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Out Rambling. On Nature, Art Institutions and Rural Queerness: An Interview with Ian Giles

BY WILLIAM KHERBEK, BLOUIN ARTINFO | OCTOBER 15, 2019



Ian Giles, Open Ramble East, Cambridge
(Photo: Wilf Speller)

“Outhouse” is a project developed by the British artist Ian Giles which examines the creation and presence of outdoor organizations begun by queer people in East Anglia. This region of eastern England is home to vestiges of Britain’s ancient history as well as storied centers of learning like Cambridge University, but the queer history of the east of England, Giles found, was poorly documented and little understood. Giles’s research unearthed a rich archive of queer outdoor regional culture and will help to shape an understanding of how organizations centering queer identity developed in a reticent, sometimes hostile culture. Groups like the Outdoor Lads, The Gay Outdoor Club and resources like Colchester’s Gay Switchboard and Outhouse East (from which the exhibition takes its name) are as much a part of the history of East Anglia as that celebrated in institutions like Cambridge’s revered Fitzwilliam Museum. Making this reality visible was a core aspect of the artist’s endeavor. Giles used his research as a basis for organizing a series of walks for queer people in four regional centers: Cambridge, Great Yarmouth, Colchester and Norwich. The walks were documented in a small booklet featuring the sights and images from the journeys as well as works by local artists. The Kettle’s Yard gallery in Cambridge is exhibiting an installation and video work by Giles that emerged from this labor of love. Blouin Artinfo spoke to the artist on the occasion of the exhibition’s opening.



Ian Giles Outhouse

How did this project originally come about?

This work comes out of a larger project called New Geographies. Ten galleries and museums across the east of England are working together to look at the east of England through new eyes. They had members of the public nominate overlooked or underrecognized sites across East Anglia. Initially it was a website with pin drops, and so I found myself clicking through those pin drops, doing that thing where you're looking for a mirror of yourself. I was looking for sites which would resonate with me. Given the nature of maps, you see a quarter of England and the sea, and I was just thinking that in this landmass there are all these queer, LGBTQIA+ people living, and I was wondering what it is like to be gay in these places. I started clicking through all of the pin drops and I couldn't really find anything that pointed to either gender or sexuality in any particular way, and, in a way, that missing information sparked my interest even more. I think because it was a map and because there was so much green on the map and there were areas of outstanding natural beauty in the region, this idea of forming rambling and walking groups seemed like a nice way to gather people together. Also, I was interested in challenging and expanding clichés of what we think homosexuals are and do.



Studio Four OUTPOST OUTHOUSE, Ian Giles

Did the project affect your own understanding of nature or of your own positioning as a gay person?

I think it reinforced my urban experience of being a gay person. I moved to London when I was 18 and lived there for 10 years. Now I live between New York and London and I see men holding hands on a daily basis and don't even notice it in such a mixed society. But what did kind of sadden and surprise me was that I did feel that across the region where I'd been working, and across the east of England, it definitely seemed harder to be a queer person, or a queer visible person.

Speaking with men in their seventies who had stayed in the east, one man spoke to me about how he'd worked a 50-year career, lived with his husband his entire life, and none of his colleagues ever knew that he had a husband. None of his colleagues ever knew anything about his home life. For me, I found that saddening, and a real weight.

This idea that no one minds what anyone else does as long as they don't "wave it in your face" — which was essentially what was said to me by a number of straight people — I found frustrating. It's not been my experience, and it's not an experience I want to promote. I feel like everyone is a minority in that everyone is so different to each other. The idea that we have fear and that we single out people in our society and say "We'd rather not deal with you. We'd rather not face you," I think it's so absurd. It really frustrates me that in the evolution of humans the last thing we actually seem to be really working on is being good to each other, and that just really pisses me off.



Ian Giles, Open Ramble East, Colchester, Photo: Wilf Speller

In considering the ways art institutions have conceptualized and represented queerness, were you hoping to use the project to build a kind of archive, or to recontextualize existing ones? Or, were you actively seeking to challenge and perhaps invert the dynamics of such institutions?

A lot of museums I worked with initially said that they didn't have queer collections. But, after looking through them with a queer eye, you start to see yourself. Things have been read so much through the heteronormative eye that we can't see the queerness when it is there. The Kettle's Yard is an interesting example in terms of control of information around queer lives. They have restricted access around their founder Jim Ede's letters. His letters are open to the public but there are five letters which have restricted access because they allude to same-sex desires and same-sex experience. There is a control of information and suspicion of information and suspicion of me as a gay artist from some galleries — not Kettle's Yard, but one of the galleries queried me about the level of nudity there would be in the final exhibition. It just felt so absurd to me because I feel if I'd been a straight artist organizing rambling walks, no one would be asking what level of nudity there would be in my exhibition.

And, as we know, nudity and museums don't really go together.

Exactly! Go to the National Gallery or anywhere and see a plethora of naked people, but apparently because it's gay it's bad. It's suddenly this awkward thing. In terms of lost histories, when I was having early conversations, it was like "No, I don't really think there are gay histories here. There aren't really gay histories in these museums or towns." So I held a public meeting in each city as kind of knowledge shares and idea dumps saying "What's gay? What's here? What *was* here? What do we know?" One of the things I loved was that, during the public sharing in Cambridge, it came up that in Christ's College Chapel there's a marble marriage memorial from 1684 of Sir John Finch and Sir Thomas Baines. They were very well-respected in their lifetimes; They were physicians, and Finch was the ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. On their monument, written in Latin, it says "Their hearts and souls were one." In all the literature around them, they're very much seen and acknowledged as a couple. You've got this 17th-century monument next to an altar in one of the big, glitzy Cambridge chapels but it's not seemingly widely known about. The silence around these types of histories is what makes queerness, LGBTQIA+ness, seem odd or "other." I find that really frustrating, and, in my own small way, I think that's a real driving point for my work — and I know that's true for a lot of other people's practices too — to try and shine a spotlight on some of these histories so that people like myself can have maps to negotiate our lives.



Ian Giles, Open Ramble East, Cambridge, Photo: Wilf Speller

In such an expansive project, it can be hard to archive or represent all the important things you encounter or experience along the way. Could you speak about some of those experiential elements of the project and how they impacted you?

One thing that I really did enjoy was when we were walking as a group along Angles Way in Great Yarmouth, there were these two Polish bird photographers with these amazing paparazzi-style lenses, and they were happy to be identified as lesbians. I felt such pleasure that they had come to this birdwatching spot, and I felt so proud when they asked who we were to say that we were a queer walking group and we were out for a walk. It felt so nice to welcome them and say, "We're here. You're here. Look!" It felt very generous, or like a safe space. It was joyful for us to come across them in the same way it was joyful for them to come across us, and they photographed our group and we photographed them. There are photographs of them in the installation: that seemingly impossible needle in a haystack, two Polish lesbians out on the Norfolk Broads, but of course there are Polish lesbians out on the Norfolk Broads photographing birds because gay people exist.

Ian Giles: "Outhouse" runs at the Kettle's Yard, Cambridge through October 20.

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