

## UNLEASH YOURSELF!

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On July 19, 2008, Her Divine Holiness the extra-terrestrial Pope Alice staged a 'Kiss In' protest along Oxford Street in Darlinghurst, Sydney. Amidst slogans like 'Everyone is Beautiful' and 'F\*\*\* Homophobic Religions,' participants were invited to *Kiss a Queer for Christ's Sake*. It was just one of many events held around the country in reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Australia that year. Speaking to media at the time, Luke Roberts explained that 'I want to see Pope Alice express herself as a focal point for anybody – gays, lesbians, transgender, queers, bisexuals, heterosexuals, anyone who has an open mind and wants to say, "We've had enough of the medieval religions that keep the world backwards":'<sup>1</sup> The message to the Queer community was clear: we are here and always have been. There is a future, and it is yours for the making.

Community and social activism have always held an important place in Luke Roberts' practice. The kiss-in event in Sydney, like many of Pope Alice's frequent appearances at Sydney Mardi Gras, was produced with the history of the international gay liberation movement and civil rights movements in mind. The UK's first official Gay Pride event in London in 1972, attended by 2,000 people, culminated with a mass kiss-in at Trafalgar Square, organised by the now infamous Black gay civil rights campaigner, Ted Brown. In Australia, one of the most famous early kiss-in actions was held in 1979, after two men in Melbourne were arrested for public indecency after being seen kissing on the street. In response, protestors staged a kiss-in outside of the Woolshed Bar on Collins Street. Organised by gay liberation and feminist activists, the event featured, as Leigh Boucher writes, 'couples of varying gender combinations [that] dramatised the uneven application of public indecency laws ... by asking which couples the police should arrest for the same act of intimacy.'<sup>2</sup>

From a young age, Roberts was painfully aware of both his outsider status and the criminalisation of his identity by heteronormative society. As is well known, not only did he grow up in the small Queensland country town of Alpha – a point of return for his decades-long practice – but he also lived in Brisbane during the era of Joh Bjelke-Peterson's deeply repressive politics. The regime was corrupt and brutally discriminatory, with police regularly arresting, assaulting, and harassing members of marginalised groups.<sup>3</sup>

In 1985, Bjelke-Peterson proposed an amendment to the Liquor Act that meant any Queensland publican could lose their license for serving gay patrons alcohol, or even permitting them on the premises.<sup>4</sup> Queensland Attorney General, Neville Harper, told Parliament the amendment would 'allow action to be taken to ensure that these sexual perverts, these deviants, these gay bars, will not be allowed to prosper, will not be allowed to continue.'<sup>5</sup> It was not until 1990 that the World Health Organisation retracted their categorisation of homosexuality as a mental illness, while in Queensland, consensual homosexual activity between male adults remained illegal up until 1991, punishable by up to seven years in gaol. It took until 2017 for those convicted under this law to have their criminal records expunged.

Reflecting on those years in 2016, Roberts wrote that:

My work has centred on hidden histories as much as anything else ... Marginalisation was forced upon me at birth. Of course I didn't realize it at the time, but its ugly shape began to be seen way before I even recognised it for what it was ... I am an activist for the marginalised. I understand that most of us feel we don't belong. I however was told in no uncertain terms from a young age that I didn't and don't belong.<sup>6</sup>

It is then not surprising that Roberts left Brisbane for Europe in 1984. He remained in one of his several self-imposed exiles for nearly four years, returning only after the 'much-loathed Bjelke-Petersen regime had finally been disgraced and was on its way out.'<sup>7</sup>

Finding ways to combat alienation and discrimination is a major driver for Roberts' work. Often that has meant turning to literal images of aliens and extra-terrestrials in his projects. Beings from elsewhere appear frequently in his art, most prominently in the missives and missions of Her Divine Holiness Pope Alice. The story of Pope Alice, we are told, 'begins in Outer Space in the year 5252 ABCD. Before Earth-time Pope Alice existed on Metalluna, one of a consortium of planets within the Orion group. At the dawn of the future Her Divine Holiness falls through a Black Hole (Her concept of reality) and lands in Australia at Uluru having bounced from Alice Springs, which still bears Her name.'<sup>8</sup>

Like *Alice through the Looking Glass* ricocheting down the rabbit hole, Her Divine Holiness is a reminder that reality is not as it seems. 'Question Everything!', she proclaims 'We don't live in the world we think we live in.' In Roberts' practice, history is often disrobed as propaganda designed to perpetuate oppressive power regimes. Room must be made for all that remains untold or invisible in 'official' narratives. According to Pope Alice, most religions are ancient history in drag resulting from contact with extra-terrestrials mistaken for gods. Her presence represents an unveiling of those deceptions. Over time, Pope Alice has created her own propaganda machine, with Roberts as her PR agent working tirelessly for intergalactic exposure. One of Pope Alice's many testimonials is from Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin: 'My conversation with Pope Alice completely altered any view I had of history and the space race.' There is much laughter in Robert's works, but the messages they convey are in fact no joke.

The queerness of Roberts' practice lies in its refusal of binary structures, and its flagrant challenge to the boundaries that work to restrict individual subjectivities. Pope Alice may be a conduit for feminine energy and have female pronouns, but she is also strikingly androgenous in her spectacular science-fictional appearances. As a being from another dimension, Alice remains outside of Earthly notions of gender or sexuality. Now well-known across the continent as an icon of queer culture, she is celebrated both for her messages of love and acceptance ('You're a Saint; I should know I'm a Pope') and for the radically open fluidity she brings to understandings of gender identities and sexual expression ('Unleash yourself!').

As Roberts says, 'I am a lot of people, and they are all coming to the party.'<sup>9</sup> A plethora of characters and personas have graced Roberts' works since the 1960s. Early photographs from his childhood show the artist with his sister in their country town backyard dressed as a pharaoh, or a shaman, or Dracula. In an interview from 1999, the artist confessed to having 'an overwhelming feeling, at a young age, of being a number of very different people – different personae – at different times ... as human beings we are multifaceted and so much is repressed – in denial.'<sup>10</sup> Later projects saw him take on the personas of Andy Warhol and Frida Kahlo in a series of 'polaroid performances', as well as appearing as figures from famous paintings by artists including Andrew Wyeth, Diego Velázquez, and Caravaggio. Roberts' now classic photograph *At the Bar of the Pub with No Beer* is a sardonic remake of Édouard Manet's 1882 play on class and gender in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*.

In his third year of art school at Queensland College of Art in 1974, this trying on and trying out of identities led to the creation of Alice Jitterbug, the original glamour girl: 'Call me anything you like but call me a cab first.' Alice made her public debut on a trip to Melbourne that same year. 'I was there at the first sighting,' testified Larry Strange, in a witness statement regarding Alice's first 'official' appearance:

It was 1974 and a brisk damp breeze blew down St Kilda Rd on an autumn evening in Melbourne. Outside the National Gallery a Balaclava tram stopped and She appeared. She was Big, masses of rich jet-black curls, towering over others, long shapely legs in platform heels, skirt split to the thigh, dark flashing eyes, vivid red mouth. She seemed other worldly ...<sup>11</sup>

Later that night, Alice Jitterbug was approached by an elderly gentleman in a three-piece suit who, much to Roberts' amusement, mistook her for Germaine Greer. As Daniel Mudie-Cunningham wrote, she 'passed not only as a woman, but as a feminist celebrity!'<sup>12</sup>

For 1974, this was an astoundingly courageous act. For many gender non-conforming individuals and 'gender illusionists' (a term Roberts sometimes uses), the danger of not 'passing' in straight society can lead to serious personal harm or death. By presenting as female in public during this era, the artist was taking a significant personal risk. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Australia, arrests for what was then known as cross-dressing were often made following charges of 'vagrancy,' 'public indecency' or offensive behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Societal and legal links between deviancy, perversion, homosexuality and gender non-conforming practices have also amplified the policing of marginalised groups and increased their vulnerability to attack.<sup>14</sup> By going public, Roberts was knowingly putting himself in the path of potential violence from both the public and the law.

Is it any wonder that Roberts is drawn to images, stories, and objects that offer alternatives to heteronormative cultures, or open gateways to other realms, both past and future? The notion that 'history is but fable agreed upon' is one he returns to often, particularly in relation to his large and ongoing *Wunderkammer* project.<sup>15</sup> The *Closeted History: Wunderkamera* images included in this project are a series of found vintage

black and white photographs that feature gender non-conforming and potentially Queer individuals from the Victorian era. Two sailors in an embrace grin cheekily at the camera. A pair of dapper men in top hats sit ladylike side by side, their legs delicately entwined. A bride in white stands solemnly with one hand on the shoulder of their androgynous-looking, seated beau. Taken primarily in the 1800s, the images testify to the persistence and existence of queer desires across time, and ‘confront us with evidence of a seemingly more sexually liberated past.’<sup>16</sup>

Both art and history are queered constantly in Roberts’ works. In the photograph *Self Portrait as Steve Hart 2006*, the artist is pictured sitting side-saddle on a horse clad in a floral-patterned dress. The dress is buttoned up neatly on top of a crisp white shirt. Holding the reins of the horse, he raises one arm up awkwardly as he stares directly into the camera. Beyond the dry grass of the paddock is Nurim, the eucalypt-covered mountain ranges of Rockhampton. The photograph is a remake of Sidney Nolan’s 1947 painting *Steve Hart Dressed as a Girl*, which in turn was based on the historical bushranger Steve Hart, a member of Ned Kelly’s gang who allegedly wore female clothing to avoid the troopers, and for their own amusement.<sup>17</sup>

Queer scholar Elizabeth Freeman would recognise the handling of temporality in many of Roberts’ images as a form of ‘temporal drag,’ marked by the ‘pull of the past on the present.’<sup>18</sup> Temporal drag is a transitive, cross-historical approach that insists that the present remains freighted with the weight of the past, even as we might be propelled towards the future. In 2010, Freeman confessed that at one moment in her life, she thought the point of queerness was to always be ahead of ‘actually existing social possibilities:’ the vanguard, the front line. Now, she thinks, the point of queerness may instead mean being ‘interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless.’<sup>19</sup>

To think of radicality not as that which marches forever forwards in the name of so-called ‘progress,’ but rather as that which stops to care for the detritus that history leaves behind was also, of course, the hallmark of Walter Benjamin’s philosophy, as laid out in his famous 1940 essay *On the Concept of History*.<sup>20</sup> This is also the legacy of the Queer artists, makers and thinkers who, Freeman says, in searching out the ‘undetonated energy from past revolutions ... gather up, literally, life’s outtakes and waste products and bind them into fictitious but beautiful (w)holes.’<sup>21</sup>

We see this same impetus shot throughout Luke Roberts’ practice. Navigating complex questions of identity, being and purpose, his works perform a litany for all those who may have been told they ‘don’t belong’ while celebrating the eternal value of working from the margins to demolish established doctrines. It is then not just literal drag that Roberts enacts with his endless masking and unmasking of selves, but also a form of queerly political *temporal drag*. Time and history become entities that might be frocked and defrocked at will. Perhaps this is why Pope Alice, as the ‘Ambadress from Infinity’ and the most ancient being in Roberts’ pantheon, is also the one who continues to hold the most enduring knowledge about the future. Long may Her light radiate.

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<sup>1</sup> See ABC News, 'Police Investigate Queer Kiss-In for WYD,' Friday 4 July 2008

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-07-04/police-investigate-wyd-queer-kiss-in/2493896>

Pope Benedict XVI had previously decreed homosexuality a 'moral evil' and an 'objective disorder' in 1992, writing that 'the practice of homosexuality may seriously threaten the lives and well-being of a large number of people.' *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons*, The Vatican, 1992,

[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19920724\\_homosexual-persons\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19920724_homosexual-persons_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> Leigh Boucher, 'Discomforting Politics: 1970s Activism and the Spectre of Sex in Public' in Michele Arrow and Angela Wollacott (eds.), *Everyday Revolutions: Remaking Gender, Sexuality and Culture in 1970s Australia*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2019), 184. See also Andrew Trounson, 'When Kissing Was a Crime,' *The Pursuit*, 24 September 2017, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/when-kissing-was-a-crime>

<sup>3</sup> Shiralee Robinson, 'Homophobia as Party Politics: The Construction of the "Homosexual Deviant" in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland,' *Queensland Review* 17.1 (2017): 29-45 and Clive Shore, *Sunshine and Rainbows: The Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press and API Network, 2001). See also Alexander Lewis, 'Homosexuality Wasn't Decriminalised in Queensland until 1991, but the State has a Long and Rich Queer History,' ABC News, 13 September 2022 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-13/queensland-homosexuality-lgbt-gay-queer-history-changes/101408660>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-01/1985-qld-cabinet-documents-mabo-decision/7053522> and <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/pdf/asmade/act-1985-081>

<sup>5</sup> *Outrage*, 31 (1985), 4, cited in Shiralee Robinson, 'Homophobia as Party Politics,' 39.

<sup>6</sup> Luke Roberts 'Stranded Doing the Strand: Open Letter to Brian Doherty,' ARI Remix, 2016 <https://remix.oral.au/stranded-doing-the-strand-luke-roberts/>

<sup>7</sup> Luke Roberts 'Stranded Doing the Strand,' 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Luke Roberts, 'MYSTORY: EMISSION TO PLANET EARTH,' in Luke Roberts, *Vanitas: Pope Alice Presents Luke Roberts*, (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1999), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Luke Roberts, Press Release, Institute of Modern Art 2011, <https://www.ima.org.au/exhibitions/luke-roberts-alphastationalphaville-3/>

<sup>10</sup> Luke Roberts, 'Tarred by the Brisbane Brush and Feathered by the American Eagle: Interview with Luke Roberts and Nichols Zurbrugg,' in *Vanitas: Pope Alice Presents Luke Roberts*, (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1999), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Luke Roberts, postcard series *From A to B and Back Again (Tar and Cement)*, Museum of Brisbane, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Mudie Cunningham, 'Camping Out at the Arse-End of the Universe,' in Luke Roberts, *Alphastation/Alphaville*, (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2012), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Sarah Chesser, *Parting with My Sex: Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life*, (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Adrian McCrory 'Policing gender nonconformity in Victoria, 1900–1940,' *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria* 19 (2021), <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/provenance-journal/provenance-2021/policing-gender-nonconformity-victoria-1900>

<sup>15</sup> Luke Roberts, email to the author, 1 April 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Luke Roberts, *AlphaStation / Alphaville*, (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2012), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Heather Smyth, 'Mollies Down Under: Cross Dressing and Australian Masculinity in Peter Carey's True History of the Kelly Gang,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18.2 (May 2009):185-214 and Ted Snell, 'Here's Looking At: Steve Hart Dressed as a Girl,' *The Conversation*, August 14, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/heres-looking-at-steve-hart-dressed-as-a-girl-1947-by-sidney-nolan-101313>. The story of Hart also marks Roberts' 2009 work *Apparition: Dyptich*, in which a cowboy-like man on horseback is pictured first clothed, and then naked, with the silhouettes of two Wandjina figures with haloes shadowing the foreground.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 62. Thanks also to my graduate student Grace Jeremy for her excellent research into the use of appropriation and anachronism in Roberts' work. See Grace Jeremy, *Appropriations of Renaissance and Baroque Art in Contemporary Australia*, MPhil, University of Queensland, 2022.

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxiii.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-400.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvi, xii.