



69 Positions at the MAI. Photo by Paul Litherland

arts

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## This exhibition questions the legacy of 1969

by [Nora Rosenthal](#)

*69 Positions addresses issues affecting the local queer community and beyond, exploring socio-political history with a critical eye.*

Archival exhibits are always special. Not only do they amass texts and video from diverse collections that most of us cannot readily access, they allow the curator a special power in piecing together a historical narrative of their own devising. More than other shows presenting works by multiple artists, they're linked by the idiosyncratic voice of one historically inclined keener, presenting their view of the past to a contemporary audience.

*69 Positions: Porter Témoignage/Our Vanishing*, a project initiated by MediaQueer and curated by Jamie Ross at the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels), presents diverse works from the ArQuives (Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives), ARTEXTE, Vidéographe, VIVO Media Arts and les Archives Gaies du Québec, as well as contemporary works that in one way or another engage with these archival pieces.

The exhibit begins by questioning Canada's self-congratulatory celebration of the 50-year anniversary of a 1969 bill that removed anal sex from Canada's Criminal Code. Bill C-150 may have allowed anal sex between two people, alone and indoors — which, as Ross puts it, opened “the door to a homo-norm” — but the following years also saw countless raids of bathhouses and cruising grounds. *69 Positions* is premised on a historicized reflection on how these notions of public and private spheres have always been of heightened significance for queer communities — impacting who can celebrate, and where; who's policed, and with what force.

From the beginning, we understand Ross's critique as about much more than the limitations of criminal code amendments to provide real and meaningful liberation in queer people's lives. The exhibition text asks: “Will I be the chronicler of progressive social tolerance in the last 29 years before the predicted collapse of all sea life? Will I tell the story triumphant of some human beings winning their social inclusion as the great extinction rages around us?”

That is to say, *69 Positions* presents intersectionality not just as an anthropocentric commitment, but as a philosophy comprising our living world. For instance, Ross looks to the late 1960s not just as a moment of sexual and political liberation, but also as a moment that saw a huge rise in industrialized fishing. One step towards social justice for some, yet also one deep plunge into environmental catastrophe for everyone. How to make sense of these bleak ironies?

Ross begins by considering the cultural moment of 1969 in relation to contemporary queer dialogues, in particular as situated in Montreal. The exhibit is an effective reminder of the numerous voices that have always comprised the Left. There's a contemporary refrain that today's Left is impossibly fractured compared to the perceived cohesion of Boomers during “The Summer of Love,” but *69 Positions* reminds us that no, of course there were ruptures (and alliances) then, too, between queer activists, between members of Black Power and Red Power, between white gay men marching in Ottawa, and trans women who, as in Roberta Kalargirou's *Transsexual Lifestyles* (1971), part of the Vidéographe collection, are uncomfortably questioned about their intimate selfhood.

I did wonder, however, if there couldn't have been additional works in the exhibit that spoke more clearly to the interrelatedness of environmental and queer discourses. Ross grounds his exhibition text on looming environmental collapse, but the works in *69 Positions* that come closest to discussing the environment do so only insofar as the environment pertains to the lived urban space of cruising grounds (as with Hazel Meyer's banner *Where Once Stood a Bandstand for Cruising and Shelter* and David Widgington's cheeky pro-cruising banner). This seemed like a missed opportunity in such an otherwise carefully considered exhibit.

Nevertheless, there is heaps to pore over, especially considering the relatively small size of the MAI's exhibition space, including a nice selection of queer porn and DIY health guides, among them an exemplar of *Mainmise* magazine (1970–1978), and many smaller booklets. The video pieces in particular are incredibly engaging — emotionally and politically charged time capsules in which the queer voices and faces that emerge are compelling, articulate and possessive of an incredible will to persevere; the kind of people who, regardless of where you fall in the great spectrum of gender, make you think in earnest about the weight of the word Pride. ■

**69 Positions: Porter Témoignage/Our Vanishing** continues at Montréal, arts interculturels (3680 Jeanne Mance) until Aug. 24. Free