

## Missing Objects and Affective Fragments: Reparative Curating of Queer Heritage

Johanna Pohtinen

---

### Abstract

In this article, I explore how queer heritage can be created in museums through fragments. I apply the concept of reparative curating to demonstrate how fragmented heritage can be 'patched up' and mapped through affective means. I examine this in the context of an exhibition at the Helsinki City Museum called *M/S Baltic Queers – Experiences of LGBTQAI+ Migration*. Through interviews, observation, and by using the exhibition as research material, I analyze how affective strategies can be employed to produce an exhibition centred on the cultural heritage of a marginalized group, and how this approach can be reparative. There is a pressing need for history among queer individuals, yet the material available is often fragmented due to systemic oppression, which means that more creative means are often necessary when constructing exhibitions. The everyday objects, clarity of queerness, and affective modes of engagement featured in the exhibition contribute to its reparative nature. By exhibiting fragments alongside stories and narratives, it becomes possible to create a fully rounded presentation of a phenomenon that has not been widely discussed before.

**Keywords:** affective strategies, fragments, museum exhibition, queer heritage, reparative curating

### Introduction

When I step out of the lift on the fourth floor of the Helsinki City Museum, I embark on a journey. The space evokes the interior of a ship, but further ahead, there is also a mise-en-scène resembling an airport security check, with trays holding people's belongings (Figure 1). Headphones are attached to the trays, allowing visitors to hear the migration stories of individuals – told in their own words but read by actors. On the trays, I see a wallet, travel documents, jewellery, and a bag of buckwheat. I have entered the exhibition *M/S Baltic Queers – Experiences of LGBTQAI+ Migration*, which depicts queer individuals who have migrated around the Baltic Sea region for various reasons since the 1960s.

The exhibition continues with an interior designed to resemble a café situated in a Swedish subway tunnel, followed by a wall dedicated to queer activism, featuring an artwork resembling children's wooden building blocks that depict queer spaces in a city. Visitors then enter a living room with a sofa, a TV, a painting of a ship on the wall, and various objects and photographs on the shelves (Figures 3, 4, and 5). The final room of the exhibition features a wall of personal ads, where visitors can create their own by arranging blocks with different phrases and words. A smooth saxophone tune plays in the background. The exhibition also includes a vast wall dedicated to a timeline of queer rights in the Nordic and Baltic countries. While there are very few objects, there are many photographs and pieces of text (Figure 2). Some of these texts have been transformed into audio and are read by actors. Some text is displayed as it typically is in museums, in a clear font on the wall, while other text appears on video, as if being typed or written in real time, resembling original documents.



Figure 1: To create an atmosphere of leaving, the exhibition began with security check trays containing objects that individuals had brought with them when moving to another country. Photo by the author.

In this article, I explore how minority heritage – and more specifically queer heritage – can be created in a museum using fragmented materials such as photographs, interviews, and artworks. I argue that in the reparative process of creating an exhibition of queer history, the active process of ‘patching up’ – treating and selecting the fragmented material – produces affective experiences that are an essential element in forming a more rounded history for queers.

This study forms part of the research project *Touching Collections: Museums as Emotional Arenas* at the University of Helsinki, in which we explore museums and heritage from the perspectives of affect and emotion.<sup>1</sup> Here, I discuss the possibilities of queer heritage through the lens of affectivity. I apply the concept of *affect* to denote sensations that are typically felt or known in the body, or that are attached to objects, but are often difficult to articulate or even notice (Sedgwick 2003; Ahmed 2010: 33; Watkins 2010: 278–9; Frykman and Povrzanović Frykman 2016: 10–11). I understand affect as something that precedes, or sometimes coexists with, conscious emotion, making affect and emotion related and often intertwined (see e.g., Watkins 2010; Frykman and Povrzanović Frykman 2016). Furthermore, affectivity fluctuates and is contextual, which means it can change over time and is dependent on the perceiver’s personal knowledge, history, and experiences (Wetherell et al. 2018: 1; Pohtinen 2024). Here, affect also functions as an active component in building and communicating heritage across different generations (Wetherell et al. 2018: 9). When this affectivity is used to make display materials *do* things, such as creating reparative narratives for exhibitions, this practice can be called *reparative curating* (Wetherell et al. 2018: 12).

I understand reparative curating as arising from discussions on the ethics of care. The ethics of care denote practices that go beyond the moral obligation to care, taking into account the emotional and affective dimensions of phenomena (e.g., Bounia 2024; Colomer and Schmitt 2024). When care is understood as an ethical practice within a museum context, it can manifest in collecting or exhibiting something that is undervalued or neglected (Bounia 2024). According to museologist Alexandra Bounia (2024), these are ethico-political choices and a form of activism. Through the ethics of care, reparative measures can be achieved.

In this study, I have opted for the use of 'queer' instead of, for example, LGBTQAI+ or other synonymous concepts. I apply queer as an umbrella term that encompasses not only the identities included in the LGBTQAI+ acronym(s) but also those who do not find themselves within it (Robenalt 2024: 14). Furthermore, queer inherently signifies resistance to normative ways of understanding and conceptualising gender and sexuality (Robenalt 2024). It is also a useful term when conceptualising the past from today's perspective. Even though the concept was not used by individuals in the past, it is understandable to contemporary readers (Taavetti 2021) and can encompass various identities and ways of being in the world.

### Queer Heritage

Queer history and queer heritage have been described as fleeting, ephemeral, and affective (e.g., Cvetkovich 2003; Halberstam 2003; Kumbier 2009; Iancu et al. 2024). These fragments constitute what Halberstam (2003) refers to as a jigsaw puzzle and may include items such as queer zines and posters, descriptions of shows, fleeting trends, and underground scenes. Queer heritage has also been recognized as intangible cultural heritage (Iancu et al. 2024), although it encompasses tangible aspects as well.

Understanding queer in relation to cultural heritage is often imbued with ambivalent and even contradictory sentiments. The challenge of labelling something as queer heritage lies in the tendency of the concept of heritage to cement and institutionalize phenomena (Mäkelä and Valo 2025: 30). On the one hand, there is a need to recognize queer identities, everyday lives, and pasts in archives and museums; yet, on the other hand, this can be seen as the very normalization and assimilation of queer identities that it is, by definition, opposed to (Edenheim 2013; Axelsson and Åkerö 2016: 4–5, 16; Ferentinos 2019: 27). Furthermore, there is a concern that if a queer archive were to exist with clearly labelled queer objects and artefacts, it might be used against queer individuals. This could occur either by 'affirming and reproducing normative attitudes and social categories' (Steorn 2012: 363), thus representing queer as a singular experience (Ferentinos 2019: 22), or by portraying queer as stable and unchanging, even though it is, in fact, in constant flux (Juvonen 2019: 12).

While there may be a general lack of objects relating to exhibitions focusing on recent history, there seems to be a particular lack of artefacts relating to queer history.<sup>2</sup> First, there is no singular 'queer culture' producing its own artefacts and other cultural products. What can be preserved as queer cultural history does not necessarily consist of objects that are clearly identifiable as queer; instead, it often comprises collections of affective ephemera. Second, queer pasts and lives have been actively erased from history – and continue to be – with what remains often discovered by chance (Paqvalén 2020), or the information is fragmented and filtered through authoritative language, as seen in criminal or medical records (Taavetti 2021). Third, many queer lives were lost during the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the Global North, resulting in a lack of elders within the communities. Many stories and much knowledge were lost along with those elders. Thus, preserving or displaying anything as fragmented and fleeting as queer heritage presents its own unique challenges.

What remains today is 'a queer desire for history' (Dinshaw et al. 2007: 178). Cultural heritage does not merely pertain to history that needs to be conserved but can also be understood as something actively created in everyday life, through everyday expressions, practices, and storytelling (Hafstein 2018: 4–6). In the next section I introduce a museum exhibition as a case study to analyze how affective strategies can be applied to produce an exhibition centred on the cultural heritage of a marginalized group, and how this might be reparative.



Figure 2: The exhibition consisted mainly of photographs and text. The wall colours and materials were carefully chosen to suit the narrative of the exhibition. Photo by the author.

### Research Materials and Context

My case study is an exhibition that took place at the Helsinki City Museum in Finland from 15 November 2024 to 2 March 2025, titled *M/S Baltic Queers – Experiences of LGBTQAI+ Migration*. The exhibition featured stories of individuals who had migrated to and from various countries around the Baltic Sea region. The reasons for migration included discrimination, but also better job opportunities or finding love in another country.

The Helsinki City Museum is known for hosting exhibitions that address minorities and lesser-known phenomena. Previous exhibition topics have included sex work, being black in Finland, and the history of gyms. These exhibitions are held on the fourth floor, while the other floors house permanent exhibitions about Helsinki. The concept behind the fourth-floor exhibitions is based on a strategy employed by the Museum to provide space for diversity, regionality, and expertise (Helsinki City Museum 2021). The Museum also invites external curators, enabling a broader range of topics than the in-house team's expertise would otherwise permit.<sup>3</sup> This specialized knowledge can be understood as cultural capital that external curators bring to the Museum, enhancing its value in the process (Hilden and Zavadski 2022).

In practice, anyone can pitch an idea for an exhibition at the Museum, and if the proposal is approved for production, they can work as a curator alongside the museum staff. External curators are hired by the Museum and receive compensation for their work. The way in which the Helsinki City Museum collaborates with external curators can be understood as co-curation. This can take various forms (Hakamies et al. 2025), and the Museum appears to be flexible regarding the roles of these curators. Their responsibilities may differ from one exhibition to another, ranging from providing advisory assistance to being fully involved in exhibition creation.<sup>4</sup>

The *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition was particularly curator-driven. The external curators collected material (interviews, photographs, and objects) for the exhibition with the help of their background research team and actively participated at every stage of the exhibition-

creation process. The changing role of external curators from one exhibition to another became evident during planning meetings, where it was noted that the museum staff were needed less in the planning of this particular exhibition compared to previous ones because the curators were so self-sufficient.<sup>5</sup>

My role as an ethnologist was to observe the meetings of the exhibition planning team. I joined these meetings at a point when planning had already been underway for over a year. I observed the exhibition planning process from April 2024 until the opening in November of the same year. The planning team consisted of two external curators from outside of the Museum, along with a graphic designer, and a spatial and lighting designer specifically hired for this project. The remainder of the team included museum staff, such as the producer. Typically, around five to eight people were present at the meetings, depending on the topic of discussion and the expertise required. I participated in a total of seven meetings, some of which were held remotely while others were face-to-face. During these meetings, I took observation notes, focusing on affective moments related to the planning process.

In addition to ethnographic observation, I interviewed the producer and one of the two external curators of the exhibition. The exhibition's producer, researcher Eero Salmio, has been involved in the creation of several exhibitions at the Helsinki City Museum. The exhibition featured two external curators: journalist and non-fiction author Antti Järvi, and artist Kalle Hamm. I interviewed Antti Järvi, who had no prior experience of working at or with a museum.

I also reached out to Niklas Koskinen, who had been involved in the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition planning team before I joined the meetings as an observer. He suggested that I also interview Aikku Meura from the Media Museum and Archive Merkki, and Kaura Raudaskoski from the Architecture and Design Museum. Although they were not directly involved with the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition, they had all contributed to creating queer content for various museums in Helsinki, for example by developing guided tours and producing events. I organized a group interview with the three of them to further expand my understanding of queer heritage and queer's relation to memory organizations.

All my interviewees agreed that I could use their real names in my research, as they were interviewed in their professional capacities. Moreover, they might still have been easily recognizable even with pseudonymization, and it seemed fair to give these experts the credit they deserve for providing thoughtful insights into my research topic. I will refer to them here by their first names, as this suits the atmosphere of the discussions. The atmosphere at the planning meetings and in the interviews was relaxed and easy-going, making it feel too formal and distancing to use their surnames.

Next, I discuss the curatorial intent behind the exhibition. I do this by analyzing my interview and observation material in relation to the exhibition. I then proceed to discuss the exhibition itself, using it as my research material.



*Figure 3: Interior of a living room where visitors were encouraged to sit down, watch a video about a person's story, and leaf through a comic book by artist Edith Hammar about commuting between Helsinki and Stockholm by ferry across the Baltic Sea. Photo by the author.*

## Affected by Narratives

### Stories of Objects

The role of objects in museums has diminished in significance since the 1990s, as museums have undergone the narrative and affective turns (Conn 2010: 20; Chassagnol and Marie 2025). Instead of vast collections of objects, greater importance has been placed on offering an experience by engaging the senses and the imagination of visitors (Chassagnol and Marie 2025). While the planning team did not explicitly state that the outcome would be an 'affective exhibition', the motives can nevertheless be interpreted as such. For instance, Eero illustrated the importance of narratives that generate affect in relation to exhibits:

Because the most boring things [in a museum exhibition] are objects that you don't understand, that you can't grasp... After all, they should evoke an emotional response in you. And if there's something you don't understand – why it's here – it easily weakens the atmosphere of the exhibition. (...) And that's why I think that the fewer objects there are, and the better they are, the stronger their impact.<sup>6</sup>

Eero's 'less is more' outlook on exhibition creation emphasizes the significance of emotional reactions evoked by objects. Here, it becomes clear that personal stories are essential for engendering the emotions and affective responses to these objects (Miklošević and Babić 2018: 83). The weight of the stories increases when there are fewer objects on display (Conn 2010: 20). Affect is not a pre-existing given attached to objects, but rather comes into being when the stories attached to those objects are brought to life through visitors' experiences (cf. Wetherell 2012: 142).

The material available for the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition was fragmented. From attending the exhibition planning meetings and listening to Antti, it became clear that there was a wealth of interview material, but a scarcity of objects. Antti described the material and the process of collecting it:

Listening to people's stories and experiences, [I've noticed that] some people have had great home archives, so that's been really interesting, of course, to come across something like that – that someone has kept so many things. (...) Well, for example, there have been some things that are not always interesting in the museal sense, but things like organizational documents, old badges from an activist era, bar loyalty cards from the 70s, or old ship brochures or tickets. That kind of stuff representing the 60s, 70s, and 80s. And then, yes, letters that tell of a completely different time. For example, letters to personal ads – people who've replied, exchanged letters, and that sort of thing.<sup>7</sup>

Antti described what queer heritage essentially is: a collection of objects that may appear random and mundane. Queer objects can be everyday items that have been appropriated by the broader queer community, such as the bandana scarf used for gay cruising.<sup>8</sup> Through this appropriation, the objects become imbued with queer affect (Steorn 2010).

At the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition, however, objects gained queer affect through their association with queer individuals or their role in queer lives. Affect is thus context-based, and its meaning is not necessarily shared by everyone. As a result, these objects may hold little value to outsiders, yet they can be rich with affect within queer contexts (Pohtinen 2024). To communicate this queer affect to outsiders, the stories of the objects need to be told. In a museum exhibition, this typically involves providing textual explanations about the objects and their historical and cultural contexts.

Antti also pondered whether these paraphernalia were interesting in the 'museal sense'. Eero touched upon the question of objects' museal value as well:

I suppose the way people understand it is that the museum wants something really beautiful or fancy or old, or something really meaningful. (...) It can be just an everyday object, even a whisk, as long as we get the story that goes with it, which then fits our concept or what we want to say with the exhibition.<sup>9</sup>

For both Antti and Eero, the object becomes interesting through the story it can convey. The meaning-making of a museum collection typically aims at grand narratives or at explaining individual objects, whereas an exhibition creates a more comprehensive depiction of a single phenomenon (Chourmouziadi 2025). In this regard, the producers of the exhibition play an active role in contextualizing the exhibits. At an exhibition, an important role is played by the narrative, which is created through the stories that place the objects in context (Chourmouziadi 2025). The 'museal value' of objects may therefore depend on their narrative potential.

Through these fragmented objects that are attached to individuals' stories, it is possible to produce a narrative 'plot' that conveys affect (Chourmouziadi 2025). As Eero pointed out: '[t]he visitor gets the idea that this person's life – or even their own – consists of these kinds of memories and fragments'.<sup>10</sup> Here, Eero addresses the challenge of depicting only small fragments in the exhibition by viewing everyone's life as composed of fragments, essentially creating a narrative that 'de-sensationalizes' queer lives (Iervolino 2023: 134) while also making the exhibition relatable to non-queers. The main values that visitors derive from a museum exhibition may include getting 'closer to the emotions of others' and reflecting on their own experiences (Miklošević and Babić 2018: 80). Offering relatability in the context of an exhibition creates a narrative that can engender affect in visitors.

### ***The Affective Work of Doing Justice***

During the meetings and in Antti's interview, the issue of doing justice to the individuals who had donated material for the exhibition, as well as the necessity of leaving some material out, elicited strong responses. Both curators also expressed concern about only being able to display a small part of the collected material in the exhibition.<sup>11</sup> In my notes, I have written:

A discussion on how to make the selections. It is mentioned, for example, that the aim is to create just one exhibition, not a major book on the subject, and that there is no way to include everything. It is pointed out that a great deal of narrowing down needs to be done. The challenge of the exhibition is considered to be the sheer number of characters whose stories are being told. The atmosphere becomes somewhat dispirited. There is a sense of distress about having to edit out parts of the material. There seems to be a shared feeling that these selections are an unpleasant but unavoidable reality.<sup>12</sup>

The *M/S Baltic Queers* working group expressed concern about whether the depictions of people's stories would be accurate, given that only small snippets were included in the final exhibition and much had to be left out. Art historian and museum professional Patrick Steorn (2012) notes that 'the act of collecting can itself be considered a site of queer affect and desire'. Since queer knowledge is often affective – something that is known instinctively in the body – the curators may have felt pressure to make the right decisions. Museologist Serena Iervolino (2023: 123, 134) points out that spatial limitations always 'squeeze much out of exhibitions' and allow only a 'snapshot' of the phenomenon, which presents a major challenge for curators. This is particularly pertinent when exhibiting extremely heterogeneous minorities (Iervolino 2023: 134).

The issue of representative objects was also discussed in my interview with Aikku, Kaura, and Niklas. Aikku raised the question of what constitutes a queer object, saying: 'I've been dreaming of such an exhibition about cisgender or heterosexuality. I'd be fascinated to see which are their central artefacts or customs'.<sup>13</sup> Although said jokingly and accompanied by laughter from everyone, by switching the perspective, Aikku highlighted the difficulty of depicting such a heterogeneous group as queers in an exhibition. At the same time, they emphasized the non-existence of a singular queer experience.

Although certain objects relate to a shared queer past, such as the AIDS pandemic,<sup>14</sup> depicting queer identity through these narratives can present it as a singular experience, despite the existence of other stories related to the queer experience (Ferentinos 2019: 22). Consequently, when constructing narratives around objects, museums must be mindful of not 'monumentalizing gay identity or treating it as a universal given' (Mills 2006: 260; cf. Iervolino 2023). White gay cis men often claim and are given space in depictions of queer histories,

but other stories and experiences are also needed (Steorn 2010: 128; Romesburg 2014: 135; Ferentinos 2019: 22; Iervolino 2023). The *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition primarily depicted the stories of white, cisgender gay men, yet it also included narratives from other letters of the LGBT community. Moreover, the exhibition avoided monumentalizing the queer migration experience by presenting it in a fragmented and mundane manner.

The fragments of material that were chosen for inclusion in the exhibition formed a narrative that had been actively created by the curators and their team. By grouping the material in a certain manner, they created a specific narrative: something is always chosen, and something is left out (Miklošević and Babić 2018). Despite concerns about not doing justice by showing only a fragment, the way different elements were arranged in relation to one another created a particular story, mood, and curated atmosphere.

According to museologist Marzia Varutti (2023: 72), the mood of an exhibition might be more powerful than the “whole” or “true” story’ in terms of engaging visitors and facilitating personal growth and healing. Thus, it may be more important to repair and patch up by conveying affective experiences than to aim for recounting the ‘true’ story, which can sometimes be impossible to obtain (Varutti 2023: 72; see also Mills 2006; Juliff 2018). Furthermore, the affective history might be authentic and true to the experiences of the people the exhibition represents. The curators’ concern about not doing justice may have stemmed from their awareness of the affective nature of this history, coupled with the realization that it lacked factual evidence supporting it. This relates to the differences in knowledge production based on lived human experience versus knowledge based on facts (Witcomb 2013).

As Niklas stated: ‘[m]useums have the capability to deal with these subjects in complex ways (...) Museums can do that.’<sup>15</sup> Cultural heritage scholar and museologist Andrea Witcomb (2013: 268) also remarks that, instead of presenting lists of linear facts, museums are able to ‘conjure the past’ through sensorial memories that objects arouse in visitors. This emphasis on conveying affective experiences rather than strictly historical facts can also be understood as a characteristic of the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition and as part of the reparative curatorial practice. The narrative plot of the exhibition was not historically linear, but rather constructed from individuals’ affective experiences related to the topic of queer migration over a span of 60 years.

### **The Need for Heritage**

The topic of truthfulness also arose in my discussion with Aikku, Kaura, and Niklas. They reflected on how, when history is desperately needed, it may be constructed even without actual proof of its existence:

Kaura: ... the need for those straightforward narratives is strong. That is not always available in the LGBTQAI+ history.

(...)

Niklas: I was just thinking something like... for example, with trans history there might be the risk of looking for individuals from the past who are trans[gender] in the same way people are trans today. The need is somehow... If we prioritize the need, we might end up cutting corners a bit.<sup>16</sup>

They referred to, for instance, presenting a historical figure as gay or lesbian even if that person never referred to themselves in those terms. Niklas noted the *need* to seek specific forms of historical representation that align with our contemporary assumptions about trans identities. However, he also emphasized the importance of discussing these matters in a way that is understandable today, while calling for subtlety when doing so.<sup>17</sup>

Aikku also expressed this need, stating: ‘[t]here’s that longing. To know what it was like in the past – your own history and the history of your own communities.’<sup>18</sup> Aikku framed the need for history as *longing*. According to queer theory scholar Carolyn Dinshaw (et al., 2007: 178), there exists ‘a queer desire for history’. This desire, need, or longing can be understood as a yearning for a different kind of past where a sense of community would transcend through time (Dinshaw et al. 2007: 178, 185). Having a history therefore fosters

a sense of belonging and identification with a community that has existed and continues to exist in various forms. This sense of belonging is not constrained by physical place or linear time and can be understood as something acquired through affective means.

In queer history, there are many aspects that have not been actively discussed. Antti explains the motives behind the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition:

I think that what has driven us from the beginning is that, when it comes to the stories of the LGBT community, there has been more collecting of memories in recent years. In general, there has been an awakening to collect material and objects in this millennium, but it's still, by comparison, quite a new development in Finland as well. I believe that collecting material and making experiences visible has value in itself, especially since so many decades have passed and things have been quieter, with not much collected. However, I think we're trying to patch up some parts of LGBT history that haven't been mapped or collected yet, even if that sounds a bit lofty to say so.<sup>19</sup>

Antti humbly notes that it is 'a bit lofty' or too grand to say that they were patching up queer cultural history that had not yet been mapped. However, this was precisely what the exhibition did for queer history and queer heritage. Antti is, essentially, describing the process of reparative curating: exhibiting these fragments of queer culture is valuable in itself, since their fragmented nature stems from the systemic oppression and erasure of queer people. Creating an exhibition is therefore an active form of patching up and repairing that fragmented past, creating a more fully rounded history for queers. By depicting individuals' stories, *M/S Baltic Queers* constructed a *phenomenon* of queer migration in the Baltic region that had not previously been mapped.

### **The *M/S Baltic Queers* Scrapbook**

#### ***The Whisk and the Whistle***

The exhibition primarily consisted of photographs and text. Some objects were displayed either as loans or as props specifically acquired for the exhibition. The photographs came from people's home albums or were taken by the research team during their fieldwork. The stories behind or related to these photographs and objects were presented in text next to them (Figure 2). In addition, letters were available in both audio and written form, along with posters, travel documents, magazine covers, and artworks – essentially, fragments of past lives. To present these fragmented queer pasts, historian and literature scholar Robert Mills (2006: 262) suggests that museums should exhibit queer in the style of scrapbooks and collage.

During the planning of the exhibition, the team expressed a desire to exhibit some everyday objects they had encountered in the homes of the individuals they had interviewed. Eero, for example, mentioned specific objects such as a Finnish-style whisk that a person leaving Finland had taken along and used ever since while living abroad, and a whistle that another individual had used in queer rights demonstrations.<sup>20</sup> Through these familiar objects, a museum visitor might be prompted to reflect on the mundane paraphernalia they use in their own everyday life, or recall a bodily memory associated with them. While these mundane objects are likely relatable to the museum visitor, they also crystallize aspects of the queer individuals' personal life stories and communicate queer pasts. In addition to their relatability, the stories associated with these objects – the whisk as a memento from the home country and the whistle as a tool for campaigning for human rights – transform these otherwise cold objects into meaningful and affective artefacts. The exhibition can be interpreted as reparative through the affective stories attached to these objects, as well as by making them relatable and corporeal.

In the end, however, neither the whisk nor the whistle was featured in the final exhibition, as the owners did not want to part with them, even on a short-term loan basis.<sup>21</sup> As gender studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich (2003: 249) points out, it can be difficult to obtain objects for exhibitions or archives because owners may be reluctant to contribute them due to their sentimental value. In exhibitions concerning migration, very few objects are typically present,

often because migration may occur under harsh conditions or in haste, meaning that people may be unable to bring objects with them (Mason et al. 2018). Moreover, the objects they manage to bring become 'precious keepsakes' that they do not wish to part with (Mason et al. 2018: 139). While the individuals featured in the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition may not have migrated in haste, some had left their home countries in humble circumstances or had otherwise considered carefully what to bring on their journey. This scarcity of objects may imbue them with even greater sentimental value. Through the often sentimental fragments and snippets that the team was able to acquire for the exhibition, *M/S Baltic Queers* presented an affective scrapbook of queer heritage.



Figure 4: Interior of a café where visitors were encouraged to sit down, leaf through pamphlets, and watch videos of migration stories. Photo by the author.

### **Sensory Engagement**

As noted at the beginning of this article, in addition to objects, the exhibition included mise-en-scènes that resembled milieus likely familiar to visitors. These included the interior of a café at a metro station and a living room, where visitors were encouraged to sit down and engage with the exhibition (see Figures 3 and 4). In the 'café', visitors could read leaflets and watch small screens depicting stories of different individuals related to cruising, for instance (i.e., looking for company). In the 'living room', visitors could leaf through a book by artist Edith Hammar and watch a programme on a television placed in front of a sofa, in which a person shared their migration story. Visitors were thus invited to engage with the exhibition and the queer past it depicted. These mise-en-scènes demonstrate how day-to-day life intersects with tragic events such as homophobia, and how seemingly ordinary locations can acquire different meanings, such as a café becoming a cruising spot. They also illustrate how a queer person leads a regular life within their own home, much like anyone else.

Literature scholar Robert Kusek (Iancu et al. 2024: 12) points out that queer heritage not only aims to *remember* and *reconstruct* the past, but also actively and creatively *engages* with it. In addition to the mise-en-scènes that invited engagement from museum visitors, this engagement can also be seen in the creation of queer pasts through the medium of creative arts (Iancu et al. 2024: 14). The *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition incorporated art, some of which

was created specifically for the exhibition (as shown in Figure 5), while other pieces were on loan from individuals interviewed for the exhibition. When there is a lack of objects or other material related to a certain topic, art can provide a means of creating a more well-rounded interpretation of the phenomenon and foster engagement through empathy towards identities that have been 'othered' (Ferentinos 2019: 31). Creative approaches can be particularly effective in eliciting affective and empathetic responses because they bring emotions and affects to the foreground, making them visible (Mason et al. 2018: 127). Art is inherently affective rather than factual – although one does not exclude the other. By incorporating artworks into a cultural-historical exhibition, it is possible to communicate with the past and evoke affective responses in visitors. Moreover, affectivity can enhance understanding (Varutti 2023: 67). Furthermore, fragmented queer heritage is patched together and gaps are filled while remaining clear about the interpretative nature of the artworks.

At the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition, visitors were offered multisensory modes of experience (Varutti 2023). In addition to visual elements, aural components were also incorporated, such as the sound installation *Looking for Love*, composed by producer Minna Koivisto and saxophonist Linda Fredriksson, which formed the soundscape of the final exhibit space.<sup>22</sup> Sound, similar to the other artworks mentioned above, can be understood as a form of affective communication that is essential in creating atmospheres (Varutti 2023). Alongside visual and aural elements, the exhibition also included tactile objects, such as leaflets, books, the sofa in the living room, and tables and chairs in the café setting (Figures 3 and 4). Essentially, visitors could 'hang out' in the exhibition space. According to Varutti (2023), touch as a sensory and bodily experience can serve as an invitation to emotional engagement. She further notes that emotion and feeling are the 'doorway to meaning' (Varutti 2023: 67). These sensory experiences can be affective, engendering emotions and feelings that lead to understanding – perhaps through empathy, identification, or learning.

Affectivity, however, cannot be fully controlled, and visitors' own knowledge, history, and emotional states also influence their experience (Varutti 2023; Pohtinen 2024). It is possible that a visitor may not have an emotional experience at the exhibition, or that their affective state may feel flat (Wetherell et al. 2018). In such cases, what the exhibition can provide is information. Even so, the end result can still be reparative, as it contributes to the visitor's existing knowledge. All the fragments brought together in the exhibition space are understood as part of a continuum, as part of the *collage*, and therefore possess reparative possibilities. The fragmented nature of the exhibition evokes affective experiences: the silences between the fragments are patched up in a collage-like manner, which is pivotal in the process of queer heritage.



Figure 5: An artwork created by Kalle Hamm, one of the curators. Visitors were encouraged to read the stories on the white cards, but were not permitted to touch the artwork. Photo by the author.

## Conclusions

Heritage is desperately needed among minorities that have previously been oppressed or whose oppression continues to this day. Discovering cultural history or heritage with which one can identify can be an affective experience, fostering continuity and hope (Bailey and Popple 2011). In this vein, a queer museum exhibition can serve as a reparative experience for queer individuals by providing much-needed recognition to those whose lives have been actively erased by such institutions. This sentiment was echoed during the interview with Aikku, Kaura, and Niklas, who discussed how museum experiences might heal old wounds by presenting things in a different way. As Kaura put it: '[q]ueering is not a metaphor'.<sup>23</sup> In the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition, queer individuals did not need to 'read between the lines' or draw their own conclusions about the exhibition texts (Middleton 2020) because the exhibition clearly communicated what it represented and aimed to convey.

It is this clarity of queer representation that made the exhibition reparative. Furthermore, bringing past events and affects into the present can serve – especially for oppressed people – as a means of redeeming 'past hope' by reclaiming and creating their own history, which may have been used against them (Bailey and Popple 2011: 20, 31). It is crucial, however, that this is undertaken by the individuals affected by that oppression (Juliff 2018: 97–8; Iervolino 2023). It must also be remembered that this, or any other, exhibition would not be reparative if queer people were not subject to systemic oppression; reparative measures would simply not be necessary in the absence of such oppression and erasure.

Creating queer heritage through affective means could be the answer to the need for queer history. Perhaps queer heritage is not meant to be monumentalized or institutionalized, but rather engaged with through creative and affective means. Instead of monumentalizing the queer experience, the *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition successfully communicated a broader phenomenon in queer history by depicting fragments of everyday life. The exhibition's contribution lies in its recognition of a phenomenon of Baltic queer migration that has not been previously discussed.

I have introduced the concept of reparative curating, which not only denotes the reparative nature of the exhibition, but also underlines how the act of patching up is reparative and affective in itself. Although a cohesive narrative plot can be found in the exhibition, it consisted of fragments, which may have resulted in a fragmented experience for visitors. However, this speaks volumes about the nature of queer heritage and what makes it affective. Engaging with fragmented materials is affective in itself, and this experience of fragmentarity and scarcity of objects is an integral part of queer heritage. The affectivity of queer heritage is tied to its fragmented nature: the scarcity, gaps, and silences all contribute to this affectivity. Incorporating these fragments and embracing the affectivity that comes with them may well be the essence of queer heritage.

## Notes

- 1 This research project is funded by the Kone Foundation.
- 2 Eero Salmio, interview by the author, digital recording, 19 September 2024, Helsinki.
- 3 Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- 4 Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- 5 *M/S Baltic Queers* exhibition planning meeting, observation notes by the author, 9 April 2024, Helsinki.
- 6 Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- 7 Antti Järvi, interview by the author, digital recording, 10 June 2024, Helsinki.
- 8 Different coloured handkerchiefs were worn by gay men at times when it was illegal or otherwise impossible to be publicly gay. Typically carried in the back pocket of jeans, the

colours signified different sex acts that they were 'cruising' or looking for. Cruising typically took place in public spaces such as parks and, to some extent, still continues today.

- <sup>9</sup> Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- <sup>10</sup> Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- <sup>11</sup> Antti Järvi, interview, 10 June 2024; observation notes, 5 September 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> Observation notes, 11 April 2024.
- <sup>13</sup> Aikku Meura, group interview by the author, digital recording, 12 December 2024, Helsinki.
- <sup>14</sup> Kaura Raudaskoski, group interview by the author, digital recording, 12 December 2024, Helsinki.
- <sup>15</sup> Niklas Koskinen, group interview by the author, digital recording, 12 December 2024, Helsinki.
- <sup>16</sup> Kaura Raudaskoski and Niklas Koskinen, group interview, 12 December 2024, Helsinki.
- <sup>17</sup> Niklas Koskinen, group interview, 12 December 2024.
- <sup>18</sup> Aikku Meura, group interview, 12 December 2024.
- <sup>19</sup> Antti Järvi, interview, 10 June 2024.
- <sup>20</sup> Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- <sup>21</sup> Eero Salmio, interview, 19 September 2024.
- <sup>22</sup> Helsinki City Museum, 'M/S Baltic Queers – Experiences of LGBTQAI+ Migration', Helsinki City Museum 2024. <https://www.helsinginkaupunginmuseum.fi/en/exhibitions/m-s-baltic-queers-experiences-of-lgbtqai-migration/>, accessed 16 September 2025.
- <sup>23</sup> Kaura Raudaskoski, group interview, 12 December 2024.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2010) 'Happy Objects', in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds) *The Affect Theory Reader*, 29–51, Durham: Duke University.
- Axelsson, B. and Åkerö, K.-E. (2016) 'LHBTQI-perspektiv och kulturarv. Aspekter på urval, överväganden och tillrättalägganden', *Nordisk Museologi*, 2, 3–19.
- Bailey, M. and Popple, S. (2011) 'The 1984/85 Miners' Strike: Re-Claiming Cultural Heritage', in Laurajane Smith, Paul Shackel, and Gary Campbell (eds) *Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes*, 19–33, London: Routledge.
- Bounia, A. (2024) 'Collecting (Forced) Migration: The Ethics of Collecting "Neglected Things"', in Alexandra Bounia and Andrea Witcomb (eds) *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma*, 198–217, London: Routledge.
- Chassagnol, A. and Marie, C. (2025) 'Introduction. "Museums as Storytellers: Reinventing the Art of Showing and Telling"', *Miranda. Revue Pluridisciplinaire Du Monde Anglophone / Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed Journal on the English-Speaking World*, 31 <https://doi.org/10.4000/140zq>.

- Chourmouziadi, A. (2026) 'Museums and Narrative. From 'Grand Narratives' and Objects Biographies to Exhibition Storytelling', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 41 (1) 127-142.
- Colomer, L. and Schmitt, E. (2024) 'Mapping Memorialisation of Pandemic Experiences: Care, Stewardship and Guardianship', in Alexandra Bounia and Andrea Witcomb (eds) *The Ethics of Collecting Trauma*, 61–79, London: Routledge.
- Conn, S. (2010) *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2003) *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dinshaw, C., Edelman L., Ferguson R. A., Freccero C., Freeman E., Halberstam J., Jagose A., Nealon C., and Hoang Nguyen T. (2007) 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13 (2–3) 177–195.
- Edenheim, S. (2013) 'Lost and Never Found: The Queer Archive of Feelings and Its Historical Propriety', *differences*, 24 (3), 36–62.
- Ferentinos, S. (2019) 'Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts', *The Public Historian*, 41 (2) 19–43.
- Frykman, J. and Povrzanović Frykman, M. (2016) 'Affect and Material Culture. Perspectives and Strategies', in Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman (eds) *Sensitive Objects: Affect and Material Culture*, 9–28, Lund: Kriterium.
- Hafstein, V.Tr. (2018) *Making Intangible Heritage: El Condor Pasa and Other Stories from UNESCO*, Indiana University Press.
- Hakamies, I., Pohtinen J., Olsson O., and Rauhala A. (2024) 'Tunteet, jännitteet ja valta museoiden yhteiskuratointihankkeissa', *Suomen museo – Finskt Museum*, 131 133-147.
- Halberstam, J. (2003) 'What's that Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 (3) 313–333.
- Helsinki City Museum. (2021) *Konseptipäivitys ja visio 2027 [Concept Update and Vision 2027]*. Helsinki: Helsinki City Museum. [https://www.hel.fi/static/kanslia/viestinta/design/HKM\\_konseptiuudistus\\_2021-esitys.pdf](https://www.hel.fi/static/kanslia/viestinta/design/HKM_konseptiuudistus_2021-esitys.pdf).
- Hilden, I. and Zavadski, A. (2024) 'Museum Participation as Labor', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 67 (3) 583–602.
- Iancu, V., Kurimay A., Kusek R., Oram A., Radziszewski K., and Szymański W. (2022) 'Queer Heritage: Central Europe and Beyond. A Roundtable Discussion', *Ikonotheke* 32 7–25.
- Iervolino, S. (2023) 'Co-curating with Trans People: The Challenges of Collaborating with Heterogenous Minoritised Communities', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 38 (2) 117–140.
- Juliff, T. (2018) 'The Battle of Orgreave (1984)', in Laurajane Smith, Margaret Wetherell, Gary Campbell (eds) *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present*, 85–101, Oxon: Routledge.
- Juvonen, T. (2019) 'Nimeämisen mahti: Sukupuolta ja seksuaalisuutta kuvaavien termien

- suhteisuudesta', *SQS Journal*, 13 (1–2) 1–22.
- Kumbier, A. (2009) *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive*, Sacramento: Litwin Books.
- Mäkelä, H.H. and Valo, O. (2025) 'Aineettoman kulttuuriperinnön käsite, käytäntö, politiikka ja tutkimus Suomessa', in Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä and Outi Valo (eds) *Aineeton kulttuuriperintö. Käsite, käytäntö, politiikka*, 15–56, Helsinki: The Finnish Literature Society.
- Mason, R., Galani, A., Lloyd, K., and Sayner, J. (2018) 'Experiencing Mixed Emotions in the Museum: Empathy, Affect, and Memory in Visitors' Responses to Histories of Migration', in Laurajane Smith, Margaret Wetherell, Gary Campbell (eds) *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present*, 124–148, Oxon: Routledge.
- Middleton, M. (2020) 'Queer Possibility', *Journal of Museum Education*, 45 (4) 426–436.
- Miklošević, Ž. and Babić, D. (2018) 'Constructing Heritage through Subjectivity: Museum of Broken Relationships', in Laurajane Smith, Margaret Wetherell, Gary Campbell (eds), *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present*, 70–84, Oxon: Routledge.
- Mills, R. (2006) 'Queer Is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 253–263.
- Paqvalén, R. (2020) 'Beyond Tom and Tove: Queering Finnish Museums from an Intersectional Perspective', *SQS Journal*, 14 (1–2) 62–77.
- Pohtinen, J. (2024) 'Constructing Affective Atmospheres at Home: Materiality and Meaningful Objects of Kink', in Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro, Viktorija L. A. Čeginskas, Anna Kajander, Helmut de Nardi (eds) *Reconstructing Homes: Affective Materiality and Atmospheres of Belonging*, 137–159, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Robenalt, E. (2024) *The Queer Museum: Radical Inclusion and Western Museology*, Oxon: Routledge.
- Romesburg, D. (2014) 'Presenting the Queer Past: A Case for the GLBT History Museum', *Radical History Review*, 2014 (120) 131–144.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Steorn, P. (2010) 'Queer in the Museum: Methodological Reflections on Doing Queer in Museum Collections', *lambda nordica*, 15 (3–4) 119–122.
- Steorn, P. (2012) 'Curating Queer Heritage: Queer Knowledge and Museum Practice', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 55 (3) 355–365.
- Taavetti, R. (2021) "'Jotta meidät muistettaisiin sellaisina kuin elimme": Queerit äänet ja muistitietoarkistojen hiljaisuudet', *SQS Journal*, 15 (1–2) 37–53.
- Varutti, M. (2023) 'The Affective Turn in Museums and the Rise of Affective Curatorship', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 38 (1) 61–75.
- Watkins, M. (2010) 'Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect', in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds) *The Affect Theory Reader*, 267–285, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wetherell, M. (2012) *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, London:

Sage.

- Wetherell, M., Smith, L., and Campbell G. (2018) 'Introduction: Affective Heritage Practices', in Laurajane Smith, Margaret Wetherell, Gary Campbell (eds) *Emotion, Affective Practices, and the Past in the Present*, 1–21, Oxon: Routledge.
- Witcomb, A. (2013) 'Understanding the Role of Affect in Producing a Critical Pedagogy for History Museums', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 28 (3) 255–271.

**\*Johanna Pohtinen**, PhD, did post doc research in the project "Touching Collections: Museums as Emotional Arenas" at the University of Helsinki while conducting research on this article. Pohtinen is interested in the affectivity of museum experiences and collections, the relationship of museum audiences to collections, and queer heritage. In their previous research, Pohtinen has explored the kink community from the perspectives of everyday life, identity, and affect. In the future they hope to intertwine their research interests in heritage, kink, queer, and affect even further.