National College of Art and Design

Illustration Design. School of Visual Culture

“Art, Social Change and Self Expression in the Queer Community”

Lee Boyle

Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of BA Illustration 2022

National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Lee Boyle

Programme / department: Illustration

Date: 26th January 2022

Table of Contents

Introduction 5

Chapter 1: Rebellion Against Traditional Values 7

1.1: Queer Visibility as a Political Act 7

1.2: Queer Activism in Ireland 9

Chapter 2: Banners as a Form of Protest

2.1: Craft Activism Explained 13

2.2: The Artist's Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment 14

2.3: Greenham Women's Peace Camp 18

Chapter 3: Rebellion and Art for Social Change 23

3.1: Rebel Dykes 23

3.2: Del La Grace Volcano 25

3.3: L.J Roberts 28

Conclusion 31

Bibliography 34

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Fallon, R. *Aprons of Power performance*, Limerick. (2018) linen, silk, felt, fabric paint, cord. Dimensions variable, each apron 85cm x 60cm approx. with hanging cord

Available at:

http://www.rachelfallon.com/artists#/aprons-of-power-and-the-artists-campaign-to-repeal-the-eighth-amendment

Figure 2: Maher, A, Fallon, R, Maycock, B. *Marching banner for the Artists campaign to Repeal the Eighth amendment*. Dimensions unknown. Nival, NCAD, Dublin. (2018)

Available at:

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/12/the-hateful-eighth-artists-frontline-ireland-abortion-rights-battle-eighth-amendment

Figure 3: Morgan, D, *Appliqué picture of the 'Embrace the Base' protest.* Dimensions unknown. The Peace Museum, Bradford, United Kingdom. (2012)

Available at:

https://thepeacemuseumcollection.wordpress.com/2012/03/01/embrace-the-base/

Introduction

This research project essay will investigate the role of queer communities in activism for social change, particularly focusing on the medium of craft activism and banners as a form of protest.

There are many intersections that exist within spaces of social change. This essay will explore the intersections between activism and lesbianism and lesbian artists who make work for social change and between activism and art -with a focus on craft activism, tapestries and banners, and the use of embroidery within queer and feminist spaces as a means for social change.

The first chapter will outline the definition of the word 'Queer' in a modern context, as well as put forward the argument that to be visibly queer in society is to be politically active. Chapter One will also focus on queer activism in Ireland and investigate how the lesbian community in particular have shaped and contributed to the movement for queer liberation.

Chapter Two will introduce craft activism and the use of craft in protest and will explore examples of craft activism being successfully enacted in the form of banners and tapestries within the context of the campaign to repeal the eighth amendment in Ireland and within the Greenham women's anti-nuclear protest in the United Kingdom.

Finally, Chapter Three will focus on lesbian artists and activists who use their queer visibility as a political statement of rebellion, including the lesbian group the 'Rebel Dykes' who actively rebelled and protested against the oppressive government in

London in the 1980's, as well as the photographer Del La Grace Volcano who used art as a way to campaign against the status quo by using queer visibility in photography as a political act. In addition this chapter will examine the work of L.J Roberts, a non-binary lesbian who uses craft activism in their practice, maintaining a political stance of queer visibility through their subject matter in queer portraiture and reclaiming imagery that was once seen as oppressive, through the medium of embroidery.

In approaching this research essay, my methodology was based on secondary sources. The Rebel Dykes documentary directed by Harri Shanahan and Siân A. Williams and produced by Siobhan Fahey was an incredibly important source as it represents a collection of accounts from members of the group recounting the activism within lesbian communities during the 1980s. The official Rebel Dykes website describes it as "a rabble-rousing documentary set in 1980s post-punk London. The unheard story of a community of dykes who met doing art, music, politics and sex, and how they went on to change their world." (2021)
I also found the essay written by Rosemary Hennessy (1995) titled 'Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture' to be very thought provoking and useful in forming my argument around queer visibility.

This Research project essay explores the idea that to be visibly queer is a political act of resistance, as well as investigating the role that craft activism has played within feminist protest and acknowledging the role that the lesbian community plays at the forefront of many protest movements.

Chapter 1 -Rebellion Against Traditional Values

The term ‘queer’, while not a new term, has been reclaimed in recent years by the LGBTQ+ community and has begun to replace the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ in reference to LGBTQ+ issues. “Queer embraces a proliferation of sexualities and the compounding of outcast posititons along racial, ethnic and class, as well as sexual lines--none of which is acknowledged by the neat binary division between hetero and homosexual” (Hennessy, 1995) ‘Queer’ acts as an inclusive umbrella term by discarding and rejecting the traditional gendered ideas within the binary of male and female that the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ can still be attributed to. ‘Queer’ includes transgender, non-binary and bisexual people, pansexual and polyamourous people among many others and incorporates all who fall into any of these spectrums and identities. It better encompases the intersectionalities of people between race, class, gender and sexuality.

1.1 Queer Visibility as a political act

While some lesbian and queer artists make explicitely political work, it could be argued that the act of creating art and simultaneously being visibly queer is in itself a political act.

Hennessy (1995) states that “The visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labour of invisible others.” While lesbians and gay people have become much more visible within mainstream media and this visibility has noticeably become more positive in

recent years, it is apparent that there is only a certain type of queer person, a *marketable* queer person, that is acceptable to be made visible in heteronormative society.

Even then, it is capitalism and the “queer or pink dollar” which prompts this increased visibility. It is a superficial tolerance and it excludes those people who do not fit into heteronormative ideals of what queerness ‘should’ be.

“Not only is much recent gay visibility aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets, but as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line.” (Hennessy, 1995) While the amount of queer visibility has increased due to the financial motivations of corporations, Queer people are still not accepted or even tolerated much more than they used to be.

These restrictions and the conditional embrace of LGBTQ+ people and culture only highlights the inequalities and lack of acceptance that still exists despite increased visibility. MediaSmarts (2019) puts forward that “queer people are being bought and sold by companies in exchange for treatment that heterosexuals should expect by default.” In other words; many corporations are performing their acceptance of the queer community in exchange for the monetary rewards, while still acting against the needs of the queer community when it suits them.

Daane Clark broaches this same topic in relation to the commodification of lesbians, observing that: “the intensified marketing of lesbian images is less indicative of a growing acceptance of homosexuality than of capitalism’s approporiation of gay “styles” for mainstream audiences” (Hennessy, 1995). Furthermore, as is highlighted by Staples (2019) “Often it is straight people who are reaping the rewards of

queerness becoming more mainstream." It is mainly cisgender, heterosexual people playing the role of 'queer' who benefit, while those who live their lives as queer still struggle to achieve the same recognition or acceptance.

It is due to this enforced simplification of queerness by heterosexual and cisgender people and the continued oppression and exclusion of those who do not fit into neat ideals of sexuality and gender in the 'right' ways, that the act of being visibly queer remains political. Queer visibility that is expressed in any way, through art or through activism work for social change, is a political act.

1.2 Queer Activism in Ireland

It cannot be denied that the wider LGBT+ community in Ireland has been historically oppressed and discriminated against. O'Toole (2005) divulges; "The 1995 Poverty report on poverty in the Irish lesbian and gay community showed that almost 60% of respondents had emigrated at some point in their lives, and that sexual orientation was a key factor in their decision. "Because I could not survive where I did not belong, I left"" (p185) While this discrimination and oppression reached all corners of the Irish queer community, the focus of political activism was primarily on the gay male population;

> "the public face of activism in the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities in Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s was mainly focused on service provision around the HIV/AIDS crisis and on rights-based activism (principally the campaign for the decriminalisation of male homosexuality)." (O'Toole, 2005. p.170)

This focus on the rights of the gay male, while necessary, led to an invisibility and lack of discussion and action in relation to the rights of lesbians and other members of the community. O'Toole (2005) posits that this invisibility around lesbian and

bisexual activism in Ireland was due to the fact that “For much of the twentieth century, Irish society was dominated by repressive social and cultural attitudes to sexuality in general.” (p.169) This mindset of shame and repression in relation to sexuality affects any person who does not fit the heterosexual and patriarchal ideal.

Historically, lesbian spaces have always flown under the radar and remained somewhat underground so even today it can be difficult to find and join these communities easily. O’Connell (2020) expresses the view that “Lesbian erasure is a massive problem both outside and within the LGBT+ community, particularly in Ireland where female sexuality, in general, has a long history of being stifled and punished when expressed.”

It makes sense that lesbian activism and movements for female empowerment naturally coexist. While not every issue that affects lesbians will impact all women, crusades for gender equality and female empowerment are relevant to and intersect with the needs of lesbian communities. O’Flynn (2018) comments on the convergence between them:

> “The queer and women’s rights movements have always seemed to battle different forms of the same heteropatriarchal oppression, and links between them are no surprise — the two movements have always been in dialogue. Unsurprisingly, it is queer women themselves who are the locus for this unity, the bridging points between two histories.”

The campaigns that worked for female and queer liberation in Ireland such as the Repeal the Eighth campaign in 2018, and for LGBT+ liberation like the Yes Campaign for marriage equality in 2015, were politically active spaces occupied by lesbians, among others. Ailbhe Smyth, a lesbian and long time political campaigner both for Marriage Equality and for Repeal the Eighth in Ireland, comments that:

"Lesbians being involved in the women's movement goes way back to the 1970s. We've always been a hugely powerful force at the forefront of the women's movement. It is in our bodies as women, and as lesbians that we are doubly subordinated." She goes on to say that "Queer politics have always been resistance politics, so there's always been a close relationship politically between the movements. I've never felt a split between being a feminist and an LGBT radical. All these issues are related because they're about sexuality, the body, autonomy and integrity. They are closely intertwined." (O'Flynn, 2018)

While individual progress has been made on rights such as marriage equality and bodily autonomy, the current systems are still harmful to women and queer people and to the freedom of all those who identify within these spheres. Barron (2022, p.24) points out the systematic issues of inequality within the Irish system:

> "Solutions are not offered for the underlying systemic cause of these young people's marginalisation - such as, for example, homophobic education systems, religious bigotry and influence, young people's legal rights (or lack of), violence, gender norms and inequalities, and poverty."

In summary, the political activism seen in Ireland towards achieving bodily autonomy and marriage equality and the prominence of queer figures within these movements for change demonstrates that feminist activism and queer activism intersect in their needs and goals. The continued disregard of lesbianism, even within feminism, evinces the continued need for a politically active and socially aware queer community, both here in Ireland and abroad, and further shows that existing as visibly queer remains both political and necessary.

The previous chapter has examined being queer as a political act of resistance and how queer and feminist activism traverse through lesbianism in Ireland. The next chapter will outline the intersection of feminist and queer protest in the context of both Ireland and the United Kingdom, and will draw attention to the use of craft and banners as a tool to achieve social change in both feminist and queer spheres. This can be seen in Ireland through the Artists Repeal campaign and in the United Kingdom through the Greenham Anti-Nuclear Missile protest camps. This chapter will highlight how those campaigning for womens rights, as well as lesbians and queer people, use art as a means of activism and political resistance.

Chapter 2 - Banners as a Form of Protest

2.1 Craft Activism Explained

Tapestries and banners have served as an overarching symbol in movements for women's equality from Suffragette times to the present day. They represent a reclamation of traditional feminine roles, using sewing and embroidery, which were once seen as a feminine, domestic activity and a way to keep women subservient. These forms of craft went into decline after women achieved the right to vote. Chansky (2010) says: "As marginalised groups within society struggle for equality with the dominant majority, they tend to cast off symbols that mark their difference, under the ideology that it is these external signs which divide them". The new wave of feminism however is embracing these symbols of femininity, transforming the art of sewing, embroidery and craft and turning them into tools that they can use to achieve equality. "They are moving to reclaim many of the domestic arts that were both devalued by the predominant masculine society and shunned as associative with oppressive domestic labour." (Chansky, 2010)

The use of banners as a means of communication in protest has been notable across the history of the UK and Ireland in more than just the feminist movement. Trustram (2011) discusses how banners featured both as a major part of the women's suffrage movement and as part of protest on a wider scale. "For hundreds of years, organisations that have a marching tradition have made banners in order to identify themselves. This includes trade unions, Orange orders, suffrage, women's and peace organisations."

Trustram (2011) also describes the use of craft as a form of protest within the votes for women movement:

> “The women's suffrage movement was a large-scale propaganda campaign that relied heavily on processions and printed material to convey its message. Banners were used extensively. Unlike trade union banners, suffrage banners were embroidered, stencilled or appliquéd and were created from within the movement. Women's traditional needlework skills were employed in a collective and creative endeavour”

2.2 The Artists Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment

A prominent example of this form of art and protest activism intersecting here in Ireland from recent years was the “Artists Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment” which was set up in 2015 and ran until the referendum to repeal the eighth was passed in 2018. The campaign was set up by Cecily Brennan, Alice Maher, Eithne Jordan, and Paula Meehan. The group aimed to highlight the restrictive reproductive laws in Ireland and encourage others, particularly fellow artists, to use cultural means to achieve social change. The decision to use the medium of craft to convey a political message is significant and not something that should be overlooked. Sewing is seen as a domestic act that is associated with femininity and conventionally served as an activity related to women who were seen as meek and docile. Using this same medium of sewing and craft to achieve gender equality goals is no coincidence. “We’re very aware of the power of imagery,” says Maher. “When you reclaim imagery, you take the power back. (Saner, 2018)

Not only does utilising craft reclaim the medium, using it for female empowerment rather than oppression, the use of banners, tapestries and craft pieces that have

been sewn and embroidered by hand conveys a very powerful, personal message and creates a very different connection with the viewer than a poster might. "Brennan and Maher claim that the power of the imagery has to do with beauty, refusing to play into the dirty politics of shock value." (Marian, 2018). In the context of the Repeal referendum, when the anti-choice side were using graphic and distressing imagery, the banners that were created with 'Artists for Repeal' showed a strength and power; the images were striking, but they refused to stoop to the level of the other side. Brennan comments that "People consistently commented when we were marching, that we had created something beautiful out of a really toxic situation." (Marian, 2018)

Rachel Fallon's contemporaneous work also follows this thread of using embroidery and crafting something beautiful to highlight what was going on. Fallon used a typical 'woman's activity' and created a powerful message from it. In Figure 1, both the image of the apron and the use of sewing and embroidery are powerful metaphors, turning on its head the idea of a subservient woman and showing the power of Irish women demanding the right to bodily autonomy through the means of craft activism.

Fig 1. Fallon, R. (2018) Aprons of Power performance - ACREA - Repeal!, Limerick.

Art can be a hugely important tool for opening debate, highlighting movements that need attention and creating discussion for social change in new ways. Cecily Brennan talks about the importance of using art as a means of protest and as a way to open dialogue in the context of the referendum to Repeal the Eighth amendment:

> "The arts at its best allows discussion, allows people to experience something, look at it, listen to it, consider it for their own selves. It opens places that haven't been open for a long time. That was our experience about the debate about abortion – it had not been public. Art helped to bring it out in a different way." (Saner, 2018)

The image shown in Figure 2, made by the Artists Campaign to Repeal the Eighth, prompts the viewer to consider the power that both the church and state hold over

women's bodies, without giving women a voice in the discussion.

Fig.2. Maher, A, Fallon, R, Maycock, B (2018)

The image in Figure 2 encapsulates these issues of patriarchal control over female bodily autonomy in a visually stimulating and engaging way and conveys the struggle that women have undergone to achieve equality in Ireland. When people are exposed to new forms of discussion, cultural ways to approach political campaigning and creative methods of displaying information, they can be encouraged to re-examine their opinions and beliefs and to foster a fresh curiosity for the discussion at large. Grace Dyas comments on the significance of art within the context of activism and social change. "Art can show the humanity and help people find the nuance in their own opinions." (Saner, 2018)

2.3 Greenham Women's Peace Camp

Another prominent example of women reclaiming sewing and embroidery in the form of banners for activist purposes was at Greenham Women's peace camp; a series of protest camps established in 1981 to protest against nuclear weapons being stored at Greenham common in Berkshire, England. The use of banners and tapestries were a vital part of protest at the site and the camp itself became a creative space where art activism thrived.

The protests at Greenham were a huge success, particularly after 'Embrace The Base', when "30,000 women arrived to protest against nuclear weapons at Greenham Common airbase on 12 December 1982"(*Embrace The Base,* 2012) in a form of peaceful protest that involved holding hands around the perimeter of the base and brought national and global media attention to the cause. While banners and craft embroidery were used during the protests, this medium of craft was also used afterwards to document the events, like in this Appliqué depicting Embrace the Base seen below in Figure 3, made by Daphne Morgan.

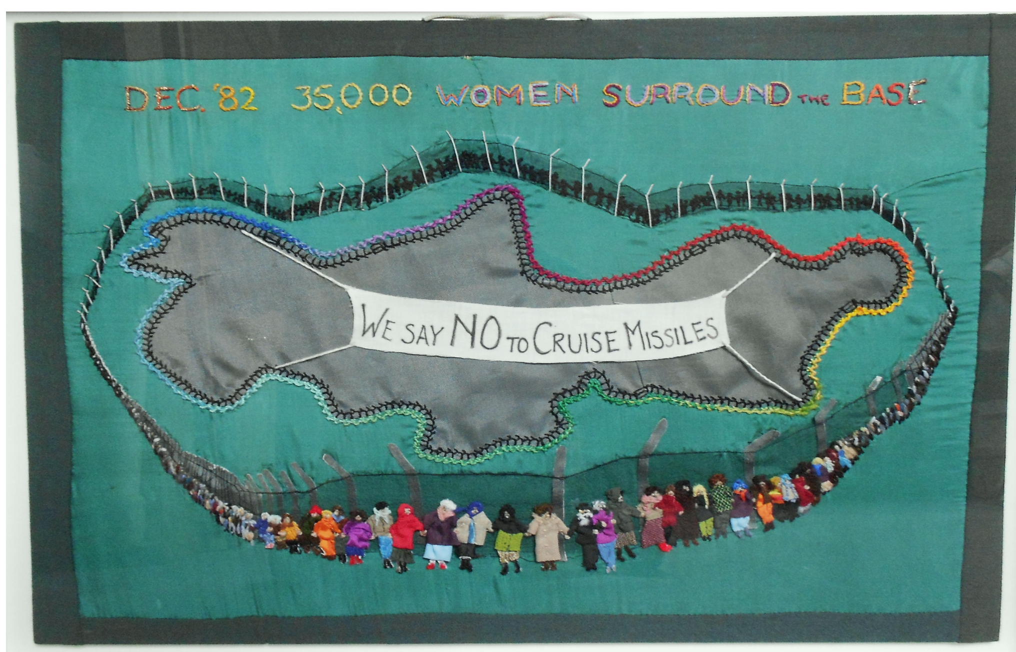

Fig.3. Daphne Morgan

Like the use of banners and craft activism employed during the women's suffrage movement, the same idea of subverting traditional ideas of feminine activities can be seen at the Greenham Nuclear Site. The women hand sewed messages and symbols to the fences surrounding the missiles. Blackwood (1984) describes how the Greenham Women appropriated the fence by "darning" it. She writes: "never have I seen such beautiful and meticulous darning...huge areas of the hideous fence soon started to look like beautiful tapestries". Protest banners were an important aspect of the camp and the use of craft by these women as a form of protest for social change was a noteworthy element in this female-led space.

The banners were a means of peacefully protesting while clearly communicating what was being fought for. For the women at the camps, they spoke through the medium of craft. "Protest banners soon became a medium for the Greenham women to powerfully translate their thoughts into an immediate message. In a way, these banners would do the talking, while the group vowed to only speak to the press with specific points of view"(Bourton, 2021) The banners were a way to keep their message clear.

The protest efforts of the women ultimately led to the removal of the nuclear silos from the site. Rebecca Johnson, a former camp resident, notes that: "Gorbachev explicitly mentioned Greenham women when he said that the European peace movement enabled his decision in 1986 to meet Ronald Reagan, leading to the INF treaty." (Moore, S, Khaleeli, H, Sarner, M, Harper, L, McCurry, J, 2017)

The non-violent protests at Greenham were predominantly women-led and eventually became women-only events. “The decision to have no men was partly practical: they were thought more likely to be violent during protests. It was also partly symbolic: the protesters presented themselves as mothers or grandmothers, protesting in the name of their children and future generations.” (The Week Staff, 2021) The fact that these protests were women-led encouraged the press to attempt to warp or dismiss the message of the protesters. “Even in this early stage, the Greenham protestors’ gender became the key storyline in how the group’s objectives were reported and later vilified.” (Bourton, 2021)

It cannot be ignored that a large portion of the women at Greenham were also lesbians. “The conservative press portrayed the women as crazed, unwashed lesbian separatists.” (The Week Staff, 2021) Julie Bindel, a participant of the “embrace the base” protest of 1982 comments on the attitude of the press: “Much of the tabloid media was prejudicial and referred to Greenham inhabitants as “dirty, filthy lesbians”. (2021) As previously outlined, activism and lesbianism have historically been very much intertwined and Greenham was no different. Not only was it a female space, it was a lesbian and a queer space. In-fact, Bindel (2021) notes that: “lesbianism and close relationships between women became normalised, with the possibility of alternative relationships opening up to women who might never have considered it.”

Karen Fisch, a member of a group called the ‘Rebel Dykes’; a group of lesbian activists which formed at Greenham, was a regular at the camp and noted the overwhelming queer presence that emerged.

“women came from everywhere, hundreds, thousands of women came. Suddenly, there I was with all of these other lesbians and women who thought they might be lesbians. It was like a ready-made community.” (Rebel Dykes, 2021)

Greenham consisted of many different groups of women, including many mothers and elderly women, but included what Jenn Thompson called “the best lesbian party of all time”(2021) when discussing Greenham in response to the ‘Rebel Dykes’ documentary. Thompson (2021) also describes the details of the activity at the camp: “Little dykes were spending weekends at Greenham and then going home Sunday night for school on Monday. There was witchy sex in misty woodland. There was a lot of drinking and mischief.” It was the first major female-only protest of its time and movements such as the Rebel Dykes carried on from this community. Despite the removal of the missiles in 1987, the Greenham Women's Camp remained as a peaceful protest against nuclear missiles for twenty years, eventually disbanding in 2000.

This chapter outlined the historic incorporation of embroidered fabric banners as a form of protest activism in Ireland and the United Kingdom as well as highlighting examples of when the art of sewing, embroidery and needlework were used as an important symbolic means of reclaiming power, giving a voice to marginalised groups and fighting for equality and social change. The cross-over between feminist struggles and queer struggles within a patriarchal society is highlighted once again, with lesbians in particular being at the forefront of many of these movements. The next chapter will specifically outline lesbian and queer artists and protest groups, including the Rebel Dykes, a group who met at Greenham Common, photographer Del La Grace Volcano who was a member of this politically active group of Rebel Dykes and non-binary artist L.J. Roberts who also takes up a needle and thread as a

form of activism and protest for the queer community. Historically, there has been a significant number of queer creatives using art to fight for social change, a subculture which is still very much alive and active today and which will be explored in the next section.

Chapter 3 - Rebellion and Art For Social Change

The term 'Dyke' originated as an offensive and derogatory slang word for lesbians who were seen as too masculine, however it has since been reappropriated. Krantz (1995) describes how

> "It originated as a homophobic and misogynistic slur for a masculine, butch, or androgynous girl or woman. Pejorative use of the word still exists, but the term dyke has been reappropriated by many lesbians to imply assertiveness and toughness."

The artists and activists that are discussed below are a small piece of a much bigger community of art activists and queer activists. This chapter will highlight lesbian activism and the role that 'dykes and queers' have had in the movement for social change through art.

3.1 Rebel Dykes

The Rebel Dykes were a group of queer people who met at the women's nuclear protest in Greenham Common during the 1980s. "From this environment evolved queer family in the form of rebel dykes, a subculture rallying against Thatcherism, homophobia, racism, gender inequality, misogyny, warfare – and having a lot of anarchic fun." (Thompson, 2021) The Rebel Dykes were outsiders in the LGBT+ community. Many were working class and poor, some were trans, some were black, all of them were dykes. "they existed outside the realm of mainstream gay and lesbian culture, from which they felt ostracized."(Thompson, 2021)

Debbie, who was a member of the group, discusses the link between art and activism within the context of the Rebel Dykes: "We came out of punk, we came out of art school, we were musicians. We were artists." It was queer creatives who were leading the charge for change within these spaces.

The group all lived together, squatting in neighbouring houses in London. It was a space for queer art to thrive.

"It was a real creative time. I mean, everybody was, you know people were either taking photographs or, you know, writing or making art or doing theatre." Many of the Rebel Dykes who existed in these politically active creative spaces "went on and become famous artists, famous filmmakers" (Rebel Dykes, 2021)

The difficulties and forms of oppression faced by the lesbian community at that time, particularly for those who identified as Dykes, are also discussed throughout the documentary. Yvonne, a former member of the group and a club DJ, casually mentions that "the chances were you probably were gonna get your head slapped about. And so it was dangerous just to be who you were in those days". The reality of being queer, and being visibly queer, especially as a lesbian, was that life was unsafe for them. Another member of the group, Maj, talks about the reality that "At least two of my friends were cut on their face because they'd been identified as dykes" and adding that "It was easier to be nocturnal so the straight people didn't ever get to see you" The Rebel Dykes existed out of necessity. The reality of life as a dyke at that time was that being visibly or proudly queer was dangerous. Fisch acknowledges this when reflecting on life at that time: "these are the sort of things that made us rebel dykes. it wasn't we just woke up one morning and goes "oh, let's be rebels. We actually had things to rebel against" (Rebel Dykes, 2021) Being queer and being politically active and aware were the same thing, then. Simply expressing themselves became political in this oppressive society.

The combination of oppression from the conservative UK government in the form of section 28, which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality, combined with the growing AIDS crisis really solidified the Rebel Dykes as a politically active group. Susannah, another Rebel Dyke who was involved in some of their high profile protests such as abseiling into the House of Lords and infiltrating the BBC news by

chaining themselves to the news desk, acknowledges the contribution of “the training camp that Greenaham common was for activist women and for activist dykes at that time.” (Rebel Dykes, 2021)

Thompson summarises her response to the ‘Rebel Dykes’ documentary with reference to the political and activist work of the group, explaining that they were making moves for social change and speaking out against the systems that oppressed and excluded them and others within the queer community:

> “Towards the late 80s the rebel dykes were fighting AIDS with Act Up and protesting Section 28 by abseiling into parliament and chaining themselves to news desks. Rebel Dykes is the archive of a constant, endless narrative of necessary fights, it’s about the resilience and playfulness of a group of queers who felt ostracized from both the straight world and the mainstream gay and lesbian world.” (Thompson, 2021)

Not only were the Rebel Dykes a prominent group of lesbian activists but many of them were also artists and used their creativity in the ongoing battle for social change and rebellion against an oppressive society.

3.2 Del La Grace Volcano

One such creative member of the Rebel Dykes who used art as a means to fight for social change is Del La Grace Volcano, a lesbian intersex photographer from California. Del La Grace uses they/them pronouns. Although they were born intersex, they were socialised as a female. They now live as both male and female. Volcano spent their time between San Francisco and London in the 1980s and contributed to much of the art activism that was seen in the Rebel Dykes. Volcano was a pioneer of providing queer visibility at a time when it was not acceptable and dangerous to be queer.

Fig. 3 Self Portrait with blue beard (1995) Photograph: Del La Grace Volcano

Their work explores gender performance, particularly performances of masculinity and femininity. Volcano defies gender norms, referring to themselves as a 'gender tyrant' they constantly challenge the boundaries of gender and sexuality in order to address these ongoing issues of queer resistance in their work. Volcano's work is inherently political as their photographs give visibility and a voice to those queer people marginalised by heteronormative societal structures. Del La Grace provides a lesbian perspective on lesbian culture; something that was then and still is a scarcity. "There is an element of being looked at in this collection that does not simply relate to the stereotypical gaze of the (male) voyeur. Lesbian images force us to theorise a lesbian gaze" (Lewis, 1994)

The Rebel Dykes documentary (2021) discusses the release of Volcano's first book 'Love Bites' which was published in 1991 after the photographer "started photographing queer dyke life in 1982".
The book received a huge amount of backlash and censorship when it was published, with many publishers refusing to print it or omitting sections before

releasing it. Lisa Power comments on the attitude towards lesbian sexuality at the time, stating: “Stuff that would not have been pornographic amongst heterosexuals was definitely pornorgraphic if it was lesbian” (Rebel Dykes, 2021)
The existence of section 28 gave the authorities the power to raid and subsequently shut down book shops if they were found to be selling anything deemed ‘unsuitable’, forcing them to be wary and omit any material that might be considered too risky’ to stock on their shelves. Many gay and lesbian shops refused to stock the book for this reason. Jim McSweeney, owner of the famous ‘Gays the Word’ bookshop in London admits to contributing to this censorship at the time; “one of the books that we didn’t stock at the start was ‘Love Bites’ when it came out. We were worried about it and we took legal advice. There were a number of images in the book that we thought could make us liable to prosecution” (Rebel Dykes, 2021).

The group of Rebel Dykes that Del La Grace was a part of believed in and fought for sexual liberation for lesbians and ‘Love Bites’ was a crucial step in that fight for visibility and autonomy. The photographer comments on their work at the time and the work of the group as a whole saying: “It's about time, 'our time' and the ways we ‘got in the way’ ”.(Volcano, 2021) They delivered a message of queer defiance through the medium of photography and drew new visibility to the issue of equality for lesbians and especially dykes within the fight for queer liberation.

3.3 L.J Roberts

L.J Roberts is an example of a queer artist who is aware of the political aspect of being visibly queer and who uses sewing and embroidery as a symbolic medium to rebel against a society which does not embrace their queer community. They are a visual artist and writer who “creates large-scale textile installations, embroideries, artist books, and collages.” (Roberts, 2020) They describe that their work “investigates overlaps of queer and trans politics, activism, protest, and craft. L.J also maintains a critical writing practice that bridges craft and queer theory.” (Roberts, 2020)

Roberts identifies as Butch. They are non-binary and use third person pronouns (They/Them). The materials they use and the subjects that form the focus of their work are informed by these aspects of their identity. It is clear from looking at Roberts’ work that a combination of their queer identity and a political/activist stance is important to their practice.

One of their projects highlighting queer identity and visibility was a series of embroidered portraits titled ‘Carry You With Me: Ten Years of Portraits’ that the artist completed, showing their friends, lovers, collaborators and queer community, primarily in New York City. Hadley Raysor Smith, the subject of one of Roberts’ hand embroidered portraits, expresses the significance of this work:“It would have been important to see images of queer people like these when I was younger. Queer people being visible and unapologetic.” (Small, 2021)
Roberts' work is significant as it intersects between and addresses both political and personal topics. They are an example of a Butch non-binary artist who focuses on

activism, queer visibility and queer history while using the traditional medium of craft and textile art. Mary Savig, a curator at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery discusses her opinion of their work, saying: "The power in Roberts's work is how it resists power...Roberts detonates hierarchies by lingering with needle and thread on the feminist, queer and trans trails that came before them." (Small, 2021)

Fig.4. L.J Roberts (2011-2021)

The same overarching theme of using craft as a means to subvert traditional ideas around femininity and instead use it to achieve a form of equality and take back

power can be seen in Roberts' work, an example of such embroidered portraiture can be seen above in Figure 4. For Roberts, as a Butch, non-binary person, sewing is a political act of resistance against traditional roles. "The artist considers the series as a way of dismantling the heteronormative tendencies of portraiture" (Florenz, 2021)

Conclusion

This Research project essay explored the idea that to be visibly queer is a political act of resistance, as well as investigated the role that craft activism has played within feminist protest and acknowledging the role that the lesbian community plays at the forefront of many protest movements, with a highlight on lesbian rebel groups and artists who have contributed to the cause for queer liberation.

When I embarked on this research project essay, I was under the impression that the areas of art activism and queer activism respectively were two distinct subjects. While they can indeed be separated to some extent, I discovered through my research that these two areas of activism intersect much more regularly than I had initially believed. It can be argued that anyone existing as a visibly queer person is performing a political act, and many queer people today are involved in activism because it is still essential to fight against the oppressive societal ideals and systems that still exist. Any artist who is creating queer art, either through the subject matter that they depict, from photography to embroidery, or anyone merely existing as a queer creative, is also contributing to queer and art activism. They are rebelling against the status quo of the heteronormative society that they exist within.

Activism is something that is very close to my heart and informs my thinking in relation to my illustration practice. As a non-binary queer lesbian myself, I am distinctly aware of the hardships that queer and trans people have faced and still do today despite the superficial progress that has been made. It is important to highlight that, although some progress has been made with queer visibiity for the LGBT+ community, there is still a lot of progress to be made with regard to acceptance and,

at the very least, tolerance. As a visibly queer person I am aware of the power of queer visibility as a political act and am passionate about activism and social change for good. All of this is encompassed in how I approach illustration.

In terms of future research, I would like to explore further how art has informed queer activism and liberation in regards to visibility and protest. I have learned the importance of visual communication in conveying important messages that may not be communicated as effectively through text or speech from my research for this essay and would like to investigate this concept more.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Fallon, R. (2018) Aprons of Power performance - ACREA - Repeal!, Limerick. Available at: http://www.rachelfallon.com/artists#/aprons-of-power-and-the-artists-campaign-to-repeal-the-eighth-amendment (accessed 5th December 2021)

Figure 2: Maher, A, Fallon, R, Maycock, B. (2018) Marching banner for the Artists campaign to Repeal the Eighth amendment. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/12/the-hateful-eighth-artists-frontline-ireland-abortion-rights-battle-eighth-amendment (accessed 24th Jan 2022)

Figure 3: Morgan, D, (2012). Appliqué picture of the 'Embrace the Base' protest. Available at: https://thepeacemuseumcollection.wordpress.com/2012/03/01/embrace-the-base/ (accessed 31 October 2021)

Bibliography

Barron, M. (2022) ‘Roundtable, Are we Queer yet?’, *Advocating for LGBT youth: seeking social Justice in a Culture of Individual Rights,* 43(1), pp. 26. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24576810.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A76d7fc82666012f7e3dd1f71dd0aa0c9&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=search-results (accessed 12th January 2022)

Blackwood, Carolyn (1984) p.28. *On The Perimeter*. London: Heinemann.

Bourton, L. (2021) ‘How the banners of Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp fought horror with beauty’ *It’sNiceThat*, 29 August. Available at: https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/women-for-peace-greenham-common-banners-four-corners-thalia-campbell-art-publication-260821?utm_source=instagram&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=intsocial&utm_content=igregular (Accessed 18 October 2021)

Bindel, J. (2021) ‘Greenham Common at 40: We came to fight war, and stayed for the feminism’ *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/29/greenham-common-at-40-we-came-to-fight-war-and-stayed-for-the-feminism (19 October 2021)

Chansky, R. (2010) ‘A Stitch in Time: Third Wave Feminist Reclamation of Needled Imagery’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43(4), pp. 681. Available at: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2010.00765.x (Accessed 13th January 2022)

Krantz, S.(1995) ‘Reconsidering the Etymology of Bulldike’. *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage* 70(2) pp.217-221.

Fallon, R. (2018) Aprons of Power performance - ACREA - Repeal!, Limerick. Available at: http://www.rachelfallon.com/artists#/aprons-of-power-and-the-artists-campaign-to-repeal-the-eighth-amendment (accessed 5th December 2021)

Florenz, G (2021) “L.J Roberts, Carry you with me, Ten Years of Portraits” Available at : https://pioneerworks.org/exhibitions/lj-roberts-carry-you-with-me-ten-years-of-portraits

Hennessy, R. (1994-1995). ‘Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture’, Cultural Critique, 29, pp. 31, 32, 34, 76. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354421 (Accessed 4th November 2021)

Hipperson, S. (2002) *Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp 1981-2000.* Available at: http://www.greenhamwpc.org.uk/ (24 October 2021)

Kerskens, C, Maher, A, Fallon, R, Maycock, B. (2018) Artist's Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Banner. Available at: https://hyperallergic.com/444665/repealers-ireland-abortion-referendum-artists-campaign/ (accessed 31 October 2021)

Laredo, A, Maher, A, Fallon, R, Maycock, B. (2018) 'Detail from a marching banner for the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment' Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/12/the-hateful-eighth-artists-frontline-ireland-abortion-rights-battle-eighth-amendment (accessed 31 October 2021)

L.J Roberts. Accessed on: https://www.ljroberts.net/portraits-2011-

Marian, O. (2018) *Artists Put Ireland's Abortion Referendum into Perspective.* Available at: https://hyperallergic.com/444665/repealers-ireland-abortion-referendum-artists-campaign/ (Accessed 31 October 2021)

Moore, S, Khaleeli, H, Sarner, M, Harper, L, McCurry, J (2017) "How the Greenham Common protest changed lives: 'We danced on top of the nuclear silos'." *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/20/greenham-common-nuclear-silos-women-protest-peace-camp (19 October 2020)

Morgan, D, (2012). Appliqué picture of the 'Embrace the Base' protest. Available at: https://thepeacemuseumcollection.wordpress.com/2012/03/01/embrace-the-base/ (accessed 31 October 2021)

O'Connell, E. (2020) 'A look back at the history of Irish lesbian spaces and the nightlife scene for LGBT+ women' *GCN*, 4 June 2020. Available at: https://gcn.ie/look-back-history-irish-lesbian-spaces-nightlife-scene-lgbt-women/ (24 October 2021)

O'Flynn, B. (2018) *How Queer Women and Nonbinary People Led the Fight to Secure Abortion Rights in Ireland.* Available at: https://www.them.us/story/queer-people-reproductive-rights-ireland (accessed 31 October 2021)

O'Toole, T. (2005) *Lesbian Activism.* pp. 169, 170, 185. Available at: https://ulir.ul.ie/bitstream/handle/10344/5316/OToole_2005_lesbian.pdf?sequence=2 (Accessed 12th January 2022)

Quigley, A. (2017) 'I Know This Much Is True: Orla Egan' *GCN*, 27 January 2017. Available at: https://gcn.ie/know-much-true-orla-egan/ (24 October 2021)

Rebel Dykes (2021) Siobhan Fahy. Available at: https://www.rebeldykes1980s.com/. London: Rebel Dykes.

Roberts, LJ (2020) *LJ Roberts Bio.* Available at: https://www.ljroberts.net/bio (accessed 2 November 2021)

Saner, E. (2018) ‘The hateful Eighth: artists at the frontline of Ireland's abortion rights battle’ *The Guardian* 12 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/apr/12/the-hateful-eighth-artists-frontline-ireland-abortion-rights-battle-eighth-amendment (accessed 31 October 2021)

Small, Z. (2021) ‘An Artist’s Portraits, Stitched Together on the Subway’ *The New York Times*, 1 October. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/arts/design/lj-roberts-pioneer-works-brooklyn.html (accessed 2 November 2021)

Smithsonian American Art Museum. (2016) *Azalées Blanches (White Azaleas).* Available at: https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/azalees-blanches-white-azaleas-2869 (accessed 10th Jan 2022)

Smithsonian American Art Museum. (2016) *The Art of Romaine Brooks.* Available at: https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/brooks (accessed 10th Jan 2022)

Staples, L. (2019) *Did culture really embrace queer people this decade?.* Available at: https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191218-the-decade-that-saw-queerness-go-mainstream (Accessed 11th Jan 2022)

The Peace Museum (2012) *The Peace Museum: Embrace The Base.* Available at: https://thepeacemuseumcollection.wordpress.com/2012/03/01/embrace-the-base/ (24 October 2021)

The Week Staff / Unknown Author (2021) *The women of Greenham Common and their legacy 40 years on.* 17 September. Available at: https://www.theweek.co.uk/news/society/954158/the-women-of-greenham-common (Accessed 17 October 2021)

Thompson, J. (2021) ‘Culture Club: Watching REBEL DYKES by Harri Shanahan and Sîan Williams’ *Club Des Femmes* 6 April. Available at: https://www.clubdesfemmes.com/portfolio-item/culture-club-watching15/ (Accessed 17 October 2021)

Trustram, M (2011) *BBC: Banners of the British Labour Movement*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/banners_01.shtml (Accessed 18 October 2021)

Volcano, D. (2021) *Del La Grace Volcano*. Available at: https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/ (accessed 5th December 2021)