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Plug'n'Play

Peeking out of the closet into the visibility paradigm

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LIVE ART AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

ABSTRACT

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TITLE OF THE WRITTEN COMPONENT/THESIS <i>Plug'n'Play</i> : Peeking out of the closet into the visibility paradigm	NUMBER OF PAGES + APPENDICES IN THE WRITTEN COMPONENT 61 pages
TITLE OF THE ARTISTIC/ ARTISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL WORK <i>Plug'n'Play</i> , (March 11– 26, 2023. MUU Helsinki Contemporary Art Centre, The Cable Factory, Helsinki.) Anna Pietilä (Spatial Design), Lempi Koponen (performer), Io Pettersson (sound design). Producer: Maria Kaihovirta. Supervisors: Julius Elo and Tero Nauha. The artistic work is produced by the Theatre Academy. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The artistic work is not produced by the Theatre Academy (copyright matters have been agreed upon). <input type="checkbox"/> There is no recording available for the artistic work. <input type="checkbox"/>	
<p>This thesis examines the complexities of visibility within the LGBTQ+ struggle, challenging the dominant narrative that coming out is the sole path to liberation. Through a reflective exploration of the artistic work, <i>Plug'n'Play</i>, and the incorporation of embodied personal and communal strategies of LGBTQ+ individuals, the study delves into the potential of the closet as a counter framework that enables fluid and plural expressions of self. By interrogating the relationships between visibility, safety, and assimilation, the thesis critically questions the strategies that prioritize visibility within LGBTQ+ struggles. It argues that the rigid binary of outness and closetedness dissolves into ambiguous gray areas, especially through our interactions with the cyber technologies, where we need tools for negotiating the terms and agreements of visibility, enabling individuals to assert agency over how and to whom they become visible.</p> <p>Additionally, the thesis investigates queer sexual and gender visibility in the context of cyber technologies, aiming to identify artistic and conceptual tools derived from personal and communal strategies that empower individuals to negotiate visibility. The urgency and necessity of negotiation strategies are demonstrated in the first chapter, "Playing Safe." Drawing on insights from the book <i>Trap Door</i> (2017), edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, the study highlights the pitfalls of fixating on visibility and representation in visual culture, including social media, and underscores the lack of comprehensive institutional and governmental support structures. Moreover, the thesis challenges the dominant heteronormative frameworks that shape safety and risk perceptions, particularly by deconstructing the dynamics of surveillance and assimilation. It reveals how surveillance apparatuses rely on visibility to function, while also shaping the acceptability of LGBTQ+ representation and public visibility by imposing heteronormative behaviors over LGBTQ+ individuals.</p> <p>In conclusion, this thesis attempts to redefine the understanding of visibility as a condition, rather than an ultimate goal for the queer community. It emphasizes the fluidity and pluralism of performances within the closet and coming out, advocating for continual negotiation and the pursuit of agency within heteronormatively organized spaces. By critically analyzing the complexities of visibility and drawing on insights from the cyber realm, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ visibility and suggests anonymity and encryption as tactics for navigating and negotiating visibility conditions. Ultimately, the thesis seeks to encourage LGBTQ+ individuals, artists, and researchers to seek tactics to challenge and reshape the sterilizing mainstream visibility discourse surrounding the community, not to fall into patriarchal, neoliberal, and white supremacist traps, by striving for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to queer struggles.</p>	
KEYWORDS LGBTQ+ politics, visibility, safety, risk, surveillance, digital technologies, cybersexuality, anonymity, encryption, artistic research	

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FOR(E)PLAY

Plug'n'Play took place in MUU Contemporary Art Centre Helsinki, between March 11 and March 26 in the form of an exhibition. The exhibition displayed byproducts of my ongoing auto-ethnographic research project, exploring the reconfiguration of performances of queer sexual desires through cyber sexual practices such as sexting, cam sex, digital cruising for sexual partners. The exhibition more specifically focused on the questions of queer visibility regarding this reconfiguration process. My take on visibility was critical towards the dichotomy of visibility-invisibility through my own queer experiences within the dominant queer discourse of celebration of outness. Through the project, I have searched for queering strategies, mainly from my own experiences but indeed shared by many queer individuals, for navigating and negotiating within this binary of visibility and invisibility.

Here with the term queer, I address the LGBTQ+ community with the radical political power it holds.¹ The term or perhaps the hashtag, queer, is not extracted from the LGBTQ+ communities and their histories in a position of “anything goes” but instead a term that helps to strengthen the theory in relation to the communities’ past, present and perhaps future. In reference to David M. Halperin’s argument in his article, “The Normalization of Queer Theory” (2003) that institutionalization of queer theory has led to its normalization.² He highlights that this normalization does not pose any threats to the established disciplines or the heterosexual and cisgender dominated institutions. Queer theory can be easily incorporated into various fields without acknowledging its historical roots in trans, lesbian, and gay studies. Furthermore, he adds that “queer” is positioned as equivalent to politically oppositional, progressive and liberal, while juxtaposition of the word with the theory reduces it into a theory and carries a danger of blocking the LGBTQ+ experiences and histories.³ Therefore, just as the LGBTQ+ community has claimed the slur “queer” back, I attempt to reclaim the notion “queer” from the neoliberal, western, institutional and mainstream appropriations of it by highlighting the personal and communal experiences of LGBTQ+. Moreover, the LGBTQ+ communities that I refer are not necessarily activist groups or “out and loud” queers, but an attempt to think of “queerness” with the LGBTQ+ people that might be closeted to the larger public and perhaps partly to the community as well.

¹ LGBTQ+ is an abbreviation which refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer individuals as well as individuals with unlisted sexual orientations and gender identities that are not heterosexual or cis gender.

² Halperin, “Queer Theory”, 341-342.

³ Ibid.

The LGBTQ+ experiences are intricately intertwined with the notions of visibility and concealment, prompting us to question the ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity are performed. However, within the popularized and most commonly accepted narratives, mainly in Europe and North-America, the act of coming out of the closet, focusing on the disclosure of one's queer sexuality or gender identity has been regarded as the singular and only awarding performance. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's deconstructionist examination in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), we encounter how the binary of homosexuality-heterosexuality is constructed and how the closet is there to assure the asymmetric power relation.⁴ Furthermore, anything that is not part of the dominant discourse and the norm which favours heterosexuals within the binary, is closeted and related with secrecy and privacy.⁵ However, in her introduction, I read something that not only resonates with my personal experiences as a queer individual, but also as an artist working with the themes and experiences related to queer sexuality and identity, somewhat publicly. She states that closetedness is also a speech act characterized by silence, but by quoting Michel Foucault, “(...)we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things.... There is not one but many silences(...)”⁶ The plurality and ambiguity of silence or the unknown, due to the several meaning that it might perform, in contrast to the specificity of coming out and disclosure, has formed my approach within my thesis work as it will be illustrated throughout the thesis.

Therefore, neither *Plug'n'Play* or this text is disclosing a singular and specific bit of information from the closet nor it is promising you facts from inside, but displays an assemblage of probabilities. Moreover, as much as it says and shows, it also consciously and unconsciously seeks different ways of not saying things as an artistic research method working with precarious and marginalized knowledges. Furthermore, with this in mind I am wondering how can we embrace this understanding of the closet as a space of myriad possibilities, diverging from the conventional understanding that coming out is the goal performance for the queer individuals, since coming outs never end?

Furthermore, as the metaphors of closet and coming out already signal, they rely on spatial figurations and organizations, by drawing a line between “in” and “out” and perhaps “private” and “public”. With this in mind, my thesis work, *Plug'n'Play*, embarks on a journey to navigate the complex terrain between the closet and coming out, challenging the binary divisions and uncovering the existence of gray zones. How

⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 27 quoted in Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 3.

do discursive spaces and contexts shape the closet, and in turn, how can the closet be perceived as a tool for negotiating space? Moreover, what can we learn from our interactions with the cyber realm, which serves both as a realm in itself and a vehicle for transition between different discursive spaces and contexts, to deconstruct and reconceptualize the boundaries of “in” and “out” that visibility is bounded to?

As I delved deeper into the cyber realm during *Plug'n'Play*, I encountered once again a collapse of the binary of outness and closetedness. How does the cyber realm challenge our understanding of these concepts, and what alternative narratives of queer sexual and gender visibility can we uncover within this context? Can we draw upon the artistic and conceptual tools derived from these experiences to reclaim agency in negotiating visibility?

In order to demonstrate the urgency and need for these strategies of negotiation, in the first chapter, “Playing Safe”, I will critically approach the emphasis on visibility within the queer struggle through the framework of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017) edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, by seeking answers for the following questions. How does this prioritization of visibility, within the confines of visual culture including art and mainstream media, limit our understanding and perpetuate the lack of comprehensive support for LGBTQ+ communities? How can an intersectional perspective shed light on the complexities and interconnectedness of LGBTQ+ struggles in the face of increasing homophobic and transphobic violence under populist regimes?

In addition, I will delve into the narratives surrounding risk and safety in relation to sexuality, aiming to unveil the normative frameworks that shape them in both the digital and physical realms. By critically examining these narratives, I hope to reveal how normative narratives function as the sanitizer that perpetuate assimilation and control within the community, and how surveillance that requires us to be visible, reinforces these narratives of safety. Through this exploration, I hope to present a nuanced perspective on LGBTQ+ visibility. In doing so, the first chapter of this thesis aims to illuminate the complex and paradoxical nature of visibility, urging us to perceive it not as an ultimate goal, but as an ongoing condition that necessitates continual analysis and negotiation.

In the second chapter, titled "Hide'n'Seek within *Plug'n'Play*: Tactics", I will explore various tools and strategies for negotiating visibility conditions throughout the *Plug'n'Play* project. By examining personal, communal, as well as the artistic practices

of Guerrilla Girls and Narcissister, I aim to illuminate the ways in which these approaches inform and shape my own artistic practice within the project. With a specific focus on the notions of anonymity and encryption, I will delve into how these concepts function as both practical tools and conceptual frameworks within the digital realm. How can feminist and queer approaches to the notions of anonymity and encryption, guide us to regain agency and control over our visibility conditions? Moreover, how do these tactics inform and shape my artistic practice within *Plug'n'Play*?

Through this thesis, I aim to challenge preconceived notions of visibility and unravel strategies for negotiating the terms and agreements of visibility within the LGBTQ+ community. How can we shift our perception of visibility from a fixed goal to an ever-evolving condition that demands critical engagement and continual negotiation? By embracing the complexities and paradoxes of visibility, I hope to embark on a transformative journey that questions, explores, and redefines our understanding of visibility in relation to the LGBTQ+ experiences and queer discourse.

I invite you to follow the leakages of theory, peep into my closet to get a taste of my artistic process and lived experiences and choose to play or counter-play along,

Journal Entry from 5 July 2023, at 20.31:

what I find a seductive and intimate game.

But not as much as the glory hole.



Plug'n'Play, performance, 2023. Photographed by Jyrki Oksaharju.

Plug'n'Play

The term "plug and play" in computing refers to the connection between two entities, such as software or hardware, without the need for the user to perform any complex reconfiguration or adjustment. *Plug'n'Play* takes this technical term and playfully appropriates it for a project that explores the intersection of queer sexuality and digital technologies. It searches for the connection point between the virtual and material, where queer sexual desires flow. For the artistic part of my thesis, I put together an exhibition with the byproducts of this exploration. There have been 4 fixtures that are converged into an hardware called exhibition, where concepts function as an operating system and software to run. Furthermore, it allows the performance to plug into this hardware to play without any reconfiguration.

Untitled (Plug'n'Play), 2023

4-channel sound installation, 50 min. (installed on loop)

The sound installation is made in collaboration with Io Pettersson, with whom we recorded sounds from my cam sex sessions, including sounds of the hardware and some conversations I had with strangers. The sounds are distorted to protect the privacy of the people. The sounds are composed and edited by Io Pettersson into an atmospheric glitchy soundscape and mixed into 4 speakers that are located at the corners of the space. With the sounds that are traveling in between the speakers, we aimed to bring a sense of spatiality and soft directions for the movement of the audience since the audience needs to step closer to the speaker in order to get a grasp of the recorded dialogues.



Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

Untitled (Plug'n'Play), 2023

Full-HD video, 7'45'' (installed on loop)

3-D Animation, photogrammetry, motion capture

The video piece, spanning 8 minutes, presents a 3D animation set within a dark virtual environment, illuminated by dramatic lighting. While the dark atmosphere symbolizes the vastness and unknowns of cyberspace, the constructed environment alludes to spaces such as a stage, a club, and perhaps a dark room, creating an in-between space that references familiar settings of desire performance. The video, set on a continuous loop, is installed with a 47-inch monitor placed on the floor, facing the ceiling. This installation invites the audience to observe the world unfolding on the screen from an aerial perspective, looking down into a captivating cyber universe.

To create the virtual materials for the video, I utilized 3D scanning technology and motion capture techniques at Aalto Studios as part of my fieldwork in the LAPS curriculum. The 3D scanned body and captured movements appear realistic from a distance which creates an illusion of a live-action video, but upon closer examination, glitches and distortions makes the virtual aspect of the animation apparent for the viewer. These glitches and distortions are results of the translation process from tangible material to the binary language of the digital realm. The exploration of animation through motion capture served as a means to experiment with translation of the tangible into the virtual, easily manipulatable. Witnessing how my body and movements transformed in this process was both fascinating and alienating, giving birth

to a new cyborg-like body that defied the laws of physics by duplicating and interacting with itself, creating an uncannily mysterious world for the viewer.

The qualities of alienation and uncanniness that emerged from this transformation became seductive elements that challenged conventional notions of queerness, presenting glitchy and deviant expressions. I sought to imbue these qualities throughout the rest of the exhibition.



Still from *Plug'n'Play*, 7'45", 3-D animation, 2023.



3-D scan used in *Plug'n'Play*.



Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

Untitled (Plug'n'Play), 2023

Mixed media installation

digital print on mesh fabric, steel wire, fishing wire, clothes from various brands

Six masks were suspended from the ceiling using transparent fishing wire, while thin steel wire connected them to the clothing on the ground. These masks were created by digitally printing multi-channel head photographs onto mesh fabric, which was then sewn into head masks. Typically, multi-channel photographs are used as textures to wrap 3D models and achieve a realistic appearance. Interestingly, one can come across stock images featuring fully naked body scans of individuals labeled with numbers. The idea of extracting identities from bodies for representation may sound cruel, but I was intrigued by the economy that is formed around our virtual bodies. The masks served as a means to emphasize and reflect on this economy, of which I found myself a part during the process.

Throughout my work with various virtual technologies, programs, and institutions, I encountered similar ethical questions concerning privacy. For example, when using the 3D Live Scanner App and Sketchfab for free to scan and transfer 3D models for certain aspects of the project, I agreed to have the resulting scans publicly displayed on their website and used publicly. While this may seem like open-source sharing of knowledge, it's important to note that neither of these platforms is a non-profit open source. When information, particularly personal and private information such as our bodies, becomes part of the equation, we start questioning if all information should be freely shared and if it should be shared at all.

Another instance of this exchange occurred at Aalto Studios, where I utilized their high-end virtual production equipment for 3D scanning my body and motion capture. The agreement stipulated that the raw materials I produced with their equipment, such as the motion data and full body scan, could be used by them for educational purposes. This encounter made me confront the fact that the numerical data left behind by my body and actions are tangible assets in their digital state.



Plug'n'Play, mixed media installation, 2023. Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.



Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

Untitled (Plug'n'Play), 2023

Mixed media installation

Latex, Steel Structure, steel wire, video projection. 3-D real-time running simulation.

The structure was made in collaboration with Anna Pietilä who has taken the role of a designer to execute the concept that we have developed together. The steel structure was built by the stage manager of Theatre Academy Marja Zilcher, and latex sheets were attached by Anna Pietilä.

The steel structure was 4m² with 3 meters height on which translucent latex sheets were stretched, creating somehow a private room in the gallery space. The latex sheets served as screens for the 3-channel projection of real-time running 3D simulation on a computer. The simulation had a 3D scan of my room as the raw material, which I experimented with virtual world physics to create a simulation that enabled animation of pixels and the 3D model of my body that was used in the video piece would appear randomly in various positions and with movement between every 2-10 minutes. Due to the translucency of the latex, it is possible to view the projected simulation either inside or outside the structure. The structure was also hosting the performance, creating a screen between the audience and the performer. The audience was allowed inside the room through its open door while the performers are not in.

I dedicated countless hours and days to *Plug'n'Play*, immersing myself in front of computer screens. Naturally, my exploration of cyber-sexuality revolved around screens, prompting me to delve into the various meanings associated with this term. My

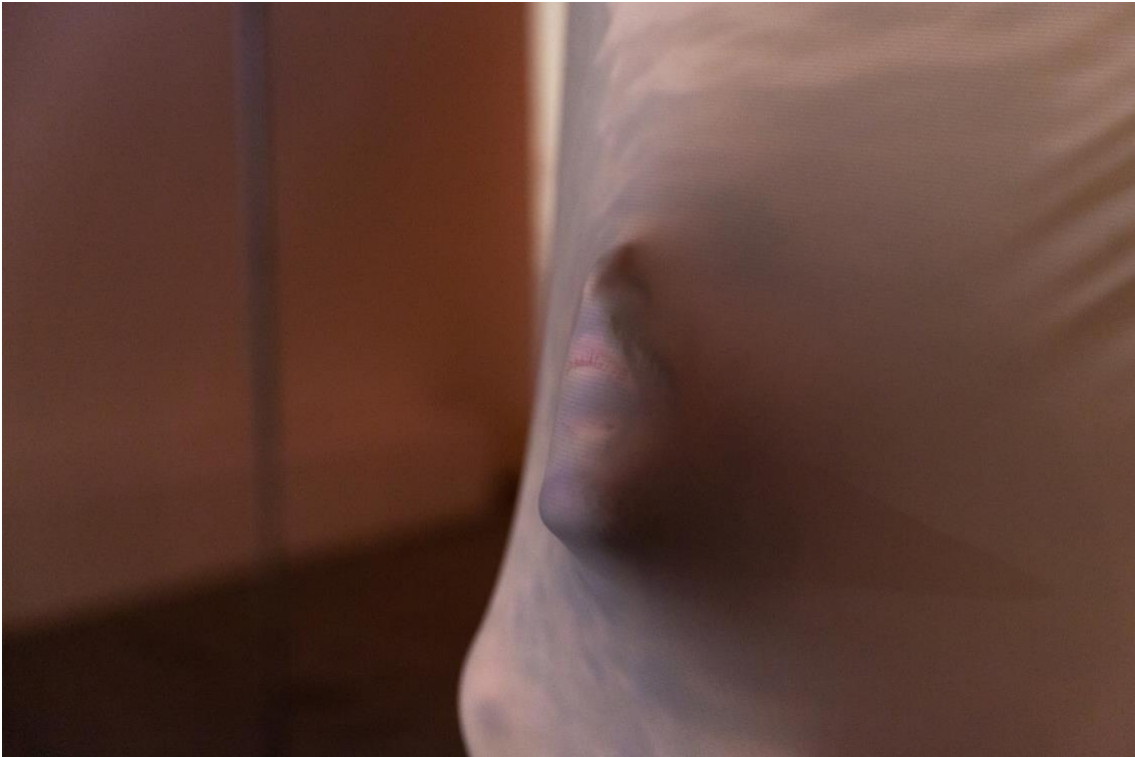
journey began by consulting dictionaries, where I discovered seemingly disparate definitions of "screen" that, upon closer examination, shared conceptual similarities that resonated with my approach in *Plug 'n' Play*. One definition of "screen" as a noun caught my attention: "the partition that is used to separate one area from another, especially to hide something or to protect you from something unpleasant or dangerous."⁷ Within this definition, two notions stood out: privacy and safety, which closely intertwined with another definition of "screen" as a verb, which conveys the actions of testing, examining, and surveilling. Additionally, "screen" as a noun refers to a flat surface used for displaying images and text, encompassing both physical surfaces and digital screens found in computers and phones. The layered meanings of the word "screen" appeared complex yet intuitively interconnected, awaiting further exploration.

Furthermore, I found the material latex to be a powerful symbol, embodying the complexity surrounding sexual activities. Latex carries connotations related to sex culture, functioning both as a fetish object and as a tool for safer sexual practices. Condoms, for instance, act as screens between two bodies, preventing direct contact between skin and bodily fluids. They serve as a preventive measure against sexually transmitted infections, emphasizing the dual role of latex as both a preconception tool and a precautionary measure. Contemplating latex as a screen, mediating between two bodies during sexual acts, while also referencing the digital screen, became the foundation of my artistic structure and conceptually signaled the research questions at hand regarding safety, privacy and visibility.



Raw 3-D scan of the room.

⁷ Cambridge Dictionary, "Screen.", <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/screen> . Accessed July 1, 2023.



Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

Untitled (Plug'n'Play), 2023

Performance, approximately 50 min.

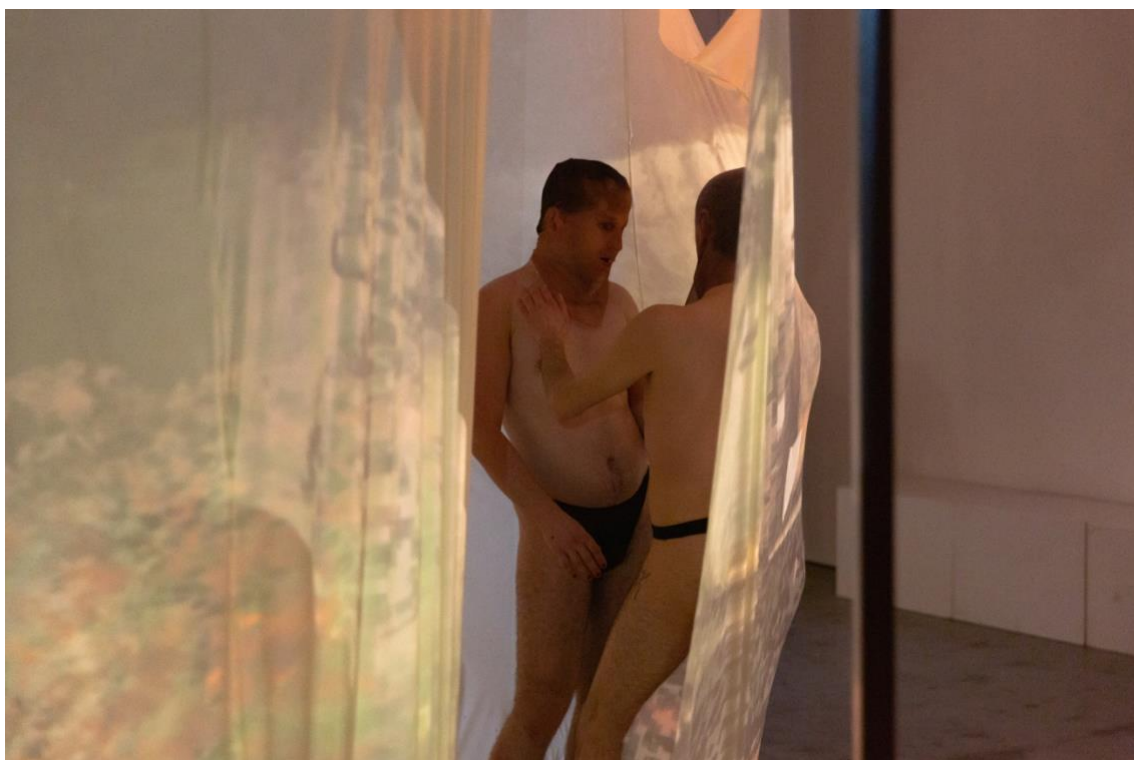
The performance took place in the latex room for approximately 50 minutes. The piece was performed by myself and Lempi Koponen who I met through the gay dating app Grindr. The visibility of the performance was mediated through the latex screen only when it was touched by the performers or stretched enough to create holes to peep in. Due to the physical structure, the performance could be experienced either by walking around or taking a seat in front of one of the screens. How much could be seen from what was happening inside the room was negotiated between the audience and the performer. Is the performer touching the screen, is the latex stretched enough, is there any holes opening up, is the audience willing to peek in and walk around to see more? are the actions in question that would lead the negotiation. Performers were either wearing tiny underwear bottoms or fully naked and wearing masks that are like the ones installed, moving slowly and in an erotic way performing to the latex screen almost like they would perform for a webcam. From time to time it was possible to encounter performers interacting with each other and performing together for a screen.

Furthermore, the performers would intervene and blend in the sound installation with the microphones, mixer and pitch shifter that was in the room. This too would lead the audience into certain directions in the space to hear what was being told. In the last 10-

15 minutes, they stop touching and stretching the latex, where their visibility is minimized. After ten minutes they would get out of the room with their casual clothing, leaving their performing self, their costume inside.



Plug'n'Play, performance, 2023. Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.



Plug'n'Play, performance, 2023. Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

Invitation

I realize that relying solely on academic texts and artworks wouldn't satisfy my quest to understand, considering the historical exclusion of queer perspectives within academia and art field. The knowledge I sought couldn't be confined to library walls. I began my exploration through digital cruising, venturing into online spaces without a specific objective. In addition to finding potential sex partners, I discovered information, stages, and audiences with those partners. Cruising taught me that desire resides in the act of seeking rather than simply finding someone. This process of seeking without a clear goal raised the questions central to my work. With *Plug'n'Play*, my intention isn't to replicate cyber sexual practices, but rather to uncover strategies for engaging with intangible LGBTQ+ histories, cultures, and situate my own experiences in relation to these communal knowledges.

I started the process by reflecting on my experiences related to digital cruising, using various dating apps such as Grindr and Tinder, having cam sex and sexting on platforms such as dirtyroulette.com, canlisaray.com, jerkay.com, and engaging in mediated sexual acts in various multi-player games. Cyber-sexual practices and seeking intimacy online have been part of my sexuality since I have been sexually active. While my active relationship with these practices was guiding me through the process of *Plug'n'Play*, approaching my own sexuality with an artistic research project indeed reshaped my relationship with these practices. Approaching my mundane behavior of cruising online with a lens of performativity and research locked me into a reckless state, where ethical questions of whom and what I am studying brought up a complex discussion.

In November 2022, I started the process of looking for a co-performer(s) to be with me in the private room that I wanted to build in the gallery space. Cruising on Grindr, searching for that partner, I finally managed to open up the discussion with a possible performer.

Journal Entry from 24 November 2022, at 19.43:

Reflection on 23 November, the first encounter with a possible performer

A couple of months ago, I was introduced to person A, in a conversation. We haven't talked much to each other, other than repeating our names till they are pronounced correctly. A couple of months later, I have come across person A with a nickname which is not appropriate to write here, on Grindr. It took a bit of memory work out to recognize them since their profile was only displaying photos of them below their nose.

In their bio, it was stated that they were looking for collaborators for videos, next to the links to their Twitter and Onlyfans accounts. I have watched one by one the short video excerpts, or one could say trailers they have put on their public Twitter account to attract people to their Onlyfans.

I have been looking for co-performers for my work, people who do have a digital presence sexually, I thought person A could be a good addition to the workgroup.

How and to whom I should reach out?

I spent weeks to figure out how to reach out to person A, in-person or through Twitter, Onlyfans or Grindr. Considering that we have met in person before, I could reach out to them when we come across each other in the material realm. However, was the person who I met in person, the same person I want to work with? Was I willing to act like we haven't met because we have never talked with their digital sexual self?

The personal and its qualities such as identity and identity performance are inherently plural. One does not only hold multiple identity roles within different contexts such as student, foreigner, child, parent, artist and such but also plays with them. Digital virtuality facilitates this play by offering worlds where the attachment to material sociality can be minimized or disguised under the illusion of pure fantasy. Rather than perceiving virtuality as mere fantasy, I choose to see it as a form of reality, a space where multiple selves can be actualized more easily. Whether these selves are fantasy or not, I find it difficult to differentiate them, both for myself and others. I base my observations on how individuals bring them out of the closet and manifest them through performance within specific contexts.

In *Plug'n'Play*, I encountered the challenge of contexts colliding and converging. It wasn't just a collision between virtual reality and the material world, but also between the contexts of cyber-sexual sites, academic art institutions, and gallery spaces. One possible reason for this clash is the seamless transition between contexts facilitated by the cyber network. Receiving a notification, an email, or opening an app like Grindr happens so quickly that it requires swift adaptation to engage in another performance. It's like a context-ception, where layers of contexts stack upon each other, necessitating the constant proximity of the metaphorical closet. As a result, I often found myself not transitioning from one context to another at different stages of the work, but rather simultaneously performing my plural selves within these layered contexts.

Moreover, these performances do not have clear beginnings and endings, which also differs this mode of layering from a palimpsest where the text written on the top is the

last one. This one looks more like layering on Photoshop or maybe more like Premiere Pro or After Effects, where you can play with the opacity of the different layers holding text, visuals, moving images etc. It allows for blending different layers holding text, visuals, moving images, and more, even creating the illusion of their nonexistence by making a layer invisible by a click.

Furthermore, the traces one leaves behind during interactions on the interactive internet continue to exist as content and receive ongoing engagement. Exiting the digital realm is not as simple as stepping out of a game, primarily due to the traces one leaves behind. These traces can be repurposed and placed in new contexts, and one might unexpectedly become a meme or a porn star while they are away. Hence, interactive internet can be seen as an endless performance, where agency is performing distributed among its users: you, me and all of us, the hardware: the domain, the cables underneath the ocean and electricity providers etc. Nonetheless, how evenly the agency is distributed is a significant question that I want us to bear in mind, even though it is not the question I will focus on answering in this thesis.

I thought, even if they appear in two different identities, they hold on to the same body in the flesh. I chose to see them as one. But I doubt myself now if this was a decision I could make. I assumed and perhaps violated one's claim on their identity presentation.

—The multiplicity of self-presentations is nothing new to me, most queer individuals, including myself, are forced to use switches to navigate in life. I present myself differently in different contexts, to different people, often to protect myself. I don't like being pushed out of the closet. Furthermore, it takes time to trust the room where the closet is put. Nonetheless, I also know and feel very deeply, that there is no singular way for coming out, there is no single self in the closet, there are worlds in the closet.—

What would be the best way to reach out to them, to which self, if they appear as plural? How to ask about their preference or declaration? Which way would be more fitting to the artistic work, also considering how not to harm anyone and protect their privacy even from myself?

This concern for safety regarding visibility did emerge by encountering various identity performances of an individual through overlapping contexts. It has led me to think of the phenomenon of the “closet” as a tool one might use as a strategy for their right to opacity. I started to think about what outness means to me as a queer individual and too what extend this is shaped by the celebratory narratives surrounding coming out. Moreover, what is the material the closet is made out of and how durable it is for constant teleportation between different contexts? Considering the overlapping contexts to what

extent the privacy sits on a stake? In the midst of these overlapping contexts, the question of privacy loomed large. It was during these early stages of my work that I was confronted once again with the issue of privacy within my practice.

My practice often stems from personal and private experiences, extending into the social and public sphere. In this case, I began to realize more clearly that my personal does not solely belong to me, but rather exists within a relationship between myself and someone or some others. Every context becomes a gray zone where one navigates their visibility in the presence of others, as visibility is not solely determined by the one who reveals themselves, but also by those who see it. How can one ensure their privacy and safety when contexts, and consequently the people who witness and interact with their multiple identity performances, overlap?

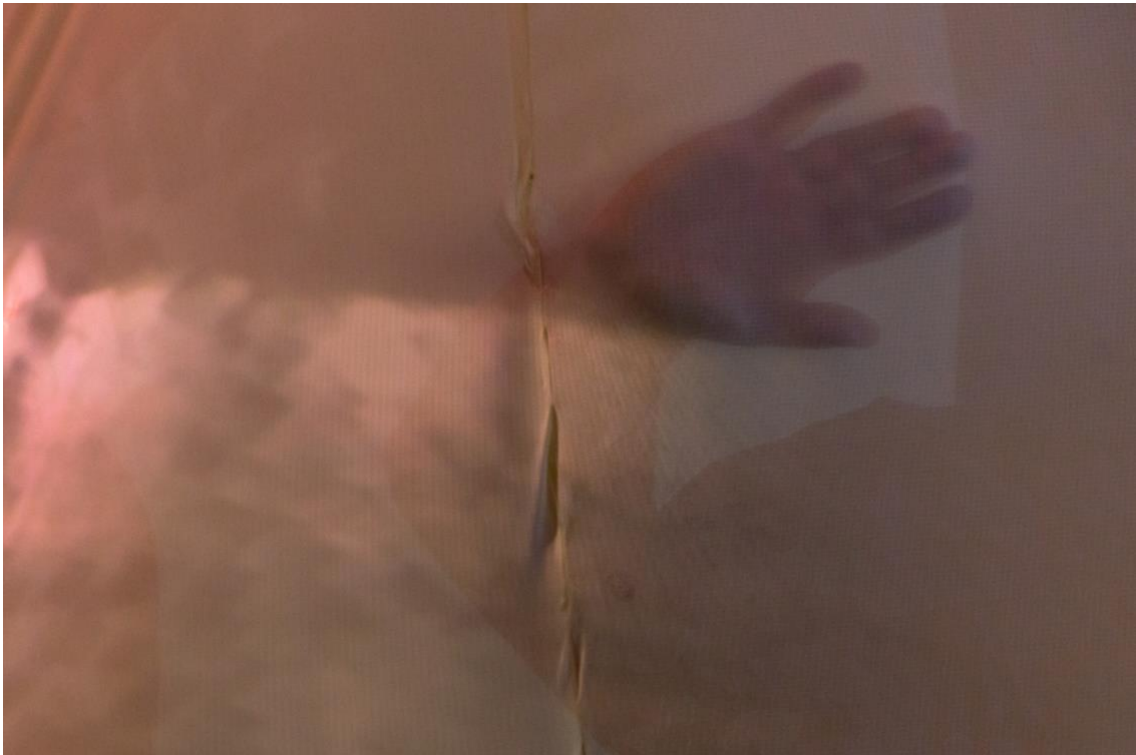
In the end, I came across person A in the material realm, I introduced myself, they didn't recognize me, I asked if they have any free time to talk about my work, I told I am looking for performers. I tried too hard not to scare them by postponing to say that it is about cybersexuality since it could reveal that I am aware of their digital sexual self. One hour later, we met in a public place, and they started asking questions but I said it is better if we talk in private, in a room. I could feel the tension building up or at least myself getting very nervous. My opening speech after closing the door was "I want to say that whatever we talk here is confidential and should be consensual, whenever you feel uncomfortable, feel free to stop the conversation and the meeting" I assume hearing this from a person that you don't know does the opposite of creating a safer space but scaring for the things to come. - It reminded me of the first time I was asked my pronouns in a meeting with people who I haven't met before. I was expected to trust the people in the space, without knowing what is the thing that secures me there. I was reminded once again "Trust me" is not enough to create a safer space, at least for the people who are marginalized and traumatized. - I continued "I don't know you very well, and you don't know me either. I have been working with queer desires, recently focusing on sexual ones. How about you?" After they briefly explained their artistic practice. I told them that I came across with them on Grindr, perhaps they have seen me there too. For me, it is important to work with queers who have some type of relation to cybersexual practices and therefore I wanted to get in touch with them for the work. - I couldn't say that:

I have seen your videos too, I have replayed those 32 seconds again and again and again, again, again, again, they are great btw, I have seen your asshole taking that pink dildo, and I also have the same size toy btw, I have observed your muscles stretching

while your hand was reaching to the bottom of the dildo, doing in and out at very fast pace, I still recall the sound of friction that was reduced by the heavy amount of lube, I masturbated to you or to your moving image, went through all the videos of others you have retweeted, I found your previous collaborators too, but I swear, I didn't ask for a recommendation from them, what I have seen was more than enough. Yes yes yea yeahhh yeahhhh yessss, I am interested in working with you because I loved your content.

I have added, they will remain discreet for the audience through masks and voice-changing effects.

After two months of trial and error, I scaled down my collaborators to 3 people, Anna Pietilä, Io Pettersson and Lempi Koponen with whom we strived for braver spaces. How much we want to share, and whom we want to share with have been some of the questions that reinforced my focus on navigating between the inside and outside of the closet to negotiate the degree of visibility.



Plug'n'Play, performance, 2023. Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

PLAYING SAFE

In dealing with what can be considered as sensitive information that discloses some aspects of our lives, such as sexuality, I wanted to accommodate but also find safer spaces for myself and my collaborators who are also the subjects of the project. In this chapter as I navigate through the process of *Plug'n'Play*, I aim to critically examine the concept of visibility in relation to the interconnectedness of safety and privacy—two key terms that frequently appear in the agreements we encounter when entering the realm of cyberspace. By exploring the narratives of risk that surround sexuality, I seek to gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play. In addition, I aim to analyze how the multidimensional context of the project, which spans both cyber and material spaces, further complicates this discussion.

Traps of Visibility

I recognize the widespread adoption of the phenomenon of coming out within LGBTQ+ communities worldwide, originating from Western cultural contexts. This acknowledgment stems from my own personal experiences of feeling a sense of disconnection from the celebratory narratives often associated with the act of coming out. It also reflects ongoing discussions within the LGBTQ+ community in Turkey, my country of birth and upbringing. These discussions aim to shed light on the unique queer realities that exist locally, which often challenge the dominant Euro-American narratives. Recent academic publications also contribute to understanding the Euro-American construction of this narrative.

For instance, Suzanna Danuta Walters, a sociology scholar, highlights in her book *The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions are Sabotaging Gay Equality* (2014) that coming out has been appropriated as a representational tale by the media to represent queerness and LGBTQ+ struggle.⁸ This narrative gained momentum following the Stonewall riots in 1969, which took place in the United States and served as a catalyst for subsequent movies and popular cultural products.⁹ The pervasive influence of media has shaped our understanding of the global queer struggle, largely through the lens of Western perspectives on coming out and public visibility.

⁸ Walters, *The Tolerance Trap*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-35.

While the dominant Western narrative of “out of the closet, on the streets” has been widely accepted as an LGBTQ+ activism strategy that prioritizes public visibility, and became a deriving force within artistic and popular cultural productions, the increasing visibility of the community in recent years have been nothing but paradoxical. Lately, efforts of trans femme, BIPOC queers, and LGBTQ+ activism under the anti-LGBTQ+ authoritarian regimes have forced us to think of the question of representation beyond images through critically thinking about infrastructures that can accommodate this visibility. Perhaps the book *Trap Door* edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton has not only displayed a collection of these discussions regarding the paradox of visibility, but also managed to penetrate the artistic and academic discourse around the representation of marginalized identities and communities. As the editors state in the introduction of the book, “We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence.”¹⁰ Furthermore, they add “This is the trap of the visual: it offers—or, more accurately, it is frequently offered to us as—the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives.”¹¹ This is perhaps why the conditions and terms of visibility need to be well thought out and negotiated instead of blindly accepting it as the only strategy for LGBTQ+ activism, art or any cultural production that values and aims to support the queer struggle against the oppressive structures.

As Michel Foucault argued by metaphorically using the 18th century innovation by Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon, that due to the threat of constant surveillance, bodies are tamed and have become docile in the disciplinary societies.¹² Furthermore, Gilles Deleuze in his “Postscript of Societies of Control” (1992), argued that what Foucault called disciplining institutions such as schools, prisons, factories, hospitals and families do not function separately as enclosed institutions but simultaneously and inter-connectedly since the mid-20th century due to the developments of surveillance technologies.¹³ Both of them highlight surveillance power, which requires bodies to be visible or the possibility of being seen in order to function. By acknowledging visibility as a pre-condition for disciplining and controlling, we can perhaps perceive the offer of visibility for historically underrepresented groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, as a trap door. I read this metaphor as an opening of a door to be slapped just after we get in, or even as an invitation for us to open the doors of our closet to be trapped unsheltered.

¹⁰ Gossett et al., *Trapdoor*, 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

¹³ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, 3-7.

Yet another perspective in approaching visibility through the metaphor of trap door is provided by Micha Cardenas in their essay “Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media” (2017) in *Trap Door* in which they explore what is visible online, in social media regarding queer community.¹⁴ They argue that the paradigmatic tool of necropolitics is the algorithms of digital media.¹⁵ By quoting the philosopher Achille Mbembe’s essay “Necropolitics” (2003) they argue that algorithms do not only manage the visibility, but also the decisions of “those who must live and those who must die.”¹⁶ They explain this through how increasing visibility makes what is visible into a targetable entity of violence but also how horrific stories of LGBTQ+ murders become part of the daily information flow of LGBTQ+ people through algorithms of the networked media.¹⁷ The effect of constantly seeing these stories and images is not only exhaustion or numbness, as it could be for people of other identities, but for the community seeing the images and news of dead LGBTQ+ people is forming one’s thoughts of whether they can live. These LGBTQ+ individuals targeted by the algorithms delivering the news of murder are constantly reminded of the threat, the proposal of an improbability of their living.

Furthermore, regardless of one’s location, thinking and witnessing the risks and LGBTQ+ struggle not only generationally but also globally is perhaps an essential quality of the community where the world wide web and social media become one of the main communication and gathering spheres. Therefore, being able to see differences between different parts of the world regarding LGBTQ+ freedom is both a reminder of one’s privilege but also the probability of danger for one’s body.

At the end of the essay, Cardenas proposes a suggestion in response to the condition where increasing visibility results in more violence that we need modes of visibility or methods that do not prioritize visibility to open up possibilities of life.¹⁸ While this suggestion might sound confusing at first, in terms of what could be modes of visibility or methods that don’t prioritize visibility, I understand this as not a full rejection of visibility, which is perhaps also not possible, but an invitation to think of visibility not as the priority but as a byproduct or an effect in our queer struggle. In response to the inevitability of visibility, especially with rapid digitalization, we perhaps might need to develop tools on how to deal with its effects. I suggest we perceive visibility as a

¹⁴ Cardenas, “Dark Shimmers” in *Trap Door*.

¹⁵ Ibid, 161-163.

¹⁶ Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, 17 quoted in Cardenas, “Dark Shimmers” in *Trap Door*, 163.

¹⁷ Cardenas, “Dark Shimmers” in *Trap Door*, 161-166.

¹⁸ Ibid, 178.

negotiable condition or perhaps a cost rather than what is offered to us as a “gift” by the institutions, or what we aim for our queer liberation. Furthermore, then we can also think that negotiating terms of our visibility is envisioning its effects, demanding cautious measures, finding strategies to gain agency in controlling the effects, and perhaps hacking the structure that stipulates disclosure, revealing, transparency and visibility from us to exist within without providing the support needed for our safety.

Certainly, none of us can disregard the anti-LGBTQ+ physical violence targeting the whole community but primarily those carrying intersectional identities and existing as multiply marked bodies such as black trans femme bodies, as non-existent. The current reality that the community lives in is nowhere far from this danger regardless of where they are located in, since there is no singular country in the world where there is a certainty that LGBTQ+ individuals won't be targets of physical violence due to their gender identity and sexual orientation, even if the level of this horrifying probability correlates with the intersecting forms of targeting. Nonetheless, physical violence is not the only thing one gets disciplined and controlled through.

Sara Ahmed suggests in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) a framework based on the dialectic relationship between spaces and bodies in their orientation with each other.¹⁹ Ahmed argues that normativity is shaped through endless repetition until a ‘normal’ is created, resulting in a spatial realm that is only selectively welcoming to certain bodies.²⁰ This systematic “familiarity” traps us in a heteronormative reality. A mechanism that allows for certain bodies to extend into space, while forbidding some other bodies.²¹ We can assume that heteronormativity functions as a mechanism in the background as the norm, without the need for any adjectives to define itself, dictating how we orient ourselves. Furthermore, Ahmed states in her book, to explain what she perceives as queer failure in orientation within and towards spaces and objects that are organized with heterosexual and racist alignments that “Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one’s place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body.”²² I perceive this bodily violent feeling not necessarily arriving from the physical obstacle we experience at that moment, but from the shared knowledge and memory of that pain.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

²⁰ Ibid, 92.

²¹ Ibid, 87.

²² Ibid, 160.

With the concept of memory, I don't propose that anti-LGBTQ+ violence was in the past and we are only living its traumatic effects, but I perceive the second that has just passed, another space at the same moment, and perhaps a future at the same space as parts of the memories we have. I don't want to frame memory as an entity of the past as it is in the linear understanding of time, but perceiving time as a clustered entity as authors of *Black Quantum Futurism* (2015) traced through various African and Asian understandings as well as through Quantum physics.²³ Rasheedah Phillips state "(...) memory is not attached to a specific calendar date or clock time, memory is not formed in regard to a specific date or time. Rather a time and date made part of the memory, so it is embedded or weaved in and controllable in future memory."²⁴ I see memory as a concept belonging to the present moment both back and forecasting, rather than belonging to a past date. Memory is within that cluster of time and spaces, as an individual or a collective body experiences it. That memory is often what orients us in a space, provides us with a familiarity, resulting in that violent feeling that disciplines us. Nonetheless, even if the spaces we exist in together with bodies and objects, are discursively organized in a way that reminds us of the memory of violence and pain, they also hold a counter-memory of solidarity even if there is no date and time attached to them for us to remember. I try to remind myself at least the probabilities of those memories for re-orienting within the heteronormatively organized spaces.

Norms of safety and assessing risks

November 25, at 22.16:

I was advised to talk with a lawyer to get answers regarding privacy and safety. They told me it is for myself, protecting my art. Who was I trying to protect my art from? It reminded me of the anecdote my friend who has moved here for studies like me told me. Her housemate expressed her worries when she went to Kontula in Helsinki, a neighborhood that is marked as the most dangerous district of Helsinki by many, and my friend was very offended by it, because it looked and felt like home for her.

The word "lawyer" immediately proposed to me that I was doing something risky. I thought that the heterosexual organizational principles of the discursive space, education and art institution, found my sexual orientation being ambiguously tied with my artistic practice risky, and proposed help to get reoriented. Orienting towards an eligible artistic practice, orienting towards safety, orienting towards the law; the very

²³ Phillips, *Black Quantum Futurism*.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 26-27.

same law that does not even recognize gender identity beyond the binary, the law that doesn't protect me from hate speech, the law that reinforces heterosexual ideals of family and kinship through the marriage right and the same law that makes me pay for the right of education to the very same institution. I wasn't sure if I understood the same thing about safety, as others, in this case, the institution. Since being online, looking for sex online, sharing information online, and meeting with strangers only for casual sex have been routine practices to me, it is not only difficult to see how differently dangerous my ordinary practices could be for myself if I share them with the audience publicly, and yet how much "risk" I want to take and to what extent the institution which produces the work and the institution which shows the work can take.

Perhaps first introduced by the sociologist Ulrich Beck in 1986, risk can be seen as a narrative created by power and governance.²⁵ Anthropology scholar Gaspar Mairal who studies risk in media, also reminds us that risk is not necessarily a mathematical calculation of probabilities, but a narrative that is constructed with the objects associated with risks.²⁶ I wondered if sexuality was one of those objects, once articulated it constructs a narrative of risk due to its discursive associations. I wondered what those narratives are, and how they contradict with the ones I and perhaps the LGBTQ+ community have. How can the narratives of risks we don't share with each other, too cause disorientation in the space we share? If sexuality is an invitational object for the narratives of risks to emerge, does interacting with this object in heteronormative spaces only propose a risk for myself or also for the straight lines drawn in that space?

November 29, at 13.04

I have always got scared easily. I remember Mom getting angry at me when I got scared as a kid. She was too, scared of my fragility. I am wondering if the institutions I work with too are scared of me, me from their power them by my fragility? What about the audience?

I assume purposefully, and sometimes unintentionally, talking about the work through probabilities has led to frustration and paranoia within the institutions regarding the work, mainly University of Arts Helsinki within which the work was produced. "What if I collaborate with a sex worker?" "What if the person wants to keep themselves anonymous?", "What if I have sex with them?", "What if I already had sex with them?" Without understanding the mentioned risks that revolve around the theme of cyber-

²⁵ Beck, *Risk Society*.

²⁶ Mairal, "Narratives of Risk.", 41–54.

sexuality, and the interruptions that it can specifically perform, I started to question my risk management skills, as well as those of my collaborators and those of the institutions in light of these probabilities of danger.

These what-ifs were not always articulated by me to the institutions to explore their limits, but also from the working group to me. These what-ifs are indeed a necessary part of the process of art making, but maybe more of working with marginalized groups who had to master the skills of measuring the risks around them in order to manage. We need to learn how to trust and it requires lots of effort. Thinking through probabilities does serve as a vehicle for us in this direction that requires patience from me as an artist, we as the working group and we as the institution. Just like we queers have a closet to hide in, I believe, “progressive” art institutions too have closets where they hide their heteronormativities and these what-ifs served us to peek into these closets. Perhaps, the institutional assumptions on what kind of art a queer performance artist might produce working with the topics around sexuality too is hidden in those closets. How queer artists are classified within these institutional closets is also a crucial discussion to have, even though due to the focus of this paper, I am leaving it for later. Nonetheless don’t get me wrong, what is in the closet is just the tags of these norms that enable us to identify them, since Sara Ahmed argued they are very actively out and manifesting through extending into one another.²⁷ We, queers have to navigate in those spaces where all heteronorms extend into one another constantly, even if identifying them requires deeper investigation, their presence is heavily experienced.

In order to reveal some of the normativities that define institutional concerns regarding safety, I suggest looking at safety through its institutionalized forms, and digging into its connotations with the concepts of security, police, control and surveillance. Cultural geography scholar Junxi Qian in their article examines the phenomenons of safety, hygiene, sterility and filthiness regarding gay cruising.²⁸ They don’t only point out these as traps of heteronormativities that use safety and security interchangeably as a tactic for marginalizing certain groups but also theorize how the heteronormative organizations of spaces result in self-disciplining queer subjects.²⁹ Furthermore, they refer to studies of another cultural geography scholar Lynda Johnston, who analyses the mentioned self-disciplining within some LGBTQ+ organizations such as Pride.³⁰ They argue that highlighting “normal” and “hygienic” gay images for LGBTQ+ visibility by excluding certain “deviant” gay expressions for the acceptance of the dominant public,

²⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 8.

²⁸ Qian, “Beyond heteronormativity?”.

²⁹ Ibid. 772-775.

³⁰ Johnston, *Queering tourism* and “Mobilizing pride/shame”, referred in Qian, “Beyond heteronormativity?”, 775.

is one of the examples of self-disciplining subjectivity.³¹ Additionally, I also think that queer sexuality, perhaps more specifically gay sexuality is read as filthy and sick through hurtful and misinformative narratives around HIV. Furthermore, non-monogamy and having multiple sexual partners, or only having sexual partners without romantic relationships are scandalized by the same reasonings. Even for LGBTQ+ individuals, dominant discourse leads to being ashamed of queer sexuality and cruising online for sexual partners.

Furthermore, it is also possible to track how sexuality is positioned as "unsafe" online. Media studies scholars, Susanna Paasonen, Kylie Jarett and Ben Light focus on the hashtag #NSFW (Not Safe For Work/Not Suitable For Work) to reveal what is marked as unsafe, and how the hashtag relies not only on the assumptions of what a workspace can be but also suggesting or reinforcing the norms of what is considered as inappropriate, shameful and embarrassing behavior that could not only risk one's job but also the social dignity.³² They argue that NSFW is a tool of categorization not only for people but also for algorithms and social media companies which are making judgments and evaluating the appropriateness of the content.³³ The research data shows that XXX, Adult, Sexy, Naked were the most used hashtags in combination with NSFW, but not the tags related to violence.³⁴ According to this information, sexual content appears to be understood as more risky than violent imagery by these companies and their users. Furthermore, they argue that porn products being consistently marked as NSFW, results in the understanding of pornography as unsafe, associating the product with risk to sexual health and the industry with exploitative labor practices.³⁵

Following Paasonen, Jarett and Light's arguments on how #NSFW marks viewing sexual content as unsafe relying on the "shame" one does feel around sexuality and the suggestion of being viewed in private, I have been wondering how the narrative of "sexuality must be kept in your bedroom" is used against the LGBTQ+ community and its public visibility, considering the marginalized sexuality and gender expressions are the premises of the community's unity. Furthermore, in juxtaposition with Qian's arguments on the risk narrative around queer sexualities and hygiene, if queer sexuality is then marked even less safe than other sexualities, also online.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Paasonen, Jaret, and Light, *#NSFW*, 77.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 18-19.

³⁵ Ibid, 43.

11 December, at 11.34

After the cam session recording with Jon

Many people prefer not to talk, not to ask questions during cam sex. Doing one of these might be enough to scare people. Use bodily gestures and try not to show your face. Perhaps some of my private cam shows are recorded and put online already. But luckily there are millions of those videos that it would be almost impossible to find myself, if I would try to investigate. This was more of a fear, a fear that was turning me on.

The shame and fear have been undeniable feelings for me both previously within my mundane practices of cyber sexuality and throughout my artistic research around the topic. Especially, when I came across familiar faces, exposed in a different context which appears to be sexually driven, it would bring some type of frustration and shame when I need to socialize with them in the material realm. It often ends up with none of us mentioning the sexual encounter, by trying to draw a line between two social personas, the digital sexual self and the material public self. Nonetheless, the sexual self is not as detached from the public self as we might think, since the app users can be classified as a public too; a public that celebrates sexuality rather than shaming it, even if temporally.

Through the discussions we have been having within the workgroup in which individuals identify themselves as queers, it was pointed out that queer individuals often are stereotyped as hyper-sexual beings and the work has a risk of falling into this stereotype. In my opinion, this was the self-disciplining imposed by the cis-hetero norms manifesting all around us, including the art institutions we are working with and studying at. I am wondering whether it is possible to articulate the self and the desire outside of the hegemonic discourse without disciplining ourselves. How can we demand respect by not feeling the necessity to fit in, or be normalized? Can we also shout “We are queers and we are here” when it is not at a Pride Parade but also in our daily lives, in the classroom, in a white cube?

Deriving from Qian’s analysis and Paasonen, Jarett and Light’s studies on safety and privacy concerning sexuality, I have argued that the concepts related to safety such as hygiene and sterility might result in heteronormative spaces and self-disciplining queers within them. I traced how social norms, that shame sexuality, define privacy as the only condition of safety for expressions of sexuality due to the visibility of sexuality being seen as a risk to one’s social dignity and safety. As I have previously mentioned, my curiosity is beyond narrating the risk through the relation between the object of risk and the individual interacting with it, but also the object of risk and the spaces where it is

located in and if it is threatening the principles of its spatial organization. I want to explore the tension between LGBTQ+ visibility and privacy in overlaid contexts such as art galleries, universities, public spaces, sex clubs and the internet as the bridge between them. In the following paragraphs, I will be looking at how one negotiates their sexual visibility with others through interactive internet, furthermore, how this visibility is negotiated with the social media companies that enable the interaction. In other words, how does one find their way through disorienting and perhaps repurposing the compass?

Navigating

The authors, Paasonen, Jarett and Light also point out that even though NSFW marks a content unsafe, the way that the hashtag NSFW shapes the behavior of the users is not necessarily keeping them away from the “risky” content. The hashtag NSFW signals that it is risky for one's social reputation and safety but it also works as a mysterious and therefore attractive force for one to take risks. The authors prove this with the research data that a large amount of NSFW hashtags are generated by bots to boost interaction.³⁶ So the hashtag that signals risk is also used as a tool to achieve popularity. Even though the question of visibility indeed relates to the condition of safety and norms that define safety, the relation cannot be simplified as the feeling of unsafety is limiting individuals' power of seeing and being visible. Visibility of sexualities and sexually associated content is constantly negotiated and the questions of where and when to see what, what is seen where and when are the questions that one asks to negotiate the act of seeing and showing, rather than resulting in complete invisibility.

Inspired by Paasonen, Jarett and Light's research on this hashtag regarding what is categorized as risky on social media, I started investigating the Instagram content of muscular guys with big bulges that were consistently appearing in my “explore” feed. The difference between their research and the case I had was that #NSFW was used in social media platforms such as Twitter where sexual content was allowed even if it is marked as unsafe, dangerous and risky, while I was investigating a site where sexual content is not allowed at all. Knowing that Instagram community guidelines don't allow either explicit or suggestive “sexual content” on their platform, I wondered how these thirst traps, which are mostly created by porn workers or amateurs to promote themselves, find their way to my feed and under what categorization and frame it is

³⁶ Ibid, 17-23.

allowed in Instagram. This ambiguous algorithmic visibility of sexuality was there which means somehow these creators found a way to negotiate the terms.

Previously with the suggestion of a cyber lawyer Aditi Ameria, in a private conversation, I have learned that as a user of any social media company, I am allowed to request the archive of data that is reserved from me. Although how much data you can request from the companies depends on the specific agreements, they make us sign. During the process, I requested my stored data from the platforms such as Instagram, Tinder, Grindr and Hornet. Surprisingly the data from Instagram came quite organized and in a large file, within a week after I sent a request. They sent me a zipped folder, with html files that you can open on your browser. Alongside the collections of my private messages, likes, comments, posts and many more, it also included a collection called “topics”. They explain with the following words.

“A collection of topics determined by your activity on Instagram that is used to create recommendations for you in different areas of Instagram, such as Reels, feed recommendations, and Shopping”³⁷

Differently from many other data collections, I have received from other platforms, Instagram did not only send me the collection of raw data, but also disclosed what data my digital interaction behaviors are interpreted into. Under the titles of topics, I realized that it included topics that I didn’t know that I was interested in, or never even thought that I interact with or view any content related to those topics such as “Fitness Competitions”, “Bodybuilding”, “Bodybuilding Competitions”, “Gym Workouts”, “Undergarments”.

6 December 2022, at 00.56:

Am I objectifying them with my horny gaze, in the end, they might be just innocent people exercising, dressing up.

at 01.30

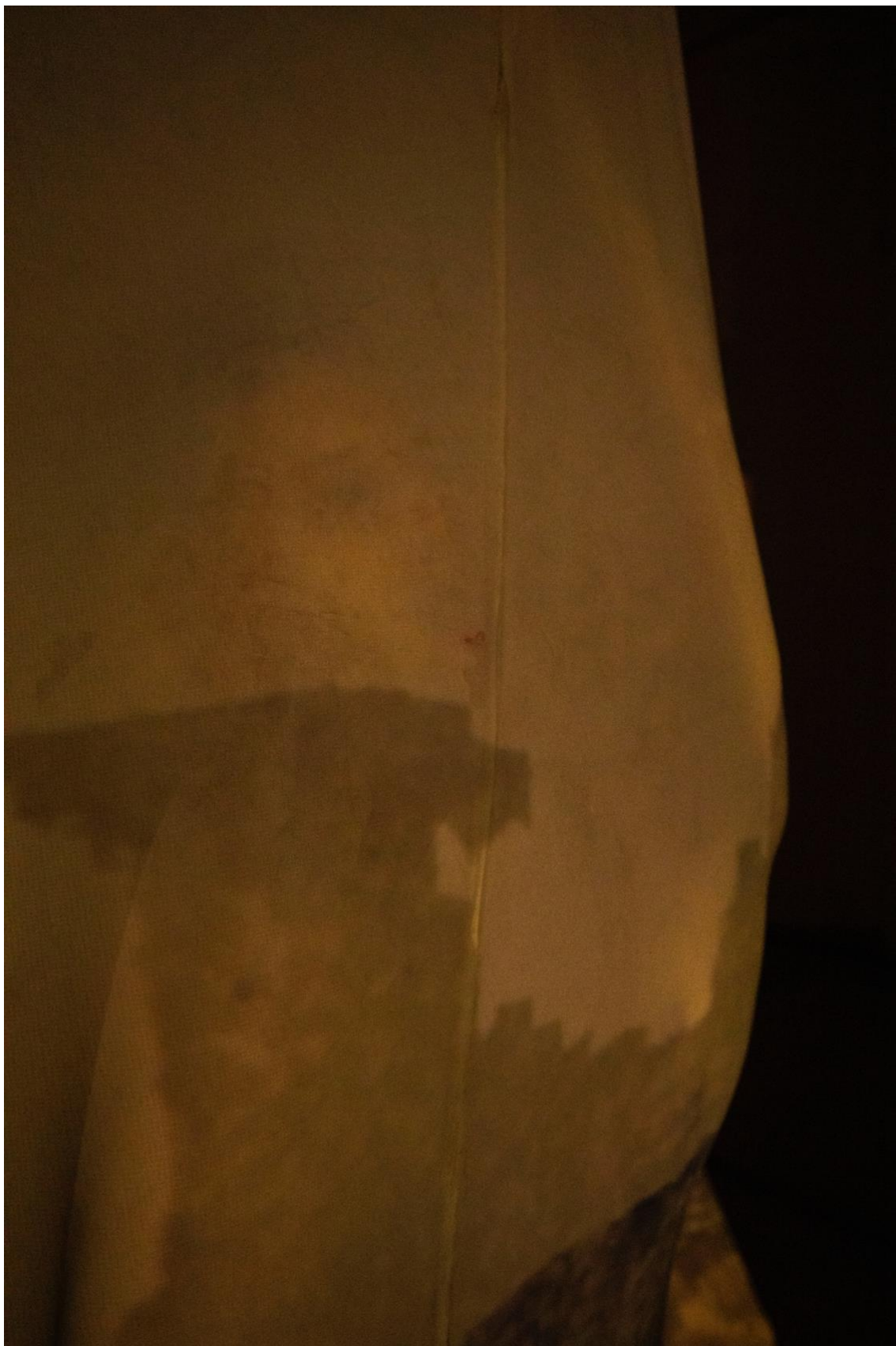
Does Instagram know that I am a slutty gay? Or does it think that I am a fitness enthusiast?

It didn’t take so long to understand or reveal what these categories meant in my feed. The thirst traps that I was viewing and interacting with were stored under these categories. These categories somehow became closets or masks for the creators to hide not this time from the public but from the algorithms that make judgments according to the community guidelines of Instagram. Nonetheless, the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the closet manifests itself in its digital form too. Even if these categories

³⁷ Instagram, “your topics.”, in data collection accessed through a private request November 12, 2022.

served as a closet, clearly Instagram is capable of differentiating these contents of “fitness” and “bodybuilding” shown to me, from the other fitness and bodybuilding content, since I assume not all fitness content creators on Instagram are male, mostly gay, centering their crotch in the center of frame, and often have large silhouettes of penis showing through their “undergarments”. Therefore, what is inside of the closet is well known by the algorithm, but the company prefers to act like they are not aware (let’s see how far) and users benefit from this unspoken agreement. Hence, I see the phenomenon of the closet as a tool not necessarily to hide in but to negotiate the terms and conditions of a visibility agreement.

In this chapter, through *Trap Door* I introduced the phenomenon of visibility and representation as a paradoxical one for marginalized groups, mainly the LGBTQ+ community. This paradox was drawn mainly through looking at the relationship between visibility and safety, by critically approaching to the prioritization of queer visibility as a queering strategy. In order to deepen the understanding of this paradox, I tried to draw a thread between visibility and surveillance. Furthermore, through providing several viewpoints, I did not only reveal how normativities around safety mark expressions of queer sexuality as unsafe and risky through tools of shame and fear, but also how privacy is dictated as the only condition of safety through the same tools. Lastly, by looking at hashtags as tools of categorization and controlling of content and users in cyberspace, I tried to illustrate the complexity and paradoxes of visibility and its effects and suggest seeking tactics for negotiation of its terms and agreements. In the following chapter, I will be sharing the tactics I learned from the cyber realm during my artistic work process and tried to employ in *Plug ’n’ Play* in its material form.



Plug'n'Play, performance, 2023. Photographed by Jyrki Oksaharju.

HIDE'N'SEEK WITHIN *PLUG'N'PLAY*: TACTICS

In Turkey, there has been an increasing violation of human rights, primarily targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, under the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and its coalition partners such as the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), etc. The ruling coalition follows polarizing populist politics that put LGBTQ+ rights at stake. Queer individuals in Turkey are under constant threat of hate speech from the regime, which fuels violence against LGBTQ+ individuals. Furthermore, pride events are being banned, and any queer social gatherings and protests are in danger of police raids. In addition to direct violence and police raids that force queer spaces like bars and clubs to shrink and close, there are also economic precarities due to obstacles in accessing basic human rights such as education and work. The already limited spaces where queer bodies can safely exist are further shrinking.

The oppression of the LGBTQ+ community is not limited to physical spaces but extends into the digital sphere as well. For instance, in 2013, the popular gay dating app Grindr, and in 2020, an alternative gay dating app Hornet, and in 2023, OnlyFans were banned in Turkey. However, as I have previously argued, on a more meta level, these apps do not innocently open up spaces or forms of outness for the queer community to gather, but they also function as archives of information, turning that information into a financial commodity for the companies. We do not have a clear understanding of with whom that information can be shared or how much access the state has to it. This access is not necessarily granted by the law but also through various tactics employed by the power apparatuses of the government. For instance, in Egypt, since the late 1990s, the police systematically arrest and charge LGBTQ+ individuals by utilizing anti-prostitution laws and a law against "debauchery," even though there is no explicit law that criminalizes homosexuality in the country. Furthermore, the police are known to hunt LGBTQ+ people by disguising themselves through apps like Grindr to arrest and torture individuals since 2017.

I am well aware that the violation of LGBTQ+, women and sexual rights is not only part of the political agenda of Turkey, the East or the Global South. With the increasing use of populist strategies in European countries and the USA, these groups are too, under the threat of losing the rights that they have gained previously.³⁸ It shows us that

³⁸ Corrales et al.. "Homophobic Populism."

progression is not linear and reminds us that current freedoms are not to be taken granted for.

Media scholar Alexander Galloway understands what Deleuze refers to with the term “societies of control” as the condition of a society where mobility is fostered inside strictures of motion, and the individuals of that kind of societies are liberated as long as they conform to the prescribed behaviors.³⁹ Nonetheless, as Deleuze argued, since the controlling is not limited to environments of enclosure as it used to be in disciplinary societies, mobilization of the bodies creates an illusion of freedom even though the digital tools that enable this mobility are in fact the apparatuses of control that involve both monitoring and influencing power.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in partial contrast to what Foucault understood as the disciplinary tool which is the probability of being seen and watched, according to Deleuze's understanding being monitored is not anymore a probability but an inevitable actuality.⁴¹ Nonetheless, this does not mean that punishment, discipline and control do eliminate each other fully through linear historical transformations of the society, but it only highlights the most common practice and source of power within that given time period. Although what changes, is the technological developments that enable even more rapid and enlarged vision for monitoring the individuals of the society. This vision is able to see underground and fringes, and what can be seen can be also formed through controlling, disciplining, and punishing.

Considering the relationship between visibility and surveillance, I believe we are in need of a paradigm shift that can pluralize the singular understanding of our queer freedom which bases itself on the Western-centric narratives of “out and proud” queers. Miia Linson in her article “Challenging the Visibility Paradigm” (2020) which focuses on Muslim immigrant lesbian experiences in the Nordic region, interprets these women's positions as simultaneously in and out of the closet, or neither in nor out.⁴² This is seen due to their involvement in multi-layered negotiations in relation to different contexts such as families, nations and queer communities. As I have previously argued, even though one's relation to the multiple contexts is a result of intersectional roles and identities one holds, with the developing cyber communication technologies the transfer between them is getting faster, where the contexts are simultaneously overlapping. Therefore, in contrast to the strategy of “out of the closet,

³⁹ Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, 106.

⁴⁰ Deleuze, “Societies of Control”, 3-7.

⁴¹ Deleuze, “Societies of Control.” & Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

⁴² Linson, “Challenging the Visibility Paradigm.”, 110-113.

in the streets”, outness or visibility appears to be multi-layered and the community constantly negotiates within and around.

Additionally, exploring the correlation between the celebratory narratives of coming out within Western queer communities and the claimed LGBTQ+ friendliness of those countries proves intriguing. A valuable perspective to consider in examining this relationship is Mark Gevisser's concept of the “pink line”.⁴³ According to Gevisser, the pink line divides the world through international and domestic politics that are shaped by the legacies of colonialism, racism and border politics. It marks LGBTQ-friendliness as properties of globalization and Western cultural colonialism and is often confronted with anti-LGBTQ+ politics supported by nationalist reasonings.⁴⁴ For instance, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of the Republic of Turkey, stated in 2021 “LGBT... There is no such thing. This country is national and spiritual and walking to the future with these values.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the pink line is not necessarily drawn by conservative populist regimes that exploit their suffering from colonialism or cultural imperialism, but also by the West and white superiority. Israeli apartheid in Palestinian land is often justified by the West and Israel themselves due to the same line. By claiming the adjectives of “progressive” and “tolerant”, Israel is pinkwashing their apartheid. Paradoxically, colonial violence that is narrated at times as humanitarian intervention was the very same method for implementing the homo-transphobic laws and morals in the countries they colonized.⁴⁶

Therefore, I call for attention to these notions that are the backbones of libertarian ethics, that the western and northern European countries that I have lived in, The Netherlands and Finland proudly claim. Whenever the terms of progression or tolerance are used in the same sentence with LGBTQ+, is signaling an understanding that LGBTQ+ people are perceived as something to be tolerated rather than equal citizens. As I have previously explained in the first chapter, the condition often appears to be only the images of queerness that don't threaten hetero-cis patriarchy and even serves for it. Furthermore, as Jose Estaban Muñoz suggests in their book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) that by seeing queerness as not here yet, we can gain greater conceptual and theoretical leverage.⁴⁷ This too provides another perspective on one of the sides of pink line, which claims itself as “tolerant” and

⁴³ Gevisser, *The Pink Line*.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁵ Hamsici, “Turkey’s Erdoğan”.

⁴⁶ For further information, see Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling*; Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*; Bedderman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

⁴⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 82.

“progressive” since it creates a delusion that the queer community’s struggle has ended in these countries. I want to end this paragraph with a note from the movie *Homotopia* (2006) co-directed by Eric A. Stanley and Chris Vargas, “Love revolution, not State delusion, Homotopia.”⁴⁸

Tunay Altay too borrows Mark Gevisser’s notion of the pink line to explore it both as a border and boundary, to study the experiences of exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQ+ people in Turkey as well as their strategies for building liberation and community in their everyday lives.⁴⁹ Regarding strategies for negotiating visibility by the LGBTQ+ communities, Tunay Altay analyzes different performances of “outness” within the context of Turkey as opposed to the Anglo-American and Euro-centric understandings of “closet” in their article. They state that outness might be operated in grey zones while disrupting the binary of “out” and “closeted”. Moreover, they add that negotiation of visibility is bounded to the safety, and risk management strategies of the queer community. They point out that digital outness is one of the precautionous management strategies queers utilize by being closeted in the material realm, in order to minimize the risk of direct violence while still being able to negotiate visibility within the publics.⁵⁰ Even though cyber networks are not left untouched by governments, conservative ideologies and exploitative financial goals of companies, the vastness of the cyber realm makes it very difficult to be fully controlled by the state. Queers, similarly to their desire-driven practice of cruising, find ways to hack and appropriate the spaces of both virtual and actual for themselves. I perceive the struggle and fight of my community as premises to seek strategies for counter-playing the cis-hetero systems and negotiating spaces for ourselves through *Plug’n’Play*.

Plug’n’Play is carried out by going back and forth between the digital and the material. Through this constant teleportation, I found myself in that grey zone that Altay refers to. What we call cyberspace, in its vastness and increased virtual mobility, reinforces the very same illusion of freedom as it is in Deluze’s description of “societies of control”. The illusion of detachment from the material realm and the controlling power which is exercised in that realm, is perhaps one of the reasons why one feels comfortable enough to perform that outness on these apps, while not in the material realm. If the act of a coming out for an LGBTQ+ individual is disclosing a piece of information regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity to a public, a social group, considering the multiplicity of the publics one does interact with, it does for sure create grey zones at

⁴⁸ Stanley & Vargas. *Homotopia*.

⁴⁹ Altay, “The Pink Line Across Digital Publics”, 1-4.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 7-11.

the times and places these publics intersect with each other. Furthermore, one disclosing one's self in the digital realm is not only a coming out to the other users of the app, but also to the corporate bodies such as the tech companies, the digital control agencies of the states and perhaps in a more meta level, to the biased algorithms.

Yet another slogan comes to mind “Velev ki Ibneyiz!”, a popular slogan from the protests of the LGBTQ+ community in Turkey. The phrase can be translated as Even if we are faggots, shouted with the attitude of “so what?”, a clause that doesn't even need to be completed into a sentence to provoke frustration in cis-hetero patriarchy. The difference between “We are queers and we are here” and “Velev ki ibneyiz” is that one of them claims the position of queerness, while the other one claims its probability. This probability of queerness highlights it as an unknown, unidentifiable and uncontainable, that everyone standing in the crowd possibly be queer. I find this probability very provocative towards systems of control because by proposing queerness as a non-categorizable entity, it challenges the limits of the system's apparatuses that require those categories in order to surveil, oppress, discipline and assimilate.

Jose Estaban Muñoz states in the introduction of *Cruising Utopia*, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality.”⁵¹ Then they add “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete for another world.”⁵² Queerness as yet unknown but on the horizon, perhaps can never be identified and uncontained form is what locates queerness in the future. This future is by no means detached from the present or past of the LGBTQ+ community and struggle, it is instead a pathway to the horizon. I find this orientation towards futures, inherently unknown property of time, a similar strategy to what the slogan “Velev ki Ibneyiz!” does by claiming a probability rather than certainty towards a system that is hungry for certainty to function.

Consequently, in the exhibition of *Plug'n'Play*, I was interested in how to tackle the problem of visibility which I have explained in the first chapter, by proposing provocative unknowns that can suggest queer probabilities and futures. Furthermore, how can I translate the tools that the practices of cyber sexuality have provided me and many people in the community to negotiate outness and visibility to conceptually and materially form queer probabilities without prioritizing the visible one here and now?

⁵¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

⁵² Ibid.

During the process of *Plug'n'Play*, in which I have been investigating the relationship between queer sexuality and the cyber realm through digital cruising, I have identified two precautionary practices that translate the closet into the digital: anonymity and encryption. By nature, they provide partial or concealed information about oneself, offering suggestive unknowns that evoke queer possibilities regarding what could be inside. I ask whether anonymity and encryption can serve as conceptual frameworks for the complexity of the "in and out" dichotomy by constituting a multiplicity of closets, and whether they can be used as tools to negotiate the terms and agreements of visibility by opening up gray zones between private and public spaces. Furthermore, I will illustrate how I responded to and translated these concepts into my working process and the byproducts of *Plug'n'Play*, which were exhibited as the artistic component of my thesis work.

Tactic 1: Anonymity (Anon Play)

13 January 2022, at 16.22:

I have been interested in anon play for a while now, having sex with people who I don't know. There are several levels in anon play, mine is quite a mild one; not having enough information about the person such as their name. But some people don't even want to see each other's photos before meeting irl. Some use masks all the time, so you never see the face of the person whom you have sex with.

Similar to other concepts explored in this paper, it is important to recognize that anonymity is not a singular entity with a uniform impact or intention. Rather, it is a complex phenomenon that encompasses a range of effects and motivations. Even though anonymity in digital space is typically associated with trolling, harassment, and bullying often targeting women and queers, perceiving it as inherently misogynist, anti-feminist and anti-queer could shadow the use of anonymity as a strategy for solidarity and care by queers and women. In the realm of cyberspace, the performance of anonymous bodies might allow individuals to partially detach from the socially and officially established identities of the material world. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that anonymity is not absolute, as surveillance remains a prominent characteristic of online interactions, and data-gathering tools have the capacity to identify individuals. While anonymity predominantly operates within user-to-user interactions, both pseudonymous and anonymous practices play significant roles in online expressions and communication.

Jessa Lingel in their paper called “A Queer and Feminist Defense of Being Anonymous Online” (2021), presented at the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, argue that by incorporating the perspectives of LGBTQ individuals and sex workers into the efforts to create a more inclusive tech, we gain a defense of online anonymity.⁵³ Moreover, they add “And at the same time, we see how a one-dimensional view of anonymity forecloses the more radical tactics that it enables.”⁵⁴ They acknowledge that online anonymity has played an important role in queer dating cultures, such as cruising and provided important forms of social support for LGBTQ groups and queer activism.⁵⁵ While online anonymity allows users to experiment with self-expression and explore fetishistic and kinky sexual practices easier, it also serves as a tool to guard one’s privacy. The strategies of anonymity such as using pseudonyms and such are tools one negotiates their outness with.

Furthermore, I started to perceive the often-used notion and hashtag in Grindr called *discreet* as a form of anonymity within queer cybersexual contexts. According to the Urban Dictionary, *discreet* is

“ a word gay/bi men use to describe themselves in a cool way that they are closet cases and have no intention of coming out soon. This allows them to maintain perceived heterosexual privilege while engaging in their true sexual desires.”⁵⁶

In my observations, *discreet* is one of the terms highlighting that there is no absolute invisibility, but instead invisibility is something that is negotiated. I understand *discreetness* as positioned at the grey zones that are in-between outness and closetedness. The closet opens up partially to a selected public, or an individual while staying closed and cautious regarding another public.

Nonetheless, Urban Dictionary and many queers who cannot play *discreetly* are rightfully angry with the strategy of *discreetness*. This too shows and proves that the strategies I am observing, suggesting and employing are by no means accessible to all LGBTQ+ individuals. Furthermore, these notions bring ethical dilemmas and are situated nowhere close to an innocent or hygienic way of negotiating visibility. However, cis-hereto-patriarchy cannot be confronted without perverse practices against the sterile images that are allowed to pass as queers.

⁵³ Jingel, “ Defense of Being Anonymous Online”, 2534.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 2536.

⁵⁶ Blueiris, “Discreet” in Urban Dictionary, May 4, 2009.

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=discreet> (accessed June 13, 2023).

During *Plug 'n' Play*, in which I have been cruising online and seeking ways to collaborate with my encounters within the framework of the project, I had to provide possibilities to stay discreet for the individuals to make sure they could feel safe sharing our relationships publicly in an art context such as crediting them with pseudonyms and using masks and voice changing effects during the live performance. After finding and agreeing with Lempi Koponen to be the co-performer in the performance, and discussing our personal needs, they expressed that they wouldn't need to stay anonymous for the performance. Even if we agreed in the end that being anonymous perhaps wasn't a practical urgency for our safety, we found a critical potential in playfully approaching visual and performative aspects of anonymity in an artistic work where we explore digital sexual practices.

In *Plug 'n' Play*, I have been interested in the queer and feminist disruptive potential of anonymity. As I delved into this subject, I found myself drawn to the Guerrilla Girls and their ingenious use of anonymity through the symbolism of gorilla masks, effectively creating a unified collective identity. By concealing their individual personas, the Guerrilla Girls adopt a shared identity that enables them to speak as women artists, employing guerrilla tactics to disrupt the patriarchal systems deeply entrenched within art institutions. The strategic utilization of anonymity allows for the creation of an alternative image that represents a larger community, facilitating discussions surrounding collective struggles rather than individual experiences. Guerrilla Girls' approach to anonymity can be viewed as an embodiment of collective action, as it transcends personal identities and emphasizes the broader societal challenges faced by marginalized groups. By operating under the guise of anonymity, they challenge the prevailing power structures and subvert the traditional notions of authorship and authority within the art world. Their choice to adopt a collective identity enables them to amplify the voices of women artists and advocate for greater gender equality and inclusivity.

Then I thought of Narcissister, Brooklyn-based artist, who questions sexual fetishism in relation to the racist and gendering stereotypes in her work. Through her art, Narcissister employs various elements such as masks, costumes, and puppetry to interrogate these complex dynamics. Notably, she chooses to operate under a pseudonym and often presents herself in public art spheres while concealing her identity behind masks. These tools of anonymity serve a dual purpose: preserving a sense of secrecy while simultaneously facilitating bodily transformation. What intrigues me about Narcissister's approach is that her embodied character, enhanced by prosthetics and other artistic elements, does not simply assume a completely new body; rather, it

functions as a multifaceted layering and assemblage. In my experience of watching her *Narcissister Live(s)* at Anti Contemporary Art Festival 2021 in Kuopio, I thought that the prosthetics were used to highlight the features of her body in flesh that was glimpsing us in between the prosthetics.⁵⁷ This assemblage and layering of skins were completing each other, resulting in an uncanny and mysterious body that made me think of the performance as more revealing than hiding. This is perhaps also what I find intriguing about the phenomenon of anonymity in general; as much as it is a tool to hide, it is also a tool to reveal. Consequently, I consider the anonymous not as the closeted or invisible, but as a tool to negotiate the terms and conditions of visibility and outness.

While performing sexual interactions live on cam, I tried to keep my head over the cam's vision and portrayed my body while hiding my head as most of the others engaging in this practice. In the performance, *Plug'n'Play*, reflecting on that code of behaviors, we have employed masks, voice-changing effects, and translucent latex covered with projection lights, as tools for us to negotiate our visibility to the audience by experimenting with the tactics of anonymity. The masks were made out of mesh fabric on which digital multi-channel head photographs were printed. I found the texture of the fabric which has evenly spaced openings resembling a pixelated visual of the image that is printed on it. Furthermore, this fabric has a translucent quality, when the performer puts it on their head, instead of resulting in full coverage, the printed image and the performer's skin blend in together. With the scaled proportions of the multi-channel photographs of various human heads according to the performers' face proportions, the use of the masks resulted in a visual in which we achieved an illusion of animating the printed still image by our face movements.

In my exploration of translating the poetics of digitality and digital intimacy into tangible forms, I sought to construct a semi-fictional world that delved into the dynamic interplay between human bodies and technological materials. Additionally, I aimed to infuse an uncanny and eerie quality into this constructed reality through the use of masks. This aesthetic element proved crucial in challenging the sanitized and unthreatening portrayals of love and intimacy, allowing me to create a space where queerness and sexuality could not be reduced to simplistic or clichéd representations.

Moreover, my experimentation with the tools of anonymity in direct relation to sexual desires served as a means to navigate the complex emotions of shame and fear. In this context, the anonymous body appears as a site where narratives of danger are located

⁵⁷ Narcissister, *Narcissister Live(s)*.

but also where the closet of shame can open. By embracing anonymity, I was able to unravel the potential of anonymity as a catalyst for transformative and rebellious expressions of identity and desire through which I harnessed it as a disruptive force that subverted the norms imposed by cis-hetero-patriarchy. This perspective led me to consider anonymity as a kinky practice, a sexual taboo, which played with the moral evaluation of anonymity as inherently dangerous and shameful.

Oxford Dictionary defines anonymity as “lack of outstanding, individual, or unusual features; impersonality.”⁵⁸ When contemplating the lack of individuality inherent in Guerrilla Girls’ use of anonymity to identify and highlight their unified collective body, a contradictory example, the realm of stock images, especially those depicting human bodies came to my mind. I refer to the bodies that are stripped from their personalities and transformed into mere representational figures that can be employed across a myriad of contexts to symbolize entire groups of people rather than the individual. In other words, an image of an individual body represents a collective body as it is in the case of the image of Guerrilla Girls. Although the difference is that Guerrilla Girls have an agency in which context this singular symbolic image of women with gorilla masks appears and therefore has certain agency in shaping what meaning it can produce, while bodies within stock images are capitalized through anonymizing by being repetitively used by the customers of the company.

While stock images predate the advent of the interactive internet, they embody a characteristic of digital technologies: appropriation. Each image can be effortlessly copied and pasted, often with little regard for the nuances of its original context. Despite the copyright licenses aimed at restricting the usage of the images, we cannot ignore the rapid copy-and-paste feature of this technology. It reminds us that any of our images that appear within the vast cyberspace can be anonymized through de-contextualizing through this copy-and-paste feature. In an instant, we can all be a meme, a porn star or perhaps an image that someone else is hiding behind.

4 February 2023, at 18.44:

It feels brutal to shop for faces online. There were so many options but I finally managed to make a selection. 8 faces costed 40 dollars in total, not all of them costed 5 dollars, some of them were more expansive than others. Most of them had titles such as #220.European.Male, but some did have proper names such as Arnold Anderson. I tried

⁵⁸ Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, “Anonymity”.

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/anonymity> (accessed June 13, 2022).

to do reverse image search on google, checked many social platforms but couldn't find them. Wouldn't be crazy if we could come across one day?

Dear Arnold Anderson

If you ever read my diary or come across with your face in my work, I want you to know that I looked out for you. Don't be offended when you see that I only used your head, I left the rest of your body at the shop, not because I didn't fancy but I didn't want to share with others. Tho, one day I would like to see it up close if you let me cuz I couldn't zoom enough without paying for the license of the whole body. I apologize.

This is the love story I am in need at this moment.

1 March 2023, at 16.22:

Feels like I am wearing someone else's skin, but when I look at the mirror I see that we complete each other, regardless how alienated I feel towards myself. I don't know if I am developing a kink, but I am looking forward to go home to touch myself with this face.



Plug'n'Play, performance, 2023. Photographed by Tuure Leppänen.

Tactic 2: Encryption

The movement founded in the 1990s, Cypherpunks, advocates cryptography, the Greek word for “secret writing,” as a way to achieve societal and political change.⁵⁹ Editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks and one of the most prominent exponents of cypherpunk philosophy, Julian Assange expresses the political power of cryptography in his introduction “A Call To Cryptographic Arms” in the book *Cypherpunks* (2012) as follows.

"Cryptography is the ultimate form of non-violent direct action. While nuclear weapons states can exert unlimited violence over even millions of individuals, strong cryptography means that a state, even by exercising unlimited violence, cannot violate the intent of individuals to keep secrets from them. Strong cryptography can resist an unlimited application of violence. No amount of coercive force will ever solve a math problem."⁶⁰

What underlines his call for cryptographic arms, is what the Cypherpunk movement believed and worked for in their operations, “privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful.”⁶¹ The companies are able to render numerous aspects invisible to users. One prominent example is the process of data collection, where vast amounts of personal information are silently amassed without users' awareness. The hidden data collection serves as the foundation for shaping user experiences, targeted advertising, and the development of user profiles, all of which occur behind the scenes. Similarly, companies engage in categorization and commodifying processes, wherein they sort and classify user data to extract value and create marketable products. These processes often occur discreetly, making the inner workings of these operations opaque to the average user. Moreover, algorithms play a significant role in shaping user experiences within cyber technologies, yet they often operate invisibly to users. Algorithms are responsible for delivering personalized content, search results, and recommendations, all tailored to individual preferences and behaviors. However, these algorithms can also introduce biases that remain concealed from users. Through biases in the training data that reinforce existing societal prejudices, algorithms have the potential to perpetuate discriminatory outcomes without users being aware of the underlying mechanisms.

⁵⁹ Assange, *Cypherpunks*.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁶¹ Ibid, 141-148.

The invisibility of these processes and biases within cyber technologies raises critical questions about transparency, accountability, and user agency. Users are often left unaware of the vast data collection apparatus that operates behind the scenes, influencing their online experiences. The categorization and commodifying processes contribute to the commercialization of personal information, further blurring the lines between privacy and commodification. Additionally, the opacity of algorithms obscures the decision-making processes and potential biases that impact users' interactions with digital platforms.

By demanding transparency from the companies regarding their processes, we can empower individuals to make informed decisions, advocate for privacy rights, and challenge the discriminatory consequences that may arise from unseen algorithms and commodification practices. Demanding transparency from the powerful, but advocating opacity for the users is a way to protect the individuals from the surveillance power and balance the established power inequalities between them, is perhaps reversing the weapon of the enemy, encryption, back to itself.

Moreover, As Legacy Russel suggests in *Glitch Feminism: a Manifesto* (2020), encryption which is the act of rendering an image invisible and inaccessible to those unauthorized, can be a useful tool to enable a mode of privacy and secure passageways for radical production.⁶² Nevertheless, Russel by referring to Jessica Pressman, argues that encryption can be seen as a reminder that there are hidden histories and gaps that are not and will not be known to certain audiences.⁶³ Russel finds shifting, morphing and embodying technology essential as a means of pushing back the exploitative hypervisibility.⁶⁴

By perceiving encryption as an act of rendering data invisible and inaccessible to those unauthorized, we can start to find some non-digital communication strategies that have been employed by the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, in Turkey, the LGBTQ+ argot called “Lubunca” encompasses around 400 words that have been used by the community and sex workers to communicate with each other through a secret language that could not be understood by the rest of the public and governments’ control apparatuses such as the police. The use of encryption allows a community to define and negotiate its borders and public visibility in order to secure its safety. While the argot conceals sexual desires in a closet that is not accessible to people outside of the

⁶² Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, 85.

⁶³ Pressman, *Circling Back*, 237, quoted in Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, 85.

⁶⁴ Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, 86.

community, it also helps to perform and communicate them within that closet where the community exists. The argot and therefore the closet becomes a tool for solidarity and care, enabling an enclosed space for showing love, affection, support and network for each other. I find this strategy challenging to the narratives that dictate coming out of the closet for queer solidarity and freedom. Being able to negotiate to whom one wants to disclose a piece of information, is negotiating what I have previously called the conditions and terms of visibility. It not only proves visibility is a negotiable condition but also breaks apart the dichotomy of visibility-invisibility by highlighting the grey zones that stretch between whom the private and public include.

Furthermore, encryption is not limited to numerical digital language or phonetics but also includes body gestures. For instance, gay cruising where one seeks a sex partner in public space, makes use of some encrypted body gestures. These gestures while being used to identify one another within the community within the heteronormatively organized spaces, also help to negotiate if there is mutual interest and consent. Walking in rounds, following one another, peeing by looking around, mimicking each other's actions, and getting in a toilet cabin and leaving the door open, can be the gestures for communicating with one another in cruising situations. These performative gestures that are used to communicate in an encrypted manner, can be understood as tools to navigate through disorienting and reorienting within what Sara Ahmed called heteronormatively organized spaces.

In *Plug'n'Play*, the performance makes use of some of the encrypted communication tools that are used within the community to navigate within heteronormatively organized spaces. For instance, the performance starts with intervening to the glitchy sound installation, with commonly used phrases on Grindr while cruising digitally, such as Where are you?, What are you looking for?, Right now. While all these phrases refer to specific things such as the preference for the position in sex or the statement that the person is looking for sex right now, once articulated within the context of art space and the situation created by the performance it receives another meaning. These references become departure points for the specific audience who shares similar references and is already familiar with digital cruising and its slang. Rather than rendering references visible to every audience, I chose to keep encryption as a mode of communicating with the audience. Furthermore, the gestures used in cruising were employed as a method by the performers to communicate consent with each other for the intimate sexual acts such as mimicking each other to welcome each other's touch.

Another encryption strategy that was employed in *Plug'n'Play* was the latex structure built to partition the gallery space to host the performance. The translucent latex structure was covered by the 3-channel projected visual simulation, mediating and framing the performers. Due to the structure, the audience was limited in accessing the performers in direct visibility but instead mainly witnessed the manually mediated image that is a blend of digital imagery and materials of latex and body in flesh. Furthermore, each surface serves as a screen that divides the audience from the performers, the audience was not able to watch all at once. So the question regarding what might be happening inside of this partitioned room, perhaps the closet, was also repeated through what might be happening on the other side, on another screen that enables access to a mediated image. What the audience standing in front of another screen sees at that point in time which I don't see, is, too, an essential one for the audience to acknowledge one's limited access to view. Encryption then became also a tool to decentralize the view and access point to the performance and required the audience to walk in the space to seek those points. Performing to the audience through the latex was resembling the way we have been performing to our sexual partners through the camera and screen within cyber sexual practices. Moreover, de-contextualizing cyber practices into material exploration too was a method of encryption through abstraction and translation.

Both the anonymous and the encrypted occupy a spot in space and therefore regardless of them rendering the data invisible, the process is visibly there. Them being visible as inaccessible and readable is what I find provocative within these tools. They both appear as intangible shadow entities that we don't know what it hides, but we are able to see that something is hidden. Therefore, the latex structure and other elements used in the work to employ anonymity and encryption did not only help us to negotiate the visibility of queer sexuality or us performers but also became tools to propose unknowns or unreadable and inaccessible messages which as I have previously defined as provocative to the systems of control. Just like making use of what-ifs as a performative strategy both to challenge the institutions I have been working with and measure risks within them to protect ourselves, the performance too proposed what-ifs regarding what might be inside for the audience. The what-ifs suggest probabilities regarding the unknown, these probabilities make the grey zone to negotiate visibility. The sounds, silhouettes, and abstract, but suggestive, mediated appearances of our bodies and movements were leading the audience to wonder within an unknown, perhaps a provocative one. I believe with the performance we have confronted the audience and the institutions we have worked with, not through displaying

straightforward sex acts of bodies but through not giving access to the clarity or reading of our bodies or their behavior fully through the normative gaze.

The mediation and framing as a mode of encryption led me into thinking about the functions of lens-based mediums in crafting realities. With the technologies of video live streaming that are a big part of cyber sexual interactions, and furthermore in social media through which we feel a power of access into various realities that might be different from ours. The illusion of the internet then is also an illusion of access and view. We are made to believe in the fact that we have access to all world through this technology. While this may be partially true, what is left out of the frame needs to be approached critically. Furthermore, *Plug'n'Play* in response to this fact does not try to reveal what is hidden, but instead by materializing the process of hiding, reminds the fact that mediation and framing as much as are tools for visibilizing, are also tools to hide.

In conclusion, exploring the poetics of digitality and digital intimacy through *Plug'n'Play*, I focused on the queer potential of anonymity and encryption both as strategies for negotiating the terms and conditions of visibility. Throughout this chapter, I hoped to reveal the potential of these practices in disrupting power structures, fostering alternative narratives that do not prioritize visibility in queer struggle, as well as serving as a tool to navigate within the grey zones between outness and closetedness. Moreover, I illustrated not only how *Plug'n'Play* led me into these practices in the process of research, but also how I found ways to translate these qualities of the cyber realm and its language into the exhibition and the performance of *Plug'n'Play*. Through artistic work, I utilized these practices both to negotiate LGBTQ+ visibility and safety with the art institutions and audience as a queer artist and to bring up the discussion of how to critically approach the questions of LGBTQ+ representation within discursively constructed heteronormative spaces.

AFTER CARE

The discussion of visibility of underrepresented groups in visual cultures is a very vast one, encompassing various standpoints driven by varying experiences. Therefore, it is quite difficult to conclude the discussion I wanted to open in a way that suggests a correct way to approach visibility. Nevertheless, I believe that throughout the text I have presented the complexity of the discussion and a specific point of view from which I approached the discussion, informed by my experience and perhaps that of many other queer individuals who have to navigate through various cultural contexts. With this approach, I tried to stay considerate of the political realities that queer individuals continuously face, even though the levels of danger vary.

Through a reflective exploration of the process of *Plug'n'Play* and encompassing personal and communal strategies of LGBTQ+ individuals, I aimed to challenge the conventional understanding of visibility through the singular act of coming out as the sole means of liberation for the queer community. Instead, I delved into the potential of the closet, a seemingly contradictory framework, and its inherent complexity, which provides a platform for fluid and plural performances of self-expression. By investigating the relationship between visibility, safety, and assimilation, the thesis questioned the strategies of prioritizing visibility within the LGBTQ+ struggle. Additionally, by considering the cyber realm, the primary contextual component of *Plug'n'Play*, as both a distinct domain and a medium for transitioning between different spaces and discursive contexts, I argued that the rigid binary of outness and closetedness dissolves into ambiguous gray areas. The thesis asserted that the closet can serve as a tool for negotiating the terms and conditions of visibility within these gray zones by negotiating to whom and how one becomes visible. Furthermore, I examined queer sexual and gender visibility in relation to cyber technologies, aiming to find out artistic and conceptual tools derived from personal and communal strategies for gaining agency in negotiating visibility.

The urgency and need for these negotiation strategies are demonstrated in the first chapter, "Playing Safe," which critically approaches the prioritization of visibility within the queer struggles. Drawing on the framework provided in *Trap Door*, I exposed the problems of fixating on the visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals, within visual culture, including social media, through its effects. Through *Trap Door*, I argued that increasing LGBTQ+ visibility might fail into increasing violence and targeting of the community, in the absence of an overarching infrastructure of support;

which is only possible through deconstructing and reconstructing the dominant discourse. Furthermore, I revealed that this targeting mainly focuses on multiply marked bodies such as BIPOC and LGBTQ, where the lack of intersectional understanding of the LGBTQ+ struggle results in failure of our reconstruction. Considering the escalating homophobic and transphobic violence under populist regimes, I emphasized the significance of adopting an intersectional perspective to understand the complex struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals.

Additionally, I supported my argument that problematizes the prioritization of visibility in the LGBTQ+ struggle through examining the dynamics of surveillance and assimilation. I have deconstructed the notions of safety and risk through their associations with sexuality, exposing the pervasive influence of heteronormative frameworks that shape and define them. Consequently, I have argued that the surveillance apparatuses that require the condition of visibility as a primary necessity to function, once they succeed in seeing, they also assimilate the community through imposing normative behaviors. These norms then also dictate what kind of representation and public visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals can be socially accepted and what kind of images are considered a risk to the heteronormatively organized spaces and social order.

The second chapter, "Hide'n'Seek within *Plug'n'Play*: Tactics," illustrates how through *Plug'n'Play* I sought tools to negotiate the terms and agreements of visibility conditions. By acknowledging the gray areas between visibility and invisibility that the LGBTQ+ community constantly navigates within, I approached the complexity of visibility from the position within the closet. I suggested an understanding of a closet not as a means to become invisible but as a tool for gaining agency in negotiating to whom and how one becomes visible. Furthermore, looked at how the closet is translated into the cyber realm through the practices of anonymity and encryption. I explored the notions of the digital realm, anonymity, and encryption both as practical and conceptual tools not only concerning the digital realm but also to the material realities of the community, to offer tactics to negotiate visibility conditions. Lastly, the chapter highlights how these practices and frameworks informed my artistic approach within *Plug'n'Play*.

In conclusion, through *Plug'n'Play* I attempted to challenge the fixed notion of visibility as the ultimate goal for the queer community, exploring the fluidity and pluralism of performances within the closet and coming out. By navigating the complexities of visibility and drawing on the digital realm, I believe to have provided a nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ visibility and strategies for negotiating the visibility

conditions. Through critical analysis and artistic exploration, *Plug'n'Play* aims to contribute to the efforts of the community in redefining our understanding of visibility as a condition, rather than a goal, that requires continual negotiation, and seeking tactics of gaining agency within heteronormatively organized spaces.

11 July 2023, 13.32

I am writing this journal entry at the point where I need to end this writing process, still uncertain on what note. I feel close to the finish line, but not exactly there yet, also don't know if it ever feels finished. I try to accept that.

When I started working on Plug'n'Play, I was not out to my family. At least, I didn't perform the speech act of coming out. Funny enough, being an artist and living in Europe, have been serving as some type of a closet, a closet for my family to put me in, time to time for me to get in, which could justify my performance of "queerness". In the midway, I happen to come out to mom and brother after measuring the risks for years, probable scenarios of abundance, and lack of love, care and respect.

I felt guilty wanting to share my story of coming out with my queer friends back home. This guilt was not necessarily because I found myself privileged to be accepted by my family, but guilt of falling into what we were criticizing together, the celebratory emphasis on the act of coming out within western queer politics and media. I felt like, I betrayed the very idea that I have been defending, the idea which shaped my approach within this project.

But honestly, coming out also did not relieve much, I have been just thinking of many other loved ones that I didn't come out to and perhaps will never. While being the one who constantly needs to perform coming out feels exhausting, what is more exhausting is not coming out but not being seen. When coming out feels like you want to be seen but there is no structure and frame that enables for the ones you come out to see you through. When you don't share the same discursive language for communication, speech act of coming out turns into entering a new closet. One constantly needs to find a shared discourse, or perhaps attempt to shift a paradigm, to open up a window to be seen from. Feels quite similar to a thesis work.

It was all these dilemmas that led me into perceiving outness and closetedness as inclusive of each other, not contradictory, and seeking tools of gaining agency in our processes of becoming visible, determining to whom and how.

Putting an end to a process always feels difficult, even more in this particular one. Will I stop this era in which I was excessively going on sex dates with people I have met online and engage in sexual acts on cams? How will I justify all these acts if there is no “art” to serve as a closet for the pervert I am?

To ensure continuum, I have already set three more dates after the one on yesterday. One on 18th, the day I give the last draft, one on 24th, the day I submit the thesis, and one on 30th just to make sure Plug’n’Play did not destroy the fun I have.

During the process of Plug’n’Play, keeping a journal was a way to document and reflect on the process for myself but also a tool to be able to share the process of work in the written component of the thesis. Once I started writing the written component and place the journal entries to provide windows for the reader to my working process, I realized that they do more than serving as documentation, perhaps it is the least they do. I recognize the difference in my tone of voice but also the freedom in not trying to justify my acts or speech, I don’t worry about grammar, coherency, argumentation whatsoever. I don’t worry about navigating around the normativites that constructs an “art practice” or “academic work” as much as other times.

These entries most probably do documentation the least, cuz no one can prove whether any of these are accurate to what really happened. It’s the doubt of fiction, I aim to implement. I find this doubt of fiction very present during any interactions within cybersexual encounters, but instead of letting that doubt destroy the fun, I choose playing along, living the fantasy where fiction and fact blend in. It is exactly how I believe the world, and the way one seeks knowledge from it, are constructed. And, I don’t think that this doubt destroys the eligibility of that knowledge instead brings it closer to the reality.

This doubt that holds on the probabilities of fact and fiction, and lacks certainty, is the provocative unknown of this text. This tactic I believe help me to protect myself to a certain degree with carrying a probability of being a fictional writing but also function as a gray zone where the binarization of fact and fiction becomes dysfunctional. This threshold where the border between in and out of the closet is negotiated and played with, then also becomes a playground that feels safer to be critical in. By assembling certain entries which are in actuality just probabilities, clues, and peepholes regarding what might be in the closet, I propose and perhaps provoke a doubt for the reader. This doubt might help to question; what might be there that we don’t know, what we think we

*know, and what if we don't know and how do we embrace these multiplicities that
silence and unknowns might perform.*

Performing Plug'n'Play through the act of writing.

*This entry also became another layer of reflection, which reflects on the text itself. This
is a warning for me to stop doing the work of the reader,
or perhaps to stop playing with the reader.*

I stop.



What you cannot see in *Plug'n'Play*, Photographed by Jyrki Oksaharju.

GLOSSARY OF APPS

In this glossary, you can find brief explanations regarding the functions of digital platforms and software applications that have been mentioned in this thesis.

Acknowledging the probability of these software technologies to change through updates, I want to make sure that my reference to these apps is based on their function at the current date, July 2023.

Adobe After Effects: A software application developed by Adobe Inc. that is widely used in the film, television, and motion graphics industries for creating visual effects and motion graphics. It provides a comprehensive set of tools and features for creating and manipulating visual elements, animations, and special effects in videos. With After Effects, users can composite multiple layers of images and videos, apply various effects and filters, and create complex animations and motion graphics. The software offers a wide range of built-in effects and presets, as well as advanced features like keyframing and masking, to achieve precise control over the visual elements.

Adobe Photoshop: A software application developed by Adobe Inc. It is primarily used for image editing, manipulation, and graphic design purposes. Photoshop provides a comprehensive set of tools and features that allow users to enhance, retouch, and manipulate digital images with precision and creativity. With Photoshop, users can adjust colors, remove backgrounds, apply filters and effects, combine multiple images, create digital paintings, design graphics for web and print, and much more. It supports various file formats and offers advanced features like layers, masks, and blending modes, providing users with extensive control and flexibility in their editing process.

Adobe Premiere Pro: Adobe Inc.'s software application for video editing. With Premiere Pro, users can import video footage from various sources, arrange and trim clips on a timeline, apply visual and audio effects, add titles and graphics, adjust color and exposure, and create transitions between scenes. Premiere Pro provides advanced features like keyframing for precise control over animations and effects, and layers for masking, blending and assembling various moving images. It also supports integration with other Adobe Creative Cloud applications, such as After Effects for advanced visual effects and Photoshop for image editing.

Canlısaray.com: An online live chat platform which pairs users randomly, allowing them to engage in real-time video and audio interactions. It is primarily used by residents of Turkey and doesn't require users to register and allow users to stay

anonymous. While it promotes itself as a platform for making friends, its user base is largely comprised of gay and bisexual men, as well as transwomen and nonbinary individuals who are seeking digital sexual interactions. The random pairing system facilitates spontaneous connections between users. There is no automated algorithms in place to detect "inappropriate content", unless someone reports it.

Dirtyroulette.com: An online platform that offers live webcam interactions with strangers without registration. It allows users to engage in explicit video and audio conversations with other individuals who are seeking adult content and sexual encounters. Similar to other roulette-style chat websites, Dirtyroulette.com pairs users randomly, providing a platform for adults to explore their sexual interests and desires. They have users from all over the world and the interface tags the users with the countries they access the platform from.

Grindr: A popular dating app among gay and bisexual men, as well as trans women and queer individuals. The app utilizes location-based technology to display user profiles in order of proximity, facilitating connections between individuals in close proximity to each other. Communication primarily takes place through private messages, providing a platform for users to engage in conversations and potentially share explicit photos. While Grindr is commonly associated with its reputation as a digital cruising platform, primarily focused on facilitating sexual encounters, it also serves as a social networking tool. Furthermore, it is important to note that in certain regions, Grindr is also utilized as a means to procure drugs, highlighting the emergence of digital ghettos that create an illusion of a surveillance-free space.

Jerkey.com: One of the online platforms that provides roulette-style webcam interactions without the need of registration. It's targeted towards gay men to engage in sexual acts with strangers through webcam.

OnlyFans: An online platform that allows content creators to monetize their work by providing exclusive to their subscribers, known as "fans." It operates through subscription-based service where creators can charge a monthly fee in exchange for access to their content. OnlyFans provides a space for individuals, including sex workers, influencers, artists, performers, to share a wide range of content such as photos, videos, live streams, and engage in personalized interactions with their fans. Even though, OnlyFans mainly hold pornographic content, it is expanding to include creators from various fields who seek to engage with their audience in a more intimate and direct manner.

Tinder: A popular dating application. It operates on a mobile platform and allows users to connect with others based on their location and mutual interests. The app presents users with a series of profiles, typically consisting of photos and a brief bio, and users can swipe right to indicate interest or swipe left to pass. If two users swipe right on each other's profiles, it creates a match and enables them to chat within the app.

Conversations can be only carried out with the matches through text, since it doesn't allow images and videos to be sent as messages.

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