 206-207).

Thus, at Sudley House, due to the lack of previous references to sexuality, the leading curator sought advice from a local women's group consisting of elderly women (typically the site's core audience) to try out her ideas for *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* and as it proved, all but one was supportive to the selected approach to wedding traditions:

In the beginning . . . I was giving a talk to a local women's group . . . They were an older group. They were absolutely the target visitors audience for Sudley House. They were completely that age group and socioeconomic background . . . They came in to look at where I was doing the preparing for the exhibition . . . I gave them a talk about the wedding dress collection in particular and then I talked them in more detail about what I'm intending to do in this exhibition and I showed them the four examples . . . from the four communities and the overall response was very very positive. One lady recoiled and was horrified 'I just can't abide treating gay people as though they are really married and not, it's not real marriage' and this sparked a debate in the group. I just sort of stood back and let them debate . . . So, it was interesting for me to see how they reacted to the idea, before we've even done it. The vast majority of people said 'no, we haven't got an issue with that, that's not a problem for us, we think it's good that you're including it' and this one person was kind of on her own terms of views that she had. So, that was encouraging to me.

(Pauline Rushton, SH)



Still, at another point in the interview, Pauline Rushton (SH) admitted that despite their attempt to consult a sample of their regular visitors, there would be people objecting to the content, which seems to be true for any kind of exhibition as it is almost impossible to please everybody:

I know people will not agree with that necessarily, especially people with a traditional background who have an issue. They would be possibly disturbed by that but I wanted to show that as another option to marriage.

Linda Pittwood (SH), on the other hand, referred to their initial discussions on ways of dealing with dissatisfied visitors, highlighting, however, that according to their previous experience with *Hello Sailor* exhibition, the main source of negative publicity was derived by certain newspapers, which consequently reassured the low possibility of getting disapproving visitors' feedback:

I don't know about challenges but we did have a conversation about what to do if people . . . if visitors did object to the inclusion in the exhibition . . . But we actually haven't had any issues and again, although we are sort of prepared for them, we discussed what we might do if we had any issues. And for *Hello Sailor*, we've only nearly had good publicity, although when the exhibition toured in Scotland there was a really inflammatory article in the Scottish Daily Mail about it . . . It's been difficult for me to anticipate challenges that we didn't face with this exhibition and as I say, we had a very good response on what we have done this kind of program in the past.

Likewise, in Birmingham, initial fears of upsetting people emerged solely through the interview with Simon Cane (BMAG). He particularly elaborated on the controversy laying behind the topic of LGBTQ culture and how it might be picked up by media or individuals as an inappropriate project presented in a publicly funded institution:

My thoughts were 'what will the media response be to . . . an exhibition about sexualities' . . . . Sexuality potentially is always going to be

[provocative] . . . particularly for the more right wing and even the mainstream press. We've seen all that before. So, there was a definite possibility that there will be a negative response. Alongside that there was also the possibility for a negative political response . . . In the past we had interventions from politicians that relate to even issues such as nudity or looking particularly contemporary art issues where artists may be more aggressive or . . . in our interpretations. So, there was a real danger, not dangers. . . . There was a possibility that it would be picked up in a negative way by the press and that could have fed out the public response. That was one of the things I was expecting, the higher level of public comment, negative public comment simply because of the subject matter.

He even drew attention to the risk of causing controversy due to the spreading of Matt Smith's interventions across multiple galleries, as their availability all around the museum space might become visible by school groups visiting the site:

I hope . . . that the idea is [that] it would make [the] museum . . . cause debate, which I think museums . . . should be doing. . . . So, entering into a discourse about . . . choices around their sexuality is potentially contentious because . . . we have a lot of school children coming through other things, so it can be contentious.

Yet, the potential gains of gradually integrating sexual otherness (but also other forms of disadvantaged identities) among a museum's regular permanent collections cannot be dismissed because of the likelihood of displeasing part of the audience. Developing an exhibition with a more diversified target audience in mind will eventually bring people in both from core and new audiences. However, appealing to a wider range of people is not enough by its own to attract the desired communities, as other factors, like quality of the exhibition, charging fee, and so on, affect one's decision to make a visit. In fact, as it will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, some of the visitors who were uncomfortable with such topics actually appeared more open to this subtle inclusion of sexual diversity as compared to more noticeable and explicit displays, which was certainly a positive

outcome originating from the museums' intention to appeal to a more diverse crowd.

### ***Establishing new approaches to museum work***

An encouraging outcome of this study was the boost in museum personnel's confidence in pursuing projects of such nature and format in the future. The idea of gaining more confidence was mainly apparent in all three interviews with staff members of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, as it was the first time they developed an exhibition on sexual minorities and in the format of artistic interventions across several gallery spaces. In a way it was felt that *Queering the Museum* was perceived as a learning experience informing their skills and expertise especially with respect on working with sexuality and its portrayal:

It's been very good for [the] museum because it's given the confidence in doing projects like this and it's been seen as . . . a way of working in a museum.

(Andy Horn, BMAG)

But I hope that it gives us the [chance] to . . . comfortably tackling those issues in museum future and being prepared . . . to engage with these issues.

(Simon Cane, BMAG)

It has been usually admitted within the sector that one of the excuses for not dealing with sexual minorities is the fear of the negative response, a fear that might be enlarged if an institution has never touched on such a sensitive topic before. Yet, the approach taken for Matt Smith's project appears to have had the potential to influence positively the museum staff encouraging them to deal with such issues in future as the first time seemed to have been successful and not having attracted negative publicity or response. Moreover, this opportunity to tackle, for the very first

time, the issue of lives and stories non-conformed to social hetero-norms through questioning traditional practices of museum collecting and displaying, might have been influential on another aspect of museum work too. Toby Watley (BMAG) shared his expectation of eventually adopting more frequently in the near future the basic technique employed for *Queering the Museum*, that of challenging the orthodox collections and narratives on display, as their current attempt was very comforting in his view:

It's early to say, but I think this definitely has to say something about confidence. Not that we would be feeling uncomfortable doing this in anyway, but when you do something and you get so much press and publicity, it's very reassuring and it makes you think how we should do more of that, not the same. But we shouldn't be afraid to do [it] really, [to] tackle the collections in quite unconventional ways and not feel too apprehensive about going with that in that way. I think confidence is definitely a big thing [gained] . . . from this process.

Along the same lines, Andy Horn (BMAG) designated this initiative as a starting point for rethinking the museum historical narratives in the broadest sense and delve into the absence of LGBT voices in them. He also pointed out the specific example of Gallery 33, a gallery on cultural differences, as a place where nobody else before had realised the now seemingly glaring exclusion of LGBT experiences:

Because it's something that hasn't been for me considered and the Gallery 33 is a case of point because it's a gallery around difference and identities and yet LGBT identities would never [be] considered in that absent in its representation . . . I think [this] is also true in the history galleries . . . One of the things we did change was . . . rethinking about the representation within the history galleries. So, it made the museum . . . think . . . We need to tell LGBT histories and represent them within the new history gallery exhibitions.

At the same time, projects of an interventional nature, based partially on existing collections and on craft or other kind of works produced by external artists, were praised as an attractive alternative route for museums affected by the general economic recession but also as projects whose exhibits are in harmony with the permanent ones without causing any negative disturbance:

I mean the fact that we kept it going for as long as we could -it's still some up on display- I mean, we didn't want to take it down because there was no need to take it down as quickly as we thought. It did fit in and I don't think it was getting in any way off our work displays and for me, it signifies a lot of the way I want to see museum's service moving forward in terms of our programming. We've got . . . less funds than . . . these big blockbusters exhibitions with big spaces. So, to focus more attention on maybe smaller budgets, more artists interventions and projects using our pre-existing collections in new ways for us, it's definitely a way ahead and definitely I want to do more in the future.

(Toby Watley, BMAG)

Bringing external professionals into the museum could also be an asset to the museum programming as it may set the foundations for a fresh use of the existing collections in combination with temporary displays:

And also [*Queering the Museum*] paves the way for bringing more artists work into the galleries and creating that connection between permanent displays and temporary displays.

(Andy Horn, BMAG)

Such a strategy nonetheless despite being highly promising, it does require high levels of institutional self-awareness and the desire to encounter and overcome long-held inaccuracies and shortcomings of a museum's curatorial practice, as Fred Wilson reveals based on his extended experience with several museums (Berger and Wilson 2001: 34).

In addition, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery had another direct gain: the acquisition of two pieces for its permanent collection. These pieces will carry on what they were initially designed for, to disrupt the heteronormative narratives in the gallery spaces, and eventually, allow the collections to become more representative of the different fragments of society. According to Toby Watley (BMAG), the partnership with Matt Smith was not solely confined within the limits of co-curatorship and craft production, but it was further extended. Regardless of the small number, the museum now has added two new pieces of contemporary craft art, managing to contribute not only to its audience development strategy, but also to its collection policy:

The strong links he made between . . . the museum and art gallery collection and his work. It wasn't any of the collection, it was our collection he was making specific links to and the fact that the legacy of the project isn't just the change of the perceptions of the museum and the press and PR it attracted, but also the acquired work from that which is going to collection. So, it's also about expanding our collections for the future and . . . one of our key strategic aims is about diversifying our collection in terms of representation and to acquire work by an artist who happens to be gay, whose work will draw up gay issues, is really important. So, I think that was another really strong aspect of the project, beyond just being an exhibition.

The artist received this quest very positively as well. Even at such a small scale, the addition of new LGBT material in the museum collection was highly appreciated as a significant step for filling in the existing gap in LGBTQ related items:

If nothing else there, hopefully, there are two pieces of work in their collection labelled as LGBT, which hopefully will help in the future.

(Matt Smith, BMAG)

Nevertheless, the interview with the artist released a level of awkwardness in respect to his identity as an openly gay artist. Contrary to the subtlety of the project overall, the artist found himself in an exposing and vulnerable situation, which is quite an alarming finding. Despite being an openly gay man and artist, being the sole artist of this specific exhibition led him to unease. The implications of such a confession are significant because it implies that society is still regarded by LGBTQ people as unprepared for a full acceptance and recognition of non-heterosexual lives:

I thought . . . my name is on a big gay show and I've done a civil partnership, everybody knows, family and friends but it's still something very exposing about saying Matt Smith is a big old gay boy and it's his exhibition. And . . . I thought, I was having my address on my website but I had to take it off for the exhibition. I don't know if that's the right thing or the wrong thing, but I'm just very aware [in] the exhibition you are offering a lot of personal information at completely strangers and that isn't always a comfortable thing to be doing. It feels very exposing, being the only artist. But in terms of a way of working I'm really happy with the museums' collections compared to working with an art gallery.

At Liverpool, however, the case was slightly different from Birmingham. The idea of continuance in providing for the sexual minorities was manifested at Sudley House as part of the National Museums of Liverpool planning. The organisation had presented in the past aspects of this minority group, like for example in *Hello Sailor; Gay life on the ocean wave* at Merseyside Maritime Museum, but it had never exhibited the subject before neither at Sudley House nor under a universal theme like marriages. *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* was one more reassuring moment to continue working towards the inclusion of society's diversity through a systematic and varying programming. Particularly, from Myra Brown's (SH) point of view, costume collections proved to be a very promising source for progressing in their socially responsive programming. In fact, she disclosed their next project related to sexual identities on the persona Lilly Savage, justifying the

importance of continuity of similar initiatives and the pursuit for constantly fulfilling the institutional diversity action planning:

We are looking further ahead in future costume exhibitions . . . and we will certainly look at how we can include that sort of diversity issues within. We are planning to do later this year . . . a costume [exhibition] of Lilly Savage . . . at the Walker [Art Gallery]. So, again contacts have [been] made. It's just keeping that sort of trend going, it's not just one off. You are actually building these diversity issues, including lesbian, gay issue at our programme. We do have a diversity action plan and exhibitions are relevant to . . . that plan. So, it has to be constant . . . It's something you need to build in that in the future and I think [it] . . . has been successful . . . So, I think the impact is we carry on, looking at our program at diversity issues again using costume collections in different ways because . . . [it's] a great vehicle for talking about cultural changes really.

### **Developing a meaningful museum experience**

Broadly speaking, cultural institutions like museums and galleries are envisioned as sites of high educational and social value, expanding people's horizons. As it has been previously discussed in Chapter 2, scholars, practitioners and museum associations are increasingly calling for a more intensified socially responsive, or even activist, practice from a wide spectrum of starting points. In addition, an increasing number of projects are continuously being carried out to further explore the effects of museum work on individuals' lives, attitudes and knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill *et al* 2000; National Museums Liverpool 2011; Museums Association 2013) but there is still a lack of a substantial amount of studies considering the long-term ones. Besides, when 'hot topics' are exhibited in gallery spaces, including the portrayal of homosexuality or any other non-heteronormative sexual identity, then, all these conversations on the expected social impact of museums become of paramount significance.



Not surprisingly, hence, the data collected from interviews with museum staff at both sites attested to an analogous excitement of having an effect on their audiences at multiple levels: emotional, conceptual and attitudinal. The themes deriving from the findings are being discussed under two sub-sections. The first one sheds light on museum staff expectation for *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* to act as a stimulus for evoking a sense of cultural ownership and a sense of belonging among people not conforming to the social hetero-norms. The second part explores the potential impact on visitors' attitudes towards sexual diversity.

### ***Evoking a sense of cultural ownership and belonging***

The plan to provide a motive for under-represented groups, such as those identifying themselves outside the heteronormative world, and to construct an environment where they would feel welcomed and appreciated seems to have played a significant role in how both projects were shaped. Research shows that minority groups often lack appropriate cultural representation and cannot relate their personal experiences to the exhibits on display, resulting in rare or no visitation at all (Dodd and Sandell 1998; Research Centre for Museums and Galleries 2004) and in a feeling of discontent due to the inability to personally connect with some displays (Desai and Thomas 1998; Heimlich and Koke 2008). Apparently then they tend to value attempts offering cultural validations of their identity and community history (Luckenbill 2002; Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010a). They may even feel being excluded by the mainstream, motivating an increasing number of museums to address the challenge of their inclusion through stand-alone exhibitions, outreach programmes, and so on, which is the exact opposite of what *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* aimed at, according to its curator Pauline Rushton (SH):

Generally I prefer to integrate because I think it's more instructive to the audience and it's less likely to ghettoise people in the eyes of the audience

as well . . . If you integrate them into the wider broader exhibitions, it's more inclusive. So, you are not making them [a] separate, ghettoised community which if we did them as a separate things, they might be perceived as such. But . . . if I say for example I did a show on cross-dressing, well, I would include aspects of straight people dressed in opposite gender clothing who are not gay.

Further, as previously raised, both case studies managed to overcome the hurdles caused by the lack of relevant collections and included these culturally disadvantaged voices. The analysis of the relevant feedback from several interviewees seems to corroborate Mark O'Neill's discussion about the impact of social exclusion on one's perception of their role in the society they live in:

The analysis underlying social inclusion is that exclusion from the opportunities society has to offer is a deeply sustained culture reinforced by attitudes of excluded and included alike. For the excluded, whether they be so for reasons of poverty, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, or most often, some combination of these, their situation can generate a lack of confidence, a sense of not belonging, which make supposed opportunities seem unattainable.

(2002: 34)

Accordingly, interview findings revealed staff expectations to evoke a sense of cultural ownership and a sense of belonging among sexual minorities through the inclusion of their experiences in their display narratives. In Birmingham, the principal contributor to the exhibition wished for LGBTQ visitors to understand their significant part in British cultural history:

I would like gay people to feel they have more of an ownership over [the] culture of this country. I'd like them to feel they have the right to be in cultural institutions, and whatever, wherever they are on the lesbian and gay spectrum, that's great and that's ok.

(Matt Smith, BMAG)

Equally, the co-curator highlighted their intention to raise public visibility of the previously disregarded LGBTQ community in order to create a context that would be more representative of their experiences, thus more pleasant:

Queering the museum was . . . an exhibition that gives visibility to . . . the lives and identities of LGBT people, which are not visible within the museum displays . . . I think the reason for doing the show is that we have never done anything before for LGBT audiences and that's partly because we don't have collections but also because of opportunities . . . It has brought some LGBT people in but not as many as we would like, which has probably to do with the marketing. But we know from some of the responses on twitter and from giving a talk that all people thought it was very positive and felt very comfortable in a museum environment.

(Andy Horn, BMAG)

At Sudley House, the idea of creating spaces of more relevance to contemporary society was also stressed as an effective strategy to reduce exclusion:

We are able to think more broadly and we want actually address all these issues and make people feel more inclusive in that venues. . . . Well, I think it would just be a less relevant exhibition, I think it would be seen more historically . . . But she made it a more rounded exhibition. It was more representative of people today . . . It was a real chance to not just go down the traditional route, and just go and do a nice costume exhibition. We are actually trying these other things because it makes it more contemporary. I think it's more relevant to society as a whole, and as organisation we really

are keen on diversity and we are really keen on trying, where appropriate and possible, to address . . . [such] issues as well . . . It was more representative of people today.

(Myra Brown, SH)

Therefore, a shared expectation was to promote each site as being truly inclusive of sexual minorities, which as other studies have shown is not only stimulating a sense of cultural ownership and belonging, but it also sets the basis for establishing a credible relationship with a previously disregarded community. It is felt that following this kind of strategy opportunities for future collaboration in terms of loans, consultancy, and so on, might open up (Tibbles 2012: 166).

### ***Prompting reflection***

Museum theory and practice has a quite long history of advancing the museums as social forum acting as places bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, stimulating public debates on emerging social issues, and promoting the notion of human rights. In other words, museums are viewed as a 'frontier', as Golding proposes, that is 'a zone where learning is created, new identities are forged; new connections are made between disparate groups and their own histories' (2007: 358). Furthermore, a shared expectation of causing some form of social change seems to lie beneath this admirable standpoint. Otherwise, there would be no actual justification of transforming museums into a cultural, educational and socially responsible institution.

Yet, as previously explained, such statements must be considered with caution, avoiding over-generalised and romantic assumptions. This is often stressed by museum professionals with a great record of involvement with the social role of museums, such as Mark O'Neill, the Director of Museums and Galleries, Culture and Sport in Glasgow, who stated about their social justice biennial project at the Gallery of Modern Art that (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010: 14):

We want to challenge people to think and feel differently, but we are not about trying to outrage people . . . It is not serious politics if you alienate most of your audience, you do not generate a dialogue . . . discussion . . . thinking . . . We want to raise issues - but responsibly.

On that account, as data showed, interviewees talked very sensibly about their projects, rendering them as examples of this social model of museum practice but simultaneously recognising the limitations of their attempt. For instance, the curator of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* elaborated on their realistic ambition of having the capacity to affect those individuals more receptive to new and less conventional ideas. In her way, she actually confirmed how visitors' openness and motivation for acquiring new knowledge work as two of the basic prerequisites for museum learning (Falk and Dierking 2000). Thus, her answer was:

You can't change people's attitudes if they are ingrained. And if there are prejudiced attitudes, you are not gonna change that over. But . . . we hope by doing this kind of approach [to] contribute to people being broadminded about it, more broadminded and not thinking 'oh God, that shouldn't be allowed' or 'only men and women should get married'. It's more of an inclusive thing then, so I'm hoping that will encourage people to think more or to be more open minded . . . So we are not trying to, it's not crusading to get a view over. But, we are just giving a view and saying 'look, this is what some people do in the gay community and that's fine'. It fits into this trend of changing customs, the law changes about how you can get married.

(Pauline Rushton, SH)

In Birmingham, nonetheless, Matt Smith (BMAG) expressed his hope that his interventions might have acted as alternative informative sources on top of others, like media for instance, advocating a set of social values with respect to equality, understanding and respect of difference. Regardless of no direct mention to the constraints restricting a museum project to fully communicate its social messages, his comment was still perceived as an indirect suggestion towards this end. For

instance, Sandell and Dodd in their article point out the contribution of the social image of museums as trustful institutions in the promotion of learning and social values, stating that:

Museums . . . might most appropriately be understood not as sites of moral coercion but rather as learning environments in which infinitely diverse meanings can be constructed; but meanings which are generated out of engagement with a set of credible, authentic and ethically informed interpretive resources.

(Sandell and Dodd 2010: 20)

Likewise, Matt Smith (BMAG) through his comparison of media's conventional portrayal of sexuality and his own attempt to depict it differently with a humorous tone, attests to this view admitting that the social impact of his project *Queering the Museum* can also manifest itself implicitly, through offering an alternative and well-informed viewpoint on sensitive issues that often contrasts with those in popular media:

I'd like straight people to take away that talking about sexuality can be funny. It doesn't have to be confrontational . . . It's not that big a deal and I think the ways that the media are treating it, it's like a big deal.

This validity of the museum voice especially in respect to invisible and often marginalised social groups was raised by Andy Horn (BMAG), stressing how the fact that museums are regarded as truthful organisations can actually prompt people to transform their previously held negative perceptions:

Well, I think . . . to make our regular audiences aware of [the] LGBT identity in an overt way rather than people saying 'I have never met a gay person', even [though] they have actually met in daily lives. They probably transact with people in a bank, in a shop, who are gay without realising it. And it gives institutional authority . . . by being in the museum. People trust the

authority that the museum has and as a consequence of that, I think that gives out a very positive image.

In addition, the deliberate choice of contextualising sexual diversity within exhibits appealing to the general public should be considered as interlinked with the museum's intention to communicate such social messages. Considering that both projects were open for the general audiences and sexual diversity was not a stand-alone portrayal in a confined space, then, it is my understanding that the encouragement of sympathetic and tolerant attitudes towards sexual minorities is more relevant to the general public as compared to the enhancing of a sense of cultural ownership and belonging which might be more applicable to visitors falling into the LGBTQ community. Consequently, although such references were found only in staff responses at Liverpool, it could be argued that the same case applied to the project in Birmingham too. Thus, *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* digs into the range of wedding traditions communicating the message of equal appraisal of each single tradition regardless of gender, ethnicity or any other cultural background one might have. Eventually, some individuals' thoughts might have been triggered on the subject of their perception and appreciation of diverse formal partnership ceremonies:

I mean, it was presented in the way that it was presented respectfully and I think that [the same sex civil partnership] was presented . . . on equal platform with anything else. So . . . you are not singling something out because it's different and that's what we didn't want to do. We wanted obviously address these are different ways but they are all equally valid.

(Myra Brown, SH)

Pauline Rushton (SH) commented along the same lines:

In the modern world, we have to accept that these things happen, so we need to reflect them back to people as we do with other aspects of the modern world. And one of the jobs that museums have, is to make people

examine what they think of as traditional or accepted ideas and debate them and think 'where does that come from?', 'what is it look like today as an idea?', 'what do we think of that?', 'how do you think it will develop in the future?'. So, those are ideas that I think it's a legitimate thing to ask in a museum exhibition and to include it in there.

Correspondingly, Matt Smith's (BMAG) interventions and juxtapositions unveiled LGBTQ stories within a highly heteronormative environment with almost no permanent references to sexual minorities. On that account, Andy Horn (BMAG) wished those engaging with the exhibition to further familiarise themselves with some of the issues affecting this marginalised community and eventually appreciate their role in contemporary society as full members of it:

I would hope that they might have more understanding of LGBT identities really and to recognise that they have their importance in the society and [that they are] not something that should be marginalised.

Moreover, the overarching social objective was also transmitted through taking visitors by surprise and stimulating their empathy as an alternative route to trigger people's attitudes. To begin with, regular audiences at Sudley House and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery anticipated an unforeseen cultural inclusion among the gallery spaces. Logically the majority of visitors would not expect to find so many references to sexual minorities across ten different galleries in Birmingham or pictures and costumes of a same sex civil partnership under the theme of 'hitched' in the traditional setting of Sudley House:



I mean from my point of view, the exciting thing was re-interpreting collections and being new ideas [and] new stories into pre-existing collections and pre-existing displays. And then, representing collections in new ways made people stop, thinking 'oh, what's going in here', 'oh, this is different'. So, there's an element of surprise for the visitors walking around the museum.

(Toby Watley, BMAG)

I think that there are probably some surprises there to people. I think that visitors, and probably a lot did, just came to see the historic wedding costumes.

(Linda Pittwood, SH)

Additionally, it was felt that sexual minorities' public image may benefit from the way they were integrated in *Queering the Museum*, as visitors may have built up more empathy towards them as a result of their engagement with its displays. The stimulation of such a feeling is more likely to be found in LGBT related exhibitions as usually they are developed to increase visibility and awareness of LGBT issues, and accordingly, inform people and hopefully reinforce positive attitudes. It is, in other words, an expected objective for projects touching on minorities in any way, and, thus, it came very naturally to hear it from the project artist and co-curator:

If on some level, it brings some sense of empathy . . . for me it would be exciting that.

(Matt Smith, BMAG)

## **Conclusions from Chapter 5**

Chapter 5 was based on the findings drawn from interviews with staff and unveiled four major themes emerging from them. Hence, I attempted to offer an insight into

the preconditions leading to the development of my two case studies and the approach they employed, as well as into the anticipated impact of the inclusive character of both projects on the museum profile, work, staff, core and new audiences.

Overall, the current findings add to a growing body of literature on how the museum sector within an economically difficult climate can still proceed in creating projects focusing on conventionally disregarded aspects of their social agenda. Institutional and external support was described as a vital precondition for the smoothest development of such inclusive projects. The implications for museum practice and especially with reference to collecting, interpreting and exhibiting material related to sexual minorities are serious. A well-written strong social policy and agenda which all museum personnel is fully aware of and ascribed to, is the basic foundation upon which any kind of socially informed project can be based. Along with charismatic 'leaders' it could enhance the level of institutional support in favour of socially inclusive exhibitions, verifying Karp and Levine's belief in the influence of the staff's character and belief system on the exhibition they produce (1991: 1). Nonetheless, the existence of policies on equality and diversity is not essential for the development of a social agenda for all museums. Yet, although there are examples of museums, like The Horniman Museum in London, having achieved their social objectives without placing a lot of emphasis on bureaucracy, if policies like the ones prevailing at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and National Museums of Liverpool are thoughtfully developed, explained and regularly practiced, then, they should be regarded as among the core contributing factors in advancing equality and diversity through socially inclusive projects (Nightingale and Mahal 2012).

Moreover, key partnerships with external professionals, organisations from the cultural sector like arts festivals, and collaboration through temporary loans with representatives from local communities might raise the chances of overcoming practical hurdles, like budget and collectable material, and soothe the production of new initiatives for the museum social programming. Thus, the foundations for

generating a socially responsible programming become too solid to be overlooked. Therefore, if a socially responsible museum philosophy is in place along with significant external partners willing to contribute, then, persisting on disregarding certain parts of the society becomes further unjustifiable. Yet, some interviewees disclosed, explicitly or implicitly, their anxiety about the rest of the staff's reaction, which might be understood as a sign that sexual diversity is still a controversial topic among some museum professionals. So, taking all these findings into consideration, it could be argued that even if the practical problematic aspects of LGBTQ inclusions are taken care of (funding and collectable artifacts), there is still a battle to overcome within the museum itself. I would then suggest that unless museums pay further attention to effectively communicating their social values, mission and responsibility to all the diverse communities they serve and to staff at all levels in order to ensure that everyone joining the museum is fully ascribed to this agenda, an increasing and eventually permanent integration of sexual minorities in collections might remain a highly demanding and incomplete task.

Also, the personal motivation and determination of the leading curators at both sites launched such a contextualisation of sexual difference among regular exhibits for the very first time at Sudley House and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Their role was crucial and recognised by other members of staff in establishing a promising working network of external partners, in overcoming the lack of appropriate exhibits in their museum collections, and in effectively promoting the overarching idea behind the projects under study among personnel to secure the necessary internal support. However, this finding should be treated with caution as it implies that sexuality and particularly non-heterosexuality still frequently remains a matter of personal agenda and initiative.

Furthermore, the anticipated positive effect on institutions' sustainability plans is another point that requires careful interpretation. Both projects under study were regarded as an asset to the institutional programming owing to their multiple contributions to their hosting site's sustainability. In her article, Claudia Ocello, President and CEO of Museum Partners Consulting, LLC, concludes with a

noteworthy remark on the close relationship between the museum social role and its sustainability:

In the current economic climate, I argue that museums - if they are willing to accept this challenge and are poised for change - should embrace this expanded vision to become more responsive and relevant to society, consequently encouraging sustainability - both as a way to keep the doors open as well as fulfil their mission.

(Ocello 2011: 188)

Her observation applies to the focus of this research as both examples were recognised as an opportunity to work towards each institution's sustainability. Critical external working networks, wise promotion of social messages to the widest possible audience and not solely to the communities involved, and confidence in diversifying institutional ways of working on exhibition planning and development were all highly praised. Specifically, they were all acknowledged, explicitly or not, as direct outcomes of having adopted certain approaches to include a usually disregarded social group, that could potentially have a positive effect on each institution's future, in terms of their audiences, collections and ultimately, of the museums' principal mission.

Thus the production of temporary exhibitions seeking to diversify audiences, to provide a richer and more reflective of contemporary society agenda and, to create new partnerships with local organisations or communities and artists, should be certainly welcomed in the museum sector. And they should be following such a direction as it is a demonstrable sign of a socially responsible and purposeful museum thinking for its future, since 'being responsive is the most responsible way to stay relevant, sustainable and to demonstrate the worth of the museum to communities and society at large.' (Ocello 2011: 199). But, raising a museum profile in order to become more socially responsive to cultural diversity, especially through partnerships with minority groups, is an ongoing process. Besides it is very unfortunate how frequently cultural institutions tend to appear inclusive on one

occasion only, lacking a plan of sustaining and further developing their social work and partnerships with minorities (Reeve 2006: 54; Tibbles 2012: 171). The inclusion of sexual minorities' voice in my case studies with the help of prominent collaborations, nevertheless, was not an one-off gesture neither at Birmingham nor at Liverpool, placing them at odds with other cultural institutions' practice. Both sites placed these particular exhibitions within a wider socially inclusive programming followed with consistency at least during the time of writing this thesis.

National Museums of Liverpool have a dedicated service and a Head of Museum Partnerships with the task of developing and sustaining a wide range of partnerships with Higher Education, Art Council Collection, International internships, North West Touring Exhibitions Group, etc (National Museums Liverpool 2013c). Besides, the leading curator of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, produced in 2011 the exhibition on a persona performed by Paul O'Grady, at the Walker Art Gallery, titled as *Savage Style: Costumes from Lilly's Wardrobe*, showing seven costumes, while four additional ones were on display at the Museum of Liverpool. More importantly, all these inclusions were presented with free access as part of the local queer arts and culture festival Homotopia, proclaiming once more in practice a continuous plan to develop exhibitions on a number of aspects concerning sexual diversity.

Likewise, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery carried on their collaboration with SHOUT! Festival with an event very similar to the concept of *Queering the Museum*. In November 2011, David Hoyle, a performance artist, was invited to conduct a tour across the museum galleries with the intention to queer some of the exhibits on display to take over 'from the successful Queering the Museum at Birmingham Museum and Art gallery in SHOUT 2010' as stated in their website (SHOUT 2011).

Finally, an interesting set of socially informed objectives manifested in interviews with staff, ranging from triggering a sense of cultural belonging for people whose sexual identities were previously ignored, to prompting reflection on one's thinking

and value system. Nevertheless, their anticipation was not too optimistic in that several interviewees explained the impossibility of pleasing and affecting everybody. Once again, signs of careful planning were evident in their responses with reference to briefing sessions they organised to discuss potential complaints and how to deal with them. Interviews with staff members unravelled a number of realistic objectives with reference to potential social impact on sexual minorities and on the general audiences engaging with each case study. By being more representative and responsive to social heterogeneity, they intended to produce a museum experience of relevance to a more diverse audience, which, according to museum literature, has been deemed as an essential precondition for tackling social exclusion (Newman and McLean 2002: 65) and as an opportunity to affect communities' sense of belonging and cultural ownership (Hooper-Greenhill *et al* 2000). Further, at both sites museum staff created these projects not as exhibitions with a plain aesthetic or historical learning value, but more importantly as a stimulus for reconsideration of traditional attitudes towards sexual difference.

To conclude, data drawn from interviews with the professionals involved in the development of the two case studies seem to suggest that potentially contentious topics, like sexual diversity, are confidently managed if thoughtful planning and proper arrangements are made in time. This finding reflects the ideas of the co-curator of the recent controversial exhibition that took place in the US *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, Jonathan David Katz, who explained during an interview with Avram Finkelstein that 'because you can't account for how an audience will respond to you, then you come to recognize that meaning is the result of an interpretive move, an interactive move, over which you have no control' (2011). On another note, Janes and Sandell elaborate on the complexities of museums' social work for those involved in management positions, mirroring most of the key themes that interviews with exhibition teams at both sites raised with regards to their organisation's social agenda:

[M]useums also need to ensure that there is a sense of shared purpose, and that a commitment to socially responsible work is enshrined in the

museum's mission. In addition, there is an ongoing need for active experimentation and risk taking . . . Socially responsible work is also a shared responsibility, and museums must be prepared to reach out to their communities to acquire the expertise and experience they themselves lack.

(2007: 11)

Thus, the only remaining task for museums truly involved in equality and diversity issues is to ensure greater consistency in their future programming.

Having analysed the aims and objectives as set by exhibition development teams, the focus is now turned on the findings from the audience research I carried out at both sites. Chapter 6, then, discusses audience reception and engagement with the inclusive curatorial approaches adopted for the two projects this study explores, followed by the final and concluding Chapter 7 where the contributions of the current study on museum practice and sexual minorities' representation as well as suggestions for future research will be analysed.

## Chapter 6: Audience reception and engagement with inclusivity

This chapter is now turning the focus to the findings from the audience research undertaken for each case study. Eighteen interviewees were asked about their views on the exhibitions through semi-structured interviews at each site, raising a number of questions ranging from general ones about the exhibition to more specific ones regarding the inclusion of contemporary understandings of gender and sexual roles in the display content. The main scope was to spontaneously get an insight into people's reception and appreciation of the inclusive reframing of gender and sexual difference.

On this account, the interview protocol was divided into five different sections, four of which included questions of a more exploratory nature and only one was specifically targeted at the portrayal of sexual difference (Appendix 3). Thus answers were sought to five sets of questions classified as (a) opening questions, (b) reactions to the exhibition, (c) messages, (d) museums as ethical leaders and their social roles, and, (e) visitor background. Following this approach, respondents were given several opportunities to comment positively or negatively on any part(s) of the exhibitions on display, without being led to comment on the particular themes my research is interested in. Only at the very end of the interview, the fourth set of questions, were members of the public directly prompted to share their thoughts on the embodied expressions of gender and sexual diversity.

Broadly speaking, individuals tend to respond differently to exhibitions. It has been known for long how one's personal background and motivations influence significantly their focus on special exhibits and the readings they might make (MacDonald 1992; Dierking 1996). The analysis of visitors' feedback therefore revealed a range of ways in which people engaged with the content and modes of interpretation. Their discussions designated a rich pool of findings which were then grouped under three major modes of understanding the projects: as a learning stimulus, as an advocacy of social morals and eventually as a moment for



reflection of themselves and others, and, finally, as a chance for reviewing the social responsibility of museums. The first category refers to the historical knowledge visitors appeared to have gained on wedding fashion history and traditions at Liverpool and on LGBT history at Birmingham. The second and most intriguing theme consists of audiences' readings of both exhibitions as socially purposeful projects because of their attempt to promote positive visibility for sexual minorities, act as projectors of contemporary social values of equality and respect for cultural and sexual difference, and consequently, evoke, if possible, change in peoples' attitudes. Finally, the third section considers audiences' reflections on the role museums should adopt and develop with respect to minorities and more specifically the LGBTQ community.

In a way, nonetheless, these forms of interaction are usually interlinked since the reception of new or more insightful piece of information may well trigger one's belief and moral system to be revised:

The learner may demonstrate that he or she knows or has insight into something that he or she did not know or could not do before; the learner may reflect new skills that have been acquired; the learner's attitudes, values or behaviour may change as a result of learning experiences.

(Black 2005: 129)

Accordingly, the majority of testimonies attest to this idea revealing that learning and enriched understandings of the implicit and explicit themes of both exhibitions emerged, fostering an impact on visitors' values, emotions and attitudes as a result of the projects. Nevertheless, in few instances the overall reception of the inclusiveness of gender and sexual difference seemed to have been blurred in some people's mind, and modest reactions towards such depictions were evidenced among a few interviewees.

## **A learning stimulus**

A usual expectation from a museum visit is about filling knowledge gaps and coming across previously unknown ideas or facts, as audience surveys repeatedly reveal (McManus 1996; National Museums Directors' Council 2004). Thus, data generated from visitor interviews gave the impression that learning occurred in various forms and at different levels. Not every single person felt that they had learnt something new nor did they reach the same conclusions on what each exhibition had intended. Following the principles of constructivist learning theory, such an assumption is expected because of the impact of one's ideology and expertise on their learning experience:

As constructivist learning theory confirms, the construction of meaning depends on prior knowledge, and on beliefs and values. We see according to what we know, and we make sense or meaning according to what we perceive. In contrast to those who hold that knowledge is a body of objective facts, external to the knower, constructivism asserts that knowledge exists only through the process of knowing, and that meanings are constructed by individuals, and not found 'ready-made.

(Hooper-Greenhill 1999b: 47)

That being the case, the majority of the recorded responses suggest that both exhibitions were regarded as an opportunity to engage with and learn something new. A better understanding of wedding traditions and LGBT past was the principal intended learning outcome and according to visitor testimonies it was well-received by many of them. Due to the different subject focus, audience members at Liverpool admitted to having enriched their historical knowledge on English marriage traditions' development throughout the ages and on how other local communities perform their wedding ceremonies. Whereas, as expected, several of those engaged with Matt Smith's interventions referred to LGBT historical facts or personalities they were not aware of before entering the site. Additionally, a small number of visitors interpreted the exhibition's message as a report on the social

change that has unfolded in recent years in terms of public and legal recognition of sexual minorities.

### ***Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs***

According to the promotional leaflet, the exhibition would be '[a] costume exhibition exploring the history of marriage, and the customs surrounding it, from Victorian times to the present day' (Figure 2). That being the case, several respondents referred to the project as an effort to display the changes in wedding fashion and costumes throughout the ages. A historical overview since Victorian times of marriage was the main objective in the opinion of four persons. Dipti reflected on 'how fashions have changed and [how] customs [have changed], although many are still the same as they've been all through the years'. But some elaborated further on the broader theme of the show. Angelina made a comparison between the customs and cost of past weddings, especially within a declining economic climate, with the particularities of contemporary ceremonies, sharing that 'it's nice to see the fashions throughout the ages and the period of austerity and how that affected the fashions and the war time weddings'. Barbara, on the other hand, highlighted though implicitly the advantage of a museum space to act as a historical learning environment, explaining that:

Also, as I've said earlier, we've learnt some new things about traditions that we are aware of but didn't actually understand where it actually came from. That was very interesting really. We've learnt in a sort of context that it's not like history lesson. It's been interesting just to walk around and see things.

Kate found herself recollecting photographic memories of her mother's wedding day, explaining that seeing matrimonial pictures of the English past prompted her to realise how outdated her own wedding dress would look in the future:

[It is] sort of realising how fashions have changed really. It's like looking at your mum's photos, and that was only back to the 50s, and then, how

compared to today sort of my wedding photos would look out fashioned. It's just sort of interesting to realising it in your own lifetime but it doesn't seem like a long time . . . How in a very short of time these things in fashion have changed.

However, interpretations of the exhibition as a project on marriage and its traditions were more than expected. A prominent finding emerged from five responses in which interviewees acknowledged the multicultural focus on diverse communities' costumes and traditions as an opportunity to expose themselves to different cultural perspectives. Without knowing whether these individuals previously had any direct connection with pagans, gypsies and Travellers, or gays, the merit of formally picturing minority cultures cannot be overlooked. A key virtue of museums is to act as the only facility for a certain percentage of audiences to get in touch with non-mainstream cultures, as very interestingly Suina puts it:

For many visitors both young and old, the museum may be the only 'educational' contact they have had with another culture. The impression they get from the museum will persist in future encounters, be they casual conversation about the culture or face-to-face associations with the people and their descendants.

(1999: 107)

Thereby, a good mix of references emerged in light of raising awareness about peripheral communities as a direct result of the inclusive thematic approach. Christine explicitly described the all-inclusive mode of marriage portrayal as her motivation for visiting with her company, stressing the learning benefit she could have as an outsider about local traditions:

We knew there was an exhibition about marriages of different communities and, as we are foreigners, we both thought it was a good idea to learn something about the different customs of communities of the Liverpool area.

Moreover, positive views were aired about local populations' embodiment. The pagan/handfasting (Christopher, Christine, Angelina), the same sex ceremony (Christopher) as well as the gypsy and Travellers (Kate, Dipti) and the Jewish weddings (Dipti) were all addressed as an interesting new piece of information. The museum thematic-community approach to the history of marital traditions proved to be enlightening for almost a third of the interviewees and effective in terms of giving visual representations of cultural customs of which is difficult to get a firsthand experience.

The idea of familiarising several persons more deeply with undiscovered areas of a certain issue, like LGBT history, was also discussed regarding alternative forms of holding a civil or religious wedding ceremony. Three interviewees referred to the same sex civil partnership inclusion as a chance for advancing and visualising their historical and social knowledge.

In particular, Maria found herself enriching her academic work as her MA dissertation was focusing on homosexuality. This finding was in accordance with one of the key strengths and opportunities described in Sudley House's Exhibition Marketing Campaign (Flenley 2010) which was to be 'of interest to textile and decorative art specialists and academics and students based across the region'.

Christopher was able to visualise the uncommon experience for heterosexual people of a same sex civil partnership and for non-pagans of a pagan ceremony 'as you don't get to see every day unless you are pagan or gay', stressing in that way the role of museums in bringing visitors in touch with a range of different customs.

Moreover, Kate grasped a slightly broader social intend, that of the change in political and public reception of same sex love which did not allow for same sex representations up until recently. In her view, thanks to the portrayal of the most recent progress in what defines a marital ceremony, the exhibition managed to show 'how things have progressed and how very much more liberal we are, how the wedding things and civil ceremonies situation is'. Perhaps the visualisation of

the evolution of wedding in time, the expansion of its definition and the development of new forms like civil partnerships, can act as a visual learning experience in that it might nurture deeper thought on the subject through the rejection of a static definition for marriage.

### ***Queering the Museum***

Equally at Birmingham, visitors' feedback resulted in similar learning outcomes, ranging from absorbing historical details from the past and present of LGBTQ history. Notably, however, an intriguing assumption could be made at this stage with regard to how both projects were publicised. Contrary to the exhibition in Liverpool, the promotion of *Queering the Museum* seemed fairly more ambitious. *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* was advertised as a costume-based exhibition on the historical overview of marriage since the Victorian era, but, nonetheless, it inspired a high percentage of attendees to reflect on a much wider array of themes (social change and values like equality and respect for diversity as discussion in previous and later sub-chapters reveals). Whereas Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery clearly stated in its leaflets and web page that *Queering the Museum* was not only about LGBTQ art and histories, but more importantly designed to challenge public perception of museums and galleries:

Museums use and group objects to tell stories. Through omission and careful arrangement of facts it is easy to assume that the objects held in museums have nothing to do with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. . . . In a bold new project, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, in conjunction with ShOUT! Festival, has allowed artist and curator Matt Smith access to their collections and galleries to tell the stories that museums usually omit. Sometimes serious, sometimes humorous, this exhibition will change how you look at museums and question what you see.

(Promotional leaflet of *Queering the Museum*, Figure 15)

To begin with, there were some visitors praising Matt Smith's interventions across the museum as an effective conclusive presentation of important aspects of LGBT past. Gabrielle, friend of gay people as manifested in her response, disclosed her knowledge gap in her friends' culture and how the unintended engagement with the exhibits filled it, at least partially:

I came in touch with a process of familiarisation with gay culture and art . . .  
Some of my best friends are gay and now I know something more about gay culture.

Two participants, despite their distinctive way of expression, seemed to have grasped the broader, and perhaps more critical message, of the unreasonable absence of sexual difference in museum collections:

It can only be a good thing and [it] helps the public understand that LGBT people have always existed and are not just a modern fad.

(David)

I felt the exhibition was giving all audiences a historical perspective about the lack of inclusion and understanding of the LGBT communities.

(Graham)

Moreover, the 19 artistic interventions publicly launched a couple of historical facts usually unknown to the wider public and even to the individuals with a special interest in LGBT history. Among the interviews, four of the respondents made specific references to having got an insight into previously unheard stories or facts. As a result, the most popular reference was to the Polari language and the green carnations, which were a kind of a secret language and sign code, respectively, among homosexual people, for four interviewees:

I have learnt some things I didn't know about, such as information about the gay slang of the past.

(Gabrielle)

There was a lot more going on than I was aware of. I learnt sort of underground culture. So, I learnt quite a lot of what [was] going on underground, identity expressions, and the way they were communicating with each other.

(Janet)

And some other [parts were] educating, such as the Polari.

(Sandra)

The Epstein Sculpture as [I] didn't know about green carnations.

(George)

Additionally, for a small number of attendants their historical memory was freshened through reading about well-known historical figures of the past and how their environment and themselves coped with their non-conformity to social norms:

It was very interesting to find [out] about historical personalities and some information about how people used to think about homosexuality and how gay used to express it or not express it.

(Sandra)

The bit about Simeon Solomon and the difference between him and Frederic Leyton. . . . The suggestion of their inclination and what went on with Frederic to rise and be successful and the other one ended up in a workhouse. I think it highlighted the difference between them.

(Peter)



Finally, Helen appreciated the visualised synopsis of the social and political change, highlighting how she was inspired to rethink the significant progressive steps for LGBT rights, as:

It was insightful and a big reminder that in my lifetime we have gained more rights, had the first lesbian kiss on TV, which for me as a young lesbian was a huge issue at the time. “Equality” with civic partnership and legislation is there but still has got long way to go. Matt’s work was a great reminder of that and also how much more we have to do.

### **A socially purposeful project**

Museum scholars along with professionals from other sectors, like broadcasting media for instance, tend to call for more relevance to contemporary society through the programmes museums or media develop, particularly after consultation with their audiences. Despite the multiple forms such a practice could take, broadly speaking it means that cultural and media organisations need to promote through explicit or implicit patterns a better understanding of the coexisting diverse communities and promote respect and tolerance among them. Considering sexual minorities, in 2010 for example, BBC’s report *Portrayal of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People on the BBC* surprisingly revealed that both LGB and the majority of heterosexual participants demanded an improved representation of LGB voices in BBC programming, in terms of quantity, modes of depiction and avoidance of prejudicial perceptions (BBC 2010: 7-8).

Moreover the evaluation of museum programmes focusing on non-heterosexual material further reinforces arguments towards a more inclusive practice representative of cultural diversity. For instance, the evaluation of *sh[OUT]: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex art and culture* exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow carried out by Sandell, Dodd and Jones in 2010,

indicated a number of interesting points raised by visitors, one of which was the social value several individuals placed on this project, highlighting that:

Generally visitors saw the message of the exhibition as a positive one, promoting tolerance and acceptance for LGBTI human rights and equality specifically and, more generally, promoting acceptance of difference.

(2010: 27)

Further, the report on *Warren Cup* exhibition at the British Museum, conducted by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre in 2006, revealed the majority of visitors' warm approval of drawing attention on sexuality, stating as one of the main conclusions that:

The majority of visitors were pleasantly surprised by the exhibition, and many thought the subject matter was entirely appropriate for the British Museum as it reflects modern society and the interests of visitors. If anything, visitors wanted to be more shocked and challenged by exhibitions!

(2006: 29)

Such examples, published online and available for the public, though limited in number, they are very encouraging in that a significant percentage of audiences regards the inclusion of sexual diversity as a positive and potentially influential element for public attitudes. The data drawn from this thesis are therefore consistent with previous research as according to the majority of interviewees these kinds of social objectives were evident in their responses. Hopefully, the current audience research, parts of which have already been published and publicly discussed at international and local conferences, further extends our understanding of the range of visitors' responses to such references to marginal gender and sexual identities. Besides, they offer additional empirical justification from a relatively rarely encountered perspective in support of growing museum literature on the need of increased cultural representation of sexual and other

minority groups experiencing high levels of prejudice and discrimination in their daily lives.

### ***Readings of social values***

A significant percentage of the audience at both sites read the exhibitions as proponents of positive visibility and, consequently, as projectors of contemporary societal values of equality and respect of cultural and sexual difference.

### ***Interpretations of visibility***

In response mainly to the question ‘Do you feel that this exhibition is trying to communicate any particular message?’ one person at Sudley House and one third of those at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery felt that visibility of sexual minorities was one of the underlying patterns. Considering the fact that almost any cultural event involving depictions and references to disadvantaged communities is primarily thought of as a means for publicly addressing their histories, it is striking how few visitors raised the issue of visibility:

I guess just that it gave a higher degree of visibility to LGBT people.

(Graham, BMAG)

Visibility. That’s all.

(Nick, BMAG)

The message was that LGBT people are everywhere and always have been.

(David, BMAG)

Moreover, *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* was an attempt that could actually help in boosting LGBT visibility, according to Christine (SH) who, as a person identifying herself as a lesbian, strongly held that such positive depictions are the prerequisite for achieving greater levels of public understanding. Still, making one's identity visible is not enough unless attention is paid to the techniques employed for the representation of identities. The significance of a well-thought cultural portrayal of homosexuality, highlighting the naturalness of same sex love and desire was underscored by this female visitor, stating that:

It will make us more visible. I think visibility is very important when you want to show the visitors that there is nothing wrong or unnatural with gays and lesbians and our special culture, if there is such a thing as special culture. Visibility is a step closer to understanding.

(Christine, SH)

Following up on the last statement, a similar reading emerged from Janet (BMAG) at Birmingham who perceived *Queering the Museum* as an opportunity for the non-heterosexual community to become visible and reveal aspects of itself, previously unknown to the general public:

Here [there] does seem to be quite a tension going on over there. Because on one hand, you've got all these expressions and you've got the language Polari, and they've got this very strong identity but it's shared only within themselves. An identity is usually something, from a psychological point of view, that you share and that you express out there . . . and you are having to do it: encode because of the social pressure. So, this is kind of fighting back and saying 'hey, here we are. Let's decode it all for you'.

A very interesting response was given by Joe (BMAG) who identified LGBT visibility opened up to the general public as one of the exhibition's strengths. His appraisal of SHOUT! Festival's partnership with the museum was founded on the premise of their collaboration in order to get SHOUT! Festival and sexual diversity

in a public spot easily accessed by any person regardless of gender and sexual identity:

I think it's picked up very successfully the theme of visibility and it was interesting watching the general public's reaction. Sometimes they looked at what we were looking at and they scurried away. I'd say this exhibition here . . . it's one of the few cases that SHOUT! as a festival can reach out for the general public. So, I think it's important because the festival should be for everyone, not just for the LGBT community.

Moreover, without underestimating the necessity of raising public awareness (through any possible form, including media, culture, daily life, and so on) for a minority's struggle for equality and civil rights, the overarching scope for societal and official recognition will not have been fulfilled until further gains have been achieved. In their review of the notion of the closet and coming out, through interviews with Americans identified as homosexuals, Seidman, Meeks and Traschen (1999: 10) point out the need for recognising the realistic potential of making homosexuality visible, as 'by making the closet into the key focus of gay oppression, coming out and affirming a gay identity is often viewed as the supreme political act - as if mere gay visibility undermines heterosexism'. Therefore, in contrast to earlier findings, Alexandra (BMAG) shared her scepticism on the potential impact that visualisation of sexual difference in *Queering the Museum* might have upon people. Despite her understanding of the initiative as an exhibition showing off homosexuality, she felt slightly critical on whether the final product could actually achieve more than just having brought 'issues about gay people' in front of visitors' eyes:

I think it seems to me that it plays down issues about gay people. Although throughout the museum, I feel the message is just "we are here" rather than provoking people to think a little harder.

### *Interpretations of equality*

National Museums of Liverpool through Sudley House on one hand and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery on the other, do not disappoint the widely accepted idea of museums as social agents; rather, through the selected interpretation and display of the topic of weddings and queer culture respectively, visitors appreciated them as advocates of the value of treating with equal terms the existing heterogeneity among cultural social groups. When interviewees were asked about what message they felt that each exhibition conveyed, the notion of equality was picked up in a range of ways. The distinctive readings these individuals made about equality unfolded naturally, given that this concept often takes various forms in official or scholarly talks and papers and therefore one single definition cannot be reached. For example, in his study on racism and equality in European Union law and policy, Mark Bell, Head of the School of Law at University of Leicester, reported that:

In documentation and academic literature, 'equality' is used alongside other terms, such as 'equal opportunities', 'non-discrimination', 'equal treatment', and 'diversity'. The precise meaning of these terms is difficult to pin down, especially in the context of European research where different jurisdictions (and languages) have adopted their own forms of equality-speak.

(2009: 27)

Two male visitors, one from the general public and one identified as gay, considered Matt Smith's interventions to be indicative of the equal rights and opportunities LGBT people face:

There's a good mix with the Matt Smith's stuff, the sexuality along with bears and things there and it's good to see a good mix of that sort of stuff. So, I suppose you don't often see that in more traditional exhibitions. So, that's good. So more equality in lot of it.

(Mark, BMAG)

On top of that, David (BMAG) senses that social justice for sexual minorities is not only depicted as a temporary fact but, at least in his eyes, it is presented as a permanent situation, expecting from visitors to understand 'that equality for LGBT people is here to stay and isn't just a transitory phenomenon'. The more interesting correlation, nonetheless, was offered by Christine (SH) who made a link between the notions of equality and sameness. In her feedback she shared her understanding of the museum choice to put on display in the same gallery space how diverse community groups formally celebrate their love and devotion to their partner, as an implicit technique to highlight the similarities between phenomenally distant identities. Such an inclusive approach to cultural difference is expected, in her view, to ease communication between people from the moment that the things they share in common come at front:

If we say there is a message is that people might be different in some aspects of their lives, but overall we are all the same. It doesn't matter if we all have different wedding ceremonies and different clothes. It doesn't matter if we are getting married to men or women because, after all, we all get married one way or another . . . The message is that we are all equal and we should start communicating more effectively.

Yet, one of the limitations of the above testimony is whether or not similar assumptions of equality among cultural groups are enough. It seems possible that expressing support for a society that will embrace its communities as equally valid may still hide an implicit attachment to the prevailing social norms. Some authors have commented on the inadequate public perception of these values as, through empirical research, they traced evidence of normative thinking. Even individuals who are honest about their liberal, anti-racist and open-minded views, may slip into this ambivalence. Although having its origin in race, the study of Bell and Hartmann through in-depth interviews on Americans' views on diversity sheds light on this complexity. One of their key conclusions then was that 'by appearing to recognize difference, yet failing to appreciate white normativity and systemic inequality, current diversity discourse makes it difficult to construct a meaningful

multiculturalism or genuinely progressive politics of race.’ (2007: 896). On these grounds consequently Christine (SH) appears, on the one hand, sympathetic to sexual minorities and their right to formally get ‘hitched’, but her words reveal an underlying heteronormative conviction that every person ends up in a monogamous relationship, regardless of whether such a relationship is called marriage or civil partnership or sharing a household as a couple.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction of this section, interpretations of the initiatives under study as having treated the experiences of sexual minorities fairly can emerge through anti-discriminatory and anti-racist attitudes and language. Two young female interviewees stressed the moral choice of each museum exhibition teams to practically avoid discrimination against sexual minorities which is usually practised through their exclusion from cultural projects. In other words, it could be argued that their understanding of practicing equality is the neglect of exclusionary and consequently discriminatory or racist attitudes against sexual difference in museum programming:

We talked a lot about the gay marriage and how it is represented in a museum and there is no racism against gay people or social exclusion.

(Christine, SH)

Perhaps something related to equality and gay people, or putting the public in touch with gay culture . . . I think that in the name of equality, gay and lesbian culture should be represented in museums, otherwise there is racism and exclusion and we don’t want or need our society to be racist. It is dangerous and will lead us to darker times.

(Gabrielle, BMAG)

### *Reflections of societal changing attitudes*

An additional layer of the interpretation that visitors deployed was the promotion of contemporary cultural diversity on the grounds of ethnic background or sexual



orientation. Questions about what messages each project might communicate to the audience produced a significant amount of data that were interpreted as reflections on the changing attitudes towards multiculturalism in UK society on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and so on. A notable percentage of respondents picked up themes like the inclusiveness, openness and tolerance towards the 'other', the progress that has taken place especially with regard to sexual minorities, and, the changed meaning of gender and sexuality as well as the assigned roles attached to them.

Undoubtedly during the last decades, and especially in the first half of the last decade, remarkable progress has taken place regarding LGBT civil rights. The repeal of Section 28 in 2003, the legalisation of same sex civil partnerships in 2005, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act in 2008 and the current bill on legalising same sex marriage are only a few from the big gains of the LGBT movement. Beyond question such legal reforms did have a strong impact on various sectors in the UK and on citizens' daily life.

Broadly speaking museums could not have remained intact, and the exhibitions under study are examples of museums' reflection of the social change taking place outside their walls. Kate (SH) thought of *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* as such an example thanks to the visualisation of how the official union of a couple has evolved through time:

It shows how things have progressed and how very much more liberal [we are], how wedding things and civil ceremonies situation is . . . It may make people realise that this is how things are today.

Likewise, Barbara (SH) stressed the inevitability of including contemporary versions of marital ceremonies:

Since it's an exhibition about . . . getting married, it's about the ages and how that has changed . . . So, you would have to include it really because it's part of what's happening.

Along the same lines, though with a dissatisfaction with the aesthetic outcome, was the comment by Olivia (SH), explaining that ‘for an exhibition on weddings, I thought it was an appropriate thing to do, but the suits are horrible’. Alexandra (BMAG), on the other hand, recollected her memories of the gay movement in Britain as a result of seeing Smith’s interventions, explaining that:

I thought about the law and how it has changed perceptions. Changes in the law have changed perceptions of gay people in Britain but I hadn’t really thought about how civil partnerships photographs might have changed images. I just haven’t thought about that before, so it’s provoking to think a bit harder.

A couple of interviewees shared their approval for the inclusive and multiculturalist approach employed at Liverpool for the representation of wedding costumes and traditions. Their analysis of the final outcome was an encouragement to engage with unfamiliar life aspects of communities with which they co-exist in their local and wider environment, and eventually help them learn and even understand what makes a community group distinctive and what they share in common with the majority:

Well, I hope so. Because I hope people would see it as another type of wedding to think about, that’s a kind of [weddings]. Because it’s quite a varied exhibition.

(Claire, SH)

It brings different communities and customs together. I think it is a perfect opportunity to come in touch with different cultures because it promotes understanding within various communities of a city and that leads to a peaceful co-existence . . . I see this exhibition as an attempt to bring the different cultures of the people of this city together. . . [It might have] definitely a positive impact. Representation without any prejudice against

gays will have a positive impact to the public because it will make more people to come in touch and better understand gay people.

(Christine, SH)

I can imagine some of the aspects of . . . the Gypsy wedding or the civil ceremonies might be [controversial] to some people, but I hope not. I hope they'll see it as [an] inclusive and affectionate society.

(Lilly, SH)

Although a multiculturalist approach was not the case for *Queering the Museum*, equivalent appraisal of positive visual and textual information on diverse ways of living was documented by two male visitors at Birmingham:

[To be] more exposed to things makes people more accustomed to it. Very good, very important. Make people aware of what else is there and people's opinions on it. Educate people a bit more.

(Mark, BMAG)

It shows that there are alternative lifestyles. Even that I stayed for 15-20 minutes, I got the sense that there is something different. So, I think that it was well-thought.

(Steve, BMAG)

Among these readings, an underlying fear that same sex portrayal might still annoy the audience was documented in one statement. When asked whether there was anything provocative in *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, Dorothy (SH) described the exhibition as a reflection of contemporary society, expecting that others would see it as such and will not get irritated:

But obviously [it is] not trying to provoke a reaction like to offend or upset anyone. But just to show that's what happens.

Other responses to the question on the exhibitions' messages reported a sense of acceptance of sexual diversity. Three female visitors, one at Liverpool and two in Birmingham, decoded a message of tolerance towards individuals who fall outside social gender and sexual norms:

Maybe make [the audience] think more that society accepts it and . . . It's being important for an exhibition and it's accepted.

(Maria, SH)

I didn't feel that there was any specific message. The exhibition attempted to represent LGBTQ culture in a nice way and that's all I see. If we assume there is a message, I would say that it is a message of acceptance and diversity.

(Sandra, BMAG)

Yes, I think it's telling us that we are really stupid people. To accept people as they are.

(Josephina, BMAG)

### ***A reflective experience***

Another important conceptual category of visitors' comments was in relation to how *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* evoked a boost on individuals' self-esteem and pride as members of a previously disrespected cultural group, but more importantly, how these projects motivated the general public to revise their attitudes towards the sexual 'other'.

### *Self-esteem and pride*

A commonly documented type of exclusion of certain populations is the intellectual barrier to access. People, especially those from under-represented communities, are more likely to experience a sense of being excluded from a museum collection due to lack of their voice and existence in it (Black 2005: 59-60; Crooke 2007: 91). The consequence of this form of exclusion is commonly then deemed as one of the principal barriers to cultural access (Dodd and Sandell 1998; Resource: 2001), which in turn further perpetuates the exclusion these communities face in their daily life:

[T]he museum that fails to tell the stories of minority groups, not only denies access to its services for that group but also exacerbates their position of exclusion by broadcasting an exclusive image reinforcing the prejudices and discriminatory practices of museum users and the wider society.

(Sandell 1998: 408)

More importantly, according to Elaine Heumann Gurian (1991: 176-177), not only decisions on the broader thematic framework, but also modes of portrayal are to blame for the social unresponsiveness of museums. The eagerness for depicting sexual diversity is not hence enough unless considerable attention is paid on what is to be displayed and how to abstain from negative connotations' reinforcement.

As might then be expected, responses emerged validating Gurian's position on the impact of what and how a subject is publicly treated. Individuals, who directly or indirectly disclosed their sexual preference, could potentially suggest a link between disclosure and self-confidence and what the museum is showing. Similar positive feelings are regularly evidenced among members of the LGBTQ community when museum or archival initiatives responsive to society's sexual diversity take place, such as in the case of the *Wedding Album Project* in 2005 which resulted in the substantial diversification of the Oregon Historical Society archives with queer stories (Clark and Wexler 2008). It was thus an anticipated

finding to encounter in many responses in Birmingham. That is, how the cultural recognition of sexual diversity across a well-established museum boosts the sense of pride among individuals identified as LGBTQ. In other words, visitors talked about how proud they felt of being what they are but equally how the validation they received enhanced their sense of belonging to the cultural sector of their country and their city. For two male visitors, *Queering the Museum* was positively assessed as an opportunity to celebrate their identity in a safe authoritative site like a museum. Their enthusiastic impression was manifested when they both felt that it is an excellent social event they could attend with their acquaintances too:

Excellent idea - something in a civic space that you could take straight family or friends to see, making the queer mainstream, celebrated, and accessible.

(Giannis, BMAG)

Yes, I think it's also important because it means we could invite our friends, our colleagues, our family to come and look at the exhibition with us.

(Joe, BMAG)

There was even an instance when one respondent admitted that having engaged with the exhibition content enabled him to learn how to become less afraid of his sexual identity and eventually gain more self-confidence, both in his personal and professional life:

I guess to be braver in my own work and how I can consider audiences in my own art practice.

(Graham, BMAG)

Yet, the sense of belonging in their local or wider culture might have been among the major gains of both exhibitions. Creating this feeling at least to some LGBTQ people, is not easily achieved though. Joe Heimlich and Judy Koke (2008) highlighted the lack of feeling welcome and its repercussions to one's museum

experience, based on their pilot study into LGBTQ visitation to cultural organisations, revealing that:

[A]lthough respondents feel comfortable visiting our institutions, institutions do not score well in creating a sense of welcoming for GLBTQ individuals or couples. Gays and lesbians feel most welcome visiting these institutions as in groups. . . . The fact that visiting with friends, especially mixed groups, tends to produce the greatest comfort levels suggests there is a sense of heteronormativity in the visits.

(2008: 101)

Correspondingly, in the eyes of three interviewees, identified as gay, the inclusion of their stories in a museum narrative was a sign of recognition and respect, an attitude rarely encountered by UK museums:

Being a lesbian myself, I felt that suddenly I was more visible in an official way and this is comforting.

(Sandra, BMAG)

[I liked] everything! It is something I never thought I'd see in my lifetime.

(Phil, BMAG)

The gay civil partnership ceremony, as I am a lesbian. However, I didn't expect it to be included in the exhibition. I am very pleasantly surprised and impressed.

(Christine, SH)

Interestingly though the thought-provoking reaction from a former-employee of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery was especially valued in the context of this study. A woman, self-identified as disabled and lesbian, brought up a profound contradiction of museum practice. Having worked for the organisation for four

years in the past she had never had this sense of belonging as the programming in offer was not representative of her identity. Museums strive for social inclusion in their projects, but as this testimony reveals, social inclusion is being fulfilled only partially. For example, without undermining the significance of employees' diversity, a socially purposeful museum cannot stay put. Rather, those in influential posts should embrace a multi-dimensional understanding of inclusiveness ranging from staff to physical and intellectual access. Likewise, this woman's statement validates David Fleming's suggestions for the adaptation of every single aspect of museums' structure to their social roles and responsiveness towards their communities (2012a). Every single step is necessary if a cultural institution aims at being truly responsive to and representative of contemporary diverse society. Her response then went as follows:

From the minute we met [with Matt Smith] in the round room, I had a huge feeling for the first time that I belonged in that museum and I worked in the space as an employee for over 4 years previously!! . . . Wanted to be part of something that I could connect with - museums do not represent me as a woman, a disabled and deaf woman and as a lesbian.

(Helen, BMAG)

### *Revised perceptions of the Other*

A popular theme picked up by most interviewees was about the impact the two projects under exploration in the current thesis might have on audience's beliefs and attitudes. Analysis of data, drawn mainly from the questions about the impact of each exhibition on its visitors, the messages it might communicate and whether audiences had found anything provocative, the majority's view was very quickly revealed appreciating both projects as challenging people's thoughts on gender and sexuality through the inclusion of multiple perspectives of the subject on display.



Some participants expressed their wish that the institutional decision to include references to LGBT culture might affect positively some individuals' minds and attitude towards those falling outside the heteronormative lifestyle:

[It will] definitely a positive impact. Representation without any prejudice against gays will have a positive impact to the public because it will make more people to come in touch and better understand gay people.

(Christine, SH)

[It will] open people's eyes a bit more. [To be] more exposed to things make people more accustomed to it. Very good, very important. Make people aware of what else is there and people's opinions on it, educate people a bit more.

(Mark, BMAG)

Nonetheless, there were a few people sharing a more modest expectation, which comes in accordance with museum learning theory on the influence of one's background on what they might gain from a museum programme. Despite their honest belief in both exhibitions' potential to contribute to social change, they all admitted that this may not be the case for every single visitor:

It may make people realise that this is how things are today. I think it might shock people, I don't know. It didn't shock me but I could imagine people even from our generation coming, who would be quite taken back to see that... I can't see how it could do harm. You would hope that it would make people more sort of open-minded but I don't know really.

(Kate, SH)

I don't see why not to me [why not include LGBT representations]. Some people might be offended but I'm definitely not offended. No.

(Catherine, SH)

I mean obviously the same sex marriage is [provocative], trying not kind of being provocative but some people would probably be not very open. For me, no.

(Liz, SH)

It could mean nothing to a visitor and everything to another. I prefer to focus on what kind of impact this might have and I believe it's a positive impact towards [a] better understanding of people.

(Gabrielle, BMAG)

I think that most visitors will be OK. Some will hopefully reflect on their views of LGBT people.

(David, BMAG)

A very intriguing comment was received by Janet (BMAG) who further noted that perhaps *Queering the Museum* might have eased discussions of sexuality in general, as she felt that people are still uncomfortable talking about it:

You hope you would open them up. I hope it will open up discussions and, I don't know, subvert the awkwardness that seems to come with talking about sexuality and things like that.

More importantly, Alison (SH) –a history teacher- and Helen (BMAG) drew attention to another vital role of museums that is of promoting positive role models especially for students and for young people respectively. Such a suggestion mirrors a particular view among museum scholars who champion for an appropriately offered multiculturalist education. Joseph Suina, for example, vouches for the value of a multiculturalist education in museums focusing on young people, without excluding the potential effect on adults too, setting a number of parameters for its effectiveness:

The knowledge should be accurate, up-to-date, and deep enough to cover what is significant for young learners. The presentation should allow the learners to understand people in terms of universal concerns as well as differing responses. . . . Recognising similar needs and cross-cultural concerns provides a framework within which young learners can achieve understanding and empathy. It is also an effective means for combating stereotypes, which develop by identifying those who are different through only a few isolated, salient features.

(1999: 107)

These women, thus, commented very positively on the inclusion of this aspect specifically and more generally for future projects. Alison (SH) emphasised that such representations can actually be a valuable educational source similar to efforts like LGBT History Month, as they:

Provide a positive role model for students. It is vitally important that those things are provided and everybody sees them as perfectly good and appropriate aspects of life and society.

Equally, Helen (BMAG) advised for a more intensified positive representation as this forms the essential element for subverting discrimination and prejudice:

Great, good and positive. Young people have to see and learn too. How else do we change attitudes and culture? We need representation.

Thought-provocation, however, seemed to have been correctly perceived as the main intention of *Queering the Museum*:

I thought the exhibition was thought provoking and sensitive without being provocative.

(Graham, BMAG)

I'm not sure that provocative is the right word – however, some exhibits were thought provoking, which is surely a major aim for any museum/art gallery.

(Phil, BMAG)

Yes, the whole exhibition makes you think, I think. That's what [it] is designed for.

(Josephina, BMAG)

Not really sure, hope it would make them think.

(George, BMAG)

Further, unsettling one's idea of what is right or wrong, socially acceptable or not, was understood as the first step into advancing one's knowledge, changing their social attitude and rejecting some stereotypical or old-fashioned beliefs about gender and sexuality:

It should challenge stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, sexual and social identities, and stress the ordinariness of the queer - its right to belong and express itself - its place in the social and creative continuum.

(Giannis, BMAG)

I didn't find anything provocative, but hopefully it provoked other people to think about their view of the world and the place of LGBT people in it.

(David, BMAG)

Helen (BMAG), identified as lesbian, felt that *Queering the Museum* was a subversion of the prevailing norm which is based on whiteness, heterosexuality and middle-class, hoping that visitors might be prompted to remind themselves that this description only fits a part of human population:

FANTASTIC - It was great, playful, clever, thought provoking, exciting, sad at how invisible we are in both objects, interpretation and above all inclusion. The world is made up of lots of different types of people we are not all white, straight and middle class.

Lastly an encouraging outcome with substantial gains in the long run emerged from the replies of three participants attesting to the overarching scope of Matt Smith's project 'sometimes serious, sometimes humorous, this exhibition will change how you look at museums and question what you see' (Promotional leaflet, Figure This specific artistic initiative was produced to unveil and criticise museums' intentional or implicit overlooking of sexual minorities in their collections and programming. Its principal objective was to act as the motive that would encourage people to question their own beliefs not only generally but also regarding their view of museums and the stories selected to be told or to be absent. On that account, the following comments were regarded as three very illustrative examples that the core intended message of *Queering the Museum* was fully grasped, at least from certain individuals:

It transforms the way you see everything.

(Harry, BMAG)

I liked the Reflection one. That's quite pretty and it's thought-provoking, trying to see things from other people's perspectives . . . Everything was thought-provoking at the very least. Even if it wasn't aesthetically pleasing. Some things were terrible aesthetically for me . . . But this is suggesting very much there's multiple ways of looking at things from multiple perspectives, and trying to encourage people, I think, to look at things from different approaches, different perspectives.

(Janet, BMAG)

I mean provocative in the general sense. All of the exhibits were designed to provoke and [I] thought some of the juxtapositions were quite jarring. So,

objects which don't look like belong together and they are brought together. So, in that sense. Another sense of thinking about the exhibits provocative would be whether they are potentially sexualised and whether that's problematic.

(Jacob, BMAG)

### **The museum as a social forum**

Despite the lack of consensus on the appropriateness of the socially purposeful museum even nowadays, evidence of a growing public demand for museums to actively validate their sensitivity to society's complexities unfolds. For instance, the extensive international research project *Exhibitions as Contested Sites: The Roles of Museums in Contemporary Societies* singled out the vast majority of Canadian and Australian museum goers' expectation to see an exhibition tackling social and controversial issues (Cameron 2005, 2010b). In addition, empirical studies with a particular focus on museums' portrayal of disability and sexual difference, like *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries* (Dodd, Sandell, Jolly and Jones 2008) or *shOUT; An evaluation of the Social Justice Programme of the Gallery of Modern Art Glasgow* (Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010) uncovered, although not incontestably, the public's approval for the inclusion of disability or homosexuality. The percentage of visitors who object to this sort of programming seems to be comparatively low, strengthening the arguments in favour of the museum acting as a social forum (Cameron 2005; Dodd, Sandell, Jolly and Jones 2008; Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010).

As might be expected, the range of responses revealed a number of key points in terms of past, present and future treatment by museums of sexual minorities, considering what, when and how such references are being displayed. More interestingly, a predisposition towards the museum as a social institution for public discussion of contemporary social topics was frequently manifested in visitors'

answers. The discussion around this theme was mainly based on the questions about visitors' thoughts on the intended exhibition messages and the anticipated impact on the public as well as on the last set of questions on the appropriateness of LGBT cultural representations at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and museums in general.

A prominent finding drawn from the answers of fairly two thirds of visitors in Birmingham, and less of the ones collected in Liverpool, manifests the public reading of museums as conservative places reflecting life according to social hetero-norms. In this way, it was felt that a positive appraisal of each place might have occurred in the minds of these individuals who, though implicitly most of the time, recognised the significant effort the museum had made to depict positive representations of the usually disregarded LGBT culture. Although attending a single museum event cannot probably lead to a more permanent visitation and an absolute turnover of the preconception of the site as highly heteronormative, nonetheless, such projects have the potential to establish a longer term relationship with culturally excluded communities. Yet, this relationship will probably fail unless museum staff has a sustainable plan, part of which are the particular exhibitions under research. Therefore, this study perceives the following audience feedback as a sign of both projects having had an impact on visitors' attitude towards these two institutions, especially in light of past empirical surveys. For example, visitors who saw the *Warren Cup* exhibition at the British Museum in 2006 disclosed similar concerns of the museum being 'a stuffy, old-fashioned, cold and remote institution' (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2006: 34). They also expressed their preference for a more regular engagement with hot topics under innovative interpretive frameworks, like the one adopted for *Warren Cup* which positively surprised many of them. Nevertheless, if and for how long this influence may last, strictly depends on whether each site's future work will continue within a socially purposeful framework.

Thus, three sub-themes emerged from their responses. Firstly, they expected museums to steadily increase the visibility of sexual difference across their

collections. Secondly, interviewees offered a wide range of recommendations on the diverse modes of portrayal for the LGBTQ community to be included in museums' programming. And, thirdly, a couple of the respondents raised the uncomfortable situation museums might be found when potentially contentious topics are on display while at the same time members of the minorities to which these topics are related regard museums as safe and comfortable places to be in.

### ***Visibility***

In his article *The Museum's silent sexual performance*, James Sanders accurately asserted that museums have been acting hypocritically with homoeroticism. His proposition is that:

Claiming its traditional practices of collecting, categorizing, and conserving as scholarly, scientific, rational, and objective, the museum has (un)intentionally served as an instrument of heteronormativity by erasing or rendering invisible artists' queer desire and representations.

(2008: 16)

Echoing Sanders' statement, the theme of visibility was indicated as a serious issue by the majority of the interviewees. Many visitors shared their frustration due to the lack in museums collections of items related to LGBT experiences and demonstrating their expectation for more equal treatment by the museum sector:

I came to see the specific exhibition as we don't often see a representation of the LGBTQ culture inside museums.

(Sandra, BMAG)



Well, LGBTQ is a minority and they haven't been talked about in a generic way. I guess LGBTQ is not fulfilled.

(Nick, BMAG)

Well, if it's good enough for the Pope . . . (the Vatican has lots of Michaelangelo's work, including the Sistine Chapel), and then, there's his David . . . Just wish that LGB&T culture was explained more clearly in museums it's there but tends to be hidden.

(Phil, BMAG)

Museums should look into collecting more LGBT focused (that speak to the widest communities possible) work for the public collections.

(Graham, BMAG)

In addition, the way *Queering the Museum* was developed, according to many interviewees, communicated the message of LGBT invisibility within cultural institutions like museums:

I felt the exhibition was giving all audience a historical perspective about the lack of inclusion and understanding of the LGBT communities.

(Graham, BMAG)

It's about the idea homosexuality wasn't represented in the arts, so I was curious to see how it would, what form it took.

(Peter, BMAG)

That LGB&T topics should no longer be alienated from mainstream museums . . . Hopefully it's a Eureka moment and they'll just wonder why information has been censored in the past.

(Phil, BMAG)

Some even shared their expectation that the exhibition might have informed more people about this situation, calling them to review what narratives are prevalent in gallery spaces and how museum choices render some voices invisible:

I think it was trying to communicate gay ideas of representation by re-appropriating traditional museum ideas about exhibition and collection. Not sure how successful it was though . . . An interesting thought about how museums show their collections and if “gay representation” is considered.

(George, BMAG)

I think that it's trying to, as I said before, get us to think about museums and how they organise their stories into particular narratives, and those narratives might be heteronormative.

(Jacob, BMAG)

Just wish that LGBT culture was explained more clearly in museums. It's there but tends to be hidden.

(Phil, BMAG)

Choices of what to collect and display, and how exhibits are annotated or explained to visitors, are based on implicit cultural assumptions and moral judgements - they manifest the agendas of the management. This is hard to grasp because the question often is "what isn't here" and it's always far harder to discern an absence than a presence. This exhibition really brought this out. Thank you.

(Giannis, BMAG)

Moreover, Helen's (SH) email feedback was designated among the most emphatically critical of museum practice ones. Not only did she draw attention to the aftermath of ongoing misinterpretation, but she also condemned such practice as homophobic. The following script from her reply is very illustrative:

Interviewer: Do you feel the exhibition was trying to communicate any particular message? If yes, what would you say this message is?

Helen: Yes we belong in a museum too. And a glaring omission that works by gay artists are not curated, interpreted and like disability hardly mentioned as a passing thought.

Interviewer: Would you like to see more lesbian and gay culture represented in museums? If yes, in what form?

Helen: In all aspects, proper interpretation in the way works are curated so it is not patronizing and elitist and worst still homophobic like it is now. More workshops and talks - involve and engage us and we will get involved.

Even so, aspirations to provoke people's minds to realise the constant cultural absence of non-heterosexual voices and the collecting, interpreting and curatorial techniques deepening the gaps seem slightly romantic according to the research data. Almost all the comments on the possibility of making the LGBT invisibility 'visible' were drawn from interviews with individuals identified as gay or lesbian. In other words, interpretations of Matt Smith's interventions as evidence of how collections have been highly infiltrated by heteronormativity were made basically by those already familiar with this exclusionist practice.

Furthermore, the tendency of LGBT temporal presence in museums' programming was also negatively commented by two respondents:

I think LGBT culture should be more prominent and is under represented and should not only exist as temporary exhibitions.

(Graham, BMAG)

I do hope to see more of that in the future everywhere because nowadays, we learn about a gay related exhibition and we feel we cannot lose the opportunity to see it and we even travel to do so.

(Sandra, BMAG)

More importantly, Sandra's (BMAG) feedback reveals an unpromising fact for museums' visitation from the LGBT segment of the population. Due to the rarity and temporariness of projects of high personal relevance, she said to be left with no other option than that of even travelling to another city to visit them. The meaning of such a straightforward disclosure, particularly if it is considered along with the role of personal relevance and interest in visiting a museum or not (Kelly 2001: 5), could be that the exclusion of individuals identified as LGBT is unfortunately an ongoing situation leading organisations like museums and galleries to fail to adhere to the broader institutional social objectives aspiring a culturally diverse audience development.

### ***Diversifying portrayal of sexual difference***

Following up on the previous discussion on raising awareness about non-heterosexual identities through increased representation for longer periods, the need for embracing new forms of representation, following the example of *Queering the Museum* innovation, with the incorporation of interventions or other imaginative techniques, was an interesting position.

I think . . . there's a big gap for most part which is only beginning to be addressed and it tends to be addressed either in this very sort of small exhibitions, which are sort of very marginal within a particular museum, or it will be about particular personalities or sort of individuals, in sort of whose gender or sexuality may not have conformed to normal and maybe a little bit about the bigger exhibitions. So, for example, there is exhibition at the British Museum on. Is it Hadrian? Yes. There's a reference to his lover and

tends to be addressed in this kind of ways. It's part of a bigger mainstream exhibition. So, I feel that those historical exhibitions like that, bringing in visual artists in this sort of disrupting historical narrative it's actually a good way to sort of rethinking some of these narratives.

(Jacob, BMAG)

Visitors praised the novelty of the project in that it was unfolded extensively in museum's space, integrated with permanent cases, and presenting sexual difference not as something 'special'. The following quotes actually lifted some of the main concerns of museum scholars and practitioners regarding not only LGBT but any minority group's inclusion, focusing around the challenges when representing 'difference'. Janet (BMAG) expressed her hope to see LGBT culture being represented naturally in museum exhibitions without being constantly described as something distinctive. In other words, her suggestion could be interpreted as a call for 'normalising' sexual difference:

I think ideally I'd like to see a time when it's not something big and it is part of the norm.

Others expressed their appreciation for seeing an exhibition on sexual minorities spread across the museum collections:

I especially liked the way the exhibits were scattered throughout the museum, and not just hidden in a room on their own.

(Phil, BMAG)

I liked the whole exhibition equally. I particularly liked seeing the items placed around the museum and not restricted to one area.

(David, BMAG)

Sandra (BMAG) even commented, like Janet (BMAG), positively on the possibility of depicting sexual difference as part of the norm to the extent that even children

would be able to engage with it. In a way, it could be argued here, that Sandra's (BMAG) reply perhaps summarises a range of possible expectations from museums and how they choose to portray LGBT stories:

I am glad that I saw this here today and that it wasn't separated from the museum collection, but it was presented as part of it. I do hope to see more of that in the future everywhere . . . in any form. I don't care if it is the provocative art of a trans artist or a knitting collection of a sweet lesbian granny. I personally would like to fit the lesbian and gay element in historical collections and to see it being represented in a way that children could visit these collections. This is extremely important to me.

Similarly, David (BMAG) identified as gay stated his support for the adoption of multiculturalist approaches to societal diversity and called for the integration of lesbian and gay voices in museum collections especially in terms of deepening their historical understanding:

Yes, I would like to see L&G people represented in any exhibition along with other communities that make up society. I don't think this needs to be done separately, but integrated into the fabric of the exhibition / museum. Historically, people we would now term Gay would not have labelled themselves as such, for many reasons. It would be useful if museums provided interpretations to help visitors understand the historical / social context.

Corresponding to this philosophy, two friends who had visited Sudley House specifically for *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* wondered why modes of depicting sexual difference mostly attest to a definition of homosexuality in terms of the sexual life, whereas at *Queering the Museum* contradictory views emerged regarding the value of labelling the sexual 'other' or not. Such an inconsistency in visitors' attitudes towards labelling further supports in fact Helen Graham's proposition, which clearly explains the complexity of labels:

The use of such labels as markers of identity can engender powerful feelings of belonging and worth, they can operate to communicate a positive sense of shared group membership and be mobilized to effect political and social change. But, at the same time, labels can work to differentiate groups and, in doing so, they can stigmatize.

(2010: 115)

Therefore, in a way, respondents at Liverpool both anticipated a tone of 'normality' in that gay people should be primarily defined and depicted accordingly, as human beings living a regular life, and not always as this segment of the population distinguished by their sexual life. Their dialogue that follows illustrates the exchange of ideas they had on the topic during their interview:

Interviewer: Would you like to see more lesbian and gay culture represented in museums? If yes, in what form?

Dorothy: I don't see why that you should. It doesn't need to [be] picked up specifically. I mean, I know Hello Sailor you had about gay scene. But I mean I don't know. If I was gay, I don't think I'd want that to be the only thing that would define me and let it have specifically picked out. I don't know.

Liz: You don't think about people, if you are with someone who is gay, you don't think about him as being gay all the time. It's just a person.

Dorothy: It's not one thing.

Liz: He might be interested in football, in books. That's not the only thing that defines somebody.

Likewise, Nick (BMAG) disclosed his hope that future framing of homosexuality would avoid tags 'possible without labels'. Meanwhile, Giannis (BMAG) and Sandra (BMAG) encouraged for the exact opposite. Sandra (BMAG) particularly offered a lengthy response on lesbian and gay depiction in national museums indicating their responsibility to the entirety of taxpayers and not simply to the heteronormative

majority. Although these comments might well fit in the previous discussion on visibility, it was felt that their strong link to the controversy of labelling placed it under the theme of modes of the portrayal of sexual diversity:

Yes, and in every medium; also in the notes and annotations provided for exhibits; and flagging up the sexual identity of the artist/artisan if known. It helps black identity if it is mentioned in passing that the artist was/is black - similarly, if it is known that they are/were lgbt.

(Giannis, BMAG)

National museums are funded by all the taxpayers and should represent everybody, even the smallest minority if possible. I don't know if LGBTQ people are the 10% as some say, but I think that we are enough and we should see ourselves and our ways of life and expressions through art present in museums. This is even more important as we often are victims of racism. If our culture is present and obvious in as many ways as possible, that will help to direct the public towards a more open-minded way of thinking about us. . . . Sometimes we see or learn about exhibitions that are about a gay artist in museums considered to be more conservative. And sometimes there is no mention to that aspect of the artist's life, even if it is fundamental for their creations. This is the worst form of hypocrisy and has to stop now. Gay facts and identities have to be revealed.

(Sandra, BMAG)

A hope to abstain from victimising images of non-heterosexuals seems to be echoed in Phil's (BMAG) suggestion for alternatives in museum representations. Comparably with disability inclusion in museums and galleries (Delin 2002; Dodd, Jones, Jolly and Sandell 2010; Murray and Jacobs 2010), individuals identified as gay might seek for positive and optimistic portrayal as opposed to the traumatic experiences of the past, such as the Holocaust or the political struggle for gay rights:



Many holocaust museums already acknowledge that lesbians and gay men perished alongside Jewish people (and some were both Jewish and Gay). But it would be nice to see happier times for the LGB&T community, like the old gay bar setup in the Museum of Berlin, with the stories from the landlady! As for Birmingham, I'd particularly like to see the dress worn by Dana International exhibited when she won Eurovision in Birmingham.

Yet, assuming a consensus for exhibitions characterised by 'normality', subtlety and integration would be naive despite the findings of this audience research. The only dissonance was raised by Alexandra (BMAG) who, despite her enthusiasm for the project, would rather anticipate more intense provocation:

Absolutely! Gay and lesbian people are part of the whole wider community and I'd like to see a more provocative handling of many existing pieces of art rather than these new pieces.

In line with findings from other studies, I would therefore argue that both physical and thematic integration of sexual difference is a sought-after interpretive device in that it can more easily engage the general public, as this research has shown. But, people sharing a common identity do not necessarily perceive and experience it alike, although the necessity for raising public awareness about a particular identity group, especially when it comes down to disadvantaged minorities, is generally accepted. For instance, in 2006, Dodd, Hooper-Greenhill, Delin and Jones in their research *In the past we would just be invisible* examined disabled people's perceptions of museums and heritage sites. One of their key findings was disabled people's consensus on the power of visibility despite their differing readings on their identity:

Although our respondents did not identify with a common identity as disabled people, all of them were positive about making disabled people visible within the museum. This opens up the possibilities for museums to lead the way in challenging current representations of disabled people,

taking into account that there is not always one viewpoint, nor is there an easy and quick approach.

(Dodd, Hooper-Greenhill, Delin and Jones 2006: 1)

Besides, disagreement on whether a LGBTQ community or identity exists has been an ongoing debate among individuals identified as such, scholars, activists and so on. On top of that, cautious reviews of the discrete inclusion of sexual diversity at both sites by certain members of the audience further strengthens arguments in favour of adopting subtle and integrated approaches too. A number of interviewees then, mainly the elderly ones, without actually being opposed to seeing aspects of the culture and history of people not conformed to the social heteronorms, offered interesting comments. Overall, it could be said that similar contradictory attitudes reflect real life occasions since tolerance of difference does not necessarily equate with feeling comfortable when interacting with the cultural or sexual 'other'.

Consequently, the following statements from four research participants at both sites reveal a slightly modest approval of LGBT displays in museum exhibitions. The reasoning behind classifying these comments as relatively positive lies on the use of words like 'decent', 'appropriate' or 'non provocative' depictions:

No, no. I wouldn't want to see [LGBT representations] no. An example like in there is fine. Not provocative. But not having a place full of lesbian and gay. This is fine, it doesn't glorify it.

(Simon, SH)

I haven't thought about it actually. But I guess, if [LGBT representation] appropriate, yes. Just something I've not considered.

(Alice, SH)

I guess I will say why not, as long as [LGBT representation] is made in a decent way, because schools are visiting the museums. Of course this could also happen with special adult-only collections.

(Gabrielle, BMAG)

I'm not personally interested in gay culture but I think it's ok. Everybody should be free to express themselves. On the other hand, it depends how provocative gay culture is. I wouldn't want for a child to go to a museum and see pictures of drag queens or gay bears and on. These are adult stuff. As long as gay culture and every other culture are modest enough for a museum, it's ok. . . . As long as it is within the limits of decency, then, there is no problem. Gay people should have their exhibitions too. If some visitors don't like it, they just don't have to go there. Nobody is forcing them.

(Christopher, SH)

An informing discussion that could possibly reflect the thoughts of other people at this age, with their lived experience of all the historical and political advancements in the gay rights movement, is being unfolded by a couple who were interviewed together at Sudley House. They both disclosed how life experiences shaped their level of tolerance for homosexuality, explaining that compared to this generation they are not used to extensive representation of sexual difference, without however being opposed to viewing references to historical facts concerning homoeroticism. In other words, it was felt that they would expect, and, according to their saying, engage with, such exhibits in historical museum collections, but at the same time an exhibition focusing solely on LGBT would cause inconvenience in the same way that gay prides do:

Interviewer: Would you like to see more lesbian and gay culture represented in museums? If yes, in what form?

Aristotle: The thing that people have to accept this, had to accept the life and although I argue this, I don't like gay people pushing it in your face, like

gay pride, I'd suppose. . . . I think no matter how big prejudice you have, I don't want it pushed into my face.

Kate: But in the context like a museum where you go to see and it's part of history, that wouldn't offend.

Aristotle: No, if it's part of history, no.

Kate: Because it's factual history.

Aristotle: Just it wasn't commonly known when I was young and I think that's the distinction now. You have people coming out saying 'look at me' and I think that's the difference. Younger people are far more tolerant than I can be. They haven't got my history or my experiences

Nevertheless, despite difference in opinion on the theoretical issue of a shared LGBTQ identity formation, all sides strive, even from different starting points, for the same scope: make themselves and their fellows visible through unprejudiced modes of portrayal. Having said that then, a safe conclusion drawn from the current and previous relevant studies could be the expectation from museum practitioners to develop a range of projects that eventually would cover a variety of needs, even those ones with a concealed level of discomfort and perhaps homophobia.

### ***Risk for the museum but safety for the audience***

A recurring theme in studies on museum representation of minority groups is the risk behind inclusionist projects. Professionals tend to be reluctant when it comes down to disadvantaged communities still struggling to secure more people's tolerance. The fear of upsetting stakeholders, partners, funders, or even a percentage of the core audience is always there. On that account, embracing sexual difference to the extent of 19 displays at Birmingham and showing costumes and pictures from a same sex civil partnership at Liverpool, while gay

rights remain a contentious area, might result in unpredictable reception. On the other hand, however, research has regularly stressed public perception of museums as safe trustworthy sites for learning history, science, art but also for introducing people in social issues. Consequently, broadly speaking, staff usually stands in a complex situation when an inclusive project is due. Risk prevails in the insiders' views whereas safety in outsiders' ones.

From visitors' testimonies then it can be gleaned that this complexity was picked up by some. The most passionate reply was received from Helen (BMAG) from the local LGBTQ community whose words could be interpreted as an indirect recognition of the museum's courage to undertake such an initiative. She thus brought attention to the role of Birmingham city council and the repercussions of its members' beliefs. In her view, the council is regarded as an 'ultra conservative' one who, unfortunately for LGBTQ people living in Birmingham, has been playing a vital role in the cultural exclusion of non-heterosexuals:

We are under-represented, completely ignored and works [are] interpreted by people who are ultra conservative. Lack of risk taking everything has to be safe and twee. Maybe that is because it is ultimately run by a council shortsighted and doesn't understand artworks. Yet you look at some paintings and work and they are nudes, in BMAG there is even a painting where the artist got his revenge by painting dogs having sex in different positions in order to get back at the person who commissioned it.

Others expressed similar ideas through their admiration for the institutional choice to dedicate part of their programming to the inclusion of sexual minorities as the risk of undertaking such an initiative might have been high, according to their viewpoint:

I thought it was bold, ambitious and it was good to see an institution like BM&G take a risk with something more contemporary and challenging.

(Graham, BMAG)

That LGB&T people are part of the community. Shame that this was pretty pioneering and hadn't been done before in Birmingham!

(Phil, BMAG)

Additionally, a further compelling finding showing the positive attitude of members of the LGBT community towards the institution, as a result of the specific project, was about the safety and appropriateness of the museum environment for bringing friends and relatives to share such an experience and make them more familiar with aspects of their identity and history as a community:

Yes, I think it's also important because it means we could invite our friends, our colleagues, our family to come and look at the exhibition with us.

(Joe, BMAG)

Sheer pleasure in something like an Easter-egg hunt, an opportunity to talk to straight friends and family about the issues raised, and the importance of flagging up the presence and struggles of gay/lesbian artists and artisans. In short, by queering the museum the exhibition queered history & the history of culture and art - something long overdue.

(Giannis, BMAG)

## **Conclusions from Chapter 6**

In March 2013 the Museums Association published *Public perception of - and attitudes to - the purposes of museum in society* (BritainThinks 2013). The research investigated museum goers and non-museum goers' perceptions about museums' roles and responsibilities. The main unanticipated finding was their assessment of traditional and recently developed roles which revealed their clear preference for the features of the modern museum compared to the social aspects of the post-modern museum. Consequently, despite their strong belief in their

trustworthiness, their activist position was questioned and deemed as of less significance.

But, in contrast to the results of a general study like that, a large amount of research into visitors' feedback on specific projects, that fall within the activist domain, contradicts their findings. Among the latter ones, I would place the audience study conducted for *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*. Based on the data drawn from 36 interviewees overall and on previous reports published by other museum scholars and practitioners, I would argue the necessity for similar inclusive exhibitions on contemporary debating issues like sexual diversity, not only because of being prominent social fora, but also for their appealing to the general public.

Broadly speaking, the desire of affecting one's attitudes or viewpoint is the principal objective for museum practitioners and scholars who advocate the socially purposeful museum. Nonetheless, framing this scope with realistic parameters is vital. For instance, it would be pointless to think that a single project attended for a while, and even for a couple of minutes, might subvert long-term beliefs. Especially when it comes down to hot topics, like non-heterosexual norms, broadening one's horizons seems more possible compared to a direct subversion of beliefs due to the power of long-lasting ideas (MacDonald 1992). On the contrary, a number of studies so far point to a more feasible outcome. That is, acting like a stimulus for opening up one's mind to a new perspective, not previously considered:

The big issue is how you can expect to teach visitors something when they are only with you for short periods. It makes sense for us to think about learning as more qualitative than quantitative, because we have an opportunity to create a context for objects and ideas, to create a mood. Perhaps in the short period that a person is in the museum, we can help him or her see something a little bit differently, in a context that maybe he or she had not thought about before.

(Dierking 1996: 25)

Thus, by drawing upon Dierking's idea, the impression of how a couple of research participants engaged with the sexual difference was fairly confusing. Although they expressed their support of the particular subtle mode of portrayal, understanding the reasoning behind, on the other hand, they were reluctant to the possibility of a future qualitative and quantitative increase in LGBT related exhibits. Nevertheless, their overall reception was interpreted as positive as these findings were thought under the prism of Dierking's suggestion. In other words, enabling them to be absorbed by a minority's depictions they were not comfortable with before -and probably after their visit- can be deemed as a small but equally very important learning outcome.

The first case refers to Steve (BMAG) who went for a random visit and accidentally engaged with a number of Matt Smith's interferences with the museum collections. Although his religion condemns same sex love and consequently he is not so keen on homosexuality, he did engage with parts of the project and commented positively on how it was developed. Considering the strong influence that his religious background plays in his belief system, it would be futile to search for signs of utterly changed attitudes. At the same time, however, there was no sign either of having been offended by the artistic interventions. Therefore, it cannot go unnoticed that despite his clear opposition, the modes of interpretation employed in this instance were appreciated as 'well-thought' and 'well-organised'. The discussion with him went as follows:

Interviewer: What were your initial thoughts on the exhibition?

Steve: The museum overall was really stimulating having something for all. As for Queering the Museum, it was well-developed.

Interviewer: Which part(s) of the exhibition did you like the most or find more interesting and why?

Steve: Nothing in particular.



Interviewer: Were there any part(s) of the exhibition that you didn't like or found least interesting and why?

Steve: I'm not too keen on modern art.

Interviewer: Was there any part of the exhibition that made you pause for thought? What and why?

Steve: Not really. It's fine, everybody has his own taste. Personally, I don't agree with homosexuality. But, the organisation made an effort pushing an alternative way of living.

Interviewer: Was there any part of the exhibition that you found especially provocative? If yes, what kinds of things were they?

Steve: No. Again, my religion, I'm a Jehovah's witness, doesn't accept this lifestyle, but everybody has his own taste as I've said before.

Interviewer: Do you feel the exhibition was trying to communicate any particular message? If yes, what would you say that message is?

Steve: It just shows that there are alternative lifestyles. Even that I stayed for about 15 minutes, I got the sense that there is something different. So, I think it was well-thought.

Interviewer: How do you feel about lesbian and gay culture being represented in museums?

Steve: It's fine, but personally I don't agree.

Interviewer: What kind of impact do you think this representation might have on visitors?

Steve: It just shows a different lifestyle.

Interviewer: Would you like to see more lesbian and gay culture represented in museums? If yes, in what form?

Steve: Not in particular. Because I don't agree. But this exhibition was well-organised and developed.

The second conflicting feedback belongs to Annie (SH) who visited *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*. Being one of the oldest participants in the audience research carried out at Sudley House she was the only one who clearly objected to the suits and images from a same sex civil partnership in an exhibition on weddings. Yet, the rest of her words indicate signs of tolerance and respect for difference. Her responses hence could neither be entirely negative nor supportive of sexual minorities' portrayal. The contradiction unravels in the following interview abstract:

Interviewer: Were there any part(s) of the exhibition that you didn't like or found least interesting, and why?

Annie: Well, I'd say the same sex marriages. I think that's pointless really. I can understand people being in love with each other. It seems wrong to me. It's alright for other people make their own decisions.

Interviewer: Was there any part of the exhibition that you found especially provocative? If yes, what kind things were they?

Annie: Well, that's provocative [the suits from the same sex civil partnership ceremony]. But it doesn't matter. I don't mind. Everybody has their own feelings about things.

The third and final case refers to the feedback received from another visitor at Birmingham, Josephina (BMAG). This example of a negotiated understanding and reception of the visual disruption of the heteronormative museum narratives acts as a comprehensible illustration of the realistic social change museums can cause to individuals with a slightly conservative way of thinking, echoing Dierking's

argument. Contrary to Steve (BMAG), Josephina (BMAG) did not take a clear stand against homosexuality. Her long held prejudice, nevertheless, manifested itself in her reception of the exhibition as an opportunity for people, like her, to revise their unjustified preconceptions. Regrettably though at the very end of her interview she implicitly disclosed her understanding of non-heterosexuality as a problematic situation. In other words, deep-rooted beliefs, such as biased views of same sex love, are reflected in one's actions, ideas as well as in the language they use when referring to the subject of their prejudice. For instance, evidence of homophobia and hate crimes can be traced in both physical and verbal abuse and harassment (Mason 2005; Stonewall 2008). As a result, the groundbreaking subversion of such a stance becomes unfeasible, compared to a gradual adaptation of one's judgement to new pieces of information and alternative perspectives. Accordingly then, Josephina (BMAG) admits her previous unreasonable prejudice against a lifestyle outside social norms, showing a slight departure from her long-lasting feelings, but her phraseology during her very last comment indicates that *Queering the Museum* was just the trigger for change, not the change itself. Her comments were as follows:

Interviewer: What were your initial thoughts on the exhibition?

Josephina: I think it's really good. It's also showing how prejudiced we are as people.

Interviewer: Do you feel the exhibition was trying to communicate any particular message? If yes, what would you say that message is?

Josephina: Yes, I think it's telling us that we are really stupid people. To accept people as they are.

Interviewer: What do you feel you took away from your visit?

Josephina: I think I have a greater sympathy for people who don't fit what we perceive as the norm.

Interviewer: How do you feel about lesbian and gay culture being represented in museums?

Josephina: I think it's an excellent idea. Everybody should have everything presented to them, so they can make their mind.

Interviewer: Would you like to see more lesbian and gay culture represented in museums? If yes, in what form?

Josephina: Yeah, I think it should be but like this, discretely. You have to actually search this out. So, it isn't thrown at you because a lot of people [might] be perhaps offended by it. It probably wouldn't do to them any harm. You can't make that judgement, can you? So, if it's done like this, where you actually have to search out the objects and the art, then, you are doing it because you want to.

Interviewer: Is there anything about this particular exhibition that is personally relevant to you?

Josephina: I don't think so. I've never had a problem with sexuality and gender.

To sum up, *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*, through its multicultural focus on traditional and contemporary wedding and civil unions, and *Queering the Museum*, with its interventional nature across multiple galleries, appear to have generated a range of learning and social outcomes. Visitors gained historical knowledge on the history of marriage evolution and on LGBT history. They made reflections on the changing societal attitudes towards cultural diversity, on how they see and value themselves, the sexual 'others' and the museum as a socially responsive institution. They also made readings of social values like equality and tolerance for cultural different groups and they even shared their views on how they would like to see the social work of museums to further develop its inclusive and imaginative features. Overall, it was felt that the final product created by each site as well as the inclusiveness and subtlety in their curatorial strategy, were

highly appreciated by most participants in the audience research. Yet, museum practitioners should always be aware that oppositional and modest views will definitely occur as my study revealed too.

An important clarification has to be made at this point. As in any qualitative research, the current interpretation of findings from the audience research carried out is only one among many. Furthermore, since the focus of the audience research part had been placed on the effect of inclusive curatorial practices, inherently the sample consisted solely of those who engaged with parts or the whole of each project, therefore, strongly oppositional views were impossible to reach for. In light of this intentional decision, their reception in terms of messages, social values and attitudes was investigated through a range of questions. Yet, it would be pointless to expect *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* to trigger the same sentiments and thoughts in every single individual. Leading curators' ambitions expecting the public to view these exhibitions as reflections of social inclusion, equality and respect for difference would neither appeal to everybody nor would be similarly acknowledged by all, as findings revealed. On the other hand, thought-provocation in its broader sense could be interpreted as the common thread underlying all these objectives and be described as a valid anticipated impact on visitors. As Sandell reports in his *Museums, prejudice and the reframing of difference* book:

While the museums are unapologetically uncompromising in their adoption of particular moral standpoints, at the same time, they also appear appropriately cautious of claiming that the values and positions that they espouse are straightforwardly communicated to, and adopted by, audiences. Rather, they are concerned to engage visitors in dialogue and to challenge them to think about complex and challenging questions.

(2007: 69)

Thus, considering this aspect, it could then be safely concluded that according to the data sample from each site, visitors made multiple readings of the social values

and messages underpinning *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* but, essentially, dialogue and rethinking on a wide spectrum of issues were sparked among the majority of the public.

## Chapter 7: Subverting the (hetero)normative museum

This research started with the intention to understand how the representation of sexual diversity through certain curatorial approaches might challenge the pervasiveness of heteronormativity played out in museum spaces. The purpose of the current study was to respond to the insufficiency of museum literature in critically reviewing a specific set of curatorial methodologies to unearth sexual minorities in museum collections and programming and eventually challenge their heteronormative narratives. For this reason I tried to offer a rounded view by exploring the process of development (primarily) and reception (secondarily) of two recent projects: *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* at Sudley House in Liverpool and *Queering the Museum* at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Both exhibitions were appreciated as unconventional examples of museum practice in regard to the portrayal of sexual difference, featuring, respectively, a subtle - thematic and spatial- integration of sexual minorities among regular exhibits. The selection of studying the under-researched area of an integrative mode of portrayal for sexual minorities contributes to the small but growing body of research within museum studies exploring the representation of LGBTQ experiences.

From the outset, the current thesis embarked on the premise that museums, like any sector of the public domain, are inevitably saturated with heteronormativity, a situation which could be challenged effectively through a subtle inclusive curatorial strand, more easily accessible to the general public and with the potential to have an impact on visitors' attitudes, especially those who might never have engaged with this topic in a museum otherwise.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I sought to investigate the aims and expectations behind museum initiatives seeking to include sexual diversity in their programming. For this reason, I have argued how the employment of an 'unexciting' way of representation, featuring a tone of normalcy and subtlety and a critical handling of stereotypes in relation to sexual minorities, allowed Sudley House and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery to transgress -at least for the duration of the projects

under study- the imposed heteronormative barriers. Additionally, I looked at the instrumental role of the curator's background, a supportive working environment and external partnerships with well-established organisations in facilitating the development of these projects and resolving commonly encountered obstacles, such as the fear of public and funders' reception, negative publicity, lack of financial resources or collection material. This discussion was followed by an exploration of the concept of museum sustainability through an analysis of the potential gains for the museum sector of such an inclusive practice. In particular, I illustrated how the portrayal of a traditional concept like 'wedding', with heteronormative connotations, through a more contemporary lens from one hand, and the appropriation of queer contemporary art craft interventions on the other hand, were both perceived as a tool to alter the museum public profile, update their way of working with collections and more importantly, advance their audience development agenda. Moreover, I identified how the concept of the socially purposeful museum played out by stressing the opportunity for cultural institutions, particularly through the integration of sexual difference, to evoke a sense of cultural ownership and belonging across visitors belonging to sexual minorities while promoting the general public to rethink their own attitudes towards difference.

In Chapter 6, I turned the focus on the potential impact inclusive curatorial strategies might have on audiences and on the public representation of sexual minorities. Certainly, the museum initiatives under study were appreciated for their historical learning value, as visitors talked about them as chances for engaging with the history of wedding evolution at Liverpool and with the LGBT history at Birmingham. Yet, the social reading visitors made as a result of their engagement with *Hitched*, *Wedding Clothes and Customs* and *Queering the Museum* were significantly more. Consequently, I reviewed the messages that most visitors who engaged with these exhibitions received from the specific cultural representation of sexual diversity, arguing that museums are understood as safe and trustful sites. In particular, museums were expected, through a range of curatorial techniques, to spark social change, transmit values pertaining to raising visibility, promoting equality and overall, reflect valid depictions of identities other than the dominant



ones as well as mirror the progress of contemporary society in terms of cultural differences. Besides, as I showed, specific interpretive strategies avoiding segregation and stereotypes are typically appreciated, especially within sexual minorities, creating a sense of pride and boosting the self-esteem of previously disregarded communities.

Overall, my empirical in-depth study on the use of an 'umbrella' theme and artistic interventions across gallery spaces as alternative tools for the cultural representation of sexual otherness, was conducted through semi-structured interviews with museum staff (primarily) and visitors who engaged with the projects (secondarily). The findings, then, were interpreted as signifying an additional and effective route for unsettling the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in museum work on a more permanent basis. Thus, this final chapter is divided in three sections, all of which unveil the main conclusions I drew from this research. The first part will explore a number of interesting and at times challenging points for museum practice and the theoretical discussion concerned with issues of representation. The second section will discuss recommendations for future work as these emerged from the limitations imposed by the current study. The third part will offer the final concluding remarks of the study I conducted.

### **Inclusive interpretive strategies: Towards the interruption of the (hetero)normative frame?**

Returning to the overarching questions posed at the beginning of this thesis, asking how and why museums develop projects to challenge heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality, and what the potential effects of integrating sexual diversity might be, it is now possible to state that museums, audiences and sexual minorities can benefit from inclusive interpretive strategies featuring a spatial or thematic treatment of sexual difference among regular exhibits, though not entirely unproblematically. More importantly, the evidence from the research I carried out suggests that the portrayal of sexual minorities through

subtle references presented on equal footing with the rest of the collections can contribute to a symbolic rejection of the binarisms and barriers imposed by the heteronormative frame within which museums generally operate, and, have the capacity to prompt visitors to consider how museums are regulated by (hetero)normativity.

Overall, the current empirical study adds substantially to our understanding of how museums and galleries might review their tactics towards the inclusion, representation and interpretation of sexual difference in their collections and programming, and eventually how they could shake the foundations of the deep-rooted heteronormative way of thinking and working. Further, '[d]isplays of power have always been what museums do' (Dubin 1999: 227), thus, museums are constantly bound up with political issues and for this exact reason they need continuously to be aware of and review their interpretive tactics, particularly in relation to disadvantaged social groups, such as sexual minorities. What I have sought to illustrate then is the possibilities that open through proactively enriching museum practice with a set of curatorial approaches aiming at *contextualising* and not *segregating* sexual difference. Thus, the major implication of my research is, in my view, the need for museums to constantly seek creative ways to diversify their strategies in terms of their display and interpretive techniques, their external partnerships and their audience development plans, if their purpose is to strengthen their social role, prompt critical reflection of long-lasting outdated perceptions, and strive for a plural cultural inclusion of previously invisible or misrepresented social groups, like sexual minorities.

So, why do museums develop projects inclusive of sexual difference? As it was previously known from past publications on the process of producing an exhibition on sexual diversity, the personal background of the leading curator is instrumental in initiating and managing effectively and passionately similar projects. Yet, a paradox emerged from the analysis of the findings in that although it still seems that such initiatives are being developed because of the personal motivation and background of the curator, at the same time, there are other influential and

encouraging factors which museums should start considering more seriously. Certainly, the identification of the curator with the stories on display is significant. Especially if one considers the long-lasting invisibility and lack of voice of sexual minorities in museum collections, then, an anticipated expectation would be to see curators belonging to this social group taking the lead on a museum initiative concerned with sexual diversity. This route has been popular among several feminists who have been stressing how by '[s]peaking only for ourselves, we leave Others to represent themselves' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1996: 10). bell hooks, for example, discusses the issue of white authority and its implicit support to prejudice, stressing the necessity for equally appreciating the contributions of black and white people's work in raising awareness about black minorities, in the place of 'this overvaluation of work done by whites, which usually exists in a context wherein work done by blacks is devalued' (1989: 43).

But, as I attempted to show, the educational background and, more importantly, the willingness for professional development within a working environment supportive of the socially purposeful museum with clearly communicated relevant policies, can actually motivate practitioners to experiment with the content and the interpretation they might offer on display. In addition, despite the fact that usually the initial idea originates from one's personal interest, the cases under my focus further highlighted how to strive for responsiveness to cultural, and more specifically to sexual, diversity through less encountered conceptual and interpretive methods, as a means for museum and audience development. Scholars previously engaged with the representation of sexual minorities in museums have been advocating the need for contemporary museums to raise their social profile and appeal to previously excluded social groups, like the LGBTQ community, by increasing the quantity and quality of their exhibits with stories related to them. What I hoped to have added in this discussion, then, is the potential for museums to benefit themselves too through the employment of an innovative curatorship seeking not only to appeal to the LGBTQ community, but also to introduce rarely seen curatorial tools, like radical craft interventions or broader thematic narratives with substantial amount of related material. Being

inclusive, and particularly though integrative modes of portrayal, has a two-fold positive outcome, for the previously silenced group and the institution itself. Exhibition teams then could actually be proactive in contextualising 'otherness' in addition to their special branded projects and try alternative modes of representation in order to raise their public profile to a range of audiences, both in terms of visitors' identities but also of people's cultural interests, striving gradually for a programming that caters for the personal and cultural needs of the public.

But, then, how do museums make such work happen? A significant issue emerging from the present research is that it stimulates the debate on the methodologies museums should follow to increase the visibility of sexual minorities among their collections. As it was stated at the introductory section, a simple increase in LGBTQ-related material is not enough. Authors who engaged with this particular topic, including Darryl McIntyre, Robert Mills, Stuart Frost or Patrik Steorn, have already made valid points for consideration, creating a pool of possible techniques. This pool can now be further diversified based on the creative and effective practices employed for *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs*. These cases were appreciated as worthy examples of an under-researched area of museum practice, because of the integrative character of their curatorial approach of sexual difference that could potentially introduce a number of tools to facilitate museum work towards a more permanent and an all-around interruption of their heteronormative narratives.

The current study then was based on two different sites, a historic house outside the city centre and a diverse large museum right at the heart of city centre, which presented, respectively, a social history / costume and a contemporary art / craft exhibition, leading nonetheless to similar conclusions. The different type of institution of these two case studies, alongside past similar initiatives at a range of organisations and under various conceptual frameworks, such as *Sexual Nature* at the Natural History Museum (2011) or *Hello Sailor* at Merseyside Maritime Museum, provide all together solid support for the belief in the capacity of any museum type to embrace sexual diversity in multiple forms.

Therefore, the need for exhibition teams to think more creatively was strongly reinforced throughout interviews, either implicitly or explicitly, according with the view that creativity presumes a desire to present fresh ideas in what and how a given topic is chosen to be displayed, which ultimately hides a level of risk due to abstaining from conventional and well-known patterns. Ultimately, then, champions of a socially responsible museum presumably attest to some level of creative thinking as they dream of a transformed institution, compared to the typical, old-fashioned view of museums as places of collection, conservation and research only. The question, therefore, has to be altered. Museum people may ask themselves whether they prefer a static organisation or a 'Museum as Disneyland' as Vera Zolberg (1996: 80-81) described it, or a changeable and multi purpose museum, which inevitably would encompass new evolving roles, risky decisions but more importantly, relevance to the changeable society and its communities. Consequently, that was the case for the projects I looked at, introducing the idea that questioning the long-held (hetero)normative thinking in planning and producing an exhibition means that the curatorial team needs to think outside the dominant paradigm, considering less expected but valid perspectives.

Firstly, targeting more broadly from the very beginning of a project seems to be an instrumental factor in its effectiveness in transmitting social messages to a wide range of visitors. This could actually have significant implications for future projects, as the outcomes are multiple and potentially reduce the risk to lose members of regular audiences. Certainly most of the times exhibition teams have the general public in mind. Yet, this research proposes an alternative understanding of thinking about the general audience. That is, museums should plan their programming with the diversity of the communities they serve and intend to serve in mind. Particularly, in social history exhibitions, the sexual or ethnic or disabled minorities might have played a role which, if known, could be included. Of course, this cannot be applied to all kinds of projects, yet, when an exhibition touches a concept that has evolved through time and is experienced in different ways by communities, then, provided that space and other contextual factors allow,

it would be misleading to focus only on the dominant social group and overlook others.

Secondly, a creative expansion of the curatorial tools that curators could employ, both in terms of content and interpretive techniques, was another conclusion to affect future museum practice, especially if one considers the strict financial times museums go through and the alleged lack of relevant material as an excuse for not producing depictions of sexual difference. Not only did my findings enhance the fact that willingness to be inclusive under a broad thematic narrative, similar to projects concerned with historical figures and stories –like British Museum’s exhibition *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict*, is among the key routes for strengthening references to sexual minorities, but they also revealed the potential lying behind the employment of craft, artistic interventions and simple but meaningful display techniques. Similarly to the work of Fred Wilson on race (for example, *Mining the Museum*, at the Maryland Historical Society), the interventions created by Matt Smith for *Queering the Museum*, involving the production of ceramic craft pieces and the questioning of heteronormative practices like the automatic pairing of figures in male and female couples, further stress the need for museums to explore the possibilities that open through crafts and particularly through radical craft interventions (Tseliou 2013b). Yet, a notable proposition that could be drawn from this conclusion, with major implications for museum practice, is that heteronormativity is based, reproduced and maintained both through the omissions of non-heterosexual identities and unconsciously made decisions in relation to display and interpretation of exhibits. As a result, if institutions are truly interested in advancing their programming and collections and become more socially responsive to the communities they serve, then, the projects of this nature, like those made by Fred Wilson or Matt Smith, could be regarded as interesting examples of how they could revise their interpretive methods, resisting automatic normative assumptions. More importantly, inviting external practitioners and especially artists whose own identity influences their work, might be an intriguing path to be followed, as:

The very nature of crafts, and people's familiarity with them, means that everyday products and materials are seen to relate to the experience of minority groups, stressing commonality and ordinariness, making difference perhaps less threatening.

(Tseliou 2013b: 106)

Thirdly, under the current financial times with many museums struggling to secure economic or material resources, another conclusion drawn from the data was about the role of creative thinking in external partnerships too. A partnership can take multiple forms and consequently museums, among other cultural institutions suffering from lack of funding, might become static in their work, unless they seek for a number of alternative choices. Inviting the communities to donate or loan their personal experiences and objects for the production of an exhibition is widely taking place. Accordingly, at Sudley House the collaboration with local communities, including the gay community, was an absolutely vital element for putting on an exhibition on marital ceremonies from a range of local cultural perspectives, overcoming the usual lack of previously invisible groups in the permanent and storage collections. But, being inclusive, especially under the current economic climate, should be a creative process at multiple levels, affecting the partnerships museums form, and consequently, an additional intriguing approach, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is about sharing authority by inviting and allowing an artist to work from a fresh perspective with a museum collection.

Having said that, one final question remains: what is the potential effect on museums, audiences, sexual minorities and, overall, the interruption of the heteronormative frame? The data acquired through interviews with museum staff and visitors indicate the effectiveness of cultural depictions of sexual difference under unifying narratives at multiple levels, opening up the lightly touched discussion in museum scholarship of heteronormativity in relation to the sector. As previously discussed in detail in Chapter 2, heteronormativity requires certain

preconditions for the perpetuation of its pervasiveness, mainly implicitly, in people's minds and actions. In other words, an attachment to binarisms and a strict division between the socially accepted naturalised heterosexual norms and the extreme opposite non-heterosexual identities, maintained through constant repetition at multiple aspects of our lives are required. On the contrary then, the review of the projects under study indicated how the integration of sexual difference across regular displays can be valued as a symbolic gesture for disrupting the heteronormative canon.

Additionally, while it is a preliminary finding, the embedding of sexual diversity across regular (hetero)normative exhibits, prompted visitors to reflect not only on their own attitudes towards others and themselves, but also on the normative power underpinning museum work. Actually, this issue, emerging from interviews with visitors at both case studies, provides further empirical support for the socially purposeful museum and the major role that cultural representational practices play in public understandings of 'otherness'. But, it should not go unnoticed that behind such preferences for more subtle and implicit references to non-heterosexual experiences and identities, a level of discomfort and prejudice against manifestations of a non-heteronormative lifestyle might be hidden. These conclusions then, eventually lead to what Morrissey accurately explained:

If frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world, 'framing' (as a verb) is about getting the right words that fit our world-view and connect to our identity, beliefs, and values. Concepts or facts are not enough to change someone's world-view; change requires finding alternative frames that incorporate our strongly held values and beliefs.

(2008: 3)

Hence this outcome, based on empirical research, further supports arguments made by other museum writers encouraging cultural institutions to adopt of a more inclusive approach to the LGBTQ community. Such a diversification of museum practice could also evolve through the use of the unifying frame of human rights,



adopted for example by the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow for their project on LGBT contemporary art (Sandell 2012), or could be applied to public history narratives, as the British Museum has been very proactively paying attention to with its past exhibition focusing on the *Warren Cup* and its recent exhibition catalogue of same sex references across its national and international permanent collections (Frost 2008; Parkinson 2013a).

Moreover, subtlety and non-controversy was valued as a positive feature of these projects, which on one hand, coincides with a significant percentage of members of the LGBTQ community as manifested in surveys in the museum and media sectors. As previously discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, many people who fall outside the socially expected gender and sexual norms, have been displeased with their public portrayal, often infiltrated with negativity, suffering, sexual explicitness and other typifications rendering them as the extreme other of the heterosexual majority (BBC 2010; Sandell, Dodd and Jones 2010; Stonewall 2010).

Nevertheless, a curatorship of this inclusive strand has to be examined cautiously. Skeptical critique by a proportion of scholars mainly from radical feminism and queer studies and people whose gender or sexual identity does not conform with the socially expected heteronorms, might arise, viewing such curatorial practices as too subtle and normalising of sexual identities rendering invisible the voice of sexual minorities and attempting to assimilate them to the norm of heterosexuality (Seidman 2001: 326). The following statement of the queer politics' scope is illustrative of this viewpoint:

A life beyond the closet, which is what normalization promises, affords a kind of personal integrity that has been unattainable for many individuals. However, legitimation through normalization leaves in place the polluted status of other marginal sexualities; it sustains the dominant norm that regulate our sexual intimate conduct apart from the norm of heterosexuality . . . Queer politics is then critical of any political strategy that aims only to

redraw moral boundaries to include a deviant practice within 'the normal' - without challenging the regulatory power of the category of the normal.

(Seidman 2001: 326)

In other words, what the current study also proposed was that sexual diversity does not have to be provocative. On the contrary, its portrayal can actually sidestep controversy, including positive images and stories featuring a sense of ordinariness, as many LGBTQ identified individuals expect from cultural representational devices. Consequently, the combination of findings contribute to theoretical debates on the portrayal of 'otherness' by strengthening the conceptual premise that how one speaks about a specific identity is a too complex task, even when the main professionals involved belong to this social group. In other words, my research attests to the impossibility of presenting a minority group and pleasing all of its members as visitors actually make different readings and have various expectations of how they would feel more comfortable to see themselves or the 'others' be portrayed.

For all these reasons, my intention from the very beginning was not to favour this technique over the other, that is, stand alone and provocative depictions. Rather, the scope of this study was to unveil the opportunities of a comparably less encountered interpretive device and eventually call for the necessity of diversity in how the museum sector chooses to display sexual difference in order to provide for the diversity within the community itself. Also, as discussed in Chapter 2, persisting on conventional portrayals of different types of otherness leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes which tend to 'portray a social group or category as homogeneous . . . [and] render uniform everyone associated with a particular feature' (Pickering 2001: 4). Embracing then a flexible practice, continuously progressing and adaptable to the needs of contemporary society, concerned not only with increasing the content of their collections or programming but also with enriching the modes of framing their narratives, is inevitably valued in this thesis. Following Gonzalez's appraisal of Fred Wilson's work in questioning the invisibility of the

racial 'other' in museum collections, it could be said that the inclusive interpretive strategies explored in this thesis offer a similar 'interpretive response to those hegemonic systems of representation that have traditionally positioned some subjects in culturally subaltern positions' (2008: 118). They are appreciated in other words as a form of resistance to a fixed normative way of museum work and thus, to fixed and limiting understandings of gender, sexual, and other kind of, identities.

### **Limitations and directions for further research**

In general, qualitative researchers work within an interpretivist framework as well as during a limited period of time. Consequently this thesis 'constitutes one way of "slicing the cake"' (Silverman, D. 2010: 66) and as such it speaks to museum practice and scholarship by looking at how and why inclusive curatorial practices can unsettle the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and actively contribute to the promotion of respect for and understanding of sexual difference through semi-structured interviews with museum staff and with visitors. Starting from the point that embedding sexual difference within the rest of a museum collection might be beneficial -without, however, undermining the potential losses- is only one perspective for reviewing the selected case studies. For instance, as it has been brought up several times in previous sections, researchers from queer studies might oppose these practices and critique them as sites of promoting assimilation to heteronormative institutions, while my viewpoint explores them as sites of subverting heteronormativity.

More specifically, the present study can serve as a base for future studies looking at additional layers in relation to the representational practices employed by museums to include the stories and culture of sexual minorities in their collections and programming and their impact on the communities they already and plan to serve. Yet, a number of important limitations, having affected the design, conduct and, consequently, the outcomes of the current thesis, need to be considered. In

addition, the findings and conclusions that were drawn from the research I carried out have thrown up questions in need for further investigation.

Firstly, emphasis was placed largely on the museum perspective and less on the visitors. For this reason, practitioners' beliefs and attitudes received greater attention in this thesis. In addition, with regard to the audience, the intentional focus on individuals who actually interacted with parts of each project could also be perceived as an additional limitation. In order to keep the overarching focus on the perceptions, attitudes and impact of inclusive and unifying representations of sexual difference, it was felt that the current doctoral thesis should offer an in-depth exploration of those issues from the perspectives of the visitors who interacted with them. Nonetheless, a future extended audience study on similar projects would be an option of continuing research on unifying narratives to better capture the impact on people's minds and behaviour but also to shed light on the reasoning for not having appealed to more people. Moreover, although the current study identified a connection between subtlety and ease to engage and accept cultural references to the sexual other, more work is required to establish it. An in-depth and large scale research in audience reception needs to be undertaken before a more conclusive association between subtle and implicit references to sexual diversity from one hand, and prompting visitors -unfamiliar with the topic- to engage with the subject and reconsider their own attitudes and perceptions is more clearly understood.

In such a future project, research questions that could be asked include 'Why you did not choose to see this exhibition?', as it might be useful to reach out for those who opted not to visit to identify the levels of discomfort that integration of sexual difference might cause to people. In fact, it would be very intriguing to conduct a large scale comparative study between a stand-alone or potentially provocative project and an exhibition like *Queering the Museum* or *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* where sexual diversity was contextualised among regular displays. Scholars and, especially practitioners concerned with representational practices in museums and galleries would benefit from a survey that takes into consideration past evaluation reports on specific exhibitions and inserts up to date data from new

research on a range of approaches to the portrayal of sexual difference, aiming at producing a conclusive report on how audiences respond to different modes of inclusion. Such a project would inevitably have major implications for the reception of other forms of difference and potentially contentious topics too.

Having said that, considerably more research into the effect of the representational practices employed by museums in relation to sexual (and other forms of) diversity would also provide compelling data if the focus was turned to contexts identified as relatively more conservative than the UK. Potentially, in conservative environments where staff might be more reluctant to display sexual difference, barriers to the cultural portrayal of sexual minorities might be overcome through the adoption of a more subtle curatorial approach, as data from the audience research revealed an easier acceptance of such depictions by visitors who might otherwise have not deliberately engaged with this subject. For example, exhibitions like *Eros* at the Museum of Cycladic Art (mentioned in Chapter 1) in countries similar to Greece where there is limited legal provision for LGBT rights, are in my view excellent sites to test whether subtle and implicit references to sexual difference are actually welcomed by the general public and what impact, if any, these might have on their attitudes towards people who do not conform to socially accepted norms.

In addition, dissemination of the longer-term impact on museum work, policies and attitudes would be advantageous. It is indeed interesting to check whether a socially inclusive project was a one-off initiative or was part of a longer term plan. As Chapter 2 revealed, heteronormative thinking and acting needs to be challenged at multiple levels from the moment an object enters the museum till the moment it gets on display. In particular, in terms of challenging the prevalence of heteronormativity, considering that its subversion can only be effective if it takes place at multiple levels, it would be extremely helpful to identify whether the aftermath of having integrated sexual difference on equal footing has been embraced in future programmes or not. Therefore, one question that needs to be asked is the assessment in the longer term of the work undertaken at both sites in

terms of whether it was an one-off attempt to be shown as inclusive or not. Continuation is crucial in initiatives concerned with social issues and marginalised communities. The reasoning is illustrated in Crooke's call for cautiousness about the actual effect of these attempts:

There is no doubt that the rise of interest in embracing cultural diversity and multiculturalism policy has increased the pace of changes in museum practice - interest in new forms of collecting, new histories on display and new ways of communicating. What is more difficult to assess is how deeply founded these changes are.

(Crooke 2007: 93)

Partially though, as it was illustrated in Chapter 5, there has been a follow up in the programming after *Queering the Museum* and *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* ended, both at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and Sudley House. Until the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 both sites had a record of a number of socially responsive projects and events, including references to sexual minorities, indicating an unchanging practice that maintains at its core their museums' social role. Thus, a follow-up study on museums that have adopted such a subversive, though temporary, approach to understand whether this implicit but highly important questioning of the heteronormative frame has permeated other aspects of their work too in the longer run.

Another limitation -but also a suggestion for future studies- concerns the impact of community partnerships on the communities themselves engaging with the final outcome. In Gaynor Kavanagh's view:

If museums equip visitors to look at the histories on offer, if partnerships are entered into where ideas and views are provoked and exchanged, if the aim is to make things that much more interesting, then some adjustments on the part of the museum have to take place. It has to be much more aware of itself and its audiences. It also has to be aware of the mechanisms and

philosophies of its own subject. But particularly, it has to be willing to enter into the spirit of experiment and exchange. Of central importance, this requires that the museum should be able to laugh at itself and enjoy the partnership. As with all things in life, one gets what one gives.

(Kavanagh 1996: 129)

At Birmingham it was possible to get the views of individuals identifying themselves as LGBTQ on how they felt about being represented in a museum setting where an LGBTQ festival and an openly gay artist were the two museum partners. But at Sudley House due to the lower rates of visitation it was not feasible to carry out interviews with members of the communities represented. In other words, identification of techniques that would allow a closer look in future surveys on the community side of a museum-community partnership would be beneficial for museum practice as it would explore the attitudes and feedback of those directly (as lenders, co-developers) or indirectly involved (members of the social group actively involved in the production of a museum project).

Moreover, if such critical discussions are to be moved forward, more information on the reasons behind the substantial lack of visibility of people identifying themselves as bisexuals or transgender is required. In fact, this appeared to be a pitfall of *Queering the Museum*, as for *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* there was a valid point in that the curator avoided the inclusion of two females to equate the heterosexual female dresses and have male suits included too. As previously explored, the majority of Matt Smith's interventions related to the male gay experience, despite the fact that the project was concerned with 'queering' the museum to allow for the stories of LGBT community to be unearthed. The artist nonetheless clarified that as a gay man himself he could not have avoided to focus on exhibits closer to his own experiences. Yet, it is intriguing how stand-alone and integrated references to sexual difference are still considered to be a male privilege.

Finally, in the queer, gender or sexuality studies domain, there is an ongoing call for scholars to consider more substantially the role of class or race and to refrain from the continuing and limiting focus on Western middle-class individuals (Carbado 1999; Beckett and Macey 2001; McQueeney 2011; Taylor 2011; Richardson and Monro 2012), a direction that is gaining increasing support within related studies. Moreover, Weeks, Holland and Waites advise for a prudent welcoming of different sexual identities, since diversity does not equal an automatic equality among them:

But recognition of the diversity of sexual forms should not give rise to an easy pluralism, which assumes their happy coexistence. Sexualities are hierarchically organized, with some forms being dominant while others are subordinate and marginalized, and are shaped by complex relations of power.

(2003: 6)

Therefore, it is strongly suggested that the association of these factors and the implications of social class or race upon the content and modes of portrayal of sexual diversity in museums and galleries is investigated in future studies.

## **Concluding remarks**

The empirical findings in this study add to a slowly growing body of literature with reference to sexual minorities and their inclusion in museum displays and programming. In line with other researches, the present thesis revealed the benefits of a more diverse museum practice when previously disparaged groups, like sexual minorities, are portrayed. Particularly, it illustrated how the integration of sexual difference through subtle unified narratives refraining from segregation, abolishing spatial and conceptual barriers and easily accessible by the general public can be a compelling direction for the cultural portrayal of sexual diversity. More importantly, it provided additional evidence in relation to the steps museums



could follow to gradually begin a more dynamic and permanent subversion of the heteronormative frame that permeates all stages of their work. Nevertheless, the encouraging aftermath of such projects does not downplay other approaches to the specific or similar subjects. Rather, what I have attempted to show is the need to research, seek and employ a range of innovative interpretive devices for exhibiting references to sexual, and other kinds of, difference by any museum striving for social responsiveness to the rapidly changing synthesis of contemporary society. The adoption of a diverse programming on and curatorship of difference is, I believe, the only way to ensure a fairer inclusion of a minority's plurality, and consequently, to practically reject restricting fixed understandings of gender and sexuality. And, as I have argued, embedded exhibits among regular collections are a very promising curatorial method to communicate this plurality to the widest possible audience.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Information about visitor interviewees at Sudley House

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> |
|------------------|------------|---------------|
| Alice            | 50         | Female        |
| Alison           | 40s        | Female        |
| Angelina         | 51         | Female        |
| Annie            | 82         | Female        |
| Aristotle        | 68         | Male          |
| Barbara          | 48         | Female        |
| Catharine        | 73         | Female        |
| Christine        | 29         | Female        |
| Christopher      | 28         | Male          |
| Claire           | 37         | Female        |
| Dipti            | 86         | Female        |
| Dorothy          | 32         | Female        |
| Kate             | 60         | Female        |
| Lilly            | 50s        | Female        |
| Liz              | 56         | Female        |
| Maria            | 21         | Female        |
| Olivia           | 49         | Female        |
| Simon            | 73         | Male          |

## Appendix 2: Information about visitor interviewees at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> |
|------------------|------------|---------------|
| Alexandra        | 50s        | Female        |
| David            | 50         | Male          |
| Gabrielle        | 26         | Female        |
| George           | 35         | Male          |
| Giannis          | 50s        | Male          |
| Graham           | 40         | Male          |
| Harry            | 31         | Male          |
| Helen            | 43         | Female        |
| Jacob            | 37         | Male          |
| Janet            | 27         | Female        |
| Joe              | 50s        | Male          |
| Josephina        | 58         | Female        |
| Mark             | 29         | Male          |
| Nick             | 54         | Male          |
| Peter            | 50         | Male          |
| Phil             | 50         | Male          |
| Sandra           | 28         | Female        |
| Steve            | 40         | Male          |

## Appendix 3: Interview protocol for interviews with visitors

*Hello, my name is Maria-Anna. I am a PhD student at the University of Leicester and I am doing a study about visitor experiences of visiting Queering the Museum / Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs. Would you mind answering a few questions?*

*Record:*

*Date:*

*Venue:*

### **Opening questions**

1. What was the reason for your visit today? Could you tell me why you came to the museum today? What prompted you to visit here today?
2. Did you come to visit the museum generally or to visit the specific exhibition?

### **Reactions to the exhibition**

3. What are your initial thoughts on the exhibition?
4. Which part(s) of the exhibition did you like the most or find more interesting and why?
5. Were there any part(s) of the exhibition that you didn't like or found least interesting and why?
6. Was there any part of the exhibition that made you pause for thought or prompt you to talk to your friend/family/visiting companion? What and why?
7. Was there any part of the exhibition that you found especially provocative?
8. If yes, what kinds of things were they?

### **Messages**

9. Do you feel the exhibition is trying to communicate any particular message?
10. If yes, what would you say this message is?
11. Where in particular do you think this comes across most strongly?
12. What do you feel you will take away from your visit?

### **Museums as ethical leaders/museums and social roles-responsibilities**

13. (Optional in case that there is no reference to the LGBT-related exhibit- If they have noticed the LGBT exhibit then move on to question 14) Could you please take a look at the image of this exhibit (show them an image of the LGBT - related exhibit) and tell me how do you feel that the LGBT perspective is included in the exhibition? Do you find it appropriate or not, and why?
14. How do you feel about LGBT culture being represented in museums?
15. What kind of impact do you think this might have on visitors?
16. Would you like to see more LGBT culture represented in museums?
17. If yes, in what form?

### **Visitor background**

18. Can I ask you approximately how old are you?
19. Is there anything about this particular exhibition that is personally relevant to you?

## Appendix 4: Interview protocol for interviews with museum staff and external professionals

### **Part 1: General questions about the exhibition**

- 1) Where did the idea of this exhibition originate from?
- 2) Who has led and managed the exhibition?
- 3) Who has been involved?
- 4) Are you aware of any difference of opinion in the advisory board or in the exhibition development team? How were they resolved, if any?
- 5) Who are the partners, if any? Did the partnership enable you to do things in a new way? What was the significance and value of this partnership?
- 6) What are the target groups of the exhibition, if any?
- 7) Could you give me an overview of the scope of the exhibition? What are the key ideas and concepts you want to put across in the exhibition? (especially regarding particular exhibits)
- 8) What are the particular strengths of such an exhibition? What impact did/do you hope the exhibition would achieve, in terms of audiences-media-policy?
- 9) How do you think the theme would be received by the public, media etc? What would you like the visitors to take away from this exhibition? Any feedback from people who have visited the exhibition? How effective has the exhibition been?

### **Part 2: Specific questions about the LGBT inclusion in the exhibition**

- 10) How did the LGBT themed exhibit emerge? Is there any particular message that you are trying to communicate through this particular inclusion?
- 11) How important was to include LGBT representation in the exhibition?
- 12) (Only applicable to *Hitched, Wedding Clothes and Customs* exhibition) How would the same exhibition differ from the one you produced if there was no inclusion of LGBT aspect?
- 13) Have you done anything similar in the past in terms of representing aspects of LGBT culture?

- 14) Were there any challenges that you faced before and during the time of the exhibition? Has the exhibition presented you with specific challenges that were different from the rest of the work you have done?
- 15) What opportunities and challenges and other implications does the representation of a concept like love/wedding from a new perspective have for you as a curator?
- 16) Has the exhibition had an impact on other aspects of the museum work?
- 17) Is there anything different for an LGBT related exhibit to be displayed as part of an exhibition about love/wedding, compared to exhibitions focusing only on LGBT culture?

### **Part 3: General questions about the LGBT representation in museums**

- 18) It has been noted that lately LGBT inclusion within museums is gradually increasing. Is there any particular reason for doing/having done this at this/that time? Why do you think this happens? Are any of these reasons relevant to the selection of including LGBT aspect in the exhibition?
- 19) What unique contribution does a museum/gallery have in raising issues of concepts like love/wedding from a seemingly more inclusive perspective? What are the challenges for such attempts?
- 20) Are you planning of continuing this attempt of promoting different aspects of life, like LGBT culture? How would you like to see this work develop in future?
- 21) It is commonly agreed that LGBT life and culture is usually represented in media and culture stereotypically. Would you consider that the way you chose to represent LGBT community is different from their typical representation? Could you please say a little bit more?

#### **Part 4: Questions targeted at external professionals**

- 22) How did you become involved in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery?
- 23) What it means to have your artwork on display at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery?
- 24) What do you think of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery doing work in this area?
- 25) Is there anything different for an artist to exhibit their LGBT related work as part of a museum displays?
- 26) Did being involved in this project influence or inform your work or practice in any way?
- 27) What have you been influenced by in developing this exhibition?
- 28) What key ideas do you want visitors to take away from their visit?



## Appendix 5: Information sheet form for interviews with visitors

### Information Sheet for Visitors

**Project Title:** Museums and social issues; Exploring visitors' responses

**Contact Address:** mat19@le.ac.uk

**Date:**

Dear

I would like to take this opportunity to tell you more about the nature of the project, who I am and why I am undertaking this research, and how you were selected for the project. I would also like to inform you about any the data you supply to me will be used and the protections of your privacy and confidentiality that are in place.

**Who is doing the survey:** I am a PhD student at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester.

**What is the project for:** To develop a better understanding of visitors' thoughts and feelings about the exhibitions under my research and the way these exhibitions may be addressing social issues.

**How you were selected:** In order to get detailed data regarding the museum projects I research, I will need to conduct semi-structured interviews with visitors. Every 3<sup>rd</sup> visitor will be selected and as such you were selected to participate in my research project.

**Your role in completing the project:** The semi-structured interview will take place at the end of your visit and it will last for about 10 minutes. Any details about my research project and your role will be explained, both orally and in written form, to you before the beginning the interview. You will be asked to look thoroughly at the Information Sheet and the Consent Form before proceeding to the interview. Your opinion will be among other visitors' responses and will enable me to get a sense of the visitors' perspective regarding the museums' potential to explore social issues and engage visitors in examining both new and familiar issues and themes.

**Your rights:** Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project at any point. If you are uncertain or uncomfortable about any aspect of your participation please contact the researcher listed at the top of this letter to discuss your concerns or request clarification on any aspect of the study.

**Protecting your confidentiality:** Material you provide as part of this study will be securely stored in accordance with the Data protection Act 1998. In addition, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity I intend to use pseudonyms or letters for anonymising you in any written or oral presentation. Furthermore, any information that you indicate you supply in confidence will not be included in the research.

I would be very grateful if you were willing to take part in this project. If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of the research please contact the School Research Ethics Officer, Dr Giasemi Vavoula, on gv18@le.ac.uk.

Thank you very much for your assistance.

With best wishes,

Maria-Anna Tseliou

## Appendix 6: Information sheet form for interviews with museum staff and external professionals

### Information Sheet for Museum Practitioners & External Professionals

**Project Title:** "Subverting the Heteronormative Museum"

**Contact Address:** mat19@le.ac.uk

**Date:**

Dear

I am very grateful that you are willing to take the time to participate in my research project 'Subverting the Heteronormative Museum'. I would like to take this opportunity to tell you more about the nature of the project, who I am and why I am undertaking this research, and how you were selected for the project. I would also like to inform you about how the data you supply to me will be used and the protections of your privacy and confidentiality that are in place.

**Who is doing the survey:** I am a PhD student at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester.

**What is the project for:** To develop a better understanding of the ways in which museums represent gender and sexuality and their potential to challenge discrimination and prejudice through the specific exhibitions under my research.

**How you were selected:** In order to get detailed data regarding the museum projects I research, I will need to conduct semi-structured interviews with members of the museum staff involved in each of the exhibitions under research. As such, you were selected for an interview as a member of the curatorial/educational team that worked for the development of the exhibition under research.

**Your role in completing the project:** The interview will take place preferably at the place of your work and it will last for up to one hour. You will be asked to have read and signed the Information Sheet and the Consent Form before the beginning of the interview. Both of these documents will have been sent to you by e-mail a couple of weeks before our meeting. The data you will provide me will form a valuable source for getting the necessary information about the aims, objectives, expectations and challenges of the exhibition under research. Your interview along with the rest of museum practitioners' ones will enable me approach the museum's perspective on its potential to challenge social norms regarding gender and sexuality through exhibitions like the ones under my research.

**Your rights:** Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project at any point. If you are uncertain or uncomfortable about any aspect of your participation please contact the researcher listed at the top of this letter to discuss your concerns or request clarification on any aspect of the study.

**Protecting your confidentiality:** Any information you supply will be treated confidentially. Material you provide as part of this study will be treated as confidential and securely stored in accordance with the Data protection Act 1998.

If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of the research please contact the School Research Ethics Officer, Dr Giasemi Vavoula, on gv18@le.ac.uk.

Thank you very much for participating.

With best wishes,

Tseliou Maria-Anna

## Appendix 7: Research consent form for interviews with visitors



### Research Consent form for visitors

I have had explained the "Museums and social issues; Exploring visitors' responses" project which is research towards a PhD at the University of Leicester.

I have read the Information sheet about the research project which I may keep for my records.

I understand that this research project will be carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester's Code of Research Ethics which can be viewed at <http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice>

Material I provide as part of this study will be treated as confidential and securely stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

I have read and I understand the information sheet Yes ☐ No ☐

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and they were answered to my satisfaction Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to the interview being recorded Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to my words being used anonymously in the student's thesis and any relevant presentations and publications Yes ☐ No ☐

Name [PRINT] .....

Signature .....

Date .....



## Appendix 8: Research consent form for interviews with museum staff and external professionals



### Research Consent form for museum practitioners and external professionals

I agree to take part in the "Subverting the Heteronormative Museum" research project which is research towards a PhD at the University of Leicester.

I have had the research project explained to me and I have read the Information sheet about the research project which I may keep for my records.

I understand that this research project will be carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester's Code of Research Ethics which can be viewed at <http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice>

Material I provide as part of this study will be treated as confidential and securely stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

|                                                    |     |                          |    |                          |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| I have read and I understand the information sheet | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|

|                                                                                                                |     |                          |    |                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and they were answered to my satisfaction | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|

|                                                             |     |                          |    |                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|

|                                                                                                                                                            |     |                          |    |                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|
| I agree to the interview being recorded and my words being used in the student's thesis and related conference and teaching presentations and publications | Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | No | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|----|--------------------------|

Please choose one of the following 3 options:

|                                                                                                                                                         |                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) I give permission for my real name and institutional affiliation to be used in connection with any words I have said or information I have passed on | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|

|                                                                                                                                                                         |                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2) I request that my comments are presented anonymously but give permission to connect my institutional affiliation with my comments (but not the title of my position) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|

|                                                                                                         |                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3) I request that my comments are presented anonymously with no mention of my institutional affiliation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|

Name [PRINT] .....

Signature .....

Date .....

## Appendix 9: Information sheet and Research consent form for email interviews with visitors

Dear ,

I am a PhD student at the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, and I am currently working on my research project for the PhD thesis. My project has the title 'Museums and social issues; Exploring visitors' responses' and the research seeks to develop a better understanding of visitors' thoughts and feelings about the exhibitions under my research.

For the purposes of this research, I would like to invite you to an email-based interview, through which I hope to get a sense of the visitors' perspective in addition to museum's one.

The interview will consist of my sending an email with 19 questions, which you will be kindly asked to answer by replying to my email. With your permission, I may then ask a few further questions to clarify your answers as needed.

The outcomes of this email interview will be presented in my PhD thesis and relevant publications. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. The research will be carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester's Code of Research Ethics, which can be viewed at <http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice>. If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of this research please contact the Museum Studies Research Ethics Officer, Dr Giasemi Vavoula, on [gv18@le.ac.uk](mailto:gv18@le.ac.uk).

Material you provide as part of this study will be securely stored in accordance with the Data protection Act 1998. In addition, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity I intend to use pseudonyms or letters for anonymising you in any written or oral presentation. Furthermore, any information that you indicate you supply in confidence will not be included in the research.

I will be happy to answer any further questions you might have regarding this interview.

I would be grateful if you could please reply to this email to indicate your decision regarding taking part in this study, by including in your email one of the following statements:

1. I consent to be interviewed by email by Maria-Anna Tseliou and I agree to my words being used anonymously in the student's thesis and any relevant presentations and publications
2. I do not consent to be interviewed.

Thank you in advance,  
Maria-Anna Tseliou

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