

RECLAIMING DESIRE

The splendidly poignant art
of Dries Verhoeven

In the epistolary opening to Andrew Holleran’s 1978 classic gay work of fiction *Dancer from the Dance*, the provocatively outspoken narrator states: “After all, most fags are as boring as straight people – they start businesses with lovers and end up in Hollywood, Florida with dogs and double-knit slacks, and I have no desire to write about them.” Instead, the novel chooses to centre around “that tiny subspecies of homosexual, the doomed queen, who puts the car in gear and drives right off the cliff!”

Holleran’s fascination for the protagonist of the “doomed queen” is unmistakably echoed in Dries Verhoeven’s recent production, *The NarcoSexuals*. While the former’s novel chronicled the hedonistic lifestyle taking place in the bathhouses of Manhattan and on the beaches of Fire Island in the decade prior to the AIDS crisis, Verhoeven’s production sheds an empathetic light on contemporary ‘chemsex’ culture: the act of using hard drugs as part of sex, primarily sex between gay and bisexual men. Both works capture a queer subculture that rejects normative societal expectations in which sex, drugs, and even death are seemingly inseparable from one another. Neither piece, however, is written with a hint of condescension; it may well be that this sincerity comes from a genuine familiarity with their subjects.

The NarcoSexuals crosses the line between experimental theatre and installation art, taking place within two shipping containers that have been converted to resemble the inside of a home where a sex party is taking place. This setting is typical of Verhoeven’s work, which often distils complex topics through interactive scenographies and interventions that allow questions to be raised around the fragile peripheries between public and private space. Several windows allow visitors a voyeuristic glimpse inside,

as performers move between the different spaces for a mesmerically looping performance lasting six hours.

The work has toured several cities in Belgium and the Netherlands since 2022, taking place on barren industrial sites that evoke the clandestine nature of an afterparty. On a wet summer evening in Utrecht, after despairingly following Google Maps on my rain-soaked iPhone screen, I felt lost, until finally I stumbled across the installation for the first time. With its slowly pulsating glow, it was hiding in plain sight beside a railway overpass. From a scenography perspective, the un-clad structure with insulation protruding from the edges was reminiscent of the iconic peepshow scenes in Wim Wenders’ classic film *Paris, Texas* (1984). Whether or not this reference is intentional, Verhoeven – like Wenders – uses set design to subvert the expected erotic objectification of the peepshow in a way that allows for poignantly intimate interactions. While the performance is undeniably erotically charged (with seven nude performers animalistically thrusting at sofa cushions, kitchen cabinets, and one another), it draws strength from its most sensual moments. A prolonged gaze between audience member and performer, separated only by rain-speckled glass, manages to invoke both seduction and tenderness at the same time.

Tuning into the performers’ words, the same script is spoken in unison and broadcast through wireless headphones. This allows the viewer to lose the sense of the individual performer, with both body and voice blurring into one another in a way that hints towards the power of sexual anonymity. At certain moments, this collective voice portrays shared

intimacy as something radical, with a sense of utopianism emerging out of its sublime degeneracy. When the voices reach a crescendo with the electronic music, the euphoria is palpable, and I found myself wanting to be inside, entangled among the bodies. At other moments, the script pushes against the boundaries of discomfort by candidly touching

upon subjects such as intravenous drug-use with a sense of tenderness and sincerity. At one point, a performer, sitting alone in a bathtub, conveys: “He slowly pushes the needle into my arm... I’m not sure if I was ever that close to someone.”

When creating a piece of art that deals with such topics today, it’s

difficult not to contextualise it within the cultural history that has come before it. In *The NarcoSexuals*, certain references are made explicitly, to the extent of bordering on cliché, with details throughout the interior such as photos of Marsha P. Johnson and other figures from the early Gay Liberation movement dotted sparsely along





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the walls. A 'SILENCE=DEATH' poster from the organisation ACT UP New York, partially obscured by a glass door, hints toward the lingering memory of the AIDS epidemic, as well as the activism, artworks, and care that galvanised the queer community throughout the 1980s and 90s. These historical references are juxtaposed with drug paraphernalia like eyedropper bottles of GHB, discarded syringes and bottles of water, alongside mobile phones left open to Grindr's endless feed of shirtless torsos, in a somewhat cynical representation of present-day gay culture.

There are inevitable comparisons to be made between Verhoeven's performance and a legacy of earlier

queer artworks touching upon issues of desire, including "*Untitled* (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*)" by Félix González-Torres. Conceived in 1991 at the height of the AIDS epidemic, the piece consists of a dancer wearing nothing but silver lamé shorts and running shoes, walking into an art institution – just once a day at an unannounced time – and dancing on a light-blue illuminated platform to music played through headphones on their own portable Walkman. Given that the dancer is displayed so confidently as an object of desire, the work was radical when first presented in the midst of the ongoing epidemic ravaging the art community which would ultimately claim his own life. An overt display of sexuality and even joy

was entirely at odds with the demonising portrayals of sickly and contagious queer men in the media at the time. Being alone on a platform with no music heard outside of their own headphones, however, the dancer is removed from the spectators in such a way that the two parties can never truly connect: the desire remains unrequited.

Verhoeven isn't the only artist to have paid homage to González-Torres in recent years, and he surely won't be the last. Reflecting on the ways the radicalism of bringing a go-go dancer into an art institution has been lost over the years, to the extent that the original work has become a cliché, artist Mahmoud Khaled surprised visitors to the Frieze London art fair with *Untitled* (*Go-Go Dancing Platform*) *Speaks* in 2016. Intervening directly in the original work of González-Torres, Khaled's performer opens his mouth for a monologue instead of dancing. Reflecting on how the work has lost its urgency through repeatedly being brought out of storage and into white-cube spaces every few years, he states: "As an artwork, I have a politically and ideologically loaded desire that I cannot address or articulate here and now!" Rather than giving a voice to the dancer himself – something intentionally absent from the original work – Khaled's monologue encompasses the artwork as a whole, reflecting on the commodification and sanitisation of something that was once radical and provocative. This insight poses several open-ended questions about the current state of the art world.

Although 'queering' has become a mainstay of institutional vocabulary in recent years, this visibility is often limited to a socially acceptable or purely theoretical notion. Beyond some twee figurative representations in paintings, queer desire is rarely touched upon in a meaningful way. There is something refreshing, then, in the ways that Verhoeven ap-

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proaches a legitimately contentious issue facing a particular subsection of the queer community today – perhaps this is only made possible by exiting the white cube and going into the public realm.

While it would be easy for critics to accuse *The NarcoSexuals* of either being overtly sensationalist or glorifying a sexual practice that many people judge as dangerous and addictive, the strength of the work lies in its nuances, not taking a particularly moralistic stance from either perspective. While the chem-sex party may well be portrayed as a self-contained utopia where the loneliness and isolation of the outside world are not felt, the men are equally trapped in a constant loop within four walls – much like the go-go dancer doomed to reappear daily on his pristine podium. In Verhoeven's production, the only moment at which one member of the party is able to leave is when an ambulance arrives to take him away on a stretcher, to a soundtrack of ambivalently horny moans from those remaining inside.

Following an era of assimilation of many queer people into straight culture among several liberal Western countries, we have grown accustomed to certain sanitised narratives through which the more complex issues of sex, drugs, and desire have been swept under the carpet. While some people have been more than happy to join 'polite society', there are other sections of the gay community that

have historically thrived by taking ownership of their own lecherous tendencies without seeking mainstream approval. This has been reflected through a number of works of art that may seem challenging or uncomfortable to a wider audience but often have a hidden depth and sensitivity to them. Having myself come of age during a period of increasing assimilation, I've often felt that something deeper was missing behind the "love is love" rhetoric that seemingly ironed out the messy complexities of queer history and identity that I was just beginning to grapple with at the time. Moreover, this rhetoric ignored the fact much societal homophobia is not rooted in who we love – its often about *how we fuck*. As global politics are increasingly becoming uprooted and the pendulum of societal tolerance is undoubtedly swinging the other way, there is real strength to be found in reclaiming these more provocative and contentious narratives as our own before anyone else can. Will this mean a return of the "doomed queen" that Holleran wrote about? I certainly hope so. <