

# Somewhere over the Rainbow: Investigating Festival Decorations in the LGBT50 Celebration of Hull, UK City of Culture 2017

**Barbara Grabher**

University of Graz, Austria

## KEYWORDS

material culture  
carnavalesque  
critical event studies  
LGBT+ Pride  
artistic interventions

## ABSTRACT

Festival decorations are crucial indicators of the carnivalesque atmosphere of events as they capture celebratory experiences in tangible forms. Due to the strong presence of rainbow colors, LGBT+ Pride events provide fertile grounds for the discussion of decorative materials. While the acclaimed symbol of the rainbow is an expression of the LGBT+ community and their campaign for equality, the color combination is contested due to commercializing and appropriating forces. Next to altered color compositions highlighting particular identities and communities within the LGBT+ spectrum, explorations for alternative decorative patterns and visual expressions inform contemporary celebrations of equality during LGBT+ Pride events. In this article, I begin with a conceptual discussion of the carnivalesque notion, its inherent contradictions of subversion and discipline, and their expression in the form of decorative materials. Through an ethnographic study of the commemorative LGBT50 celebration in the context of Hull UK City of Culture 2017, I argue that alternative decorative approaches not only aesthetically influence the event but enable the reclaiming of the subversive atmospheres produced by the carnivalesque environment. Countering disciplining mechanisms of brand-like rainbow strategies, I outline how artistic practices negotiate innovative approaches to frame LGBT+ communities, identities, and celebrations.

Barbara Grabher

### Introduction

Developed in reference to François Rabelais's depiction of the medieval Roman carnival, Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque continues to guide scholars' interpretations of contemporary events.<sup>1</sup> While this classic text is employed in multiple ways to interrogate the meanings, values, and experiences of celebrations, analysis of the material culture of festivities through the concept of the carnivalesque remains limited. Despite Bakhtin's heavy focus on the body and on matter, his work has rarely been used to investigate the materialities of festivities. While material cultures and, particularly, decorations are a central demarcation of the festive character and carnivalesque atmosphere, they lack systematic attention from scholars.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I discuss the relevance of materialities, decorations, and related artworks in the context of celebrations through the lens of Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. Expanding upon another one of my publications, "Tinted Visions: Performing Equalities through Festive Decorations in LGBT-themed Events in Hull, UK City of Culture 2017,"<sup>3</sup> I interrogate the carnivalesque characteristics of subversion and discipline through material interpretations of celebrations. On the one hand, I am attentive to the restrictions of decorative expressions, as buntings, banners, and signs increasingly serve as branding tools linked to commodifying structures of the contemporary event landscape. On the other hand, I concentrate on the presence of artistic interventions in the decorative designs of events and argue that this creative interrogation enables the subversive potential that Bakhtin describes in his interpretation of carnivalesque celebrations.

As outlined in further detail in a later section, I understand decorations as crucial elements in celebrations, marking festive spaces through tangible, symbolic alterations.<sup>4</sup> I thus address decorations in general terms: rather than materially defining what decorations are, the overarching visuality of festivities determines my research attention. Therefore, while I consider the obvious buntings, banners, and signs, I also expand the category of decorative materials to include face paintings, costumes, and accessories as visual markers of celebrations.<sup>5</sup>

My analysis centers on the LGBT50 event series, which constituted one of the flagship events in the yearlong celebration of Hull as UK City of Culture in 2017. With the weeklong program of cultural activities collectively known as LGBT50, the city of Hull commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in England and Wales. Here, the celebration referred to the passing of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, which legalized intercourse between two male adults.<sup>6</sup> As a crucial legislative change and following a long-standing struggle toward equality, the date is an important reference for the national as well as international LGBT+ rights movement. Organizations such as Hull 2017 Ltd, the local charity Pride in Hull, and the queer arts collective Duckie were involved in the curation of the celebration and its diverse program, mixing large-scale concerts with intimate performances, exhibitions, and print productions.<sup>7</sup> On July 22, 2017, the first-ever UK Pride Parade and Party inaugurated

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Rebecca Finkel, "Beyond Bakhtin: Literally Legislating the 'Hell' out of the Carnavalesque," paper presented at the International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, Istanbul, August 20–24, 2008, <https://eresearch.qmu.ac.uk/handle/20.500.12289/1796>.

2. Barbara Grabher, "Tinted Visions: Performing Equalities through Festive Decorations in LGBT-themed Events in Hull, UK City of Culture 2017," in *Performing Cultures of Equality*, ed. Emilia Duran Almarza and Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

3. Grabher, "Tinted Visions."

4. Stephen Doyle, "Merchandising and Retail," in *Festival and Events Management: An International Arts and Culture Perspective*, ed. Ian Yeoman et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

5. Christian Derbaix, Alain Decrop, and Olivier Cabossart, "Colors and Scarves: The Symbolic Consumption of Material Possessions by Soccer Fans," *ACR North American Advances*, 29 (2002): 511–18.

Christian Derbaix and Alain Decrop, "Colours and Scarves: An Ethnographic Account of Football Fans and Their Paraphernalia," *Leisure Studies* 30, no. 3 (2011): 271–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2010.527356>.

6. "LGBT50," Hull 2017 Ltd, accessed April 30, 2018,

<https://www.hull2017.co.uk/whatson/events/lgbt-50/> (site discontinued).

7. Grabher, "Tinted Visions."
8. Barbara Grabher, "Gendering Cities of Culture," last modified December 12, 2019, <https://genderingcitiesofculture.wordpress.com>.
9. Barbara Grabher, "Observing through Participants: The Analytical and Practical Potential of Citizens' Involvement in Event Research," *Studies on Home and Community Science* 11, no. 2 (2018): 66–76.
10. Finkel, "Beyond Bakhtin."
11. Henya Pielichaty, "Festival Space: Gender, Liminality and the Carnavalesque," *Journal of Event and Festival Management* 6, no. 3 (2015): 239. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEFM-02-2015-0009>.
12. Linkages to Victor Turner's notion of liminality and communitas commonly inform and expand the original understanding of Bakhtin's discussion of carnival and its carnivalesque features.
13. Jack Santino, "The Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque," *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 491 (2011): 61–73, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.124.491.0061>.

the weeklong event series with an unprecedented number of parading participants, cheering supporters, and concert visitors. Following the unexpectedly successful kick-start to the week, smaller events by local organizations took place: the exhibition "House of Kings and Queens" by Lee Price took over the newly established Humber Street Gallery; local LGBT+ writers published and presented their community zine *Lost Property*; and the University of Hull held lectures related to LGBT+ politics and culture for students, staff, and members of the public. The commemorative event ended in a "Summer Tea Party" curated by the queer arts collective Duckie in the main square of the city. While tea and cakes were served to visitors and passersby, drag performers, marching bands, and community dancers provided entertainment and reflections upon LGBT+ histories, cultures, and politics. The outdoor performance was followed by the concert "I Feel Love" by BBC Radio 2 in the city hall, and the event series came to a close with an after-party in a locally renowned LGBT+ club.

The empirical data for further analysis was collected in the context of the research project "Gendering Cities of Culture" and includes the voices of producers, artists, and visitors to the event.<sup>8</sup> For the purpose of this study, I interviewed key professionals involved in the production of the celebration and collaborated with "observing participants," a group of residents of Hull who visited different events during the LGBT50 celebration as part of this research.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the data collection is informed by participative observations, as I joined in the community arts projects *50 Queers for 50 Years* and *Into the Light*. Additionally, I visited the majority of activities included in the event series as a member of the public.

This article combines conceptual and empirical discussions of the carnivalesque concept, the inherent dichotomy it involves between subversion and discipline, and its material interpretations. First, I focus on the concept of carnivalesque and highlight its subversive and disciplining potentials. Second, I illustrate this conceptual relationship through the presence of the rainbow as a decorative strategy of the event series. Based on my own observations and on those of participants, I argue for disciplining mechanisms of the rainbow pattern due to commercial and appropriating tendencies. Subsequently, however, I look "somewhere over the rainbow" and stress that artistic interventions in the event series invite voices from the margins to imagine alternative decorative designs. Through the analysis of two projects as part of LGBT50, I present the way in which artists and their creative practices negotiate the carnivalesque environment to reclaim the event's subversive potential amidst the disciplining characteristics of the celebratory atmosphere.

### **Carnavalesque, Material Culture, and Celebrations: Conceptual Relations**

Rebecca Finkel argues that there are two central, competing approaches to the social role of celebrations in the current canons of event studies.<sup>10</sup> Here, according to Henya Pielichaty, festivals are understood in a juxtaposition "between celebratory chaos and a social vehicle employed to maintain order and discipline."<sup>11</sup> In this dual understanding of celebrations, Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque serves as an important interpretative framework.<sup>12</sup> Attentive to both the subversive potential and the disciplinary mechanisms inherent in festivities, the carnivalesque concept provides a broad framework for understanding the relationships established in the context of festive celebrations.<sup>13</sup>

14. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.  
15. Ibid., 6.  
16. Ibid., 6.  
17. Ibid., 11.
18. Neil Ravenscroft and Xavier Matteucci, "The Festival as Carnavalesque: Social Governance and Control at Pamplona's San Fermin Fiesta," *Tourism Culture & Communication* 4, no. 1 (2008): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3727/109830403108750777>.
19. Chris Anderton, "Commercialising the Carnavalesque: The V Festival and Image/Risk Management," *Event Management* 12, no. 1 (2008): 41, <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599509787992616>.
20. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.  
21. Ibid., 9.
22. Santino, "The Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque."
23. Gerard Aching, "Carnival Time Versus Modern Social Life: A False Distinction," *Social Identities* 16, no. 4 (2010): 415–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2010.497699>; Carl Lindahl, "Bakhtin's Carnival Laughter and the Cajun Country Mardi Gras," *Folklore* 107 (1996): 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1996.9715915>; Alessandro Testa, "Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, 1 (2014): 44–73. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341260>.
24. Steven Kates, "Producing and Consuming Gendered Representations: An Interpretation of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras," *Consumption*,

Bakhtin notes that the power of celebrations lies in the subversion of norms. He describes the carnivalesque as a "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order, [which marks] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions."<sup>14</sup> With reference to laughter, humor, and the grotesque, Bakhtin sets carnival against "serious, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cultural forms and ceremonials."<sup>15</sup> Carnival "[builds] a second world and a second life outside officialdom,"<sup>16</sup> as it creates "a world inside out."<sup>17</sup> In their contemporary analysis of the San Fermin Fiesta in Spain, Neil Ravenscroft and Xavier Matteucci note that "the carnival effectively legitimate[s] a utopian reaction against the order of 'high' culture" and declare that carnivals are thus established as "sites of transgression, license and excess."<sup>18</sup> Chris Anderton adds that "the monological discourse of official culture [is] temporarily displaced by a dialogical profusion of alternatives.... It [is] a time of fluidity, instability, and subjectivity and [offers] potential for radical change."<sup>19</sup> This potential for subversion and transgression is enabled through temporarily established forms of governance. Bakhtin notes that "the utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this [carnavalesque] experience, unique of its kind"<sup>20</sup> and famously summarizes festivities as "the second life of the people, who for a time [enter] the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance."<sup>21</sup>

While the carnivalesque concept has received hyped and maybe even romanticized attention,<sup>22</sup> scholars and practitioners increasingly challenge the assumed subversive potential of celebrations.<sup>23</sup> In the contemporary festival landscape, the changing focus from "production towards consumption"<sup>24</sup> reproduces a shift from the subversive potential of celebrations to their disciplining mechanisms.<sup>25</sup> Steven Kates exemplifies these tendencies with reference to events such as "military parades or the Macy's Christmas parade" and notes that, rather than transgressing norms, these celebratory performances "reinforce and reflect the ideological dominant way of life."<sup>26</sup> While parades and performances seem to lend themselves to an analysis of subversive enactments, Pielichaty explains that the "controlled chaos"<sup>27</sup> only gives an impression of transgression: rather than sustained subversion of the status quo, the transgressive illusion serves as a controlled breaking point in strictly stratified societies. In accordance with this account, Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist explain:

Festivals continue to offer a liminality in which people can engage in "deviant" practices ... safe in the knowledge that they are not transgressing the wider social structure they encounter in everyday life and that is infused in the moral codes of the festivals themselves. [Therefore,] carnivalesque inversions of the everyday, can be, and are, deployed to maintain and reinforce social order and, thus, the discipline of bodies and behaviours.<sup>28</sup>

As a consequence, subversive and disciplining characteristics exist in entanglement throughout festivals, events, and celebrations. The latter are neither one nor the other but are rather continuously shaped by both characterizing factors. Kates elucidates:

The meanings of the festival evolve over time, sometimes politically charged and rebellious, sometimes commercialized and "corporate" but usually existing in a dialectic tension, reflecting the morass of social conditions and political agendas in which the festival itself is embedded.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, "carnavalesque" becomes a contested term that counters sensations of subversion and transgression with the disciplining features of the granted spaces of celebrations.<sup>30</sup> Rather

*Markets & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2003):

8.

25. Ravenscroft and Matteucci, "The Festival as Carnavalesque."

26. Kates, "Producing and Consuming Gendered Representations," 7.

27. Pielichaty, "Festival Space."

28. Neil Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist, "Spaces of Transgression: Governance, Discipline and Reworking the Carnavalesque?," *Leisure Studies* 28, no. 1 (2009):

35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360802127243>.

29. Kates, "Producing and Consuming Gendered Representations," 8.

30. Finkel, "Beyond Bakhtin," 6.

31. Generally speaking, Bakhtin's considerations of carnivalesque materialities need to be read in the context of Rabelais's work. The human body played a crucial role in the latter's writing and in Renaissance traditions in general.

32. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 20.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 26.

37. *Ibid.*, 40.

38. *Ibid.*, 24.

39. Grabher, "Tinted Visions."

40. Doyle, "Merchandising and Retail."

41. Andy Bennett and Ian Woodward, "Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging," in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett,

than generally accepting festivals, events, and celebrations as subversive per se, carnivalesque interpretative frameworks need to acknowledge the disciplinary effects that events inherit.

### Materializing the Carnavalesque

Expanding on conceptual discussions of the entangled carnivalesque characteristics of subversion and discipline, I explore Bakhtin's acknowledgment of materiality in reference to bodies and masks<sup>31</sup> and regard how scholars address the issue in contemporary event frameworks.

Bakhtin's attention to the materiality of carnival departs from his consideration of turning the "subject into flesh."<sup>32</sup> As a way to bring carnivalesque atmospheres "down to earth,"<sup>33</sup> his analysis centers on bodies, masks, and the aesthetic, material sketch of a "grotesque realism."<sup>34</sup> Here, particularly parody, degradation, and laughter serve as tools for this materialization of the carnivalesque. Therefore, the concept is characterized by grotesque understandings of "bodily elements" and as "deeply positive."<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin emphasizes that the carnivalesque body should not be regarded as a complete unit; rather, "it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."<sup>36</sup> He notes that the body as well as the mask are "connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negotiation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the "phenomenon in transformation, and as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming"<sup>38</sup> is expressed in carnivalesque materialities.

As mentioned in the introduction, events' materialities are routinely presented in order to capture the atmosphere of celebrations. However, material culture hardly ever serves as the investigative subject in itself.<sup>39</sup> While focused studies are scarce, a few exceptions to the canon deserve further discussion. Not all cited authors directly link to the conceptual discussions of carnivalesque. However, their research introduces the relevance of material culture in festivals, events, and celebrations. Representing a mainstream event studies perspective, Stephen Doyle acknowledges that the materiality of events influences—sometimes even enhances—event experiences.<sup>40</sup> With an interest in the sociological and anthropological value of events, Andy Bennett and Ian Woodward explore the conceptual relevance of events' materialities, pointing out that "festivals ... produce a temporal, yet highly visible and in some cases inherently spectacular, display of commonly shared lifestyle preferences."<sup>41</sup> In their study of the Wintersun Festival in New South Wales, Australia, they refer to so-called nostalgia festivals and recognize "classical cars, period fashion, and various retro or reproduction consumer accessories as essential contributors to the festival experience."<sup>42</sup> Not necessarily linked to event studies but coming rather from a research perspective on football and fandom, Christian Derbaix, Alain Decrop, and Olivier Cabossart investigate the experiences of football fans and their relationship with merchandise. The authors point out: "Football fans conspicuously show a lot of support to their teams by such overt behavior as singing, shouting and cheering but also through a lot of material merchandise: scarves, hats, shirts."<sup>43</sup> While the aforementioned scholars pay attention to what could be considered a mask in relation to Bakhtin's interpretations, Kates pays particular attention to bodies as material representations during LGBT+ Pride events. In *Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, the scholar observes contrasting bodily displays in accordance with his conceptual assumption that "carnavalesque celebrations ... may be considered contested ground

Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward  
(Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate,  
2014), 14.

42. Ibid., 14.

43. Debraix, Decrop, and  
Cabossart, "Colors and Scarves,"  
517.

44. Kates, "Producing and  
Consuming Gendered  
Representations," 10.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 10–11.

47. Ravenscroft and Matteucci,  
"The Festival as Carnavalesque."

48. Beyond the general debates  
on the commercializing  
tendencies in LGBT+ events,  
the LGBT50 event series needs  
to be read as part of the UK  
City of Culture celebrations  
in Hull. As an element within  
the yearlong hallmark event,  
LGBT50 contributed to the  
urban regenerative agenda  
proclaimed by the UK City of  
Culture celebrations. For further  
information on this relationship,  
see Barbara Grabher, "Gendering  
Cities of Culture: City/ Capital  
of Culture Mega-Events and the  
Potential for Gender Equality"  
(PhD diss., University of Hull,  
2019).

49. Kates, "Producing and  
Consuming Gendered  
Representations," 8.

50. Catherine Baker, "If Love Was  
a Crime, We Would Be Criminals":  
The Eurovision Song Contest and  
the Queer International Politics  
of Flags," in *Eurovisions: Identity  
and the International Politics  
of the Eurovision Song Contest  
since 1956*, ed. Julie Kalman, Ben  
Wellings, and Keshia Jacotine  
(Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan,  
2019), 178.

for countervailing meanings.<sup>44</sup> While he notes an "overwhelming and pervasive spectacle of the hyper masculine body,"<sup>45</sup> Kates simultaneously considers "embodied ... costumes and displays that many might consider socially risqué, gross and disgusting."<sup>46</sup> Highlighting ironic play and satirical efforts, the author outlines the possibilities of material interpretations in order to express the carnivalesque ambitions between subversion and discipline. Overall, the cited scholars illustrate how bodies and paraphernalia can be addressed as tangible expressions of intangible event experiences.

### Rainbows and Beyond: Materializing the Carnavalesque Dichotomy

The carnivalesque concept, its subversive and disciplining features, and its material interpretations guide my analysis of the decorations of the LGBT50 celebration. The event series exemplifies the dialectic tension between subversion and discipline as described in relation to the carnivalesque concept.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, the event series' commemorative reference to the historical struggles for LGBT+ rights frames the celebration in a general atmosphere of subversion and transgression of heteronormative societal structures. On the other hand, beyond this immediate political interest, festivals in general, and LGBT+ events in particular, are subject to commercializing and appropriating forces.<sup>48</sup> So-called rainbow capitalist tendencies strongly influence the contemporary LGBT+ event landscape. Therefore, in accordance with Kates's explanations, LGBT50 "[exists] in a dialectic tension" between the "politically charged and rebellious" and the "commercialized and 'corporate.'"<sup>49</sup> In my interrogations of the event series, this dialectic tension becomes visible in decorative design. Between rainbow colors and alternative decorative styles, the events' materialities capture the existing carnivalesque tensions in the LGBT50 celebration.

### Committing to Colors? Striped Expectations and Branding Tools

Created in 1978 by the San Francisco-based artist Gilbert Baker, the rainbow has served as the acclaimed symbol of the international LGBT+ movement since the mid-1990s.<sup>50</sup> The omnipresence of rainbow-colored flags, bunting, and other paraphernalia determines the overall visibility of the LGBT50 celebration and therefore calls for my analytical attention.

According to Max, a member of a charity involved in the organization of the LGBT50 event series, the decorative design of colorful stripes responds to general expectations around LGBT+ Pride events. He explains: "I think that people would expect [rainbows].... [They expect that] there would be some kind of rallying flag or ... something."<sup>51</sup> With awareness of visitors' expectations, Max even goes so far as to consider the rainbow flag as an "organizational branding" for LGBT+ events. He explains that "having the venues dressed in a rainbow bunting and getting a flag ... flying over the Guild Hall ... [is] so important." Without further clarification whether the rainbow expectation is important for his event or the celebrated cause of the event, the relevance of the rainbow symbol and its expectations in the context of the LGBT50 celebration becomes clear.

Beyond visitors' aesthetic assumptions, Sophia, a Hull resident and participant in the LGBT50 event series, clarifies that the rainbow decorative design symbolizes the campaign for LGBT+ rights. She observes:

51. Max, interview with the author,  
August 23, 2017, Hull.

52. Sophia, interview with the  
author, August 8, 2017, Hull.

53. Danielle Cooper, "Rainbow  
Flags and Donor Tags: Queer  
Materials at the Pride Library,"  
*InterActions: UCLA Journal  
of Education and Information  
Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014): 2–21;  
Francesca Ammaturo, "Spaces  
of Pride: A Visual Ethnography  
of Gay Pride Parades in Italy  
and the United Kingdom," *Social  
Movement Studies* 15, no. 1  
(2016): 19–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2015.1060156>; Catherine Silverstone,  
"Duckie's Gay Shame: Critiquing  
Pride and Selling Shame in Club  
Performance," *Contemporary  
Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012):  
62–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2011.645234>.

54. Rosa, interview with the  
author, August 3, 2017, Hull.

55. Sophia, personal conversation  
with the author, June 13, 2018,  
Hull.

56. Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking  
Homonationalism," *International  
Journal of Middle East  
Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013):  
336–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381300007X>.

57. Kates, "Producing and  
Consuming Gendered  
Representations"; Ravenscroft  
and Gilchrist, "Spaces of  
Transgression"; Finkel, "Beyond  
Bakhtin."

By sticking all the rainbow things, by the police having rainbow beards and by the rainbow lashes on the uniform[s] and the rainbow steps and all the rainbowyness [sic] everywhere, ... [the city was] trying to visibly show that [they] had moved on and that they were much more inclusive and LGBT[+] aware.<sup>52</sup>

According to Sophia, the decorative design is therefore not only based on an aesthetic decision but also suggests commitment and support for the struggle for gender and sexual equality.

While the rainbow color pattern serves as a symbol of commitment and therefore fulfills expectations, increasing commodification and commercialization of LGBT+ Pride events drives the dispute about the rainbow symbol.<sup>53</sup> While agreeing with Sophia's observation on the rainbow's aesthetics and signification of commitment to the sociocultural value of equality, Hull resident and event visitor Rosa questions the sincerity behind the symbolism. Noting the rainbow-branded logos of various companies in the LGBT50 celebration, she challenges the support and its effectiveness. On the one hand, she considers the company-branded logos "rather heartening [, as] ... organizations were making known that they were supporting gay communities."<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, however, she is aware that "for some of these organizations ..., it is all a front.... They give a nudge to support but behind the scene they are still [not supportive]." While showered in rainbow colors, Rosa critically claims: "It is questionable whether the support is there." Although she appreciates the collaboration of commercial partners, Rosa questions the motives of companies to change their logos into rainbow visuals. In agreement with Rosa, Sophia synthesizes: "You don't know if [the companies] are there to support the struggle for equality, or if they want those struggling for equality to support them."<sup>55</sup> Dubbed "rainbow capitalism," the use of the color pattern by commercial companies receives increased critique as the inherent connotations of the decorative design are questioned.<sup>56</sup>

Max's consideration of expected decorative designs, Sophia's attention to the inherent connotations of the colorful stripes, and Rosa's questioning of the level of commitment highlight the problematic realities of rainbow decorations. On the one hand, the rainbow is an acclaimed and even expected symbol for transformation of the societal status quo and therefore implies a strong ambition for subversion and transgression. On the other hand, the commodification of the transformation process functions as a mechanism of control. Between subversion and discipline, the rainbow symbol illustrates the carnivalesque characteristics theorized by scholars. As an expected expression of commitment and support but also as a branding tool, rainbow aesthetics are highly contested for their restrictive—and even disciplining—influences.

### **Somewhere over the Rainbow: Artistic Interpretations and the Reclaiming of the Subversive Potential of Carnavalesque Celebrations**

Concerning this tension between subversion and discipline and its visual display, several previously cited scholars recognize artistic interventions as fruitful contributions in decorative designs. With an emphasis on marginal and imaginative practices, the reclaiming of subversive potential is highlighted through creative explorations.<sup>57</sup>

Less prominent than the colorful rainbow stripes, artistic interventions, especially those by the queer arts collective Duckie, invite carnivalesque subversion into the celebration of LGBT50. Upon my question regarding the aesthetics of the collective's curation of the Summer Tea Party,

58. Henry, interview with the author, July 27, 2017, Hull.

59. "50 Queers for 50 Years," Duckie, accessed March 15, 2018, <https://www.duckie.co.uk/vintage/50-queers-for-50-years>.

60. Jess, interview with the author, July 14, 2017, Hull.

Henry, one of Duckie's producers, exclaims: "No rainbow flags! No. Read my lips: No rainbow flags."<sup>58</sup> Rather than complying with expected aesthetics, the collective uses artistic practices in an attempt to reclaim the carnivalesque opportunity of transformation. Henry explains:

Did you go to the gay pride thing? They put a show on the stage and you know what those shows are going to be: This is a popstar from ten years ago singing a song.... [Duckie and its artists are] just not into that. So, this stuff that we are putting on will not be like that.... We are interested in the kind of alternative side of that, not so much the side that is presented by the traditional gay pride. [The party] last weekend, that is one way of doing it. That is fine and sweet, but we are into a bit more a challenging, progressive notion of gender and culture.

The intellectual act of creating "alternatives" to the "traditional" is expressed in the organizations' decorative designs. The collective's disdain for rainbow brandings and search for other forms of visual expression are linked to their understanding of LGBT+ activism. Henry elucidates:

[LGBT+ activism] comes from an artistic tradition of being oppositional, being against society. [For me] to be queer means that we should be asking other kinds of questions apart from just consuming the mainstream. ... We are interested in asking more questions about what does it mean to be a human being; what is happening in the world; you know, who we are. All questions that aren't asked. We want to ask those questions. We open it up.

Therefore, Duckie's decorative strategies are highly driven by artistic interrogations, employing fantasies and fostering perspectives from the margins to create loopholes in the carnivalesque discipline in order to enable subversions of the status quo. Consequential to these considerations, the following analysis concentrates on the decorative approaches of two artists directing the community craft and dance projects *50 Queers for 50 Years* and *Into the Light*.

### Recycled Renaissance

The project *50 Queers for 50 Years* was commissioned by Hull 2017 Ltd and executed by Duckie through an artistic director and supporting artists. Over the course of two months, members and allies of the LGBT+ community were invited to join this craft project in order to develop fifty representations of individuals, events, and places related to the history of the local and national LGBT+ movement. In an open workshop format held in an empty shop unit on one of Hull's high streets, the icons were constructed out of cardboard, branches, and recycled material. The iconic representations included Freddy Mercury, Gok Wan, Liz Carr, and Sue Perkins, among others. Accompanied by a booklet identifying the individuals and their contributions to the LGBT+ movement, the crafted statues were paraded during the UK Pride Parade as part of the opening event for LGBT50 in Hull.<sup>59</sup>

The aesthetic approach of the craft project is captured by the wordplay "recycled Renaissance." With the ambition to create a "very visual and hopefully emotional" display, artistic director Jess found inspiration in Renaissance iconographies.<sup>60</sup> However, to craft toward these aesthetics, the project mainly used recycled materials. Jess explains:

Renaissance is a period that I love.... I am very interested particularly in the kind of Renaissance medieval iconography. It is kind of my big sort of thing. I love going to really old churches and I really love paintings from the Renaissance. That is my big passion. I love the richness, the quality; I like the stillness; I just love the beauty.... [In my visual approach,] there is a lot of connecting to that religious imaginary. I love the aesthetics of the church. I love the stained glass. I love the statues. I think it is beautiful....

Even though I am not religious, [this aesthetic] is something that speaks very deeply [to me] spiritually.... I just feel there is something in all that that we lost.... I don't know. [It is] kind of what life is about.... It ... takes you beyond your own life.

With an explosion of gold and related color tones, Jess's admiration of Renaissance iconographies characterizes the crafting process and products.



Figure 1: *50 Queers for 50 Years*, Nr. 17 Bronski Beat, Wilberforce Drive, Hull, UK; © Anna Bean

In the crafting as well as the parading of the statues, I noted a strong sense of care expressed in the handling of the icons. When I mention this observation to Jess, he draws upon a participant's crafting experience in order to reflect on the relationships between the aesthetic approach, LGBT+ activism, and the required sensitivity. He recalls:

There was something happening the other day: A young boy came in—I would say about nineteen, very nervous. I talked to him and found out what he wanted to do. So [I suggested to him] to work on one icon of a trans person, who is an incredibly brave Muslim trans guy.... He was so moved and excited by this whole thing. He just really threw himself on to the work. ... I can just see it meant so much to him to put the glitter on; just to make this image as beautiful as he could. And it was a bit clumsy, as he has done it. But I kind of love that. I love the way it is a little bit clumsy, because ... it is heartfelt, it is real.... This is what I want!

Referring to the term “queer sensibility,” Jess clarifies that his aesthetic vision responds directly to this element of care illustrated in the previous citation. He explains further:

I think it has to do with that sense of martyrdom.... Almost like being rejected and defiled and all that. [It] feels like in that sense [like] kicking yourself up and make something absolutely fucking stunning that people have to take a second look at.... This is kind of what excites me and that is what I see in these ancient paintings. It is something about terror and beauty and [the] magnificen[ce] of it. I just think there is a learning that is part of a queer sensibility which really needs to get out [and] makes [the work into] something extraordinary.

Working with members of the community through the aesthetic approach of the “recycled Renaissance” and employing a “queer sensibility” to the process, Jess explores decorative designs beyond the expected rainbow visualities. The craft project *50 Queers for 50 Years* is inspired by the aesthetics of Renaissance iconographies and recreates these through recycled materials. Here, the artistic practices invite a decorative visibility that recognizes struggles: the references to the other aesthetic genre contribute to the acknowledgment—and even worship—of iconic events, people, and places. Linked with “queer sensibility,” Jess’s work “takes you beyond your own life” and invites you to explore and subvert the general status quo through this artistic approach, which contributes toward the decorative design of the LGBT50 celebration.

### Moving in Unity

Next to Jess’s considerations, I further concentrate on the artistic choices guiding the community dance project *Into the Light*.<sup>61</sup> Similar to the *50 Queers for 50 Years* project, I was able to closely observe the project as one of the fifty community dancers. As a participant in the project, I took part in regular rehearsals and the two performances in Duckie’s Summer Tea Party on the final day of the weeklong LGBT50 celebration. While the project’s exceptional choreographic approach and dance pedagogies call for further examination in a separate publication, in this article, I discuss the choreographer’s decorative designs used in the costumes, props, and general scenery for the performance.

In an informal conversation during the UK Pride Parade and Party, Thomas, the choreographer of the project *Into the Light*, explained to me that he generally distances himself and his artistic practice from rainbow patterns. In our later interview, he reasons as follows:

People are already doing [the rainbow thing]. It is already being done a lot.... What is the point of repeating [it] again?... [In my creative work] I ask: Where is Thomas in that? How do I want to interrogate that as an artist? So, this is my take. Where is my work on this? Where is my aesthetic? For me, [*Into the Light*] is a piece of work. So, it is about trying to get my point of view across visually and in the style of movement.<sup>62</sup>

Distancing himself from what “is already being done a lot,” Thomas emphasizes that the performance is about his interrogation of the subject matter. Therefore, his artistic vision becomes visible not only in movement but also in the way the dancers dress, the props they handle, and the scenes they create. Contrary to the rainbow reference, the fifty participating performers are dressed in androgynous looks of the 1950s. The colors gray, white, and brown dominate the scene, a monotony interrupted by shimmers of gold. Rather than bright colors, the pieces of clothing draw attention through attached tags with terms such as “lesbian,”

61. “Looking Back on INTO THE LIGHT,” Yorkshire Dance, accessed September 28, 2017. <https://yorkshiredance.com/news/into-the-light-reflection>.

62. Thomas, interview with the author, July 24, 2017, Hull.

“homosexual,” “trans,” or “Section 28,” among others. Referring either to historical facts or identity labels, their random placement on the jackets, ties, or trousers of the performers is independent of the performers’ own identifications or experiences. Thomas explains:

In ... the design [of] the costumes, I wanted to get this idea across of a slight androgynist feel. You know, the group is made of people that identify as straight, as gay, as bisexual, as nonbinary—there is this whole mix of opinions and identities. But rather than me highlighting that with each individual, I wanted to create a palette, where as an audience you look at it and you just see one. We are one voice. We are not just individuals, we are together as people, as a human race regardless of sexuality, etc. So, when the audiences watch fifty people perform this work, they shouldn’t know ... who identifies as a boy or a girl, gay or straight. They should look like a pack, like a swarm of people that can’t [be] labeled [individually].



Figure 2: *Into the Light*, Queen Victoria Square, Hull, UK; ©Anna Bean

Beyond the dancers’ costumes, Thomas’s artistic vision further crystallizes when the rainbow flag becomes relevant to the storyline of the performance. As an important reference point in relation to the formation of the LGBT+ movement for equality, the performance requires use of the color palette. However, despite its relevance, Thomas consciously decided to avoid the mainstream visual of the horizontal stripes. Rather, he chose to represent the political movement through individual unicolored flags being waved in synchronous movements by different individuals. As stated above, his aesthetic and intellectual approach demanded more nuance than a mainstream rainbow aesthetic would allow. Therefore, in refusing to restrict himself to the limitations of the conventional color palette, Thomas’s artistic vision looks beyond the already existing strategies for visualizing the struggle for equality. Through his artistic interventions, he opens channels to imagine alternative readings of the subject matter and creates a subversive interrogation through creative tools.

## Conclusion

In this article, I investigated the concept of carnivalesque in relation to its negotiation of material cultures of festivals, events, and celebrations. I paid attention to Bakhtin's discussions of the carnivalesque body and mask as a tangible expression of the transformative ambitions of carnival. Furthermore, I interrogated the tensions between subversive and disciplining characteristics of carnivalesque celebrations and illustrated these dichotomies through the rainbow pattern as a common decorative strategy in LGBT+ events.

With an interest in reclaiming the subversive features of carnivalesque atmospheres, I concentrated on artistic interventions that employ a visual strategy beyond the rainbow branding. As marginalized and imaginative practices, I emphasized that creative interrogations may hold subversive potential for celebrations. Focusing on two community arts projects, I discussed the decorative approaches of Jess, artistic director of *50 Queers for 50 Years*, and Thomas, choreographer of *Into the Light*. Affiliated with the queer arts collective Duckie, both artists distanced themselves and their artistic practices from brand-like rainbow strategies. In agreement with Duckie producer Henry, they sought alternative aesthetic approaches. For example, Jess linked the project's decorative strategy to his interest in Renaissance iconography. Fascinated by the beauty "beyond your own life" but crafting mainly with recycled materials, Jess not only conferred recognition on the icons, but he also provoked a sense of care, attentiveness and, in his words, "queer sensibility." Shifting my attention to Thomas's decorative approach in the community dance project *Into the Light*, my analysis was guided by his poignant question: "Where is Thomas in this?" Distancing himself from "what has already been done," his visual strategy draws upon androgynous looks and intentionally misleading labels. The colors gray, white, and gold create a unity among the community cast members moving in unison. Playing with visions of plurality and singularity, Thomas's representative spectrum opens the opportunity to create imaginings beyond expected narratives.

Both artistic interventions work within the framework of the LGBT50 celebration. However, in their own way, the artistic and creative practices create loopholes in restrictive design strategies. Embracing the subversive potential within a disciplining context of a carnivalesque "world inside out,"<sup>63</sup> the artistic interrogations create a fruitful and powerful imagining of alternative societal structures and norms by presenting other decorative visuals "somewhere over the rainbow."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aching, Gerard. "Carnival Time versus Modern Social Life: A False Distinction." *Social Identities* 16, no. 4 (2010): 415–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2010.497699>.

Ammaturo, Francesca. "Spaces of Pride: A Visual Ethnography of Gay Pride Parades in Italy and the United Kingdom." *Social Movement Studies* 15, no. 1 (2016): 19–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2015.1060156>.

- Anderton, Chris. "Commercialising the Carnavalesque: The V Festival and Image/Risk Management." *Event Management* 12, no. 1 (2008): 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599509787992616>.
- Baker, Catherine. "‘If Love Was a Crime, We Would Be Criminals’: The Eurovision Song Contest and the Queer International Politics of Flags." In *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*, edited by Julie Kalman, Ben Wellings, and Keshia Jacotine, 175–200. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bennett, Andy, and Ian Woodward. "Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging." In *The Festivalization of Culture*, edited by Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward, 11–26. Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate, 2014.
- Cooper, Danielle. "Rainbow Flags and Donor Tags: Queer Materials at the Pride Library." *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014): 2–21.
- Derbaix, Christian, Alain Decrop, and Olivier Cabossart. "Colors and Scarves: The Symbolic Consumption of Material Possessions by Soccer Fans." *ACR North American Advances*, 29 (2002): 511–18.
- Derbaix, Christian, and Alain Decrop. "Colours and Scarves: An Ethnographic Account of Football Fans and Their Paraphernalia." *Leisure Studies* 30, no. 3 (2011): 271–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2010.527356>.
- Doyle, Stephen. "Merchandising and Retail." In *Festival and Events Management: An International Arts and Culture Perspective*, edited by Ian Yeoman et al., 156–70. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
- Duckie. "50 Queers for 50 Years." Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://www.duckie.co.uk/vintage/50-queers-for-50-years>.
- Finkel, Rebecca. "Beyond Bakhtin: Literally Legislating the ‘Hell’ out of the Carnavalesque." Paper presented at the International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, Istanbul, August 20–24, 2008. <https://eresearch.qmu.ac.uk/handle/20.500.12289/1796>.
- Grabher, Barbara. "Observing through Participants: The Analytical and Practical Potential of Citizens’ Involvement in Event Research." *Studies on Home and Community Science* 11, no. 2 (2018): 66–76.
- . "Gendering Cities of Culture: City/ Capital of Culture Mega-Events and the Potential for Gender Equality." PhD diss., University of Hull, 2019.
- . "Gendering Cities of Culture." Last modified December 12, 2019. <https://genderingcitiesofculture.wordpress.com/>.
- . "Tinted Visions: Performing Equalities through Festive Decorations in LGBT-themed Events in Hull, UK City of Culture 2017." In *Performing Cultures of Equality*, edited by Emilia Duran Almarza and Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez. London, New York: Routledge, forthcoming.
- Hull 2017 Ltd. "LGBT50." Accessed April 30, 2018. <https://www.hull2017.co.uk/whatson/events/lgbt-50/> (site discontinued).

- Kates, Steven. "Producing and Consuming Gendered Representations: An Interpretation of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras." *Consumption, Markets & Culture* 6, no. 1 (2003): 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253860302699>.
- Lindahl, Carl. "Bakhtin's Carnival Laughter and the Cajun Country Mardi Gras." *Folklore*, 107 (1996): 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1996.9715915>.
- Pielichaty, Henya. "Festival Space: Gender, Liminality and the Carnavalesque." *Journal of Event and Festival Management* 6, no. 3 (2015): 235–50. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEFM-02-2015-0009>.
- Puar, Jasbir. "Rethinking homonationalism." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 336–39. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381300007X>.
- Ravenscroft, Neil, and Paul Gilchrist. "Spaces of Transgression: Governance, Discipline and Reworking the Carnavalesque?" *Leisure Studies* 28, no. 1 (2009): 35–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360802127243>.
- , and Xavier Matteucci. "The Festival as Carnavalesque: Social Governance and Control at Pamplona's San Fermin Fiesta." *Tourism Culture & Communication* 4, no. 1 (2008): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3727/109830403108750777>.
- Santino, Jack. "The Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque." *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 491 (2011): 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.124.491.0061>.
- Silverstone, Catherine. "Duckie's Gay Shame: Critiquing Pride and Selling Shame in Club Performance." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012): 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2011.645234>.
- Testa, Alessandro. "Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2014): 44–73. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341260>.
- Yorkshire Dance. "Looking Back on INTO THE LIGHT." October 4, 2017. <https://yorkshiredance.com/news/into-the-light-reflection/>.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 675378. Thanks to Mariëlle Smith, Catherine Vulliamy, and Jill Howitt for their language editing, proofreading, and critical feedback. My gratitude goes to all research participants, who continuously support the investigation as they challenge, reflect on, and discuss the developments in and of their city with me.

## AUTHOR BIO

**Barbara Grabher** is a postdoctoral research assistant in the research group Urban HEAP in the Institute of Geography and Regional Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. She recently completed her PhD at the University of Hull, UK, and the University of Oviedo, Spain, where she conducted research for her thesis, *Gendering Cities of Culture*, in the context of the Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Framework GRACE project (Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe). Her work combines perspectives from critical event studies and gender studies, as she highlights the relevance of celebrations in the production and negotiation of cultures of gender equality. Furthermore, as a research assistant in the Culture, Place and Policy Institute at the University of Hull, she coauthored the final evaluation report for Hull UK City of Culture 2017, with specific emphasis on the impact area "Society and Well-being." Grabher holds a BA in cultural and social anthropology from the University of Vienna, Austria, and an MA in gender studies from Utrecht University, Netherlands, and the University of Granada, Spain.

## OPEN ACCESS

© 2021 by the author. Licensee [H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online](https://www.h-net.org/). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0** license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)

## HOW TO CITE

Grabher, Barbara. "Somewhere over the Rainbow: Investigating Festival Decorations in the LGBT50 Celebration of Hull, UK City of Culture 2017." *Journal of Festive Studies* 3 (2020): 200–214. <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2021.3.1.86>

*The Journal of Festive Studies* (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from [H-Celebration](https://www.h-net.org/), a network of [H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online](https://www.h-net.org/), and is the inaugural journal published through the [H-Net Journals](https://www.h-net.org/) initiative. It can be found online at <https://journals.h-net.org/jfs>.