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# Sex in the City: Reclaiming the Public Stage

Discussant & Panel Summary: Jess Deshayes, MA candidate, Gender/Cultural Studies, Simmons College

## Panelists:

Elisabeth Fallica, PhD candidate, Sociology, The New School

*"Dancing on an Unsteady Stage: The Performance of Gender and Sexuality in New York Neo-Burlesque"*

Dagmar Van Engen, MA candidate, English Literature, Boston College

*"Queering the City: Performing Privacy and Claiming Urban Spaces in Howl"*

Julian Gill-Peterson, PhD candidate, American Studies, Rutgers University

*"Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP New York Back into the City"*

The first panelist, Elisabeth Fallica, opened with a vividly reconstructed scene of a burlesque show she saw in New York City in October 2009. Having filled the audience's imagination with glitzy dresses, fans, corsets, and pasties, she then asserted that such neo-burlesque performances have the capacity both to reproduce and to subvert heteronormative ideas of sexuality. The ultra-feminine aesthetic of burlesque can operate in an exaggerated manner to denaturalize the concept of "woman," but performers need to handle this exaggeration with care lest they simply reinforce problematic ideas about beauty and the body. Fallica details a performance she attended in October 2010 as an example of subversive burlesque. She says that the performer channeled anger into her performance, which the audience found alternately vulgar, fierce, and uncomfortable. Fallica suggests that the uncomfortable moments in the performance pushes

viewers outside the comfort zone of the straightforward glamour they expected, forcing them to engage critically with their own assumptions about what it means to perform “sexy” and “feminine.”

Dagmar Van Engen presented next on Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem, *Howl*, and the representation of gay masculinity in this work. Ginsberg’s poem, she argued, describes the subversion of public places: commies, queers, junkies, Jews, mystics, all kinds of characters considered “insane” or “deviant,” erupt into public view and insist that they exist. Van Engen analyzes Ginsberg’s depiction of gay men engaging in anal sex; his characters shriek with pleasure, challenging the dominant reading of this sexual act in the 1950s as painful and perverse. She also directs attention to the places these gay men transform. Intended as a place of stigma, the hospital becomes a positive and erotic place, with “insane” gay men finding joy in their identities—the very identities for which they are being punished. Van Engen duly resisted an overly utopic reading of *Howl*; however, she noted that even when the walls collapse, the inmates will run outside to find more travails, rather than finding freedom. She argued that the poem hints at repression and oppression still to come for the gay community. Her final remarks opened up questions about performativity in politics, and how to bring queer theories into activism.

The final panelist to present, Julian Gill-Peterson, discussed AIDS as the backbone of many queer histories, haunting us as an archive across generations. How do memory and forgetting, he asked, connect us to urban AIDS activism, and help us imagine alternative futures? His work highlights the importance of oral histories, and draws significantly from the ACT UP Oral History Project. During his presentation, he discussed a particular protest by ACT UP, which occurred on Wall Street in March 1987, as remembered through oral histories. The demonstration involved not only the “official” protesters, but also drew in passers-by, as it confronted directly the company whose profit-driven pricing for an anti-viral drug they were protesting. Gill-Peterson discussed the significance of this kind of activism that breaks down the barriers between public and performer, active and passive. His challenge to current activists is how to do activism on this same level, despite heightened security in New York City today, and how to return to memories of homophobia to imagine queer futures.