

**WE'RE
FAMILY.
NO MATTER
WHAT.**

The Future is Archaic:

**compiling remnants of the queer cultures of
decades past to resuscitate queer counterpublic
spaces at MIX NYC**

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Myth

When I first encountered the mythology of MIX NYC five years ago, a group of older queer friends conveyed a magical queer lifeworld. They recounted, in rapid excited fragments, an immersive multi-media space that would emerge from an abandoned factory or theatre from the labor of *hundreds* of queer volunteers. There its magic would exist for a week of nonstop interactive art, experimental film, hedonism, and community—only to be torn down afterwards, a transient performance. However, they insisted that I wouldn't really *get* it until I went. One needed to feel the MIX Factory, to experience it. It would be like *nothing* I had ever experienced.

Needless to say, I went; then converted, I became a volunteer. The community and mythology around MIX have continuously shaped my queer existence in New York. However, I am not alone in this experience. Determined not to let my own love of MIX cloud the questions I asked for this paper, I simply requested that my respondents write or say something—anything—about their experiences with the MIX festival. In addition, I looked at what the leadership of MIX has said about the queer experimental film festival in other interviews. The overwhelming responses made something immediately apparent: MIX evokes a deep emotional resonance for a certain subset of radical queers in New York City that other queer artistic or nightlife spaces do not.

I expected this among the leadership of MIX, yet their responses still seemed poignant and reflected the reactions of festival participants as well. As an example, the executive director Stephen Kent Jusick contends:

“While there are many great festivals in the world, for many reasons, it’s the *personal, visceral and emotional response that MIX NYC evokes from people* that make it worthwhile for me...I hear from visiting filmmakers or hardworking volunteers or first-time attendees who give deeply personal tribute to their experience, as eye-opening, or somehow...life-changing” (Nichols, 1).

Similarly, past programmer and artist Zave Martohardjono insists, “One of the two nights I came to party, I just stuck around to catch friends, eat and talk, and watch all the...*mayhem. No other space like it—really*” (Nichols, 1). They continue, “we all know how much threat there is to that kind of free space...This might be a little sentimental, but I really had some big feelings about how important MIX is” (Ibid). Board president Sloan Lesbowitz, affirms Jusick and Martohardjono’s sentiments, “it will be beautiful...it will be imperfect...the films will be thought-provoking, challenging, beautiful and politically- charged...you will laugh...you might cry...the programs are curated with specific visions and themes that *you will not see at any other festival*. You might fall in love” (Nichols, 1). One can observe that these leadership responses emphasize a unique emotional response that the MIX Festival produces.

My contributors further highlighted the distinctive reactions that the leadership emphasized. Tinker Coalescing, a talented nightlife photographer who has volunteered at and previously professionally photographed MIX for 5 years, insists that the festival is “most of the reason why I’m still in New York.” She describes the festival as both “moving” and “life changing,” declaring it “the most magical place and coming together of peoples I have ever encountered.” She smiles and continues, “it’s special, you know, you’ve never seen anything like it, I’ve never seen anything like it, it’s a story...a playground of art, image and identity that every queer artist needs to see...you’re really

not an artist until you see it. It's the only thing I tell younger queer artists they need to see." This year is the first year since she started coming to the festival that Coalescing will not photograph it, as she currently is taking a professional break. She holds up the "Emeritus" volunteer badge that Sparrow (the volunteer coordinator) made for her and says that she's "ecstatic" to be able to really experience the festival this year. "It's my favorite holiday, and now it actually feels like one." Elina Schnayderman also emphasizes how special MIX is. They have volunteered at MIX for the past three years, and insist that it is "one of the only places where I feel embraced... the volunteers are my family, and it is the most liberating space in the city that I've found, which is awesome." Mars Hobrecker, one of the exhibiting artists at MIX 28, says that the piece he co-created, *This Little Holy Place*, fits into the festival, because he considers the MIX Factory "sacred." He emphasizes that the space is "beyond anything else," and maintains that it's "seriously a life obligation to see what queers can produce when they work together." Most strikingly, Hobrecker maintains that he didn't feel like he was "truly in New York" until he first attended the festival in 2012. When I ask why, he describes some of the countercultural examples of MIX: public sex, embracing of kink, nonchalant nudity, thought-provoking art, and the experience of a public gathering space where he could "meet his elders, find out what New York was *supposed* to be like."

Hobrecker does not find out what it was *actually* like; instead, how it was *supposed* to exist. In an attempt to figure out why my respondents set MIX apart from the other (extremely lively) queer art and performance events and festivals in New York

so starkly, I had discovered a function that MIX fulfills in a way that other communal queer spaces do not: a type of living queer *mythology*. Indeed, observing the words of the current MIX leadership seemed to reflect an ongoing performance of historical queerness. As Diego Montoya, the MIX venue designer insists:

“MIX NYC is one of the last left of its kind; a noncommercial queer space without the usual boundaries found in New York City. It is a family space made by the community that for a week gives us a place to be together and experience queer art that isn’t shown anywhere else...when the city has shifted so drastically into the mainstream it is good to see an organization like MIX NYC still standing” (Nichols, 1).

Martohardjono affirms Montoya’s sentiment, “for better or worse, *MIX is one of the last vestiges of the underground arts scene that is clearly dying—especially in NYC*. There are fewer and fewer spaces where queers can bring their full selves and full lives, especially as NYC gets more corporate, gay and mainstream” (Nichols, 1). From these claims, one could imagine that MIX exists as an artistic—not literal—phantom of historic queerness.

In her book *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*, co-founder of MIX Sarah Schulman even goes as far as to assert that the work of the current MIX leadership (including her 1987 co-founder Jim Hubbard) is “in a sense, living museums of values of the past” (Schulman, 99). Yet she emphasizes that “their personal efforts still allow new artists to be heard and seen and to develop” (Ibid). More explicitly, she insists:

“Current artistic director Stephen Kent Jusick *continues the vision* that, rather than fostering elite columns of producers of passive entertainment, instead art collectives and institutions can actively *create* queer artists by presenting queer work, maintaining venues, and staying grassroots. The goal of the organization is to get the work to marginalized people so that they can imagine themselves making art. And history has shown that open door, welcoming, community-based policies produce both high profile and under-the-radar artists. Not only have many well-known successful makers come out of MIX, but the inclusivity has also resulted in the early development of young

curators of color like Shari Frilot and Rejendra Roy...Both started as grassroots curators at MIX and have grown to be influential leaders with the knowledge and values of inclusion that come only when one is developed in the community” (Shulman, 98).

As one can see, the MIX festival performs a type of intervention of the past, yet this intervention does not happen passively. Schulman seems to echo the figurative sentiments of the current leadership of MIX, insisting that MIX exists as a museum of *values*, instead of a literal museum of history. Consequently, I argue that through its immersive counterpublic, MIX *restages* and denaturalizes the past, producing living apparitions of what older queers have named lost, and queering temporalities to create future possibilities.

Build-Out

It’s 8pm on a Saturday night the weekend before MIX 28 and I am chopping squash in the kitchen. It seems like infinite things need to get done in the next couple of days, but no one seems too worried. Somehow the space always magically comes together at the very last minute. I am taking a break from hanging thick curtains over the large chipped factory windows in our Sunset Park location where spandex pants were once assembled; officially to “keep out the draft,” unofficially to keep out prying eyes, since this year the factory sits in a semi-residential area.

I’m helping cook dinner in a makeshift kitchen for a weary group of volunteers. All the way through the build stage, MIX cares for its volunteers in this way: sandwiches, coffee, and a nightly family dinner. The dinners—both in the build stage and throughout

the festival—stay gluten-free and vegan, healthful and delicious. Over the course of volunteering, I realize that this remains one of the main ways that MIX attracts people from different social economic classes to both the build-out and to the festival itself. The woman standing next to me showing me how the squash should look before it goes in the pot and the person teasingly stealing bites from the tossed salad provide examples of this phenomenon.

Flayr has in the past been through Silvia’s Place and various other crisis centers for queer homeless youth in the city. Sparrow hired them into the cooking leadership after a friend of a friend raved about their cooking. Sparklez grew up in a low-income family in Kentucky, and is the first in her family to attend college (she recently went back to school at age 33, and receives sporadic congratulations hugs throughout the night). She works as a performer, and takes on a variety of odd jobs. Both Flayr and Sparklez are trans individuals of color, and both are in prominent (paid) positions on the catering crew.

While our hands work the repetitive labor of chopping, I get into a discussion with Sparklez about being queers who can’t access most queer spaces in New York City. She lives far into Brooklyn, far from most of the venues that host major queer events, and often can’t afford cover fees or drinks. I worry about strobe lights and dance floors due to photosensitive epilepsy (last weekend I cheered when I learned from Dizzy that strobe lights are once again banned from the MIX Factory). “I feel like a ghost sometimes,” she says quietly. Yet the MIX Factory fills itself with ghosts. Earlier on a coffee break, Montoya spoke of how MIX tries to get as many queer people into the

space as possible, and my personal experience can attest to this. Efforts include everything from building a 40-foot wheelchair ramp, bussing in people who can't afford transportation and reaching out to homeless queer youth, to providing free food and safe places to sleep to volunteers and festivalgoers. As MIX 27 volunteer Emmerson Lunarbow confirms, "I love experimental film...but I couldn't care about the art as much at that time [2014], volunteering was more about knowing where my next meal would come from."

This provides opportunities for contact relations among queer people in a way that New York City cannot sustain at this point in time. In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Samuel Delany's main thesis emphasizes the necessity of contact relations in cities. "Life is at its most rewarding, productive and pleasant", he insists, "when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will" (Delany, 111). Delany demonstrates how contact relationships positively affect everything from class mobility to providing models of intimacy that productively question heteronormative relationships (Delany, 170 & 40). Schulman alludes to the importance of contact relations in her work as well, stating, "gentrification is the removal of the dynamic mix that defines urbanity—the familiar *interaction of different kinds of people* creating ideas together" (Schulman, 27). Both Schulman and Delany implicitly mourn the progressive disappearance of contact relationships in New York City, and trace the grounds for their disappearances.

One could understand the nature of these contact relationships by contrasting them with networking relationships, another form of interaction between strangers,

which takes place more commonly today. Networking relationships often involve people with “like interests” in a professional and motive-driven setting (Delany, 128-129). This type of connection between people does not often cross class lines; networking institutions either set this boundary explicitly with prohibitive pricing, or implicitly with activities or interests that remain inaccessible to people not of a particular class background (Ibid). While networking often takes place within physically bounded institutions, Delany gives an interesting example of a networking interaction between strangers holding playbills who connect on a public bus. Since the playbills act “as signs of the shared interest (and shared economic level) characteristic of a networking group” the conversation tacitly cut off anyone who couldn’t afford the expensive theatre tickets (Delany, 181).

In contrast, contact relationships “tend to be more broadly social” and appear random (Delany, 129). Consequently, these interactions between strangers distribute resources much more effectively. In a networking situation, many people compete within a particular genre to receive favors from the few people accomplished enough to bestow them. Accordingly, “networking produces more opportunities to network—and that’s about all (Delany, 139). Desire holds the structure stable, even though the only outcome seems to further *enforce* inequality. However, contact relationships can take place anywhere, between people with vastly different interests and needs. Desire also replicates contact relationships, but this can come from many different places—including, as Delany demonstrates, sexual ones. The relative randomness of contact relationships means a wider variety of needs and assets, leading to less competition and

more fruitful interactions (Delany, 136). In addition, contact relationships challenge the common understanding of intimacy; some of the contact relationships that Delany describes transpire non-consecutively, or only occur for one hour. Yet Delany makes it clear that the length of time or lack of development along a traditional timeline does not make these relationships any less meaningful (Delany, 40).

Yet these significant contact relationships have progressively faded in New York City. Delany and Schulman both name multiple interweaving grounds for this tragic disappearance, including gentrification, privatization, and crackdowns on sexualized spaces (that Delany's thesis asserts exist as a primary source of interclass contact). The exact lineage of this transformation cannot fit into this paper, but I will trace some key points that relate to MIX. As Delany illustrates, "the threat from AIDS produced a 1985 health ordinance that began the shutdown of the specifically gay sexual outlets in the neighborhood: the gay movie houses and the straight porn theaters that allowed open masturbation and fellatio in the audience" (Delany, 15). Interestingly, Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard founded MIX in 1987; two years after the devastation began (Bernstein, 56). This crackdown on queer sexual spaces, combined with the rapidly emptying apartments of queer people dying from AIDS, hastened gentrification forces that had already begun in a more insidious manner. Schulman declares that before the AIDS crisis, New York City policy had already begun to be developed "with the stated goal of attracting wealthier people back to the city in order to be able to pay municipal bills" in the then bankrupt city (Schulman, 25). Yet she relays that then, "large numbers of my neighbors started dying, turning their apartments *literally* to market rate at an

unnatural speed” (Schulman, 26). Some of the queer people dying from AIDS were class privileged white migrants like the people the new policies hoped to attract, yet these people generally had very different motivations for moving to New York City. Schulman says of the people who began moving into her dead friends’ apartments, “they came not to join or to blend in or to learn and evolve, but to *homogenize*. They brought the values of the gated community and a willingness to trade freedom for security” (Schulman, 30). Sure, the neighborhoods became “safe,” she says, “but only because they became dangerous to the original inhabitants (Ibid). The effect on queer public life was nothing short of devastating. Delany argues that the privatization of sexual space all but destroyed the interclass contact that once took place in public. “...If every sexual encounter involves bringing someone back to your house,” he laments, “the general sexual activity in a city becomes anxiety-filled, class-bound, and choosy” (Delany, 127). Schulman adds that mass displacement of sexual queer space and gentrification affected politics and art as well, as the three remain deeply interconnected (Schulman, 90). “Here we see a really pivotal moment of change,” she laments, “when art must become something that does not make people *uncomfortable*, so that they will spend money” (Ibid).

Delany parses this discomfort, the fears that both developed from and spurred on this sterilization process. “Over the last decade and a half,” he writes, “a notion of safety has arisen”:

“...A notion that runs from safe sex (once it becomes anything more than making sure your partner uses a condom)...to safe neighborhoods, safe cities, and committed (i.e. safe) relationships, a notion that currently functions much the same way the notion of “security” and “conformity” did in the fifties. As, in the name of “safety,” society

dismantles the various institutions that promote interclass communication” (Delany, 122).

He continues, “what I see lurking behind the positive foregrounding of “family values”...is a wholly provincial and absolutely small-town terror of cross-class contact” (Delany, 153). These fears alone have dire consequences for contact relationships; “safety” in this context means not talking to strangers and staying away from interclass public spaces and avoiding people with stigmatized mental health conditions (Delany, 193). Delany provides an excellent example of how talking to men in the porn theatres by Times Square moved him, men who society at large might deem insane. “Going there,” he claims, “allowed me to see that madness from a different perspective—and perhaps learn a little about it” (Delany, 58). The porn theatres facilitated these interactions, which Delany attributes to deepening his empathetic capabilities (Delany, 60). In this way, *discomfort* stays in the frontlines of class separation and gentrification.

Networking, of course, provides the *safe* and scripted form of contact relationships, with the interclass or neuro-atypical connections that Delany describes either implicitly or explicitly removed. New York in its current incarnation exists very much as a networking city (Muñoz, 53). I think of this, speaking with Sparklez. She and I live on opposite ends of the city, and both of us can’t exist in many queer spaces. We reside in different social economic spheres. For all of these reasons and more, we would most likely never encounter each other on the street. The queer events that take place in 2015 provide *networking* environments, hostile to both of us. At a prominent queer venue, bouncers once threw me onto a bench outside while I seized, to *protect* the club

from liability. And once, Sparkles got thrown out of a club for yelling at a white guy for touching her leg non-consensually, for making him feel *threatened*. The solution, she claims, lies in affinity spaces—spaces for only queer people of color, for example, or for only disabled queers. This seems both highly welcome, and somehow troubling to me. The community splinters, but whose safety truly gets protected? Who polices who belongs in an affinity space? Who gets *ghosted* once again in a sea of conflicting identities? In his interview with Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, Jusick alludes directly to this problem, lamenting, “the community is much more atomized and fragmented” (Bernstein, 73). Hubbard responds with, “there is no community...it just doesn’t exist anymore in the way it did fifteen years ago” (Ibid). Interestingly, Schulman parses the cause of this division. “We were the conspiracy,” she states, “that was the relationship between us. It didn’t matter if we knew each other. Now gay people identify with the power structure that they’re working for. And that identification is a lot stronger than their relationship to each other. So, *therefore, there’s no community*” (Ibid).

MIX 28

Social networking is safer, social networking is more accessible; on Tumblr, one can filter any undesirable tags with Tumblr Savior. On many platforms, one can have contact relations with many different people without ever actually speaking to them; there are fewer physical barriers to interaction, and lots of things remain *free* for those who can acquire access to a computer. Yet, as Sarah Schulman inquires, “will everything

(books, music, pornography, education, movies, friendship, camaraderie, love, and television) all be free if they're consumed online and prohibitively expensive to experience in person" (Schulman, 18)? As I cuddle with a large group of friends on a pile of pillows early Friday evening, I wonder about this—what exactly we lose when queer counterpublic spaces move more and more online. The focus on embodiment and physicality within MIX makes it easy to feel like we're *missing* something in current incarnations of queer artistic or nightlife spaces in New York City, something harder to place than mere nostalgia, or a shift from contact relationships to networking ones.

In his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner defines publicness as "a space of coming together that discloses itself in interaction" (Warner, 122). "Counterpublics," he states, "are 'counter' to the extent that they try to supply *different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity*...spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be *transformative*, not replicative merely" (Warner, 121-122). For example, MIX restages contact relationships by providing a space where they can occur, a space counteracting the networking mentality that currently pervades New York City. Yet I would argue that there exists something transformative in the type of *multisensory physicality* that MIX emphasizes.

That is not to say that digital environments lack physicality, yet they do overemphasize two senses: sight and sound. If MIX existed as a normative film festival, it would also prioritize these senses. Yet touch, smell, and taste run rampant as well. The softness of the pillows and the flavor of the food surround me, the touch of bodies on the dance floor, the sensation of art that we crawl through and run our hands over,

the scent of Sparklez frying doughnuts and the aroma of sweat late into Saturday night when my senses begin to disorganize. As organizer Devon Gallegos exposes, at MIX we “co-build temporarily better worlds through *stories and sense, and the derangements of both*” (Nichols, 1).

This sensory overload emphasizes what Warner himself points out: counterpublics tend to accentuate “embodied sociability” over textual communication, and this formulation remains part of what makes them transformative (Warner, 123). Jusick relates this type of embodied sociability to the “free and open” MIX Factory, adding that the organizers of MIX make “a conscious choice to create welcoming and comfortable spaces for queers to congregate, and have tried to make the temporary MIX Factory into a place where people can have their needs taken care of” (Nichols, 1). This, along with a commitment to multisensory environments, “*extends the themes off of the screen and into life*” (Nichols, 1). Further, multiple respondents named artistic costuming as a major component of their MIX experiences. Thus, the disruptions present in the MIX Theatre pair with sensory disruptions in the factory and among its participants: art and life, knowledge and desire all *mix* (no pun intended).

Alexis Clements illustrates this well in his description of MIX 28 installation piece

E L E M E N T S. He writes:

“Both seating areas include a plastic bag of potting soil with conspicuous holes in the top of each, evoking an array of possible meanings — a desire to possess, touch, and smell nature but only in contained and mediated package, along with allusions to penetrative sex and glory holes. The view from the car simultaneously feels like being in a peep show booth, a Flintstones car, and an extremely low-budget movie set, complete with tiny wind machines for effect...the flickering of moving images in front all the while, like an abstract, clown version of those television channels that continuously play burning logs...pairs of people seemed to linger in the inviting sets of chairs. And it felt

like there were layers of meaning around obsessions with experience, exhibitionist desire, and what values and problems are at play when we manufacture natural illusions” (Clements, 1).

Clements affirms both the way in which installation pieces help to facilitate contact relationships in the MIX Factory, and the multisensory nature of these installations. However, he also strikingly describes allusions to glory holes and peep shows, allusions to past queer sexual spaces that Delany describes in depth (Delany, 47).

The integration of art and life has taken place many times, yet I would argue that in the context of MIX, this particular boundary crossing signifies another type of interaction: the interface between a performative past and an imagined future. Here, the ?? no longer conscious enters into New York queer life; and a *temporal queering* takes place. In *Cruising Utopia: The then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz declares, “the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things” (Muñoz, 27-28). Thus, even though “the archives is a fiction...queer restaging of the past helps us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time” (Muñoz, 121 & 171). What displays itself at MIX does not *literally* represent the past, but provides artistic echoes, reverberations that have effects on the present New York City. The presence of the past “tells us something about the present, it tells us that something is *missing*” (Muñoz, 86).

Straight time obeys a narrative of *progress*; consequently we dismiss the past for what we perceive as new. Yet, as Muñoz construes, “we were queer before we were lesbian and gay” (Muñoz, 127). Thus, looking back becomes critical to queer world making projects. Under a narrative of progress, the past becomes naturalized and static.

The artistic echoes of a past community present in MIX call this into question. While this notion of past indeed exists as *myth*, it does not exist nostalgically. Rather, MIX's focus on *sensory* performances of the past ensures that one does not perceive these echoes as separate from the present festival, contained to another time.

Even when the past shows up more literally within the MIX festival, one perceives it as an ongoing process. For example, at MIX 28, archiving collective XFR offered free digitization services to festivalgoers (Cowan, 1). Here, the past entered literally into the space of the festival, with a massive grassroots archival project centered on voices often left unheard. Yet their table made their process sensory and transparent, adding to the action of the festival. The message that they repeated echoes the calls of older queer people: *do not forget*. In Delany's work, forgetting leads to gentrification (Delany, 152). Schulman's work, forgetting is *deadly* (Schulman, 13). Yet remembering remains different from the enactment that takes place during the course of the festival. This enactment *transforms* with its physicality, and the myth of community stays alive.

Takedown

A neon sign glows above the door to the MIX 28 Factory that states, "*we're family to matter what*" (See: Branlandingham, 1). While I laugh at first, I think about this sign more while I run trash outside during the festival, and again when I serve food to festivalgoers (including some close friends) on Sunday. I ask my friends what they think

about it, and they say it's a "nice fantasy" to think that everyone who enters the MIX Factory forms a family, and question, "who does the "we" include?" Remembering Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman's assertion—that the queer community does not exist anymore—I sadly agree with them. Yet ironically, it's only when I watch a crew carefully removing the neon lettering during takedown that I realize that this sign may not be nearly as cheesy and incorrect as it seems.

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner describes the curious process by which one can only create a public by addressing it (Warner, 107). In a similar manner, I believe that the MIX Factory attempts to create its counterpublic by the implicit address to all those who enter that takes place in this sign. As Muñoz makes clear, "queerness is not yet here...queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (Muñoz, 1). The piece above the door tacitly states the difficulties with declaring all those who enter *family*, yet it still makes its declaration. The assertion seems antiquated—yet as with much of the MIX festival, the sign performs a mythic past in order to perhaps create a future. This future would not exist statically as a state to reach under a narrative of progress. Rather, the process of creating the *family* that this sign addresses seems ongoing. As Montoya states in relation to constructing the MIX factory, "the *process* is as important as the end result" (Nichols, 1).

And now, we take its edifice down. Weeks of hard work removed in just a couple of days. It seems sad, but New York remains a networking city that cannot sustain embodied contact-filled spaces like MIX consistently anymore. Yet every year, the

experience transiently pops up for a week in November. MIX has “become somewhat of a season,” a systematic entrance of performative pasts into a city that cannot sustain them anymore (Nichols, 1). And after these pasts envelop all of my senses in every aspect of the festival, *I realize what exactly we have lost.*

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