

Standing In Between Two Mirrors:  
Queer Reflections in the Work of Geoffrey Farmer

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## Abstract

### Standing In Between Two Mirrors: Queer Reflections in the Work of Geoffrey Farmer

Hanss Lujan Torres

This thesis offers a queer reading of the artistic practice of Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer (b.1967) by situating queerness as the foundation for Farmer's approach to artmaking. This thesis considers Farmer's practice between 1992 and 2017, contextualizing the artist's work within the shifting landscape of LGBTQ+ politics. This twenty-five-year frame contemplates the different realities for gay men, from the peak of the AIDS crisis to the legalization of same-sex marriage in North America. This thesis comprises of three chapters that examine the artist's engagements with the future, past, and present. The author employs queer theory as a lens to consider Farmer's vast practice as it provides a historical and theoretical framework that unfolds alongside the artist's career. Various concepts from studies on queer temporalities are applied to make sense of the artist's relation to time and better comprehend his depictions of it. Chapter 1 examines the artist's emerging career in the 1990s and explores early works that depicted homosexual desire and advocated for gay identity. Early drawings, videos, and installations inspired by science fiction and popular culture are read here for aspects of queer futurity. Chapter 2 focuses on Farmer's practice in the 2000s and analyzes his better-known installations that deconstruct and re-organize space and time. The author maps Farmer's interests in archives and reads his disruptive acts as efforts of 'queering' the past. This research culminates with a critical reading of the artist's installation, *a way out of the mirror* (2017), at the Canada pavilion for the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale. Chapter 3 examines how this prestige coincided with the country's sesquicentennial anniversary, also known as 'Canada 150.' The author contemplates the artist's personal narratives platformed on this national stage during this political moment through readings of homonationalism to unpack what was at stake in the present. Throughout the thesis, the author argues for the need and value of applying a queer perspective to Farmer's work as it offers a nuanced understanding of the artist's illustrious career.

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Lastly, thank you to Geoffrey Farmer for leading me down this journey of infinite reflections. In this close reading of his works, I have encountered some of the many references, archives, and histories that form the constellation that is his artistic practice.

Thinking through his work during these past few years has brought great comfort as well as perplexity, and enlightenment, but overall, a deeper understanding of the structures of time, and the many ways one can shatter them.

Have you ever tried standing in between two mirrors? You should. You will see a great long line of shiny mirrors, each one smaller than the one before, stretching away into the distance, getting fainter and fainter, so that you never see the last. But even when you can't see them anymore, the mirrors still go on.

– Geoffrey Farmer, *Geoffrey Farmer*, 2016.

## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Ground Control to Geoffrey Topham (1992-1998).....</b>	<b>17</b>
1.1: Geoffrey Topham.....	18
1.2: The Future in the Present.....	21
1.3: Existential Collaborations.....	25
1.4: Queer on the Horizon.....	29
<b>Chapter 2: The Queering Practice of Geoffrey Farmer (2000-2015).....</b>	<b>36</b>
2.1: Queer Archives.....	37
2.2: Queering History.....	40
2.3: Queer Bodies.....	48
2.4: Queering Technologies.....	51
2.5: In Retrospect.....	53
<b>Chapter 3: <i>A way out of the mirror</i> (2017).....</b>	<b>54</b>
3.1: Remembering the Past: Axes of Straight Time.....	55
3.2: Queering the Present: Homonationalism.....	59
3.2 A: Settlement.....	61
3.2 B: Belonging.....	64
3.2 C: Neoliberal Collaborations.....	66
3.3: Queer Affect and The Future Now.....	67
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Figures.....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>115</b>

## List of Figures

1. Newspaper clipping with Geoffrey Farmer (Topham) promoting the exhibition *Reorientation: Imported Fruits*, *The Daily Courier*, Thursday, October 21, 1993, Sec C.
2. Geoffrey Farmer (Topham), Early work by the artist from the exhibition *Reorientation: Imported Fruits* captioned as “a single element in Geoffrey Farmer Topham’s mixed media series,” *The Capital News*, October 28, 1993.
3. Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, 1995–1996, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Permanent Collection.
4. Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, 1995–1996, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Permanent Collection.
5. Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, 1995–1996, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Permanent Collection.
6. Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.
7. Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.
8. Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.
9. Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.
10. Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.
11. Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.
12. Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Installation Without A Ship*, 1992 (installation detail), *Building Your Own Spaceship*, Or Gallery, 1996.
13. Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Untitled (series)*, mixed media on paper, 20 x 25 cm each, for the exhibition *Home Alone: How to Build Your Own Spaceship*, Or Gallery, 1996.

14. Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Untitled*, mixed media on paper, 20 x 25 cm, for the exhibition *Home Alone: How to Build Your Own Spaceship*, Or Gallery, 1996.
15. Geoffrey Farmer, *The day I floated away from the society I had known* (installation detail) 6: *New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 1998.
16. Geoffrey Farmer, *The day I floated away from the society I had known* (video still), from the catalog 6: *New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 1998.
17. Geoffrey Farmer. *Hunchback Kit*, (2000-), Vancouver Art Gallery collection. 2000.
18. Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit* (2000-) (detail), Crate, lights, electrical cords, drawings, research documents, monitor, VCR, videos, dimensions variable, Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, 2000.
19. Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit* (2000-), mixed media, dimensions variable, Vancouver Art Gallery, Photo credit: Don Gill, 2005.
20. Geoffrey Farmer, *The Last Two Million Years* (installation view), foamcore plinths, perspex frames and cutouts from selected pages of the history book *The Last Two Million Years*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, 2008.
21. Geoffrey Farmer, *The Last Two Million Years*, 2007, Installation view, *How Do I Fit This Ghost in My Mouth?*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2015.
22. Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, paper cutouts from *Life* magazines (1935-1985), archival glue, miscanthus grass, floral foam, wood table, at documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.
23. Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, *Life* magazines (1935-1985), archival glue, miscanthus grass, floral foam, wood table, at documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.
24. Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, *Life* magazines (1935-1985), archival glue, miscanthus grass, floral foam, wood table, at documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.
25. Geoffrey Farmer, *Boneyard*, 2013, paper cutouts, wood, glue, dimensions variable. Installation view, ICA Boston, 2016.
26. Geoffrey Farmer, *Boneyard*, 2013, paper cutouts, wood, glue, dimensions variable. Installation view, ICA Boston, 2016.

27. Geoffrey Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer (installation view)* paper cutouts, textile, wood, and metal, 365 figures, *Nomads*, National Gallery of Canada, 2009.
28. Geoffrey Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer (detail)* paper cutouts, textile, wood, and metal, 365 figures, *Nomads*, National Gallery of Canada, 2009.
29. Geoffrey Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer* (documentation) for the exhibition *How Do I Fit A Ghost In My Mouth*, The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2015.
30. Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (installation view), computer-generated algorithmic montage sequence, dimensions variable. Catriona Jeffries, 2010.
31. Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (installation view), computer-generated algorithmic montage sequence, dimensions variable. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2016.
32. Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (installation view), computer-generated algorithmic montage sequence, dimensions variable. *The Care With Which The Rain Is Wrong*, Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, Germany, 2017.
33. Geoffrey Farmer (@anhourbeforesleep), *Gay and Proud (1970) Lilli Vincenz. Footage of one of the earliest Gay Pride demonstration marches, the first Christopher Street Liberation Day parade, held in NYC, June 28, 1970, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots*. Instagram, November 24, 2018, Accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqrRhptAreS/>.
34. Geoffrey Farmer (@anhourbeforesleep), *Lonesome Cowboy- excerpts (1968) Andy Warhol*, Instagram, July 28, 2019, Accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqrRhptAreS/>.
35. Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror* (installation view), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
36. Unknown photographer, *Untitled (Collision)*, 1955, archive of the artist.
37. Unknown photographer, *Untitled (Collision)*, 1955, archive of the artist.
38. Geoffrey Farmer, *Wounded Man*, Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.

39. Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
40. Geoffrey Farmer, *SFAI Fountain* (installation view), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
41. Geoffrey Farmer, *SFAI Fountain* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
42. Geoffrey Farmer, *Planks* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
43. Canada Pavilion, Giardini di Castello, Venice, Italy, 2018.
44. Canada Pavilion, Giardini di Castello, Venice, Italy, 2017.
45. Hans Haacke, *Germania* (installation view), German Pavilion, forty fifth Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 1993.
46. Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
47. Geoffrey Farmer, *Trough*, Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
48. Geoffrey Farmer, *Praying Mantis* (installation view), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
49. Germaine Richier, *La Mante Grande*, bronze with brown patina, HC2/11, 1956.
50. Geoffrey Farmer, *Praying Mantis* (detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
51. John Alvin, *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, movie poster, 1982.
52. Geoffrey Farmer, *Duvet*, Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.
53. Geoffrey Farmer, *FATHER AND SON*, ink on paper, 12 x 9 in., Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York City, New York, 2018.
54. Geoffrey Farmer, *A DREAM OF OFFSPRING*, ink on paper, 12 x 9 in., Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York City, New York, 2018.



55. Geoffrey Farmer, *If You Want To See Something Look at Something Else* (Allen Ginsberg 1926–1997) (installation detail), fifty color photographs mounted on perspex, framed, Volunteer Park, Seattle, USA, 2019.

## Preface

Following Geoffrey Farmer's practice, I perceive my research experiences as another series of collisions that mirror his poetic methodology. I briefly met the artist in February 2017, a few months before his debut at the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale in, out of all places, Kelowna, British Columbia. He was in town for an artist talk organized by my alma mater, the University of British Columbia Okanagan. Before the event, he stopped by the Alternator, an artist-run-center that I was volunteering for at the time. In a brief but pleasant conversation, he mentioned that the Alternator was the first gallery that exhibited his work outside of Vancouver. A few months later, I found myself at the Venice Biennale, watching onlookers get soaked by Farmer's geyser-fountain as it pierced through the roof of the Canada pavilion. My curiosity for the aforementioned exhibition also erupted with intrigue. Upon returning to Kelowna, I sifted through the Alternator's boxed-up archives and looked through Farmer's lengthy CV but could not locate any trace of the show. On a final attempt, I created a calendar of the exhibitions that I found in the archives and marked the few instances where records were missing. I noticed that in the early 1990s, the Alternator received consistent coverage from the local newspaper, so I tracked down their microfilm and scanned through their 1993 fall issues. On October 14, 2017, I found a short article along with a photo of a twenty-six-year-old Farmer promoting a show entitled *Reorientation: Imported Fruits* (fig. 1). I was the same age as he was in the picture, and I found this photo on the same date that the exhibition opened, twenty-four years later. The headline reads: "Exhibit explores gay sexuality." I became fascinated by thinking about how Farmer went from showing at the Alternator to

the Venice Biennale. I was also curious about how the artist's work grew from gay politics to the multilayered installations of recent fame and critical attention.

I have followed this research into my graduate studies, and it has transformed my relationship with art and my understanding of time and queerness in profound and unexpected ways. I resonate with Farmer's early disruptive efforts, having also spent my youth in British Columbia. I also see parallels between Farmer's time in San Francisco and my experiences studying in Montreal, with both cities having rich queer legacies and liberties. I have a great deal of respect for the artist and his projects, but along with my admiration, I wish to offer a critical and nuanced reading of his work. I respectfully situate my position as a queer racialized settler and uninvited guest working between the unceded territories of the Kanien'kehá:ka and the Syilx Okanagan peoples. I engage with discussions on sexuality, race, and decolonization from this perspective.

The timing of this project has radically informed the outcomes of this thesis. Contemplating queer time, the possibilities of queering the past, and the politics of the present during the collective pause and turbulence during the unfolding of a worldwide pandemic have challenged and reinforced the ideas proposed in this thesis. Admittedly, thinking through familial traumas, the early years of the AIDS crisis, the state-sanctioned harm of colonization, and their intergenerational affects have been tough to navigate. Yet, through it all, in these unique moments of distress, delay, and failure, I have learned to put the theories of queer time into practice and trust in the potentiality of queerness. In many ways, through this process of closely looking at Farmer's work, I managed to catch my own reflection. Through this mirroring process, I hope that the ideas presented here find their way to anyone else trying to make sense of the *now*, and the *then and there*.

## Introduction

Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer's (1967–) practice is a vast and multivalent hall of mirrors that produces variant forms of reflection. Through a process of research, material exploration, and an alchemy all his own, the artist has amassed a body of work that indulges in history, literature, popular culture, and personal memory to deconstruct and reassemble archives, images, and exhibition spaces. Farmer's most observant critics have acknowledged that his practice is about the passage of time; some go as far as to say that his medium is time itself.<sup>1</sup> I agree with these observations; however, I find that they do not address his practice fully. In the process of deconstructing and reorganizing space, the artist disrupts time and forms new and strange temporalities that result in states of queerness. In fact, queerness applies to multiple aspects of Farmer's work. An analysis of this sort is largely absent in the literature that addresses the artist's career, yet, I believe it to be an imperative aspect of his artistic formation.<sup>2</sup> I propose a queer reading of Farmer's practice, one that situates his works within the politics of their time. This approach forms a more nuanced perspective on Farmer's art and subjectivity. I posit queer theory as a framework to examine the artist's specific relation to time, as it better contextualizes the artist's envisioning of the past, present, and future. Queer theory offers

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<sup>1</sup> Daina Augaitis, "Recovered and Re-Arranged: Geoffrey Farmer," in *MashUp: the Birth of Modern Culture*, ed. Daina Augaitis, Bruce Grenville, and Stephanie Rebick (London, UK: Black Dog Publishing, 2016), 364; Kitty Scott, "Geoffrey Farmer," in *Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture: 10 Curators, 100 Contemporary Artists, 10 Sources*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist (London, UK: Phaidon, 2010), 106; Diedrich Diederichsen, in *Geoffrey Farmer*: (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2008), 7.

<sup>2</sup> I have only encountered one text that addresses the queerness in one of Farmer's works, the 2011 haunted house installation, *The Intellection of Lady Spider House*, at the Art Gallery of Alberta for its queer affect. See Mark Clintberg and Jon Davies, "Haunted by Queer Affect: Geoffrey Farmer's *The Intellection of Lady Spider House* and Allyson Mitchell's *Killjoy's Kastle*," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016): 56-75, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs.5.1.56\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs.5.1.56_1).

a suitable lens to thinking about Farmer's approach to artmaking, discussed here as *queering*. This analysis also allows for a deeper engagement with the sexual and gendered aspects of Farmer's work and the power dynamics at play within his illustrious career. I argue that queerness is the foundation for Farmer's work and is essential to understanding the vastness of his practice.<sup>3</sup>

The term *queer* is an unfixed and ever-evolving "zone of possibilities."<sup>4</sup> The American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler cautions writers to consider "what is at stake in the term" as queer connotes multiple meanings and uses; therefore, I wish to outline how I apply this term to Farmer's practice.<sup>5</sup> Overall, I use *queer* for its core definition as being "strange, odd, peculiar, [and] eccentric."<sup>6</sup> Throughout his career, Farmer has utilized strange and misfit characters from science fiction, literature, and history to embody feelings of difference and alienation experienced during his youth. These feelings of difference, explored here as queerness, largely stem from his sexuality and growing up as a closeted gay teen in the 1980s, a time when homosexuality was discriminated against and persecuted in North America.<sup>7</sup> Queerness is a system of

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<sup>3</sup> I reached out to Geoffrey Farmer through his gallery representation, the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in July 2023 requesting an interview to discuss the contents of this thesis, however, no response was received from the artist by the specified deadline. This study compensates for the absence of Farmer's direct input by drawing extensively from available primary and secondary sources.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Edelman, "Equations, Identities, and 'AIDS,'" in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 114, quoted in Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Butler pointedly asks this question to encourage the term to be used strategically to further its politics. See Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), 174-75.

<sup>6</sup> "queer, adj.1," OED Online, September 2021, Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156236?rskey=GIrq7F&result=2&isAdvanced=false> (accessed November 11, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> In 1969, the Criminal Law Amendment Act (Bill C-150) added an exemption to the criminal code allowing homosexual acts between consenting adults in private spaces, thus decriminalizing homosexuality in Canada. Farmer, who was born two years prior, belongs to a generation of gay men who witnessed the slow and turbulent shifts towards tolerance and acceptance of gay lifestyles.

knowledge and a transgressive state infused with creative potentiality. In this research, I analyze queerness for its epistemologies and affects, and examine how it appears throughout Farmer's work. In the following chapters, I locate the queer figures in Farmer's work to map a foundation for queerness and trace its evolution throughout his practice.

Additionally, when looking at the development of his practice, I observe how as the work matures, he shifts from depicting queerness to creating the feeling of it. I read Farmer's efforts to disrupt, deconstruct, and reorganize spaces, archives, bodies, and memories as examples of his *queering* capabilities. Queering—an application of queer as a verb or a “doing” of queerness—is at the essence of the artist's practice.<sup>8</sup> Queering is also understood as a shorthand for “queer reading,” or paying close attention to the sexual and gendered aspects of a text.<sup>9</sup> This thesis highlights the sexual aspects displayed throughout Farmer's practice, including homoerotic drawings and experimental videos found explicitly at the start of the artist's career and the more subtle and suggestive nods to the artist's sexuality woven throughout his larger and better-known projects.

In the contemporary vernacular, ‘queer’ is often utilized as an umbrella term encompassing non-straight identities and orientations. At times, I use queer in this plural manner, when addressing collective non-heteronormative perspectives. It is worth pointing out that for some, the term queer also serves as its own sexual and gender identity. I do not subscribe to this approach. Instead, I follow queer theory's unfixed perspective on identities, best described by Lee Edelman, who argues that “queerness can

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<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 565.

<sup>9</sup> Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London, UK: Icon Books, 2016), 102.

never define an identity; it can only disturb one.”<sup>10</sup> However, regarding identity, I do not wish to imply or speculate beyond what the artist has disclosed. Since the start of his career, Farmer has publicly identified as a gay man; therefore, he will be acknowledged as such when addressing his identity.<sup>11</sup> Farmer’s gay identity formed in a specific time and place, and it was an integral and influential aspect of his artistic practice. For those reasons, it must be specified. For this reading, I consider Farmer’s identity as a gay man as part of his subjectivity.

Returning to Butler, the term queer has inherent political implications. It is a rejection of the normative and a contemplation of power dynamics concerning gender and sexuality. In this respect, I acknowledge that the cis-gender gay male experience has been addressed at length by writers and criticized by queer theorists for dominating the narratives of queerness.<sup>12</sup> Bearing this in mind, I still see a need and value in applying this particular perspective to Farmer’s work because, as argued throughout this thesis, queerness is deeply embedded in the artist’s practice. It expands beyond Farmer’s sexual identity, and has become a source of reference and an approach to his artmaking. Queerness informs much of what he does; therefore, discussions of his art must recognize its importance. In addition to providing context for his practice, I believe that centering

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<sup>10</sup> Lee Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff,” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>11</sup> To be clear, I am not arguing that Farmer should be acknowledged or identified as queer, but rather that he actively incorporates queerness in his practice. I posit that his experiences as a gay man who lived through a time of heavy discrimination against homosexuality informed his queering abilities.

<sup>12</sup> The unfolding of gay politics in North America suggests a false progressive narrative for those who are non-heterosexual. See Jack Halberstam, “Introduction: Low Theory,” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NY: Duke University Press, 2011), 12-19.; José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: Feeling Utopia,” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 11; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 110, no. 3 (1995): 343-349, <https://doi.org/10.1632/s003081290005937x>.

and tracing the unfolding of queerness in Farmer's work also complicates and reveals aspects within his practice that standard ways of thinking have not addressed. As I see it, a queer reading must be as attentive to the normative as it is to the non-normative qualities of the artist's practice. While I contend that Farmer's subversive approach to artmaking is queer, a queer reading must also acknowledge his seemingly ascendant career trajectory and contemplate how this proximity to the normative regimes of progress and success affects his choices. Queer theory views these linear accounts as systems of discipline and often opposes them.<sup>13</sup> When discussing Farmer's career, one must consider what other factors granted him access to the renowned institutions that featured his work and allowed him to be disruptive and produce his form of queerness.

To examine the queerness in Farmer's work, I engage with seminal queer theory produced around the same time the artist's work emerged. This approach forms a theoretical and historical frame that contextualizes his elaborate career. I focus on Farmer's practice between 1992 and 2017, situating this research between the year that he completed his formal artistic training and the apex of his career thus far, his selection as the official representative at the Canada pavilion for the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale. This twenty-five-year period saw different realities for many LGBTQIA+ individuals caught in the shifting perspectives of gender and sexuality at the end of the twentieth century. Furthermore, this frame positions Farmer's work between the peak of the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s and the legalization of same-sex marriage in North America in

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<sup>13</sup> French theorist Guy Hocquenghem argues that capitalist success regulates normativity. He states that "capitalism turns its homosexuals into failed normal people, just as it turns its working class into an imitation of the middle class." Similarly, cultural theorist Jack Halberstam argues that a capitalist market economy "must have winners and losers." To Halberstam, winning leads to compromise, so he suggests that queerness should embrace losing because failure offers more transformative abilities. See Guy Hocquenghem, "Capitalism, Family and the Anus," in *Homosexual Desire*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993, 94; Halberstam, "The Queer Art of Failure," in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 94.



the early 2000s.<sup>14</sup> These significant moments also situate the development of queer theory, which also emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, Farmer's artistic practice began with an ardent interest in sexuality and advocacy for gay identity. A life-changing year studying abroad at the San Francisco Institute of Art (1990-1) exposed him to sex-positive artistic practices, gay culture, and queer politics that would inform his work for the next decade.<sup>15</sup> He came out shortly after and spent much of his early career applying the experiences of feeling different because of his sexuality to his work. Around that same time, activists reclaimed the former pejorative, mobilizing *queer* to reject assimilationist approaches and attend to the political urgencies largely stemming from the AIDS crisis. Queer, as a scholarly term, was first introduced by feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis. In 1991, she proposed *queer theory* to restructure the scholarship known as gay and lesbian studies.<sup>16</sup> Feminist theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, David M. Halperin, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, and Judith Butler critically expanded this work. They infused the study of gender and sexuality with a social deconstructionist approach and post-structural feminist critique largely borrowed from French theorist Michel Foucault to examine, disrupt, and resist preconceived

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<sup>14</sup> The first cases of what was then called GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) and is now known as AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) were reported in North America on June 5, 1981. The AIDS epidemic tragically ravaged the LGBTQ+ community throughout the 1980s and 1990s and continues to impact the lives of many to this day. See "A Timeline of HIV and AIDS," HIV.gov, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>; Same-sex marriage became legal in British Columbia in 2003, then recognized nationally in Canada with the enactment of the Civil Marriage Act in 2005. Marriage equality was achieved in the United States in 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Laurence, "Geoffrey Farmer fêted in new Vancouver Art Gallery show," *The Georgia Straight*, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.straight.com/arts/458161/geoffrey-farmer-feted-new-vancouver-art-gallery-show>.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa de Lauretis proposed "queer theory" after surveying a need to reconsider the structure of same-sex studies. De Lauretis rejected the term three years later as she felt people were not using it in its intended critical way. See Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, An Introduction," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (1991), iv.

configurations of gender, sex, sexuality, and desire. Queer theory can adequately engage with these aspects of Farmer's works.

Queer theorists understand that these shifting perspectives on gender and sexuality formed new understandings of the self and of time.<sup>17</sup> Like gender, time is a social construct historically built through heterosexual views; those who do not follow the normative life cycles of adolescence, marriage, and reproduction likely encounter queer temporalities. This research engages with seminal texts and critical perspectives on time and queerness, in particular, the scholarship of Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Jose Esteban Muñoz. These theorists examine the construction of time and offer alternative ways of navigating it. In 2005, Halberstam proposed the concept of *queer time*, a "potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child-rearing."<sup>18</sup> This theory offers a counter-model for the heteronormative and linear understanding of time, which Halberstam addresses as "straight time."<sup>19</sup> To Halberstam, the conventions of reproduction and generational lineage form schedules that regulate and sustain normativity. Expanding on this concept, Freeman proposed the term "chrononormativity," which she defines as "the interlocking of temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life," to address the institutional forces as that discipline and bind time to heteronormativity.<sup>20</sup> Farmer's relationship to time, family, and queerness is complicated and interwoven into

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Halberstam suggests that the "diminishing future" promised by the AIDS crisis prompted the emergence of "queer time" in the last decade of the twentieth century. See Jack Halberstam, "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories," in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xxii.

his artistic practice. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, at the start of his career, the artist positioned himself outside of his patriarchal lineage by renouncing his given paternal surname, “Topham,” and opting for his maternal last name as his artistic moniker. Farmer’s emerging work often depicted gay sex scenes in popular culture, science fiction, and youth sports culture to rebel against tradition and social norms of the nuclear family and its perceived futures. Through these works, Farmer cultivated a practice outside the regulations and schedules of heteronormative life and embarked on an artistic career informed by queer temporality.

Queer theory produced at the turn of the twenty-first century was significantly concerned with its position on futurity. In the book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), American literary critic Lee Edelman suggested a queer perspective that rejects the future. He theorizes that the heteronormative tradition of reproduction informs the dominant conceptualization of the future, which he terms “reproductive futurism.”<sup>21</sup> He argues that the well-being of the Child informs the future, as the Child is the “perpetual horizon” for political thought.<sup>22</sup> Edelman positions queerness in opposition to the continuity of reproduction; therefore, he argues that if “the future is Child’s play,” then it is no place for queers.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Edelman proposed an anti-future queer theory that embraces the death drive and the “here and now.”<sup>24</sup> Muñoz disagreed with this notion. In his 2011 book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, he

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<sup>21</sup> To Edelman, the Child (not to be confused with children themselves) is the image of a collective political structure. See Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff,” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> In his anti-futurist polemic, Edelman references the Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of the death drive as the negative perspective that queerness must embrace and follow its pursuit of “jouissance,” or enjoyment. Ibid, 25.

argued that “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope.”<sup>25</sup> To Muñoz, the elements of desire, speculation, and world-building are futurist tropes found in queerness; therefore, to him, queerness is always “on the horizon.”<sup>26</sup> It is something yet to happen and something to reach towards. I apply these perspectives on futurity to Farmer’s emerging practice. Works including makeshift spaceship installations and drawings of science fiction characters in sexually compromising situations suggest that the artist sought to project himself and his sexuality beyond the present. Alternatively, Farmer’s early collaborative projects, also found during the emerging period of his career, depicted an embrace of the “here and now” and an awareness of his mortality. These works involved the artist and his collaborators collaging gay sex scenes (either drawn or taken from magazines) into recreational youth and board culture environments like ski hills and skateboard alleys, with a grim reaper figure looming nearby. Chapter 1 examines how the concerns and ongoing anxieties of gay men in the 1990s informed much of Farmer’s early (and often dismissed) works.

Queer theorists Christopher Reed and Christopher Castiglia argue that much of the “temporal disorientation” associated with queer temporality are “signs of a post-traumatic response” to the AIDS crisis.<sup>27</sup> They insist that this seismic moment informs queer theory’s feelings of being out of time and future-minded. Reed and Castiglia situate theory produced after this time as “second wave of queer theory.”<sup>28</sup> Two shifts in perspective informed this movement in queer studies: the anti-social turn, which includes

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<sup>25</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, “Queer Theory Is Burning: Sexual Revolution and Traumatic Unremembering,” in *If Memory Serves: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 146-56.

<sup>28</sup> Reed and Castiglia argue that second wave queer theory is informed by a particular forgetfulness of time before the AIDS crisis, which they call “degenerational unforgetting.” Ibid.

queer thinking that embraces failure, solitude, and negativity, and the affective turn, or the theorizing of felt experience and emotional impact.<sup>29</sup> This queer reading applies both ‘turns’ to Farmer’s practice and, following Reed and Castiglia, considers how personal trauma informs the artist’s work. From the bullying and harm that he experienced in his youth due to homophobia, to the intergenerational traumas that he reconciles with later in his adulthood (see Chapter 3), Farmer’s art mirrors his lived experiences. My approach to considering trauma in Farmer’s work also follows in the scholarship of feminist and queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich, who theorizes on the affects of trauma from a cultural (rather than clinical) perspective.<sup>30</sup> In her work, Cvetkovich connects trauma with the use and creation of archives, or what she considers an “archive of feelings.”<sup>31</sup> In her research, she posits that artists (as opposed to archivists or historians, per se) are “unafraid to make use of their very personal, subjective, and affective investments in the archive” and thus produce alternative and creative outcomes that challenge the norm.<sup>32</sup> The relation between feelings and archives is not inherently negative. Elizabeth Freeman’s writing on queer temporalities also considers the feelings attached to disrupting the past; however, she suggests that beyond trauma and melancholia, queering history can be informed by and result in pleasure, a concept that she refers to as “erotohistoriography.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “The affective turn” was introduced by critical theorist Patricia Ticineto Clough in her book of the same name, where she used it to address writing in the humanities and social sciences concerned with feelings and emotional impact. “The affective turn in queer theory” is often associated with how queerness affects and is affected by others. For more see Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Duke University Press, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11316pw>.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, “Introduction,” *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, et al., “Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Radical History Review* 122 (2015): 211–231, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849630>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Freeman, “Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories,” *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, xi–xxix.

Similarly, feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed underlines that desire is an inherent source of queering. In her research on queer phenomenology, Ahmed analyzes how queer is a spatial term that twists and averts linearity and continuity. She views queerness as a deviation that situates objects “out of line,” causing them to fail to extend in linearity.<sup>34</sup> In the early 2000s, Farmer’s work became invested in deconstructing and re-arranging image-based collections designed to synthesize extensive histories. These included magazine collections, art history books, and other image archives. In Chapter 2, I explore Farmer’s relation to the past by looking at his most elaborate installations between 2000 and 2015. In these works, Farmer removes figures from their contexts, linearities, and specificities and forms new spatial and temporal orientations. I apply Ahmed’s perspectives to Farmer’s uses of archives in his most elaborate installations and examine how Farmer’s queering of archives collides the past onto itself and thus form new and strange temporalities and spatialities.

In tracing the queerness of Farmer’s work and contextualizing it within the politics of its time, I engage with critical queer theory that addresses the shifting power dynamics of gay politics in modern society. As mentioned earlier, queerness positions itself in opposition to the normative structures created by heterosexuality. In 1991, Michael Warner introduced the term “heteronormativity” to address the normalizing project made by hegemonic heterosexual culture.<sup>35</sup> In the early 2000s, professor of social and cultural analysis Lisa Duggan popularized the term “homonormativity” to address the

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<sup>34</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NYC: Duke University Press, 2006), 92.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxi-xxv.

privatization and domestication in western neoliberal gay politics.<sup>36</sup> Duggan acknowledged how for many gay men, the gay liberation movement led to assimilation with heteronormative values and a relation with the nation-state via the legalization of gay marriage and acceptance in military service.<sup>37</sup> Cultural and political geographer Gavin Brown argues that Duggan's understanding of Homonormativity (which he capitalizes to acknowledge its dominance and popularity) is often understood as homogenous and "unassailable."<sup>38</sup> He considers this as dangerous as it leaves no room for nuance and argues that discussions of homonormativity require specific relations and geographical contexts. Brown writes, "it is not enough to contextualize sexuality within a specific time-space," there is a need to "map the complex and often contradictory social dynamics that produce and, in turn, reproduce within particular sexual cultures, practices and desires."<sup>39</sup> With Brown's arguments in mind, I approach dialogues on homonormativity with nuance. For many years, gay men and gay culture at large faced violence and discrimination. At the turn of the twenty-first century, and after decades of activism and protest, gay men and women, predominantly in the global north, were given rights and societal acceptance. This relatively different shift in power is not inherently negative, but it does pose a problem when the achievement of gay rights is seen as the

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<sup>36</sup> Gender studies professor Susan Stryker is credited with coining the term "homonormativity" although she acknowledges that it was used earlier by trans activists in San Francisco in the 1990s who were criticizing how gay and lesbian identities were at the forefront of politics. See Susan Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 145–157. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2007-026>; Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History*, (UK: Icon Books, 2016), 154.

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D Nelson (New York City, NY: Duke University Press, 2002), 175–194.

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Brown, "Homonormativity: A Metropolitan Concept that Denigrates 'Ordinary' Gay Lives," in *Journal of Homosexuality* 59 (2012): 1067.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 1069.

summit for equality. I apply theories on homonormativity to consider Farmer's association with the nation-state. The presentation of Farmer's work at international art world fairs positions him in dialogue with Canadian identity and national representation. This association was prominent at the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale when the artist was selected to exhibit at the Canada pavilion during the nation-state's sesquicentennial anniversary, also known as "Canada 150."<sup>40</sup> Farmer's installation titled *A way out of the mirror* was a collision of personal histories and past traumas within the artist's family. The pavilion displayed fountains and sculptures portraying narratives about the artist's grandfather, father, himself, and his husband. In this chapter, I engage with the politics of the present and consider what occurred at this particular moment, when the National Gallery of Canada commissioned the artist to perform his queering practice on a nationalist platform during a crucial marker for Canadian history.

In the book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), U.S.-based philosopher and queer theorist Jasbir K. Puar offers a critical reading of queer politics post marriage equality. Puar proposes the concept of "homonationalism," a shorthand term for "homonormative nationalism," as a lens to think through the relationship between gay rights and the nation-state.<sup>41</sup> Homonationalism is a temporal narrative that assumes a linear model where time passing equals improvement, and gay rights serve as a barometer for progress. Gender studies professor Scott Lauria Morgensen extends Puar's analysis to the North American settler-colonial context. He

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<sup>40</sup> 2017 marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the confederation of Canada. While celebratory for many, this anniversary was seen highly political year, with calls for reflection and action against the country's colonial history and ongoing genocide of Indigenous people.

<sup>41</sup> Puar's writing is specific to the Israel and Palestine conflict. See Jasbir K. Puar, "Introduction: Homonationalism and Biopolitics," in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 29.



contrives “settler homonationalism,” which illustrates “queer modernities forming amid the conquest of Native peoples and the settling of Native Land.”<sup>42</sup> Settler homonationalism is a critique that uses queer and decolonial studies to examine the imperial biopolitics within queer projects in the US nation-state. Interdisciplinary scholars OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon examine settler homonationalism in the Canadian context through their analysis of Pride House, a safe space for LGBTQIA+ athletes and audiences at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, BC.<sup>43</sup> Media spectators saw this inaugural addition to the Winter Games as a prime example of Canadian exceptionalism while ignoring the violence and disruption it caused to Secwepemc and St’at’imc First Nations.<sup>44</sup> Dryden reads these 2010 Winter Olympics events as “pinkwashing,” a strategy that posits myth-narratives of LGBTQIA+ progress and acceptance to deflect other forms of oppression, often at the expense of others.<sup>45</sup> Scholar Sonny Dhoot analyzes Canadian pinkwashing as being informed by two particular operations: Belonging and Settlement. Belonging involves a means of inclusion, and settlement requires taking up space.<sup>46</sup> In reading Farmer’s presentation at the Venice Biennale through the lens of Settler and Canadian homonationalism, I look at the nuance of pinkwashing and examine how the artist disrupts and abides by these conventions.

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<sup>42</sup> Scott Morgensen, “Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16 (1–2): 105. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-015>.

<sup>43</sup> The Venice Biennale is often referred to as ‘the Olympics of contemporary art.’ Both festivals involve nationalist representation at an international platform. I rely on these similarities to apply Dryden, Lennon, and Dhoot’s theories to this context.

<sup>44</sup> OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016), 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Sonny Dhoot, “Pink Games on Stolen Land: Pride House and (Un)Queer Reterritorializations,” in *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016), 53.

Standing between mirrors causes various forms of reflection; this is how I approach this research. At large, this thesis posits theoretical and historical frames to contextualize the artist's works. As mentioned earlier, the development of queer theory and Farmer's practice offers unique points of reference for queer encounters. Another set of frames that I consider is the hegemonic understanding of Farmer's work concerning his often-disregarded emerging practice. I use exhibition catalogs, press interviews, and newspaper articles as my primary sources to situate Farmer's career development and unpack the hegemonic understanding of his work. I also use these for their subjective insights. The artist's monographs are particularly revealing. Farmer is known for writing annotations accompanying his works; these vary from fragmented thoughts to obscure references and diaristic entries that provide glimpses into his subjectivity.<sup>47</sup> I bring this information to my analysis of Farmer's work. I follow social theorist Michael Warner's approach to writing about queer issues by placing queerness and its politics "as starting points rather than as footnotes."<sup>48</sup> I also take inspiration from Halberstam's "Low Theory," a critical approach that uses Foucault's idea of "subjugated knowledges," or knowledge otherwise disregarded from dominant history.<sup>49</sup> I turn to forgotten group exhibitions, experimental collaborations, and local press coverage to unearth the disqualified narratives and works at the foundation of the artist's practice. A more nuanced understanding of the work is obtained by closely examining these minor details in the literature concerning Farmer's work.

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<sup>47</sup> It bears mentioning that the biographical and personal information discussed here is disclosed by the artist in his works or in interviews concerning his work. I believe that to consider the artist's subjectivities is to fully engage with all that the artist is exposing in the work.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, vii.

<sup>49</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 11.

This thesis rigorously argues for a queer reading of Farmer's practice and makes evident the many ways that queerness appears in his work. While his practice may lend itself exponentially to many fields of research and interpretation, I do not believe these would be possible without his formative experiences growing up gay and the unique estrangement he felt then, which he later conceptualized into his illustrious artistic practice.<sup>50</sup> From depicting queerness to creating experiences of queerness, this is an essential concept for understanding the artist's work. Queerness is at the root of his practice. It intersects with his interests and informs what he does. Therefore, it must be considered and critically addressed when discussing his art.

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<sup>50</sup> Farmer's work lends itself to many different readings and theoretical frames, including new materiality, sculptural aesthetics, theatricality, performativity, and the history of photography, to name a few.

## Chapter 1: Ground Control to Geoffrey Topham (1992–1998)

The 1990s were a politically charged time for LGBTQ+ issues in North America. The beginning of the decade saw extreme right-wing conservatives lobbying campaigns and proposing religious-based policies against gay and lesbian lifestyles in favor of the Child and traditional family values.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, anti-homophobic resistance and collective movement intensified due to the grief and frustration from the lack of action and empathy toward the HIV and AIDS crisis. Around the same time, arguments surrounding contemporary art, particularly the funding and censorship of radical or offensive work, were debated against under the moralistic divide known as the culture wars of the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> This setting was the political landscape for Farmer's emerging artistic practice.

In this chapter, I contextualize the artist's formative years with theories on queer time, an alternative temporality to normative straight time, or, as Halberstam defined, the "potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child-rearing."<sup>53</sup> I examine Farmer's rejection of the dominant structures of the nuclear family, masculinity, and productivity to locate the queerness that serves as the foundation for his artistic practice. This chapter uncovers a collection of early and sexually explicit works by the artist, ranging in various media, including drawings, collages, experimental videos, and installations. In these works, I consider the themes of alienation, longing, and

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<sup>51</sup> As per Edelman's theories on reproductive futurism, I capitalize the "Child" to distinguish the image of the Child and children in general. Edelman posits that the Child is the "perpetual horizon of the political endeavor," and serves as a symbol of the future for the political structures. See Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> The phrase "culture wars" is credited to a speech given by US presidential candidate Pat Buchanan at the Republican National Convention in 1992, who stated, "...[t]here is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America." Pat Buchanan, "Buchanan, 'Culture War Speech,' Speech Text," *Voices of Democracy*, March 23, 2016, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/buchanan-culture-war-speech-speech-text/>.

<sup>53</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

existentialism as examples of a queer futurity. Ultimately, I apply two perspectives for imagining queer futures to Farmer's work: the "here and now," as proposed by Edelman, and the "then and there," as theorized by Muñoz. Edelman perceives that those who do not participate in the linear reproduction cycle have "no future." He proposes that queer individuals embrace this anti-future perspective and live in the present. This idea is most apparent in Farmer's early collaborative works with other gay men, where anxieties of mortality are juxtaposed with depictions of gay sex and recreational youth activities like snowboarding and skateboarding.

Alternatively, Farmer's independent efforts, which involve his interests in technology, science fiction, and popular culture, portray the artist projecting himself and his sexuality into the future and positioning queerness, as Muñoz puts it, "on the horizon."<sup>54</sup> In this chapter, I make apparent how Farmer's practice aligns with concepts of queer temporality and argue that his early projects were explorations of queer futurity.

### **1.1 Geoffrey Topham**

Much of the upheaval from the 1990s was a continuation of the cultural work done in the 1960s. Consequently, the unique moments and circumstances developed during this period influenced the artist's understanding of time. Farmer, whose birth name is Geoffrey Victor Topham, was born in the summer of 1967, a season of unrest, transformation, and commemoration in North America. A time when Canada celebrated its centennial anniversary, and the United States witnessed civil rights uprisings, as well as the sexual revolution and the infamous "summer of love."<sup>55</sup> A few years later, the

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<sup>54</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> The Summer of Love was a phenomenal period where young adults converged at San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. Farmer would make his way to San Francisco during his formative artistic years. The significance of these events would collide fifty years later at the Venice Biennale; see Chapter 3.

Stonewall Riots of 1969 in New York City ignited the gay liberation movement of the twentieth century. Concurrently, Canada legalized same-sex sexual activity in the same year.<sup>56</sup> In the book *Time Binds*, Freeman assesses that gay, lesbian, and trans artists born between the 1960s and 1970s possess a unique relation to time, as they witnessed revolutionary changes within society. This generation's coming-of-age formed following the anxieties of the cold war and its concerns with space exploration and the future of humankind. This time also saw unique technological developments, particularly in the rise of mainstream media through television and print. Gay and lesbian artists from this era also witnessed the intensified homophobia and anxieties from the HIV and AIDS epidemic that lingered through the 1980s and 1990s. As Freeman notes, these seismic cultural shifts led to this generation of artists becoming interested in "inventing possibilities for moving through and with time, encountering pasts, speculating futures, and interpreting the two ways that counter the common sense of the present tense."<sup>57</sup> These histories shaped Farmer's temporality and informed the unique usages of time in his work.

Farmer, who grew up hiding his sexuality during his teenage years, acknowledges that his oppressed youth greatly impacted his worldview. Adolescence was difficult for the artist, who experienced hostility and violence for being a closeted gay teen.<sup>58</sup> One of Farmer's early drawings (fig. 2) depicts a wounded person bleeding from his head, ears,

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<sup>56</sup> In 1969, the Criminal Law Amendment Act (Bill C-150) added an exemption to the criminal code allowing homosexual acts between consenting adults in private spaces.

<sup>57</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, xv.

<sup>58</sup> Farmer recalls experiencing "a lot of violence, or threats of violence" while growing up in West Vancouver. See Murray White, "Geoffrey Farmer at the Venice Biennale: Through a glass, darkly." *The Toronto Star*, May 13, 2017. Accessed November 05, 2017. <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2017/05/13/geoffrey-farmer-at-the-venice-biennale-through-a-glass-darkly.html>.

and mouth while peeking over mountains and overlooking a rural townscape from a distance. In a 2017 interview, the artist reflected on his youth, admitting: “I think growing up gay in the [19]70s created a very deep impression on me. Only now am I starting to understand what it was like for that kid not to honestly express his desires and feel that there wasn’t a place for him in the world.”<sup>59</sup> Animosity and shame resulted in the artist experiencing much of his early life as an outsider. These feelings of difference would later manifest as inspiration and force for many of his early artistic projects.

In 1989, at the age of twenty-two, Farmer enrolled at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (ECIAD) to hone his artistic skills and develop a budding painting practice.<sup>60</sup> Farmer’s later start into post-secondary education exemplifies the artist rejecting what Freeman calls chrononormativity, or “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”<sup>61</sup> While most of his peers went directly from high school into their undergraduate programs, Farmer took time off and later decided to pursue art professionally. While no age is too late to start higher education, in the frame of straight time and its fixation with productivity, this stalling of development is a delay in maturation. Moreover, it marks a late entry into the workforce—this deviation from the social script of a chrononormative life gestures towards the beginnings of an alternative temporality.

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<sup>59</sup> Kevin Griffin, “Geoffrey Farmer on art, photography, and growing up gay,” *The Vancouver Sun*, May 7, 2015, <https://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/geoffrey-farmer-on-art-photography-and-growing-up-gay>.

<sup>60</sup> Emily Carr Institute is now known as the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Farmer’s initial artistic efforts were focused on painting, having received several artistic and painting scholarships to formalize his practice. See Geoffrey Farmer, *Geoffrey Farmer Topham CV*, 1993; Michael Scott, “Domestic decay’s big day in art: Geoffrey Farmer’s mess challenges the nature of the creative process,” *The Vancouver Sun*, (Vancouver, BC) November 10, 2001, H14.

<sup>61</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3-5.

Around this time, the artist began experimenting with his given surname, *Topham*, sometimes pairing or interchanging it with his mother's maiden name, *Farmer*, which he later settled on.<sup>62</sup> By abdicating his paternal name, the artist renounced his genealogical inheritance and assumed a future outside the confines of patriarchal lineage and straight time. This significant decision affected the trajectory of the artist's life. The artist's name change is a breaking with the past and a rejection of the perceived political future that awaited "Geoffrey Topham." Halberstam considers this radical act as a form of "queer forgetting," where the artist "forgets family and tradition, and lineage and biological relation and lives to create relationality anew."<sup>63</sup> By removing himself from patriarchal expectations, Farmer gained the freedom to exist and explore time on his terms. This newly crafted version of himself, "a queer version," disconnected from family and straight time, pursued a queer temporality.<sup>64</sup>

## 1.2 The Future in the Present

During the second year of his studies, Farmer went on a year-and-a-half-long exchange to the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) (1990–91) in California. This new environment expanded the artist's worldview and exposed him to new ways of thinking. He attended lectures by avant-garde artists like Carolee Schneemann and John Cage and heard radical poet Allen Ginsberg recite *Father Death Blues*.<sup>65</sup> Farmer also studied creative writing

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<sup>62</sup> The changes of the artist's name are traced through his early exhibition record. In 1989 he began his studies at Emily Carr Art Institute under the name Geoffrey Topham. In 1993, he presented himself as Geoffrey Farmer Topham in the group show, *Reorientation: Imported Fruits*. For his first solo exhibition in 1996, the vinyl on the Or Gallery's window credits him as Geoffrey Topham. The artist's moniker settled by 1998, when he identified as Geoffrey Farmer, as seen in an undersigned catalog questionnaire for the group exhibition *Six: New Vancouver Modern* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

<sup>63</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 80.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Scott, "Domestic decay's big day in art" *The Vancouver Sun*, November 10, 2001, H14.



under punk poet Kathy Acker, whose postmodernist pedagogy and sex-positive demeanor contributed to his coming-of-age.<sup>66</sup> Farmer's alternative education continued off-campus. San Francisco's vibrancy exposed him to LGBTQIA+ history, gay politics, and the realities of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.<sup>67</sup> When discussing his time in San Francisco, Farmer explained: "I worked on one of the first plays on Harvey Milk. I worked on the Shanti Project, which delivered home care to people with AIDS."<sup>68</sup> San Francisco was a defining time for the artist who witnessed the full spectrum of being gay in the 1990s. In an interview reflecting on his early beginnings, Farmer contends: "Growing up gay and feeling like I existed outside of society, I always had a desire to be part of society." This longing would translate into his practice: "In the beginning, my interest in art was to somehow become part of the world."<sup>69</sup>

San Francisco, a city historically known as a refuge for outsiders, allowed Farmer to experience a sense of belonging and observe possibilities for alternative futures. Muñoz identifies these moments as "an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present."<sup>70</sup> Muñoz proposes the concept of utopias as a method for thinking about queer futures. He refers to Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of*

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<sup>66</sup> Acker was a significant mentor for Farmer. She pushed his creative and literary interests by introducing him to the works of William Burroughs and Gertrude Stein, who informed his unique bricolage and deconstructionist approach to art. See Scott Watson, "GhostFace: Geoffrey Farmer," *Geoffrey Farmer*, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror*, 227

<sup>68</sup> Harvey Milk was the first openly gay man elected to public office in California. In 1977, when discussing young gay people coming out, he highlighted the importance of having and giving them hope. See Harvey Milk, "Milk, 'You've Got to Have Hope,' Speech Text," *Voices of Democracy*, July 5, 2016, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/milk-youve-got-to-have-hope-speech-text/>; Kevin Griffin, "Geoffrey Farmer on art, photography and growing up gay," *The Vancouver Sun*, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, "How One Artist is Redefining the Exhibition Space," *The Walrus*, February 1, 2018. <https://thewalrus.ca/how-one-artist-is-redefining-the-exhibition-space/>.

<sup>70</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 55.

*Hope* (1954), which nominates two approaches for utopian thinking: Abstract utopias and concrete utopias.<sup>71</sup> The difference between the two is that abstract utopias lack “historical consciousness,” whereas concrete utopias are “relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential.”<sup>72</sup> Farmer’s experiences in San Francisco are glimpses of a concrete queer utopia.<sup>73</sup> Muñoz aptly points out that “[h]eteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them. All we are allowed to imagine is barely surviving the present.”<sup>74</sup> San Francisco’s queer and counter-culture legacies, SFAI’s postmodern education, and the unique experiences that Farmer encountered in this year-long exchange instilled an educated hope and signaled an alternative possibility for living and existing in the world. After experiencing the potentiality of a queer future, Farmer returned to Vancouver with a strong and defiant sense of self. The artist grew into himself, found his way out of the closet, and applied this newly formed approach to his artistic practice.<sup>75</sup>

Upon completing his studies, Farmer began looking for opportunities to exhibit his newly liberated work. The themes he explored aligned well with the changing climate of artist-run culture in British Columbia. In the early 1990s, the Pacific Association of Artist-Run Centers (PAARC) called upon its membership to promote “the inclusion of racial and sexual equality in [their respective] community.”<sup>76</sup> One of its newly formed

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> I refrain from calling San Francisco itself a queer utopia as that would ignore the city’s many problems including high cost of living, racism, and safety concerns for LGBTQ+ individuals. However, I contend that Farmer’s experiences in San Francisco, its impact, and memories of that time signaled a kind of hope that is described in Muñoz’s terms as a queer utopia.

<sup>74</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 112.

<sup>75</sup> Robin Laurence, “Geoffrey Farmer,” *The Georgia Straight*. 2015.

<sup>76</sup> *Annual General Meeting 1993 Agenda*, report (Kelowna, BC: Okanagan Artists Alternative Association, 1993).

member organizations, the Alternator Gallery, assimilated this message into its radical programming. During its initial years of operation, the Alternator committed to providing “a venue for unorthodox or controversial art that cannot be seen in municipal or commercial galleries.”<sup>77</sup> In the fall of 1993, artists Ed Pien, Johannes Zits, Dennis Day, and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer) traveled to Kelowna, BC, to form the group exhibition, *Reorientation: Imported Fruits*. Here, the artists were unapologetic with their approach. Their individual and collaborative works openly discussed same-sex desire, mortality, and conflicts with masculinity as they uninhibitedly disclosed their experiences as gay men.<sup>78</sup> *Imported Fruits* reflected the gay liberation approach of the 1980s and early 1990s, which relied on identity politics to push forth the acceptance of sexual diversity.<sup>79</sup> The artists were there to disrupt and stage what the local newspaper considered “the most controversial show to ever come to Kelowna.”<sup>80</sup> Another article (fig. 1) with the headline, “Exhibit explores gay sexuality,” featured a defiant then twenty-six-year-old Farmer staring directly at the camera while standing beside a collaborative installation. Farmer further engaged with this advocacy when he participated in a panel discussion alongside fellow artist Ed Pien on gay identity and homosexuality in the arts as part of the exhibition’s programming.<sup>81</sup> Here, Farmer demonstrates the disruptive approaches that he acquired from the likes of Acker and Ginsberg and puts into practice Muñoz’s concept of “the future in the present,” this time by showing others that an alternative way of being is

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<sup>77</sup> Betty Dhont, “Alternator: Cultivating Alternative Art in the Okanagan,” ArcPost, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://arcpost.ca/articles/alternator-cultivating-alternative-art-in-the-okanagan>.

<sup>78</sup> Maev Brennan, “Heavy subject, light tone,” *Capital News*, 1993.

<sup>79</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, 77.

<sup>80</sup> Andre Wetjen, “Exhibit explores gay sexuality,” *The Daily Courier* (Kelowna), October 21, 1993, Weekend ed., sec. C.

<sup>81</sup> Brennan, “Heavy subject, light tone,” *Capital News*, 1993.

possible.<sup>82</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Farmer continued participating in similarly disruptive group shows, including the 1997 exhibition *Big Dick Time* at YYZ in Toronto, which almost cost the gallery their funding.<sup>83</sup>

### 1.3 Existential collaborations

The 1990s was an existential period for gay men living in Vancouver. According to the Canadian Journal of Public Health, in 1995, HIV infection became the second leading cause of death for men between the ages of twenty-five to forty-four.<sup>84</sup> By 1998, Vancouver became the city “with the highest percentage of people living with HIV in the developed world.”<sup>85</sup> Even though health and science breakthroughs began to lower these statistics, the severity of HIV and AIDS and its proximity to death cast a shadow on sexuality and promiscuity. And even with growing social awareness, gay men continued to face stigma for this disease. Throughout the 1990s, Farmer participated in collaborative projects with other gay male artists based in Vancouver. Collectively, these works depicted the anxieties of their time with a sense of irony and an embrace of

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<sup>82</sup> In 1993, the city of Kelowna did not have any allocated public spaces for LGBTQ+ groups. Community was built through temporary events and gatherings such as exhibitions; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> The 1997 group exhibition *Big Dick Time* at artist-run center YYZ in Toronto, ON, displayed a similar unapologetic approach towards acceptance of gay perspective. *Big Dick Time* featured collaborative film works by artists Joe Gibbons, Tony Oursler, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon, Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), and Jonathan Wells. The exhibition almost caused YYZ to lose its funding from Metro Toronto. See: Steve Reinke, “Big Dick Time, Curatorial Essay, YYZ, 1997,” My rectum is not a grave, 1997, <http://www.myrectumisnotagrave.com/writing/bigdicktime.html>.

<sup>84</sup> In 1995, the leading cause of death for males in Canada between the ages of twenty-five to forty-four was and continues to be suicide, with HIV infection peaking as the second. However, in the US, by 1995 HIV infection became the leading cause of death amongst all Americans between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. See Dena L. Schanzer, “Trends in HIV/AIDS Mortality in Canada, 1987-1998,” in *Canadian Journal of Public Health / Revue Canadienne de Sante’e Publique* 94, no. 2 (2003): 135–39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41994093>; Lawrence K. Altman, “AIDS Is Now the Leading Killer of All Americans from 25 to 44,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 1995, sec. C, p. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Vancouver experienced two major outbreaks of HIV infections. The first increase in HIV prevalence occurred in the mid-1980s from an incidence of men who have sex with other men (MSM). The second outbreak, which took place in the mid-1990s is largely attributed to transmission amongst injection drug users (IDU). Gay men remained a high risk throughout the 1990s. See Colin W. McInnes et al., “HIV/AIDS in Vancouver, British Columbia: A Growing Epidemic,” *Harm Reduction Journal* 6, no. 1 (May 2009): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7517-6-5>.

sexuality. In his anti-future polemic, Edelman encourages those who fail reproductive futurity to embrace the Freudian psychoanalytic concept of the death drive. This negative approach favors enjoyment or what he refers to as “jouissance.”<sup>86</sup> These homosocial collaborations portray queer temporalities that orient their lives towards the here and now.

Between 1995-96, Farmer shared a studio with friend and former ECIAD schoolmate Brian Jungen (b. 1970) in downtown Vancouver. During this time, the artists created a collaborative series of drawings and mixed media collages now referred to as *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen* (fig. 3). In this series, Farmer and Jungen challenged the inherent masculinities of outdoor and snowboard culture through homoerotic drawings of male snowboarders on sketchbooks and snowboarding magazine clippings. The sexuality is further enhanced by the artists when making apparent the phallic aspects of the snowboard itself and revelatory texts depicting the snowboarders' sexual encounters. These works were assembled as exquisite corpses, with the artists taking turns adding different elements. Jungen recalled their collaborations served “as a way to push each other, to see how extreme [they] could take it.”<sup>87</sup> Farmer was familiar with snowboard culture; when he was younger, he worked as a “lifty” or chair lift operator at Cypress Bowl, a ski resort where he would often disappear to and “imagin[e] the world is out there somewhere.”<sup>88</sup> A recurring motif in these drawings is a black-cloaked grim reaper wielding a scythe and sauntering the mountain slopes (fig. 4).

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<sup>86</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 31.

<sup>87</sup> Brian Jungen, “Untitled Letter,” Wood Land School: Kahatenhstánion tsi na’tetiatere ne Iotohrkó:wa tánon Iotohrha / Drawing Lines from January to December, SBC Gallery, March 2017, [https://catrionajeffries.com/assets/artists/jungen-brian/Jungen\\_Untitled-Letter\\_Wood-Land-School\\_SBC\\_2017.pdf](https://catrionajeffries.com/assets/artists/jungen-brian/Jungen_Untitled-Letter_Wood-Land-School_SBC_2017.pdf)

<sup>88</sup> A lifty is someone who works as a chair lift operator at a ski resort. Kevin Griffin, “Geoffrey Farmer on art, photography and growing up gay,” *The Vancouver Sun*, 2015.

This shadow-like figure that contrasts the white snowscapes and often takes over the compositions (fig 5) is an embodiment of death.

Using Edelman's polemic on anti-futurity, the queer pleasures of cruising for sex on the mountain slopes signal a refusal of authority and reproductive futurity, thus representing what he identifies as *jouissance*. Death lingering near the dalliances of these promiscuous snowboarders (who Edelman would identify as *sinthomosexuals*) is the psychoanalytic manifestation of the death drive.<sup>89</sup> According to Edelman, "the death drive names what the queer, in order of the social, is called to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability."<sup>90</sup> This antagonistic approach is a refusal of the future and an embrace of the here and now.

A similar depiction of the death drive and its negative perspective on the future appears in another one of Farmer's collaborative projects. Between 1994-96, Farmer produced a series of experimental short films with fellow ECIAD alum Jonathan Wells.<sup>91</sup> Their 1996 collaboration, *Sad Story of a Gay Skateboarder* (fig. 6), is a satirical existential tale about a young gay man's mortality. The film begins with a skateboarder, played by Wells, sitting in the backseat of a car, speaking directly to the camera: "I didn't want to go on this car trip, dad. I told you that before we left. It's not going to be any

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<sup>89</sup> According to Edelman, *sinthomosexuals* are those who have no interest in the future because of their non-heterosexual and assumed non-reproductive sexual orientation. The death drive is a Freudian psychoanalytic term that suggests humans are oriented toward death and destruction. Edelman proposes an embrace of this notion when considering a queer future imaginary. See Edelman, *No Future*, 39.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Farmer's collaborative films with Jonathan Wells include *Pizza 222* (1994), *Kiss my Swollen Theory* (1995), and *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (1996). These films are catalogued respectively at <https://www.vtape.org/artist?ai=1472>; <http://videoout.ca/catalog/sad-story-gay-skater>.

fun.”<sup>92</sup> Farmer, cast as the “fantasy skater,” interjects, “I’ll make it fun,” as he unbuttons Wells’ pants and simulates oral sex (fig. 7). Wells continues with a foreboding soliloquy:

This is my fantasy skater who is with me in the back of the car, giving me enjoyment that, at this point, I can only fantasize about. My life will be cut short abruptly by a freak accident involving a car driven by my own father. It’s a tragic story, but one with which I’m sure we’re all very familiar.<sup>93</sup>

Both artists’ amateur acting adds to the scene’s intentional absurdity, which concludes with Farmer breaking the 4<sup>th</sup> wall by making a funny face at the camera. An interlude proceeds, consisting of a stop-motion photomontage, which pans the gaze from a centerspread of an orgy from a gay porn magazine (fig. 8) to a *Charlie Brown and the Peanuts Gang* pillowcase that reads, “Happiness is being one of the gang” (fig. 9).<sup>94</sup> The film resumes with Wells leaving a convenience store and, as predicted, gets run over by his father’s car. This denouement is dramatized in slow motion and underscored with Henry Purcell’s aria, “Dido’s Lament.” The film concludes with a woman dressed in red visiting the body of the lifeless skateboarder (fig. 10). The woman, portrayed by artist Una Knox, weaves her fingers over his (fig. 11) as the credits roll.

The film *Sad Story of a Gay Skateboarder* and the drawing series, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen* approach the topic of sexual promiscuity and death with dark humor, excess, and irony. Edelman argues that irony has a certain charge that is disruptive and thereby queer. Irony is an undoing of narrative, which is necessary for an undoing of futurity.<sup>95</sup> At a time when discussions of sex and promiscuity

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<sup>92</sup> Geoffrey Topham (Farmer) and Jonathan Wells, *Sad Story of a Gay Skateboarder* (1996; Vancouver, BC: ECIAD & Video In), Digitized video.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Referring to Belgian literary critic Paul de Man, Edelman suggests, “any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing of any theory of narrative.” See Edelman, *No Future*, 23.

in art and popular culture mainly were about safe sex and HIV and AIDS awareness, both the snowboarders and skateboarders in Farmer's collaborative works display no signs of such activism. Instead, they embrace the pleasures of the present and accept their mortality.

The use of board sports culture highlights aspects of queer temporality in both projects. Evidently, there is a slight generational gap between the artists and their subject matter. Board sports are typically associated with youth culture. They have a sense of anti-authority and anti-responsibility stemming from suburban juvenile angst. Skateboarding, in particular, is a subculture predominantly for teenagers. Farmer, Jungen, and Wells' engagement with these sports in their late twenties and past the early stages of adulthood demonstrates a queer temporal arrested development. The artists' embrace of youth culture is a resistance to maturation, or what Halberstam calls a "notion of a stretched-out adolescence," one that blurs the "clear break between youth and adulthood."<sup>96</sup> Further, like gay sex, counter-culture leisure sports like skateboarding and snowboarding are examples of unproductivity. Straight time views these activities as time-wasting, idle, and anti-future orchestrations against the structures of capitalism, family, and mainstream society.

#### **1.4 Queerness on the Horizon**

Whereas Farmer's collaborative projects opted for a negative embrace of the death drive, his solo artistic practice subscribed to a more hopeful approach that envisions queer life beyond the present moment. This contrasting perspective corresponds with the arguments on queer futurity between Edelman and Muñoz. While Edelman argues that queers do not

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<sup>96</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 153.



factor in the dominant concept of the future, Muñoz argues that “the future is queerness’s domain.”<sup>97</sup> According to Muñoz, “the present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and “rational” expectations.”<sup>98</sup> He proposes that the “then and there” is more disruptive to the dominant structures of temporality than the “here and now.”<sup>99</sup> Farmer’s solo projects explored speculation, world-building, and alternative temporalities that imagine “queerness on the horizon.”<sup>100</sup>

Three elements informed Farmer’s views on queer future imaginaries. As mentioned earlier, Farmer’s youth and experiences of feeling like an outsider informed his artistic practice and uses of longing and speculation. His time year-long exchange in San Francisco exposed him to the potentiality of an alternative future and was a glimpse of what Muñoz calls “the future in the present.” The third and major driving force for the artist’s queer future envisioning was film and cinema. Farmer began making videos at the age of fourteen and saw films as an opportunity to escape reality.<sup>101</sup> Living in Vancouver, a city affectionately known as “Hollywood North,” further enhanced the artist’s interest in movies and science fiction.<sup>102</sup> Queerness is intrinsic to science fiction. Science fiction disrupts the norms of reality and imagines new ways of being. When discussing the work

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<sup>97</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Farmer recalls making films in his teens, and being fascinated by them from a young age. See Michael Scott, *Little to Show From 6 New Artists*, *The Vancouver Sun*, February 21, 1998.

<sup>102</sup> Vancouver is called “Hollywood North” for being a prominent location for studio films and television shows. Most notably, the science fiction television series, *The X files* was filmed in Vancouver from 1993–1998. The show was amongst “the first productions to call the city home.” For more, see Harrison Mooney, “Fox Mulder’s ‘X-Files’ office on display at East Hastings gallery,” *The Vancouver Sun*, May 17, 2018 (Accessed August 20, 2020) <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/fox-mulders-x-files-office-on-display-at-east-hastings-gallery>.

of American science fiction writer Samuel L. Delany, Halberstam points out that “queers use space and time in ways that challenge conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility.”<sup>103</sup> Farmer’s early sci-fi-inspired projects reject the present and insist on alternative possibilities for existing in and beyond the realities of a heteronormative world.

A movie that greatly impacted Farmer was Steven Spielberg’s motion-picture *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Farmer’s fascination with the film is apparent through his extensive collection of E.T. figures (fig.12), which he used in his early projects.<sup>104</sup> This coming-of-age film tells the story of an extraordinary alien from an unknown planet who gets stranded in a suburban neighborhood in California. The story centers on the friendship between the alien and a ten-year-old boy named Elliot, who must conceal the extra-terrestrial from others before helping it find its way home. This film holds many queer moments and narratives, both direct and implied; it is perhaps most successful in exposing the constructs of the nuclear family and heteronormativity.<sup>105</sup> In his study on children’s films and the lessons they hold, Halberstam argues that “the human-[alien] bond is queer in its reorganization of family and affinity in the way it interrupts and disturbs more conventional romantic bonds in the film.”<sup>106</sup> The merging of fantasy and

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<sup>103</sup> Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 11.

<sup>104</sup> Farmer displayed his collection of E.T. figurines as readymades in an illuminated vitrine that accompanied his drawings and installations.

<sup>105</sup> The demise of Elliot’s nuclear family through his parent’s recent divorce and the assignment of E.T. gender by the children expose the sociocultural constructs of family and heteronormativity. For a proper queer reading of Spielberg’s *E.T. the Extra-terrestrial* see Brooke M. Beloso, “Making E.T. Perfectly Queer: The Alien Other and the Science Fiction of Sexual Difference,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 2 (December 2012): 222-236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.724023>.

<sup>106</sup> Halberstam’s quote discusses the Pixar animated film *Monsters Inc.* (2001) I replaced the word “monster” with “alien” as I find the argument applies to *E.T.* See Halberstam, “Animating Revolt,” in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 44-45.

reality reveals the possibilities of queerness from a child's perspective.

What resonated most with Farmer was the character's awkwardness. With its extending neck, long arms, blue eyes, and awkward body, E.T. embodied the feelings of strangeness and alienation the artist endured for being different in his youth.<sup>107</sup>

Halberstam considers "childhood [as] a long lesson in humility, awkwardness, limitation, and what Kathryn Bond Stockton has called 'growing sideways.'"<sup>108</sup> This perspective is apparent in the artist's first solo exhibition, *Home Alone: How to Build Your Own Spaceship*, at the Or Gallery in 1996. The exhibition featured an untitled series of homoerotic drawings by the artist similar to the ones seen in *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, except in this collection, the figure of death is replaced with images of E.T. in precarious situations like lifting weights while wearing a wig or being held like a child (fig. 13). One drawing of E.T. includes the words "Nature/Culture?" at the bottom (fig. 14), alluding to the question of whether sexual orientation forms biologically or culturally. Stockton asserts that children are innately queer, and society and its rules cause the child to grow up. She recognizes "growing up" as a heteronormative orientation that follows the linear trajectory of adulthood, marriage, and reproduction.<sup>109</sup> As discussed earlier, Edelman views the Child as the emblem of reproductive futurism. In his solo projects, I argue that Farmer uses E.T. to represent a different Child, the queer Child, or rather, an image of a queer child that is awkward, fantastical, and alien. The queer Child, represented by E.T., exists beyond the realities of

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<sup>107</sup> It should be noted that E.T.'s gender is never confirmed in the film. E.T. was given masculine pronouns by Elliot, after he panicked when his younger sister, Gertie, dressed E.T. in a wig and her clothing. However, director Steven Spielberg uses "it" pronouns when referring to E.T.

<sup>108</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 28.

<sup>109</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

the heteronormative world and is the emblem of an alternative future.

Another film that Farmer referenced in his early work was Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The epic film imagines the temporal order of the universe, mapping the linear evolution of humanity and its relation with technology, from the prehistoric invention of a weapon to human explorations in outer space. This progress is measured throughout time by mysterious encounters with sentinel monoliths. The central narrative follows spacemen Dave Bowman and Frank Poole's expedition to Jupiter, assisted by their artificial intelligence supercomputer HAL 9000. When HAL becomes a threat to their mission, the spacemen decide to dismantle the machine in order to survive. The film concludes with Bowman reaching Jupiter and finding a new monolith. This encounter causes the spaceman to travel through a stargate and arrive at a room of unknown space and time. There, he meets future aging versions of himself and the new monolith. This encounter marks a new horizon for humankind, resulting in Bowman transforming from a dying version of himself into a Star Child. Much like E.T., the Star Child indicates queerness. The Star Child, a result not of reproduction but of transformation, suggests new and alternative possibilities for development and is an emblem of queer futurity.

For the 1998 group exhibition *6: New Vancouver Modern* at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, Farmer created the site-specific installation heavily inspired by the film. *The day I floated away from the society I had known* (fig. 15), used various items found within the gallery space, including scaffolding, clumps of extension cords, multiple lights, and two back-to-back televisions. Farmer organized them to resemble "a futuristic

spacecraft.”<sup>110</sup> This assemblage, which transformed quotidian objects into something fantastical, is what Muñoz identifies as “ornamental,” or the site “where non-functionality and total functionality merge.”<sup>111</sup> Muñoz sees the ornamental as charged with potentiality for another world and is, therefore, a marker of queer futurity.

A video recording of the artist working overnight at the gallery was a central component of the installation (fig. 16). The curator of the exhibition, Scott Watson, describes the video as consisting of:

[...] among other activities; an unexplained medical procedure performed on a prone-bandaged body, a Nietzschean image of the artist as convalescent. In one magical sequence, objects bounce and shatter as they are tossed down the gallery’s interior cement staircase (an image of intentionality as destruction and process as entropy), creating a haunting musicality.<sup>112</sup>

The video recording creates anticipation of what is yet to happen or what may have already occurred. It adds a queer temporal dimension that suggests that the present is not all there is. Muñoz refers to this as the “then and there” of queer futurity. Referencing the work of Giorgio Agamben, Muñoz argues that potentiality “is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense.”<sup>113</sup> Farmer’s engagements with science fiction follow Muñoz’s positioning of queerness not as an identity but as an ideality. It is something “not yet here.” For Farmer and Muñoz, queerness is “on the horizon.”<sup>114</sup>

Thus far, I have contextualized how queer temporality formed in Farmer’s

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<sup>110</sup> The installation was initially called *Wormhole*, making reference to both the science fiction genre trope of a time-space distortion that connects distant locations and glory hole booths generally found in gay clubs and bathhouses. See Scott Watson, “Ghost/Face: Geoffrey Farmer,” *Geoffrey Farmer*, 100.; Monika Szweczyk, “Changes in the work of Geoffrey Farmer,” *CJ Press*, 21.

<sup>111</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

<sup>112</sup> Scott Watson, “Ghost/Face: Geoffrey Farmer,” *Geoffrey Farmer*, 101.

<sup>113</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

emerging career. His youth, education, and interests reflect a resistance to straight time and adopt an alternative approach to being and doing. Farmer's work during this emerging period portrayed the tensions between the present and the future that he and other gay men encountered in the 1990s. From this perspective, he crafted an approach charged with a disruptive and time-warping force addressed in this context as queering. At the turn of the millennium, Farmer's queer temporal force shifted its attention away from questioning and imagining the future and, instead, explored the possibilities of queering the historical past.

## Chapter 2: The Queering Practice of Geoffrey Farmer (2000-2015)

At the turn of the millennium, Farmer's practice shifted its temporal focus. Whereas his emerging work contemplated the future, his work in the 2000s explored the possibilities of engaging with the past. In this chapter, I examine Farmer's relation to history and the visual media archives he used in his elaborate installations. I argue that Farmer's subjectivity plays a factor in his explorations of the past. LGBTQ+ individuals have a complicated relationship with history and archives. As figures often do not get seen in the dominant narratives of history or who have their histories erased, eradicated, or questioned, they are often left to form and reimagine the past on their own.

Queer theory addresses the affective investment that LGBTQ+ artists have in the archive. In her research, Cvetkovich observes that queer artists are "unafraid to make use of the very personal, subjective, and affective investments in the archive."<sup>115</sup> First, I consider Farmer's efforts in accumulation and cataloging as a means to form queer archives. I then explore Farmer's elaborate installations that practice the deconstruction and rearrangement of image-based archives. Better known as his "paper works," these installations involved the artist cutting out subjects and objects from the pages of historical compilations, ranging from magazine anthologies, art history books, and digital image databases, and restaging them in new configurations. Farmer's approach to deconstruction follows German theorist Walter Benjamin's concept of technological reproducibility, which argues that original works lose their "aura" through the process of photography and photo reproductions.<sup>116</sup> To Benjamin, "aura" is the presentness or the

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<sup>115</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, "Ann Cvetkovich, 'The Queer Art of the Counterarchive,'" YouTube (Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University, December 13, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pefn1BI9bOE>.

<sup>116</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London, UK: The Bodley Head Ltd, 2015), 1-26.

“here and now” of the original image. I argue that this removal of aura is a queer temporal practice. In this chapter, I analyze Farmer’s process as queering. Ahmed acknowledges that queering is a spatial term; it averts linearity, continuity, and straightness.<sup>117</sup> I apply Ahmed’s concepts of queer phenomenology to examine what Farmer’s queering does to the structures of history and time in the categories of collections, histories, bodies, and technologies. I also use phenomenology to consider the linear progressions made in Farmer’s career during this time. For instance, Farmer’s references mature from science fiction and popular culture to literature, poetry, and historical archives. I also examine how Farmer’s approach to the past is informed by the development of technology as it relates to the development of photography and the printed image from analog to digital. Most noticeably, in this period, the exhibition spaces that host the artist’s work changed from local galleries to national institutions and prestigious international art fairs. From a queer perspective, I consider how these linear and ascending narratives affect the works.

## 2.1 Queer Archives

As discussed in Chapter 1, Farmer’s early practice developed a world-building approach that involved accumulation, staging, and “the narrative possibilities of objects.”<sup>118</sup> His collection of E.T. figurines, for instance, or the accumulated objects he used to create spaceships and other assemblages, were early efforts of building archives to depict his feelings of estrangement. In 2000, the artist produced new work for the group exhibition *Self-Conscious* at Catriona Jeffries Gallery. His contribution, *Hunchback Kit* (fig. 17),

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<sup>117</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 67.

<sup>118</sup> Dan Byers, “Printed Matter: Geoffrey Farmer’s Paper Works,” in *Geoffrey Farmer* (Boston, MA: The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston), 46.



consisted of a 13-foot tall and narrow metal shipping crate, similar to those used in film productions, that included an assortment of objects gathered from his travels.<sup>119</sup> In this work, Farmer's fascination with queer characters continued this time with the tragic bell ringer Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831). The kit featured research material on hunchback figures in popular culture and evocative objects relating to the narrative, including images of actor Charles Laughton as Quasimodo in William Dieterle's 1939 film adaptation, a copy of *Kaliman: El Hombre Increible*, as well as rope, lightbulbs, and VHS tapes on the subject of theatre produced by Farmer (fig. 18).<sup>120</sup> The artist's gathering of these disparate objects, is a form of queer collecting. Cvetkovich points out that "[q]ueers have long been collectors because they are not the subject of official histories, and thus have to make it themselves by saving materials that others might see as marginal."<sup>121</sup> She argues that the impulse to collect is "often motivated by a desire to create the alternative histories and genealogies of queer lives."<sup>122</sup> In comparison, E.T. was a figure of the future, and Quasimodo, although a fictional character, is a queer figure of history. He has a past, or rather, a documented genealogy within Western visual culture. *Hunchback Kit* is what Cvetkovich calls an "archive of feelings," or an archive with affective qualities "encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in their production and reception."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Kitty Scott, "Geoffrey Farmer," in *Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture*, Phaidon Press, 2010, 106.

<sup>120</sup> *Kaliman* is a popular Mexican comic book series about a hyper-masculine superhero and his nemesis, a hunchbacked figure named Yorvich. For more on what *Hunchback Kit* included, see Reid Shier, "Hunchback Modern: The art of Geoffrey Farmer," *Canadian Art Magazine*, Summer 2001, 46-49.

<sup>121</sup> Cvetkovich's use of queer here is meant to be used in the broadest sense to include LGBTQ cultures, See Ann Cvetkovich, "Ann Cvetkovich, 'The Queer Art of the Counterarchive,'" YouTube (Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University, December 13, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pefn1BI9bOE>.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, "Introduction," in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1-14.

*Hunchback Kit* is a process-based and ever-evolving archive. Cvetkovich aptly points out, “If the archive is a process, not a thing, then it can be mobilized in multiple directions.”<sup>124</sup> *Hunchback Kit*’s display changes every time the work activates in a gallery space as Farmer chooses to exhibit different items at a given time. One of the items in the kit is a curatorial manual with possible ways to install the objects. After its debut at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, *Hunchback Kit* traveled to Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario later that year and became Farmer’s first solo exhibition at an art museum.<sup>125</sup> This iteration of *Hunchback Kit* included new VHS tapes recorded outside the AGO as well as six rubber masks of Quasimodo placed in the gallery director’s office for the duration of the exhibition. In 2005, the Vancouver Art Gallery purchased *Hunchback Kit* and displayed it in a group exhibition entitled *Classified Materials: Accumulations, Archives, Artists*.<sup>126</sup> This version of the kit (fig. 19) borrowed items mined from the gallery’s storage and scattered them alongside the traveling shipping crate.<sup>127</sup> The works that followed *Hunchback Kit* continued this process-based approach that brought archives and objects into the institution to transform and queer the gallery space.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, “Ann Cvetkovich: Artist Curation as Queer Archival Practice,” YouTube (EMPAC | Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer, April 20, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyzXsr4MZZw>.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew Teitelbaum, “Present Tense 16,” Art Gallery of Ontario, accessed December 12, 2022, <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/present-tense-16-geoffrey-farmer>.

<sup>126</sup> Sara Milroy, “Too abstruse for youse,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 19, 2005.

<sup>127</sup> Lee Henderson, “Quasi Models: Thising and Thating in the World of Geoffrey Farmer,” in *Border Crossings*, No. 106, Spring 2008, 67.

<sup>128</sup> Farmer installed an empty life-size film trailer structure inside Contemporary Art Gallery-Vancouver for the exhibition *The Blacking Factory* (2002). For his solo exhibition, *Pale Fire Freedom Machine* (2005) at the Powerplant Gallery in Toronto, the artist installed a gyrofocus fireplace designed by French artist and designer Dominique Imbert. Farmer filled the gallery with furniture which was incinerated in the spinning stove. In *Airliner Open Studio* (2006) where Farmer brought in an aircraft inside Jeffries’ gallery. In 2004’s *Wash House: Even the foul dirt and putrid stains of your life know their fate!*, Farmer installed a functional laundry facility at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, his alma matter’s university gallery, where students could wash their clothes while visiting the exhibition. See Peter Culley, “The Mnemosyne of Geoffrey Farmer,” *Contemporary Art Gallery: Vancouver*, 7-16; Monika Szewczyk, “Changes in the work of Geoffrey Farmer,” *CJ Press*, 18-21.

The artist's affinities for collecting and staging intensified when his works entered the sales and art collection market. In 1999, Farmer received commercial representation with renowned Vancouver-based gallerist Catriona Jeffries. Her approach to dealing art is distinguished for looking beyond the commodities of commercial art.<sup>129</sup> Jeffries mentored Farmer. She connected his interests in popular culture to the history of Vancouver's photo-conceptualist movement and provided the artist with space to develop his unique approaches to art.<sup>130</sup>

## 2.2 Queering History

Farmer has a nuanced relationship with history. As discussed in Chapter 1, the artist renounced his patrilineal history when he renounced his paternal surname in exchange for Farmer. History, in general, is not kind to those who step outside of heteronormativity and the progress of straight time. Queer theory views history as a linear structure that supports heteronormative narratives. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin proposes that history is separate from the linear and chronological temporality he calls "homogenous, empty time."<sup>131</sup> He urges historians to "brush history against the grain" or work against these constructs' dominant narratives.<sup>132</sup> In a 2007 roundtable on queer temporality, Queer theorists debated Benjamin's request as "a queer desire for history."<sup>133</sup> Historian Carolyn Dinshaw remarked, "[t]o think outside narrative history

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<sup>129</sup> Jeffries best explained her method of art-dealing as "I'm not bringing the work to you, the collector. I am bringing you to the artist." Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Frances Bula, "Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver's Contemporary Art Queen," BC Business Magazine, December 1, 2010, <https://www.bcbusiness.ca/catriona-jeffries-vancouvers-contemporary-art-queen>.

<sup>131</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (London, UK: The Bodley Head Ltd, 2015), 253-264.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," in *Queer Temporalities, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 185.

requires reworking linear temporality.”<sup>134</sup> In 2007, Farmer was seemingly also contemplating this very approach and used it as a method for his practice.

Farmer’s first formal foray into queering history began in 2007 after encountering a copy of the 1974 *Reader’s Digest* anthology, *The Last Two Million Years*. The publication largely consists of illustrations and photographs depicting a range of significant historical events throughout the development of humanity, including “prehistoric man, the great civilizations, ideas and discoveries, and histories of all nations.”<sup>135</sup> Farmer unbound this history by cutting out the book’s two-dimensional figures and transforming them into three-dimensional paper sculptures. *The Last Two Million Years* (fig. 20) staged illustrations of prominent figures of history along with photographs of ancient monuments and other historical objects and freely dispersed them across the gallery space. According to Ahmed, queer moments occur “when the world no longer seems the right way up.”<sup>136</sup> Farmer’s arrangement disordered the chronology of the encyclopedia and formed new associations, not based on historical accuracy but on his own accord. By collapsing and reanimating the linearity of history, Farmer created queer temporalities that clashed eras, cultures, and regions anew. Curator Pierre Landy remarked, “[t]he result is monumental and fragile, ordered and chaotic, serious and humorous—and extraordinarily poetic.”<sup>137</sup>

The order that Landy mentions comes from the installation’s architecture. The cutouts were distributed on foam-core pedestals of different shapes and sizes, building a

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> *The Last Two Million Years* (London, UK: Reader's Digest Association, 1974).

<sup>136</sup> Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” 561.

<sup>137</sup> Pierre Landy, “Where’s Geoffrey,” *Geoffrey Farmer*, Musée d’art contemporain de Montreal, 2008. 89-94.

museum of sorts. Museums affect the viewer's sense of time and order. Halberstam points out that "the viewer walks, sits, observes, and passes through space, and thus creates meaning in a different way."<sup>138</sup> Farmer complicates this intended linear meaning by creating connecting foam-core stairs, ramps, bridges, and runways to the plinths (fig. 21) to disorient the viewer's gaze further. This queer spatialized version of a museum provides multiple and alternative ways to navigate space and interpret history.

Farmer queered not only the gallery space but also the meaning of each image. Each cutout was numbered and assigned accompanying descriptive titles written by the artist and available via an accompanying take away booklet. These titles varied from found texts from the pages of the encyclopedia to personal descriptions written by Farmer. Curator Kitty Scott recalls, "the poetic mix of factual and subjective pondering in this miniature publication further extended the potential of the work."<sup>139</sup> Art critic Kim Dhillon provides an example of the installation's cataloging associations:

A cut-out of Mahatma Gandhi was taped onto a narrow, tall plinth in the foyer. Next to him was an animal depicted out of proportion. Titled with one of Gandhi's most famous quotes – 'When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end they always fall – think of it, always.'<sup>140</sup>

This type of queer poetic writing is akin to Farmer's former instructor, Kathy Acker, who appropriated texts and coded them with new meaning and subjectivity. Through his writing, Farmer transforms the Reader's Digest book from a comprehensive collection of facts into an archive of feelings.

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<sup>138</sup> Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 105.

<sup>139</sup> Scott, *Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture*, 106

<sup>140</sup> Kim Dhillon, "Geoffrey Farmer," *Frieze*, January 1, 2008, <http://www.frieze.com/article/geoffrey-farmer>.

Around this time, Farmer's multilayered projects steadily gained the attention of national and international audiences. In 2008, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal gave the artist his first mid-career survey, solidifying his status in contemporary Canadian art. By the 2010s, Farmer had achieved hegemonic success. He had exhibited at all the major art museums in Canada, and his participation at international biennales received critical acclaim. These accolades eventually led to a commissioned work for the prestigious documenta 13.

*Leaves of Grass* (fig. 22) consisted of 24,000 cutout images culled from approximately 900 issues of *Life* Magazine, surveying five decades spanning from 1935 to 1985.<sup>141</sup> Each image was meticulously cut and glued onto stems of dried miscanthus grass and propped up on floral foam, forming a bouquet of images stretching diagonally on a 124-foot-long table that ran across the corridor on the second floor of the Neue Galerie (fig. 23). The verticality of the installation was deliberate. Farmer organized the images chronologically, depicting the progress of American life with photo essays covering wars, fashion photo spreads, and missions into outer space. In an interview with *Canadian Art Magazine*, Farmer reflected on the exhibition's shape and meaning; he said, "the piece is very much about factory life. Factory farming, the war factory, the death factory, the automobile factory, the Hollywood factory, the personality factory... History emerging out of a factory. In the end, it takes on the appearance of a conveyor belt."<sup>142</sup>

From a queer phenomenological perspective, "becoming vertical" or "lining up" is an orientation that allows the repetitive cycles of heteronormativity to continue and

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<sup>141</sup> *Life* magazine (1883–2000) was a weekly general-interest American publication known for its photo essays and a wide variety of topics.

<sup>142</sup> Rosemary Heather, "Geoffrey Farmer Discusses His Big Documenta Hit," *Canadian Art*, August 30, 2012.

extend into space.<sup>143</sup> Ahmed states that “the ‘straight line’ is achieved through work, which rereads moments of deviation from the family line as signs of the failure of the homosexual subject to ‘find its way.’ The homosexual subject, in other words, gets read as having got lost on the way ‘toward’ the ‘other sex.’”<sup>144</sup> While at first, this project comes at odds with the artist’s earlier attempts at queering temporality, one can read between the pages (or, in this case, leaves) of the work to see its queerness. Following Benjamin’s urge to “brush against the grain,” I encounter hints of queerness within this linear depiction of time.<sup>145</sup>

*Leaves of Grass* borrows its title from Walt Whitman’s epic book of poems of the same name.<sup>146</sup> “Leaves of Grass” (1855) includes long narrative poems written in free verse addressing different ideas of American culture, including urban life, democracy, and sexuality. The controversial book faced a ban in the United States for including depictions of homoerotic desire.<sup>147</sup> According to historian Gary Kinsman, Whitman’s loosely queer-coded texts describing “comradship” and “adhesiveness” played “an important transitional role in the making of homosexual consciousness among both men and women.”<sup>148</sup> His writing inspired the queer writing of poets like Allen Ginsberg and Kathy Acker, who both inspired Farmer.

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<sup>143</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 66.

<sup>144</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 79.

<sup>145</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, 258.

<sup>146</sup> Farmer noted that first iteration of documenta took place in 1955, a year that marked the one hundred anniversary of the first edition of Whitman’s collection of poems. See Heather, *Canadian Art*, 2012.

<sup>147</sup> *Leaves of Grass* was legally banned in Boston in 1880 and informally banned elsewhere in the United States for being too sexual and obscene. The 1860 edition of the book included Whitman’s Calamus poems, which depicted Whitman’s love affair with another man. See Ronald G. Shafer, “Whitman’s ‘Leaves of Grass’ Was Banned - and Cost Him His Federal Job,” *The Washington Post* (WP Company, April 29, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/04/30/walt-whitman-leaves-grass-interior-department/>.

<sup>148</sup> Whitman borrowed the concepts of “comradship” and “adhesiveness” from the pseudoscience of phrenology to describe male bonding. See Gary Kinsman, “The Historical Emergence of Homosexualities and Heterosexualities: Social Relations, Sexual Rule, and Sexual Resistance,” in *The Regulation of Desire:*

Farmer's *Leaves of Grass* is as coded as Whitman's. The installation is an extravagant display of the development of print media (fig. 24). The popularity and mass-produced (weekly) issues of *Life* magazine made it an "influential advertising mechanism" during its heyday, often depicting "safe traditions and familial values, which many sought in the postwar adjustment period."<sup>149</sup> While this approach intended to promote a heteronormative lifestyle, its deviation was inevitable. Because homosexuality was not in the mainstream, homoerotic imagery was published in innocent contexts. For instance, underwear ads featuring half-nude men were made accessible in these weekly magazine printouts. Queer historian Christopher Reed notes how magazines "invoked homosexuality to both titillate and discipline readers."<sup>150</sup> *Leaves of Grass* depicted how print media promoted heterosexuality; however, it is also a legacy of how the queer gaze found ways to persist. Kinsman remarks how "[h]omosexual and lesbian cultures and heterosexual hegemony [...] are two sides of the same relational process that is part of a series of gender, class, and social struggles in the formation of a capitalist and patriarchal society."<sup>151</sup> Indeed, the timeframe that *Leaves of Grass* considers, 1935-1985, is also a time when, through "the development of capitalist and social relations [...] emerged the discourse of individualism."<sup>152</sup> This allowed, "young people (especially boys and young

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*Homo and Hetero Sexualities* (Montréal, QC: Black Rose Books, 1996), 65; for a critical look at Whitman's sexuality and how it informed his poetry, see Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York, NY: Plume, 1998); The glorification of Whitman has been criticized by scholars of color, for his racism towards Black Americans in Manhattan. See June Jordan, "For the Sake of People's Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us," Poetry Foundation, accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68627/for-the-sake-of-peoples-poetry>.

<sup>149</sup> Rebecca Centanni, "Advertising in Life Magazine and the Encouragement of Suburban Ideals," *Advertising & Society Review* 12, no. 3 (2011): <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2011.0022>.

<sup>150</sup> Christopher Reed, "Secrets and Subcultures: 1900 - 1940," in *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 143.

<sup>151</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, 71.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 50.



men) [to] more easily break free from family relations,” escape their suburban neighborhoods, and participate in a gay lifestyle.<sup>153</sup> This timeline covers the homophile movement, the Stonewall riots, and the impacts of the gay liberation movement.<sup>154</sup> Reading *Leaves of Grass* as a study of the construction of homosexual identity, which was quite persistent in Farmer’s early career, is made much more apparent when you consider how the last issue used in the installation was a feature on the AIDS epidemic.<sup>155</sup> It is worth noting that when asked to choose a song for the documenta 13 phone app, Farmer decided on “Over the Rainbow,” sung by Judy Garland in the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>156</sup> This song and movie are notoriously associated with queer resilience and an imagining of a queer elsewhere.<sup>157</sup>

Farmer’s proceeding project returned to disrupting time, this time by queering the canon of Western art history. The 2013 installation *Boneyard* (fig. 25) used images culled from the 1986 book *Capolavori della Scultura Italiana* and the art booklet series *I Maestri Della Scultura* (1965–1967), two art anthologies that attempted to summarize the history of Italian sculpture.<sup>158</sup> *Boneyard* featured a collection of over 1,200 Italian sculptures that were once carved out of marble, copper, and stone and were now rendered on paper and dispersed on a large circular plinth. Curator Dan Byers observed, “the sculptures, predominantly figurative, emphasize the varying representations of the human

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> For a thorough review of the gay liberation movement, see Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 30-43.

<sup>155</sup> Heather, *Canadian Art*, 2012.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> For a thorough look at the relationship between queerness and the film, *The Wizard of Oz*, see Austin Henderson, *Over the Rainbow, Beyond the Screen: Queer Legacies of The Wizard of Oz (1939) in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*, (Montreal, QC: Concordia University, 2020).

<sup>158</sup> Both anthologies were published by Fratelli Fabbri Editori and gifted to Farmer by Canadian artist Ted Rettig. Aryn Hoestra, “The Mime of the Ancients: on Geoffrey Farmer’s ‘A Light In The Moon’,” *Border Crossings*, 69.

body over time.”<sup>159</sup> The temporality of the installation ranges from 10 AD to the late 1960s. Born in 1967, Farmer essentially examined the history of how artists depicted human bodies before his time. These images, varying from busts of saints to statues of immortalized heroes like the virgin Mary and Alexander the Great (fig. 26), vastly differ from the artist’s former awkward-bodied subjects like E.T. and Quasimodo.

In this project, Farmer is concerned with reshuffling the temporality of Western art and rearranging it according to his subjectivity. Drawing inspiration from German art historian Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an unfinished project that arranged images based on intuition, Farmer applied his own organization of images through feeling rather than history.<sup>160</sup> Curator Scott Watson observed, “we might take his strange figurations and juxtapositions as the disclosure of a hidden symbolic order—or, more accurately, the desire to construe one.”<sup>161</sup> Farmer demonstrates what Dinshaw considers a “queer desire for history.”<sup>162</sup> Through the rearrangement of bodies, Farmer’s process also attends to Freeman’s ideas of erotohistoriography, which “uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform [an] encounter”<sup>163</sup> These reconfigured encounters freed these figures from their confines of straight time and the disciplined linearity and regulations of art history.

### 2.3 Queering Bodies

I have mapped out Farmer’s interest in queer bodies, but Farmer’s practice also includes the queering of bodies through collage. Art historian Lucy Lippard acknowledges that “collage is born of interruption and the healing instinct to use political consciousness as a

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<sup>159</sup> Byers, “Printed Matter: Geoffrey Farmer’s Paper Works,” 48.

<sup>160</sup> Daina Augaitis, *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*, 315.

<sup>161</sup> Scott Watson, *Geoffrey Farmer*, 99.

<sup>162</sup> A “queer desire for history” is a concept that Carolyn Dinshaw proposes in GLQ’s Queer Temporality roundtable. Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” in *Queer Temporalities, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 162.

<sup>163</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 95.

glue with which to get the pieces back into some sort of new order.”<sup>164</sup> Halberstam considers collage as a radical queer practice rooted in feminism.<sup>165</sup> To him, “collage asks us to consider the full range of our experience of power—both productive power, power *for*, but also negative power, or power to unbecome.”<sup>166</sup> The installation, *The Surgeon and the Photographer* (2009) (fig. 27) best illustrates these ideas. Here, Farmer formed an extravagant crowd of puppets crafted from photographs taken from hundreds of coffee table books purchased by the artist from a closing second-hand bookstore. Farmer saw that “the bookstore in Vancouver resembles a ruin. It is lawless, a labyrinth of book piles and collapsing pyramids.”<sup>167</sup> Judith Butler notes how “[i]f identities were no longer fixed... a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old.”<sup>168</sup> Fragments of history constructed these collaged bodies (fig. 28). Farmer combined clippings from different body parts with a plethora of objects (such as artworks, cameras, and leaves) and rested on fabric bodices, resulting in three hundred and sixty-five individual figures—creating a new calendar of sorts. Freeman sees calendars as a measurement tool that compels chrononormativity,<sup>169</sup> which she describes as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”<sup>170</sup> Farmer’s calendar rearranges bodies and appendices, generating new queer beings. If gender forms

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<sup>164</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: New Press, 1995), 168.

<sup>165</sup> Hannah Hoch, Kara Walker, Yoko Ono, and Louise Bourgeois are some of the artists who have used collage and cutup methods in their feminist works. For more, see Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 136; Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 110.

<sup>166</sup> Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 136.

<sup>167</sup> “Geoffrey Farmer: The Surgeon and the Photographer at Barbican's Curve,” Flux Magazine, December 1, 2017, <https://www.fluxmagazine.com/geoffrey-farmer/>.

<sup>168</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 203.

<sup>169</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), quoted in Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” in *Queer Temporalities, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 160.

<sup>170</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 3.

through “a set of repeated acts” that “congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,” then Farmer’s collages can be seen as a deconstruction of it.<sup>171</sup> This deconstruction of identity enables new and strange bodies to form, which Farmer does with humor and subjectivity. Snippets of different faces and features from humans, animals, artworks, and objects ornament bodies.

Art critic Laura Cumming recalled, “An orator who looks remarkably like Malcolm X carries an owl for an augury. A bumpkin in medieval sackcloth smokes a Lucky Strike. A vestal virgin carrying an amphora has one leg raised to dance the cancan.”<sup>172</sup> Farmer’s collages also follow the tradition of Surrealism. Writer and curator Kathy Noble finds that these assemblages depend on “the viewer’s subconscious relationship to the materials and objects and photographic imagery.”<sup>173</sup> The work is also affected by the artist’s subjectivity. For instance, one particular puppet in the installation combines Ray Bolger’s Scarecrow costume from Victor Fleming’s film, *The Wizard of Oz*, along with what looks to be the eyes and nose of a Hollywood actor’s headshot (fig. 29). The puppet holds a protest sign that reads, “GAY IS GOOD GAY IS PROUD GAY LIBERATION FRONT.” This assemblage depicts what Freeman considers “temporal drag”<sup>174</sup> The sign is an anachronism of identity politics and a not-so-distant past when gay men like Farmer had to protest for their rights in North America. In the Vancouver Art Gallery’s 2015 catalog for *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, Farmer’s annotation

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<sup>171</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

<sup>172</sup> Laura Cumming, “Geoffrey Farmer: The Surgeon and the Photographer; Marcel Dzama: Puppets, Pawns and Prophets – Review,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, April 6, 2013), <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/apr/07/geoffrey-farmer-marcel-dzama-review>.

<sup>173</sup> Kathy Noble “The Eternal Return of Frank Zappa,” in *Geoffrey Farmer: Let's Make the Water Turn Black* (Zürich, CH: JRP Ringier Kunstverlag, 2013), 63.

<sup>174</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.

for this puppet reads: “I don’t consider myself an activist, but I realize how much I’ve benefited for the sacrifices of others.”<sup>175</sup>

The installation’s title and the accompanying catalog reference Benjamin’s seminal 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In this text, Benjamin examines what is lost and gained in the growing presence of mass reproduction technologies. Benjamin discusses the art-making differences between cinema and painting by creating an analogy between the work of a Surgeon (the camera operator) and a magician (the painter). He states, “[t]he painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law.”<sup>176</sup> The result of mass reproduction is a loss of “aura” or the presentness of a work of art. Benjamin argues that this process liberates the work from previous traditions and is a more democratic way to experience art. This cycle of technological reproduction appears throughout the process of the exhibition: The original subject gets photographed, then this photograph gets reproduced in a coffee table book; the reproduced image from the book then gets cut up and rearranged into a puppet, which then gets photographed and reproduced again as part of the catalog. Each step in the process “emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.” At the same time, each step queers the history of the image further and further.

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<sup>175</sup> This publication was part of *How Do I Fit This Ghost in My Mouth?* Farmer’s 2015 mid-career survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The book celebrated the VAG’s acquisition of *The Surgeon and the Photographer*. Geoffrey Farmer, “Annotations,” in *Geoffrey Farmer: the Surgeon and the Photographer* (Vancouver, BC: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2015), 402-430, 411.

<sup>176</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 3-13.

## 2.4 Queering Technologies

Often accompanying *The Surgeon and the Photographer* was the digital photomontage display, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (2010-2014) (fig. 30). This computer-generated sequence shuffles over 7,000 thousand photographs collected from image archives and projects them onto a large screen (fig. 31).<sup>177</sup> Freeman remarks on how image sequences affect the gaze:

Thus, to pause on a given image, to repeat an image over and over, or to double an existing film in a remake or reshoot become productively queer ways to “desocialize” that gaze and intervene on the historical condition of seeing itself.<sup>178</sup>

Farmer further desocializes the sensory experience through sound, as the images are synched with sound clips, creating a temperamental sequence that shuffles between slow and quiet-paced moments and then erupts with a stream of sounds and images. For example, bells ring as a nude torso appears on the screen (fig. 32), birds chirp during the moon landing, and cymbals clash at Princess Diana’s royal wedding. The photomontage progresses sporadically, at times rapidly, leaving viewers little to no time to make sense of the associations between sound and image. The algorithm is programmed to respond to the changes and inputs throughout its twenty-four-hour programming; therefore, no sequence is ever the same.<sup>179</sup>

The title of this computer-generated photomontage and sound installation is actually well-known excerpt from Italian poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s 1803 sonnet, *The House of Life: 97. A Superscription*. However, Farmer’s reference is a bit more layered

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<sup>177</sup> This work was developed with digital media artist Brady Marks, with the support of the Barbican, Mercer Union in Toronto, and Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples. See Byers, *Geoffrey Farmer*, 52-3.

<sup>178</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, XVII.

<sup>179</sup> Michael Harris, “Geoffrey Farmer: Canada’s Representative at the Venice Biennale,” *Nuovo Magazine*, March 13, 2017, <https://nuvomagazine.com/magazine/spring-2017/geoffrey-farmer>.

than this. In his exploration of French novelist Marcel Proust's life and his relation to photography, Hungarian-French photographer and writer Brassai acknowledged that this same sonnet excerpt was a dedication written on the back of a photograph given to Proust by a young Swiss student named Edgar Auber, whom Proust fell in love with in 1891.<sup>180</sup> Auber died a few weeks after, leaving Proust in grief. The inscription, which became a premonition of their tragic love, haunted Proust and became a guiding principle for his work. This haunting inscription imbued with emotional intimacies turns the photograph into a counter archive of queer experience, or what Cvetkovich calls, an "archive of feelings." Farmer is aware of this experience. By replacing the inscription with sound, Farmer is able to form similar and new kinds of queer encounters.

Farmer's nostalgia and vast knowledge of popular media transformed into an online digital archive. Since 2012, the artist's Instagram account, "@anhourbeforesleep," has amassed a collection of over 1,000 video clips posted by the artist ranging from obscure films, performances, interviews, and documentaries (fig. 33-34). The Instagram handle refers to the artist's personal practice of making a post one hour before going to bed.<sup>181</sup> Farmer's footage is culled from other library archives and shared widely with his large following. His posts disrupt the viewer's feed, queering it with clips of camp and counterculture, like the 1980 horror film *Mark of the Witch* or the music video for the 1978 disco anthem, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" by queer icon, Sylvester.<sup>182</sup> Halberstam sees the archive as a dynamic space:

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<sup>180</sup> Brassai, *Marcel Proust Sous L'emprise De La Photographie: 16 Photographies De L'auteur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>181</sup> Geoffrey Farmer, "Artist Talk with Geoffrey Farmer," UBCO Visiting Artist Series (February 1, 2017).

<sup>182</sup> Geoffrey Farmer, Instagram post, October 31, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4R4yTTAiLQ/>; Farmer, Instagram post, May 31, 2017, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BUv\\_eYvjS5U/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BUv_eYvjS5U/).

The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making.<sup>183</sup>

Instagram's social features allow users to directly engage with the artist and the posts at any time of day. Through the comments section or via the platforms sharing possibilities, Farmer's queer archive expands beyond his account and generates new opportunities for queering time and history.

## 2.5 In Retrospect

By 2015, Farmer had amassed an expansive body of work, which included videos, sculptures, installations, and the written word, forming a multiverse of references.

Farmer's first major retrospective, *How Do I Fit This Ghost in My Mouth?* organized by Vancouver Art Gallery in 2015 featured many of the works in this chapter. This mid-career survey of Farmer's practice became a full circle moment for an artist whose father practiced law and spent time in the building when the gallery served as a courthouse.<sup>184</sup>

Around this time, Farmer's interest in looking backward in time and history had him yearning to look at his own past. In an interview with Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, the artist remarked, "after the documenta (13) project, I really felt that I had entered into the world somehow [...] I began to think about my own history. I just felt that it was time to be more introspective."<sup>185</sup> This return to himself would manifest at a time of collective national contemplation, causing a collision that produced variants of reflection.

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<sup>183</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 169-70.

<sup>184</sup> Farmer's father was a lawyer (now retired) and crown prosecutor. Marsha Lederman, "Geoffrey Farmer's brave new world at the Vancouver Art Gallery," *The Globe and Mail*, June 12, 2015, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/geoffrey-farmers-brave-new-world-at-the-vancouver-art-gallery/article24941802/>.

<sup>185</sup> Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, "How One Artist Is Redefining the Exhibition Space," *The Walrus*, February 1, 2018, <https://thewalrus.ca/how-one-artist-is-redefining-the-exhibition-space/>.



### Chapter 3: A way out of the mirror (2017)

In 2017, Farmer was arguably at the pinnacle of his professional career as he was selected to represent Canada at the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale. Following the cosmology that navigates his practice, this prestige aligned with the country's sesquicentennial anniversary, as well as his fiftieth birthday, compelling the artist to reflect on the nation's identity and his very own. The installation, *A way out of the mirror* (fig. 35), consisted of a series of fountains and sculptures dispersed throughout the deconstructed Canada pavilion building. Viewers were initially drawn to the central feature, which was a large courtyard fountain containing large planks of wood and a water feature that varied in pressure, from innocent squirts of water to an erupting geyser. Two large metal-cast sculptures were positioned at opposite ends of the central fountain: a grandfather clock jabbed with various farming tools on one end, and on the other, a larger-than-life statute of a praying mantis with a book on both its lap and head. Upon further inspection, you noticed these strange assemblages were fountains as well, with water running out of their fissures and puddling at their feet. Other smaller sculptures and water features appeared throughout the pavilion, including a concrete water trough with metal pipes, an aluminum cast of a duvet cover, and a large bronze recreation of a poetry page, with water trickling down its letters. The collective feeling of the works at the Canada pavilion was somber; however, the water features gave it a sense of playfulness and joviality. Collectively, the works in *A way out of the mirror* acted as shards of a mirror that the artist formed to ruminate on various traumas exposed in this collision of time. Each work was a collage of personal and national histories that the artist researched to make sense of the present moment. Thus far, I have argued that Farmer's practice involves queering time, but how

does this come into play at such a significant political moment for Canada? In this chapter, I critically look at Farmer's participation at the biennale and consider the impacts that occur when queering collides with nationalism.

### 3.1 Remembering the Past: Axes of Straight Time

The overarching narrative of *A way out of the mirror* stems from Farmer's encounter with two black-and-white press photographs that depict a collision between a train and his grandfather's lumber truck (fig. 36-37). Farmer's grandfather survived the accident, but the impact led to a heart attack, which ultimately caused the patriarch's death.<sup>186</sup> The artist used these images as the starting point to examine the trajectories of intergenerational trauma—how did this event that impacted his father's life ultimately affect his own?<sup>187</sup> By learning about the grandfather he never knew, Farmer was able to come to terms with an identity that he renounced at the start of his career. Farmer, whose birth name is Geoffrey Victor Topham, bared his grandfather's ghost in his middle and last name.<sup>188</sup> Farmer, who recalled having a difficult relationship with his father, spent his early twenties contemplating his inherited surname.<sup>189</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, this decision marked the artist's commitment to a queer temporality and informed his emerging artistic practice. Halberstam sees the renouncing of family as an act of forgetting, which “becomes a rupture with the eternally self-generating present, a break

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<sup>186</sup> Farmer's grandfather hit his chest on the steering wheel; it is believed this led to his heart attack a few months later. Marsha Lederman, “When Generations Collide,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 21, 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/geoffrey-farmer-explores-inherited-trauma-in-work-for-venicebiennale/article34100772/>.

<sup>187</sup> Sara Angel, “Geoffrey Farmer's Tour De Force at the Venice Biennale,” *Maclean's*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/geoffrey-farmers-tour-de-force-at-the-venice-biennale/>.

<sup>188</sup> Canada, The Canada Council for the Arts, Public Affairs, Research and Communications, *Profile Funding in British Columbia*, 1998-99 and 1999-2000, 33, accessed November 08, 2017, <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/K21-11-2000.pdf>.

<sup>189</sup> This turmoil can be traced through the artist's early exhibition record between the years 1990-1998. See Chapter 1; Farmer spoke about his complicated relationship with his father in an interview prior to the Biennale. See Marsha Lederman, “When generations collide,” *The Globe and Mail*.

with a self-authoring past, and an opportunity for a non-hetero reproductive future.”<sup>190</sup> In the exhibition, Farmer depicts the remembering of his patriarchy as a defunct grandfather clock in the sculpture-fountain titled *Wounded Man* (fig. 39). This bronze sculpture consists of a brass longcase clock with an axe and other farming tools lodged onto it throughout its structure, evoking parallels to the surgical diagram of the same name.<sup>191</sup> In an interview with journalist Marsha Lederman, Farmer addressed this work as “a portrait of his grandfather, his father, and himself combined. But it is also a portrait of men in a large sense of the battles they endure – in war and at home.”<sup>192</sup> By reflecting on his paternal ancestry through this literal representation of a time marker, Farmer creates an axis for lineage, reproductive futurism, and normative social order. This form of generational remembering pulls Farmer into what Halberstam calls “the time of inheritance”:

The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability.<sup>193</sup>

The relationship between family and nation manifests itself at the Canada pavilion.

Across from *Wounded Man* grows a large living bagolaro tree protruding from the pavilion roof (fig.39). The pavilion has preserved the tree as a permanent fixture

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<sup>190</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 70.

<sup>191</sup> “The Wound Man” is a diagram from the 1400s that depicted the injuries a man would encounter in battle. Physicians used it as an educational tool. See Jack Hartnell, “Wording the Wound Man,” *British Art Studies* (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale Center for British Art, June 29, 2017), <http://britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-6/wound-man>; In the exhibition’s didactic, the artist recalled encountering an Italian version of this diagram, “An image of a man penetrated by a wide variety of weapons like the ones found in Johannes de Ketham’s *Fasciculus Medicinae*, Venice, 1491.” See Geoffrey Farmer, “A way out of the mirror,” *A way out of the mirror* (didactic) (Venice, IT: National Gallery of Canada, 2017).

<sup>192</sup> Marsha Lederman, “When generations collide,” *The Globe and Mail*.

<sup>193</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 5.

throughout its existence.<sup>194</sup> Queer phenomenology would associate the growing tree as representing the family tree growing out of the national pavilion. To Ahmed, family trees represent “the ‘wish’ for reproduction.”<sup>195</sup> Queer theory sees family and its linear progressions as the conventions for the heteronormative perspective of time understood as “straight time.”<sup>196</sup> The nurtured tree growing out of the pavilion and the grandfather clock acted as symbols representing the structures of heteronormativity. If these structures in the installation represent straight time, then the inherent queerness in Farmer’s practice can be interpreted through the waters that flow throughout the pavilion.<sup>197</sup> Water is the unfixed, disruptive, and persistent element in the exhibition. Its release embodies the emotions within the artist’s personal narrative and the histories addressed in this project. Water runs through the defunct grandfather clock, spewing from its many fissures. Water also pierces through the roof of the tree-nurturing pavilion. Just as water flows free from these structures, so too did Farmer’s queer temporality disrupt the repetitive unfolding of his family’s generational time, marking *a way out of* this transmission.

Another collision of narratives occurred in the exhibition’s central feature. *SFAI Fountain* (fig. 40) consisted of a docile fountain that erupted into a towering geyser, penetrating through the roof of the dismantled Canada pavilion and soaking unexpected onlookers passing by. *SFAI Fountain* is another collage of personal histories relating to Farmer’s self-discovery. The fountain’s base is a replica of the courtyard fountain at San

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<sup>194</sup> The pavilion was designed to include this tree, which is typically encased in glass.

<sup>195</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 83.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>197</sup> The queerness in Farmer’s practice not only includes his personal identity as a gay man but also his recurrent incorporation of queer narratives that he has made throughout his career, as well as the affect of queerness found within his many installations.

Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), Farmer's alma mater and the initial site for his coming-of-age. The Moorish tiles of the San Francisco Art Institute's fountain reflect Farmer's artistic beginnings and the foundation for his queer temporality.<sup>198</sup> This was also the first time he heard about the Venice Biennale.<sup>199</sup> Farmer was twenty-four when he studied in San Francisco. Concurrently, the artist's father was at this age when his father passed away.<sup>200</sup> This event resulted in his father's undertaking the family's patriarchal role, formalizing his chrononormative temporality. Dispersed atop the fountain are two-by-four brass planks, referencing his grandfather's accident. These are also fountains, with water springing from them (fig. 41-42). The erupting water of the *SFAI fountain* is a reference to another fountain: the geyser-like jetting water feature at Washington Square Park. Allen Ginsberg recited poems, and LGBTQ+ activists gathered here. Farmer also cites the park's fountain as a representation of his husband, Bill.<sup>201</sup>

Farmer positions his relationship as the release for these combined narratives to flow freely from the confines of straight time. However, this narrative of progress forms a critical component to unpack. Queer theorist Lisa Duggan coined the term "homonormativity" in 2003 to consider the privileging of heteronormative projects in LGBTQ+ culture. She states, "homonormativity is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormativity assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them

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<sup>198</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>199</sup> Farmer recalled an encounter with an *Arts Canada* (now *Canadian Art*) magazine featuring Michael Snow's 1970 participation. See "A Way out of the Mirror, a Work by Geoffrey Farmer to Be Presented at the Canada pavilion at La Biennale Di Venezia 2017." *NewsWire*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/a-way-out-of-the-mirror-a-work-by-geoffrey-farmer-to-be-presented-at-the-canada-pavilion-at-la-biennale-di-venezia-2017-614361983.html>.

<sup>200</sup> Marsha Lederman, *The Globe and Mail*, 2017.

<sup>201</sup> Farmer is married to American film and voice actor, Bill Mondy who is from New York City. See his acknowledgements in Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer*, 430.; also see Farmer, *A way out of the mirror*, 255.

while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>202</sup> Homonormativity’s compulsion towards the politics of same-sex marriage and serving in the military signal a desire for nationalist belonging.

Homonormativity derives its orientation from normative traditions and, as a result, is subject to the influence of straight time. *SFAI Fountain* is an assemblage of familial past, artistic development, and the unfolding of his politics and personal life. This display of homonormativity on a nationalist platform opens Farmer’s *mirror* for critique through a discourse of homonationalism.

### 3.2 Queering the Present: Homonationalism

When considering the present, 2017 also marked a contentious milestone in Canadian history. “Canada 150” indicated 150 years of colonial violence towards Indigenous peoples on stolen land. Farmer’s fountains take on new meanings when contextualized to represent the country on a nationalist platform at such a critical time. Puar proposes the term *homonationalism* to discuss the relations between national ideologies with so-called LGBTQ+ “progress,” often at the expense of others.<sup>203</sup> She envisions homonationalism as “a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality.”<sup>204</sup> Gender studies professor Scott Lauria Morgensen adapted Puar’s ideas through the lens of U.S.

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<sup>202</sup> Lisa Duggan, “Equality, Inc.,” in *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, 50.

<sup>203</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, Special Issue 02 (2013): 337, doi:10.1017/S002074381300007X.

<sup>204</sup> As Puar puts it, homonationalism “is not another way of distinguishing the good queers from bad queers, [it] is not an accusation, and not a position,” but rather a lens to examine how sexuality intersects nationalism. See Jasbir K. Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, Special Issue 02 (2013): 337, doi:10.1017/S002074381300007X.

and Indigenous relations, offering the concept of “settler homonationalism,” which addresses “effect[s] of U.S. queer modernities forming amid the conquest of Native peoples and the settling of Native land.”<sup>205</sup> The book, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion* (2015), written by Canadian scholars OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lennon, considers homonationalism in a Canadian context and acknowledge the need to challenge “the persistence of imperialist mythologies that continue to position Canada as a peace-keeper, a middle power, and a land of freedom.”<sup>206</sup> Farmer’s fountains at the Canada pavilion must be interrogated for their compliance to upkeep the nation-state’s perception of its tolerance and benevolence towards those on the margins of society.

In Dryden and Lenon’s text, professor Sonny Dhoot considers Sarah Schulman’s concept of “pinkwashing,” which is “a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinian’s human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life.”<sup>207</sup> Using Morgensen’s understanding of Settler Homonationalism, Dhoot applies the concept of pinkwashing to the Canadian context to consider “the figuration of Canada as a “gay haven” [while] simultaneously displac[ing] Indigenous claims for sovereignty and self-determination.”<sup>208</sup>

Situating this progressive narrative during a moment like Canada 150 and employing terms like “reconciliation” and “intergenerational trauma”<sup>209</sup>— terms used to

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<sup>205</sup> Scott Lauria Morgensen’s research expands beyond merely “adding settler to the term,” and considers how “colonial biopolitics of modern sexuality [conditioned] queer formations past and present.” See Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities,” *GLQ* 1 April 2010; 16 (1-2): 105–131. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-015>.

<sup>206</sup> Dryden, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion*, 8.

<sup>207</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>208</sup> Dhoot, “Pink Games on Stolen Land: Pride House and (Un)Queer Reterritorializations,” *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging*, 50.

<sup>209</sup> Farmer’s press release read, “La Biennale di Venezia that interweaves diverse stories of collision and reconciliation.” Curator Kitty Scott addressed the lumbers in the exhibition as “evok[ing] the collision, one

address the impacts of colonialism—are acts of pinkwashing the settler colonial project. Using Morgensen’s writing, Dhoot proposes pinkwashing in the Canadian context as being informed by two operations: belonging and settlement.<sup>210</sup> Belonging is performed through a means of inclusion, while settlement requires the taking of space.<sup>211</sup> Dhoot applies a third operation for the Canadian settler-colonial matrix: neoliberal collaborations.<sup>212</sup> The rest of this section will consider *A way out of the mirror* through this queer critique and interrogate the artist’s attempts to destabilize this narrative.

### 3.2 A – Settlement

Farmer dismantling the Canada pavilion is a rejection of settlement. The pavilion, designed by the Milanese firm BBPR and built in 1958, was, as Farmer notes, “part of a war reparations agreement with Italy.”<sup>213</sup> The Canada pavilion is only one of thirty permanent buildings in the Giardini di Castello.<sup>214</sup> The National Gallery of Canada undertook a four-year renovation project for the building in anticipation of its sixtieth anniversary in 2018 (fig. 43), which allowed the artist to engage with its architecture. Farmer’s dismantling of the pavilion included the removal of the entrance, including all glass panes, windows, and three sections off the roof (fig. 44). Farmer made a second

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that replicates the one that set his family on a course which created an intergenerational trauma.” See “A Way out of the Mirror,” *NewsWire*; Angel, “Geoffrey Farmer’s Tour De Force,” *Maclean’s*.

<sup>210</sup> I use Sonny Dhoot’s analysis of Canadian pinkwashing via his research on the creation of Pride House, an LGBTQ+ space designed for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. The Biennale is often referred to as “the Olympics of contemporary art” for its national pavilion format. Therefore, the relation seems appropriate. See Sonny Dhoot, “Pink Games on Stolen Land: Pride House and (Un)Queer Reterritorializations,” in *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging*, ed. OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016), 49-65.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Dhoot considers neoliberal collaborations as element for pinkwashing, which “helps to facilitate pretexts for the dispossession and elimination of Indigenous peoples.” Ibid, 59-62.

<sup>213</sup> Kitty Scott and Geoffrey Farmer, “Glossary,” in *Geoffrey Farmer: A Way out of the Mirror* (Ottawa, ON: National Gallery of Canada, 2017), 227.

<sup>214</sup> Chris Hannay, “How the Canada Pavilion Was Restored,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 15, 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/article-how-the-canada-pavilion-in-venice-was-restored/>.



opening in the pavilion's back brick wall, and masegni paving stones replaced the terrazzo flooring to better suit the pooling waters from the fountains.<sup>215</sup> Farmer's transformations opened the pavilion, collapsing the interior with the exterior. Curator Kitty Scott said the project aimed to "creat[e] a much more open space that looks outward and upward instead of turning in on itself."<sup>216</sup>

The dismantling of a pavilion as a critique of national identity was first performed across the Canada pavilion twenty-four years before Farmer's *mirror*, at the German pavilion with Hans Haacke's groundbreaking (in all senses of the word) project, *Germania* (fig. 45). In 1993, Haacke won the coveted Golden Lion award at the forty-fifth Venice Biennale for demolishing the German pavilion's marble flooring, which was part of Hitler's remodeling efforts for the pavilion in 1938.<sup>217</sup> This intervention set a precedent for Farmer's dismantling of the pavilion as a commentary on nationhood. Haacke's actions served as a reminder of history and the disruption of a utopia. Farmer's gesture visually conveyed the need to reconstruct and rebuild the idea of a "utopic" nation such as Canada. Whereas Haacke's intervention included the Italian inscription for the country, "Germania," which was also the name Hitler considered to rename Nazi Berlin had he been successful, Farmer intended to take down the country's name marker (fig. 46).<sup>218</sup> On the didactic text for the Canada pavilion, the artist wrote: "The struggle

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<sup>215</sup> Kitty Scott and Geoffrey Farmer, "Glossary," 227.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Subsequently, in 2017 the German pavilion won the Golden Lion award and engaged with the pavilion's flooring via an elevated glass platform in Anne Imhof's *Faust*. For more on Haacke's installation, see Julian Jason Haladyn and Jordan, Miriam, "Disrupting Utopia: Hans Haacke's Germania or Digging Up the History of the Venice Biennale," In *Charged Circuits: Questioning International Exhibition Practices*, March 14, 2008, Montreal, Canada. (Unpublished), accessed April 1, 2021, <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1340/>.

<sup>218</sup> Germania was the name Hitler envisioned to rename Berlin, which would be the 'capital of the world.' See Julian Jason Haladyn and Jordan, Miriam, "Disrupting Utopia: Hans Haacke's Germania or Digging

for the removal of the Canada sign; if it is still on the front of the pavilion, I lost.”<sup>219</sup>

Efforts of reconciliation were made and included in the exhibition. Three months before Farmer’s official selection announcement, the only high school in Kinngait, Nunavut, burned down.<sup>220</sup> In early 2017 Farmer visited the high school, named after Inuk photographer, archivist, and artist Peter Pitseolak, and asked the community for permission to recover a handful of the remains from the wreckage. As an act of gratitude, Farmer promised to help rebuild their library.<sup>221</sup> The metal scraps were incorporated into the exhibition as seen in the fountain, *Trough* (fig. 47). Farmer installed the salvaged pieces from the school on a water trough from the Second World War, which was gifted to the artist by a farmer from Switzerland, where the artist cast his sculptures.<sup>222</sup> Farmer saw this pairing as “an empathetic understanding and bridge to other stories that are not [his] but that we as a nation must look at.”<sup>223</sup> This gesture of solidarity appeared relatively minor when compared to the grandeur and complexity of the other sculptures at the Canada pavilion. The trough sat on the opposite end of the pavilion’s back brick wall, almost as if it was outside the space; passerby viewers distracted by the geyser-like

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Up the History of the Venice Biennale,” *Open Research Repository*, OCAD University, Accessed April 4, 2021. <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1340/>.

<sup>219</sup> In the end, the Canada inscription remained in the pavilion, except it was painted black in contrast to its usual white lettering. See Farmer, “A Way out of the Mirror,” *A Way out of the Mirror* (didactic) (Venice, IT: National Gallery of Canada, 2017).

<sup>220</sup> The Peter Pitseolak School in Kinngait (formerly known as Cape Dorset), Nunavut, was set on fire in 2015. Lisa Gregoire, “Fire Destroys Nunavut High School, 170 Students Left Stranded,” *Nunatsiaq News*, September 8, 2015, [https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674fire\\_destroys\\_nunavut\\_high\\_school\\_leaves\\_150\\_students\\_stranded/](https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/65674fire_destroys_nunavut_high_school_leaves_150_students_stranded/).

<sup>221</sup> Geoffrey Farmer, *A Way out of the Mirror* (didactic).

<sup>222</sup> *Through*, along with the other sculptures in *A way out of the mirror* were cast at the Kunstgiesserei St. Gallen art foundry in Switzerland. In unpacking the political meanings of Farmer’s work in Venice, it is intriguing to note that the works were created in Switzerland, a country known for its neutrality in the first and second world war and in global affairs.

<sup>223</sup> Angel, “Geoffrey Farmer’s Tour De Force,” *Maclean’s*.

fountain likely missed it.<sup>224</sup>

### 3.2 B – Belonging

Farmer's use of estrangement takes form at the Canadian pavilions' *mise en scène* in the large-scale bronze sculpture of a resting mantis. With a book on its head and another on its lap, *Praying Mantis* (fig. 48) sits in reverie on the north end of the pavilion. Farmer acknowledges this sculpture as a self-portrait of his youth, "a period that we have all gone through when the body is so awkwardly transforming."<sup>225</sup> This reflection of his turbulent adolescence is a mature and recurring motif in his practice. With its frail body and limped wrists, the insect is a queer monument for the artist, as it continues his anthropomorphic uses of queer figures. Farmer recognizes French sculptor Germaine Richier's 1946 sculpture *La Mante Grande* (fig. 49) as the inspiration for this figure.<sup>226</sup> However, there are some noticeable differences between the two sculptures. Farmer's *Mantis*' eyes bulge while Richier's are much smaller; Richier's mantis has breasts whereas Farmer's does not; also, compared to *La Mante*'s frail and almost decomposing claws, the front legs of Farmer's *Mantis* have four long well-formed fingers. Farmer's *Mantis* (fig. 50) also bears a similar resemblance to a figure from the artist's early career, his first iteration of a queer being, Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (fig. 51). In contrast, *E.T.*'s index finger glowed and had healing qualities, Farmer's *Mantis* acted as a fountain and emitted water from its fingertips.

*E.T.* and *Praying Mantis* is a form of "creative anthropomorphism," which refuses

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<sup>224</sup> In some ways, this exchange parallels the Canadian history concerning relocations of Inuit into the high Arctic between 1953–55 in service of asserting Canadian sovereignty in the North during the Cold War. See *The High Arctic Relocation: A Report on the 1953-55 Relocation* (Ottawa, ON: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1994).

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> "La Mante Grande," Museu Coleção Berardo, Accessed December 21, 2017, <http://en.museuberardo.pt/collection/works/1041>.

the human body and human exceptionalism by turning the ambiguous body into a “site of critical intervention.”<sup>227</sup> Halberstam writes: “In practicing creative anthropomorphism, we invent the models of resistance we need and lack in reference to other lifeworlds, animal and monstrous.”<sup>228</sup> When speaking about Farmer’s use of E.T. in the 1990s, curator Scott Watson remarked, “[i]t could be said that adolescence is the location of a critical, negative sense that all is not well with the social order.”<sup>229</sup> The *Mantis* is not just referencing Farmer’s past but also his early investments in queer futures. In unbecoming a citizen of the present and instead becoming an emblem of the future, the *Mantis* offers an alternative way of existing in the world.

Connecting Farmer’s *Mantis* to E.T. also opens up another aspect of the familial matrix that Farmer pieces together for *A way out of the mirror*. Spielberg’s epic film reevaluated the nuclear family dynamic, taking form in a single-parent household and telling the kinship between child and alien. While the family often marks an erasure of other modes of kinship, Farmer attentively expands that idea by using a sculpture of a crumpled white duvet cover. *Duvet* (Fig. 52) was an aluminum rendering of a cotton duvet across the *SFAI Fountain*. The exhibition’s didactic alludes to this as “[a] duvet freshly slept in by Karl after an LSD trip in the rock formations of the Maggi River, I had to drive us to the airport the next day.”<sup>230</sup> The aforementioned ‘Karl’ is Karl Rühle, Farmer’s project manager, to whom Farmer dedicated this exhibition’s monograph.<sup>231</sup> These demonstrations of kinship offer a small counter to the structures of the family

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<sup>227</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 107.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>229</sup> Watson, *6 New Vancouver Modern*.

<sup>230</sup> Geoffrey Farmer, *A Way out of the Mirror*.

<sup>231</sup> The first page of the *A way out of the mirror* catalog reads “For Karl.” See *Geoffrey Farmer: A Way out of the Mirror* (Ottawa, ON: National Gallery of Canada, 2017).

spread throughout the pavilion and represent an alternative way of being.

### 3.2 C – Neoliberal Collaborations

Dhoot considers neoliberal collaborations as one of the strategies for pinkwashing. The Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) was the presenting sponsor for the Canada pavilion at the Venice Biennale. RBC's Wealth and Management website featured Farmer in an article under their "Arts and Culture" for headlining the pavilion.<sup>232</sup> The article highlights the support RBC provided the artist throughout his career, listing the purchase of one of his works and financing the production of Farmer's 2008 catalog at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal. Farmer acknowledges RBC's involvement:

Fostering culture and supporting artists at crucial points in their careers is a vital bridge to the success of culture and society in Canada. [...] I mean this in a holistic way, and in an economic way, as cultural activities create jobs and contribute economically to Canada – so it makes sense that RBC would be involved in fostering that.<sup>233</sup>

RBC's support comes at odds with the intent of the project's politics. In the 2010s, water became a highly political topic in North America.<sup>234</sup> This issue was due to the construction of oil pipelines, which violated Indigenous territories. In 2017, RBC invested \$714 million in Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project, "which seek[ed] to twin an existing pipeline from Edmonton to the B.C. coast, nearly

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<sup>232</sup> RBC Wealth Management, "Geoffrey Farmer Represents Canada at the Venice Biennale," accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.rbcwealthmanagement.com/ca/en/news-events/events/geoffrey-farmer-represents-canada-at-the-venice-biennale/detail/>

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> While access to clean water has been an ongoing fight for many Indigenous communities in North America, the 2010s saw large-scale political movements including the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests at Standing Rock Indian Reservation in 2016 and 2017. In 2015, then-leader of the Liberal party, Justin Trudeau vowed to end First Nations reserve boil water advisories within his first five years as Prime Minister. See John Paul Tasker, "Justin Trudeau promises to end boil water advisories on First Nations within 5 years," CBC News, September 16, 2015, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-justin-trudeau-first-nations-boil-water-advisories-1.3258058>.

tripling the overall project's capacity."<sup>235</sup> RBC, an institution protested by Indigenous and environmental coalitions over water rights funding *A way out of the mirror*'s various water features was a neoliberal act that went unnoticed during Canada 150.<sup>236</sup>

### 3.3 Queer Affect and the Future Now

At the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Farmer made several efforts to queer the Canada pavilion. By converging the indoors with the outdoors, flooding the pavilion floors, and staging modes of un-settlement and un-becoming, he challenged the structures of time and place and disrupted concepts of development and transformation. But these acts were sanctioned by the political moment. As Annamarie Jagose explains, "the template of national identity does not fulfill the radically denaturalizing power of queer."<sup>237</sup> To international audiences unbeknownst to the realities of the settler-colonial project in Canada, Farmer's ambitious project read as a jovial waterpark. At any point in the exhibition's run, you could find tourists staring in amazement at the magnitude of the geyser and children enjoying the playfulness of the installation. Arguably, any project presented at the Canada pavilion in 2017 would have had to address the country's political climate and be subject to a decolonial reading. Rather than being a potential allegory to transmit the country's political urgencies during a critical moment like Canada 150 on an international stage, Farmer's narratives of progress and familial reconciliation dampened critical discussions on reconciliation. Inadvertently, Farmer's account of personal growth contributed to Canada's forced narrative of being a

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<sup>235</sup> April Fong, "RBC chief warns investors 'getting impatient' on Trans Mountain," *BNN Bloomberg*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/rbc-chief-warns-investors-getting-impatient-amid-trans-mountain-setback-1.1133446>.

<sup>236</sup> Charlene Aleck et al., "Trans Mountain Letter," *Banktrack*, June 6, 2017, [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ubcic/pages/1512/attachments/original/1497272052/Trans\\_Mountain\\_letter\\_June\\_2017.pdf?1497272052](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ubcic/pages/1512/attachments/original/1497272052/Trans_Mountain_letter_June_2017.pdf?1497272052).

<sup>237</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 109.

progressive and tolerant nation. Alas, Farmer's 'Venetian mirror' is well-worn and pitted, nuanced, and imperfect.

Since the biennale, Farmer relocated from Vancouver, BC, to Kauai, Hawai'i, an island with a vast legacy of colonialism.<sup>238</sup> Given how Farmer's practice is informed by place, as well as this particular project that engages with the dialogues of colonization, Farmer's settler complicity will continue to be a critical factor in his work in the future.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> In 1778, British explorer Captain James Cook arrived in Kauai, Hawai'i, during his third voyage to the Pacific Ocean. This moment is understood as the first contact between Europe and Hawai'i. See Glyndwr Williams, *The Death of Captain Cook: A Hero Made and Unmade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>239</sup> Location has continually informed Farmer's work. The impact of his year-long exchange studying in San Francisco was made apparent in the biennale's central fountain. Vancouver's association with film and cinema, as well as its photography legacies factored into his emerging and mid-career work. The impact of Hawai'i's histories on his work remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

Geoffrey Farmer's practice is intricate and multilayered. I have argued that Farmer's subjectivity informs his approach to working with time and weaves throughout his works. I have also argued that queering has been at the core of his temporal projects and honed throughout his practice. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam identifies that queer time "operat[es] against the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition proper to hetero-familial development."<sup>240</sup> Farmer's career has ascended in an incline of achievements and successes that subscribe to the linearity and normativity of straight time. So how does the concept of queer time operate within a narrative of progress by virtue of straight time? I conclude this research by reflecting on how these perceived binaries coexist in Farmer's practice.

Having built a longstanding career filled with national honors and critical international acclaim, the artist has achieved high levels of conventional success. His representation by esteemed galleries like Catriona Jeffries elevated the artist's profile and demonstrated that his work is of commercial interest and high value. His selection for the fifty-seventh Venice Biennale acknowledged his practice to the level of national pride and cemented its importance in the fabric of Canadian art. Talent, hard work, perseverance, and ambition are visible in his elaborate installations and clearly factor into his success. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Farmer's gender, whiteness, conventional attractiveness, and upper-middle-class status were undeniable factors for his acceptance into the mainstream. The art world is biased towards artists of this nature. But that does not necessarily translate to the level of success that he has attained. I believe

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<sup>240</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 75.



Farmer's use and understanding of queerness are crucial to this. In looking at Farmer's influences and references, it is evident that the artist values queerness. He is well-versed in the work and practices of his forebears, including Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Marcel Proust, Kathy Acker, and Walter Benjamin. All of them were figures who understood the complexities of their sexualities and fearlessly used it as a process in their artistic practice. I see this astuteness of queerness and its application to his practice that set Farmer to follow similar trajectories of other conventionally successful white gay male artists like Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987).

Previous readings of Farmer's work have attended to the various other entry points that the artist provides.<sup>241</sup> However, they have overlooked the importance of a queer reading. I believe there are two reasons for this. For one, there is an assumption or perhaps a fear that such a reading flattens an artist's work to their mere sexual politics. In this aspect, I argue that reading Farmer's work for its queerness rather complicates and expands the understanding and meaning behind his works. Farmer's work delves into the significant sexual politics, yet these merely represent a single layer among the myriad dimensions of queerness that permeate his practice. As explored in this research, queerness has expansive histories and sophisticated concepts and theories that require skill and finesse. The other reason why such a reading has not been produced on him yet is that Farmer's narrative does not fit perfectly into the theories of queerness. This reading produces contradictions and reveals limitations or, at times, failures to adequately meet queerness at its theory in full, which is why I believe such a reading is all the more necessary. Its peaks expose the nuances within queerness that I hope theory continues to

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<sup>241</sup> Farmer's work has been interpreted through different theoretical frames including postmodernism, materiality, art conservation, labor, theatricality, and the history of photography.

unfold. But as seen in Farmer's work, it is precisely in these collisions where artistry forms.

Since 2017, Farmer's practice has moved towards comparatively smaller projects in scale, yet just as intimate as *A way out of the mirror*. In the years following the Venice Biennale, he continued exploring the themes and concepts presented in *A way out of the mirror*. In 2018, the artist exhibited a series of ink drawings on paper that continued with his exploration of self. The exhibition *Mudpuddlers, Corn Borers, Polymorphic Platyforms* looked at Farmer's relation to drawing as a method of observing.<sup>242</sup> Titles like *Father and Son* (fig. 53) and *A Dream of Other Offspring* (fig. 54) suggest a continuation of the artist's interests in the complexities of lineage and family. In 2019, one of Seattle's art exhibition spaces, Western Bridge, commissioned Farmer to create an outdoor art installation. *If You Want To See Something Look at Something Else (Allen Ginsberg 1926–1997)* (fig. 61) expanded on Farmer's interests in Ginsberg and found imagery by displaying images of the poet framed and spread throughout Seattle's Volunteer Park, a location deeply intertwined with the city's LGBTQ+ history.<sup>243</sup> In 2019, the artist produced a limited edition of pins sold to celebrate Nottingham Contemporary's tenth anniversary. *I am a Fern* (fig. 55) consisted of eighteen-carat gold safety pins and a hand-typed letter composed by the artist. The letter explained that the pins were replicas of a safety pin given to the Farmer by his first sexual partner, a man described as having a mohawk, tattoos, and a motorcycle.<sup>244</sup> In the letter, Farmer revealed that he attached his

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<sup>242</sup> Casey Kaplan, "Mudpuddlers, Corn Borers, Polymorphic Press Release,"

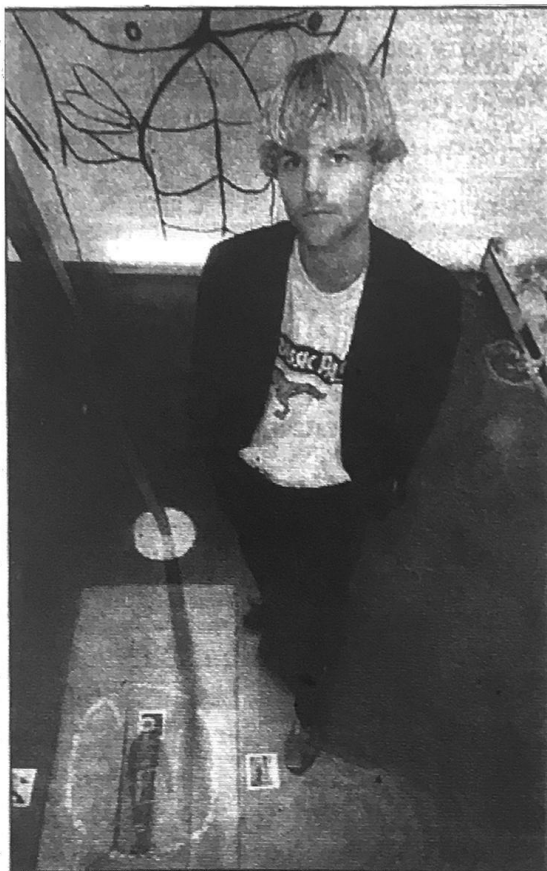
<https://caseykaplangallery.com/exhibition/geoffrey-farmer-2/>, Accessed February 20, 2021.

<sup>243</sup> Volunteer Park in Seattle served as a gathering place for various events, rallies and celebrations concerning LGBTQ+ rights and visibility in the city.

<sup>244</sup> Artspace, "Geoffrey Farmer: I am a Fern, 2019," [https://www.artspace.com/geoffrey\\_farmer/i-am-a-fern#](https://www.artspace.com/geoffrey_farmer/i-am-a-fern#), accessed February 21, 2021.

given pin to a string and wore it as a pendant throughout his youth. In 2001 he had the safety pin cast in gold after selling his first work and still wears it today. Much like the other writing components of Farmer's practice, the letter reveals the artist's commitment to queerness. The gold pin, an emblem of "a punk aesthetic," is a reminder to avert normativity as there is knowledge in transgression.

## Figures



KEVIN DUNN/The Daily Courier

Geoffrey Farmer Topham stands beside his large-scale installation, which is currently on display at the alternator gallery in Kelowna.

## Exhibit explores gay sexuality

By ANDRE WETJEN  
Daily Courier staff

"Sexually explicit material," warns the sign on the door of the alternator gallery on Bernard Avenue.

No kidding.

The show *Reorientation: Imported Fruits* opened last week at the Kelowna gallery and remains on display until Nov. 6.

The exhibit, which explores gay sexuality, may well be the most controversial show to ever come to Kelowna, says Barbara Leidl, one of the gallery's co-ordinators.

No doubt.

*Reorientation* shows the works of four men, and includes a large-scale installation by Geoffrey Farmer Topham, drawings and paintings by Johannes Zits and Edward Pien, and three recent tapes by Toronto video artist Dennis Day.

"Should one passively accept gay sexuality as perverse and unacceptable because society in general has deemed it as such?" the artists ask in a joint statement.

Day's three short videos — which are both creative and thought-provoking — is the best of the work on display. They range from the somewhat hu-

morous *Heads or Tails* to the dark *Got Away in the Dying Moments*, which addresses the issue of AIDS.

Much of the still art is controversial because of its sexually explicit nature. There are a number of good pieces, but a lot of it is simplistic rather than "playful", the word used by the artists themselves.

Some of the artists will be at the alternator gallery on Saturday to address gay issues, homophobia and the arts.

Invited speaker Elizabeth Van Assum of Vancouver will also participate at the talk, which begins at 7 p.m.

There will be a small cover charge.

Anyone wanting to view the exhibit during regular hours can drop down to the gallery between noon and 4 p.m., Tuesday to Saturday.

It is located near the foot of Bernard Avenue, a short walk from The Sails.

"Part of the purpose of the gallery is to show artists who would otherwise not be seen at commercial galleries," said Leidl.

In the case of *Reorientation*, at least, the alternator gallery is certainly fulfilling its mandate.

Figure 1: Newspaper clipping with Geoffrey Farmer (Topham) promoting the exhibition *Reorientation: Imported Fruits*, The Daily Courier, Thursday, October 21, 1993, Sec C.

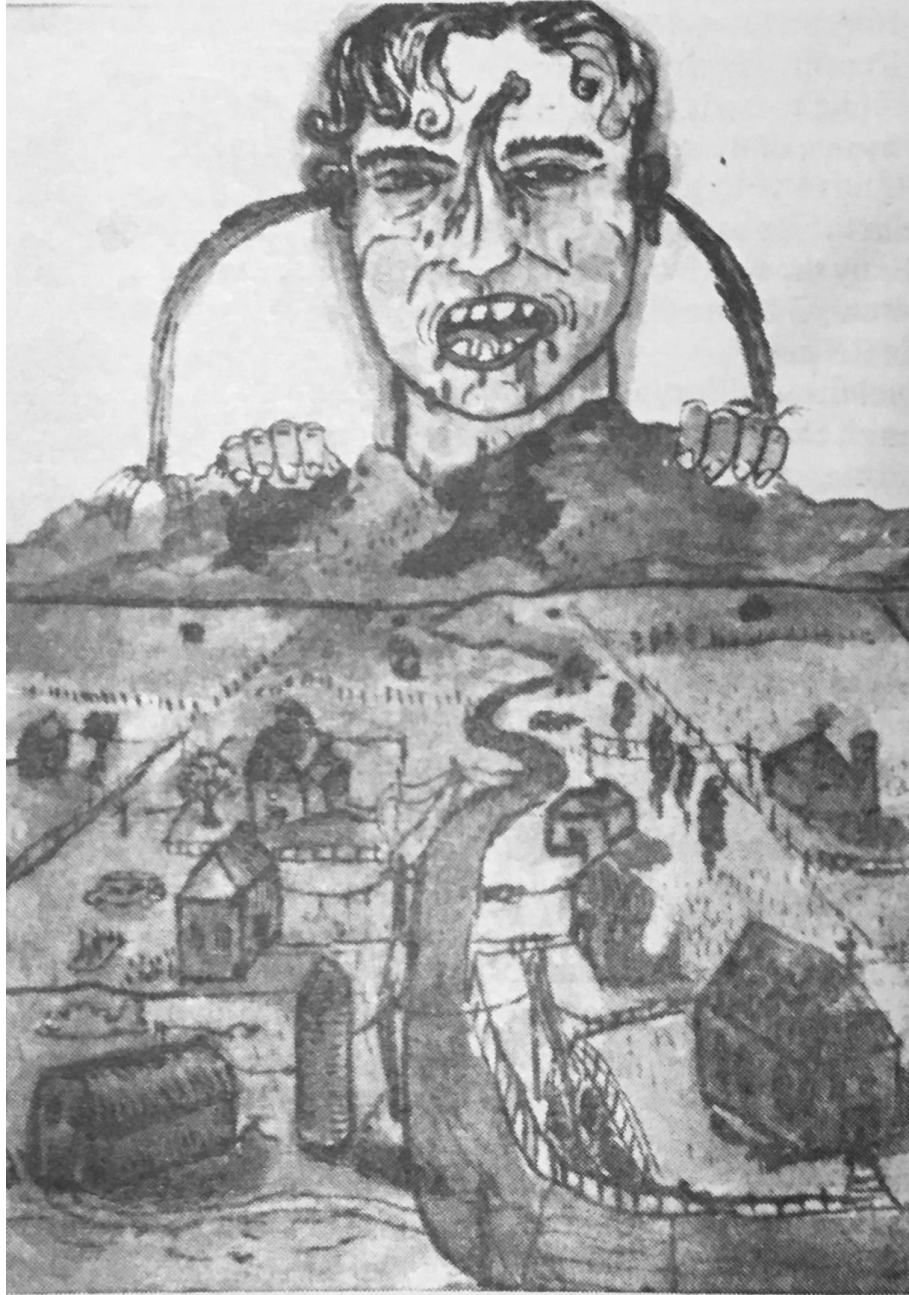


Figure 2: Geoffrey Farmer (Topham), Early work by the artist from the exhibition *Reorientation: Imported Fruits* captioned as “a single element in Geoffrey Farmer Topham’s mixed media series,” *The Capital News*, October 28, 1993.



Figure 3: Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, 1995–1996, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Permanent Collection.



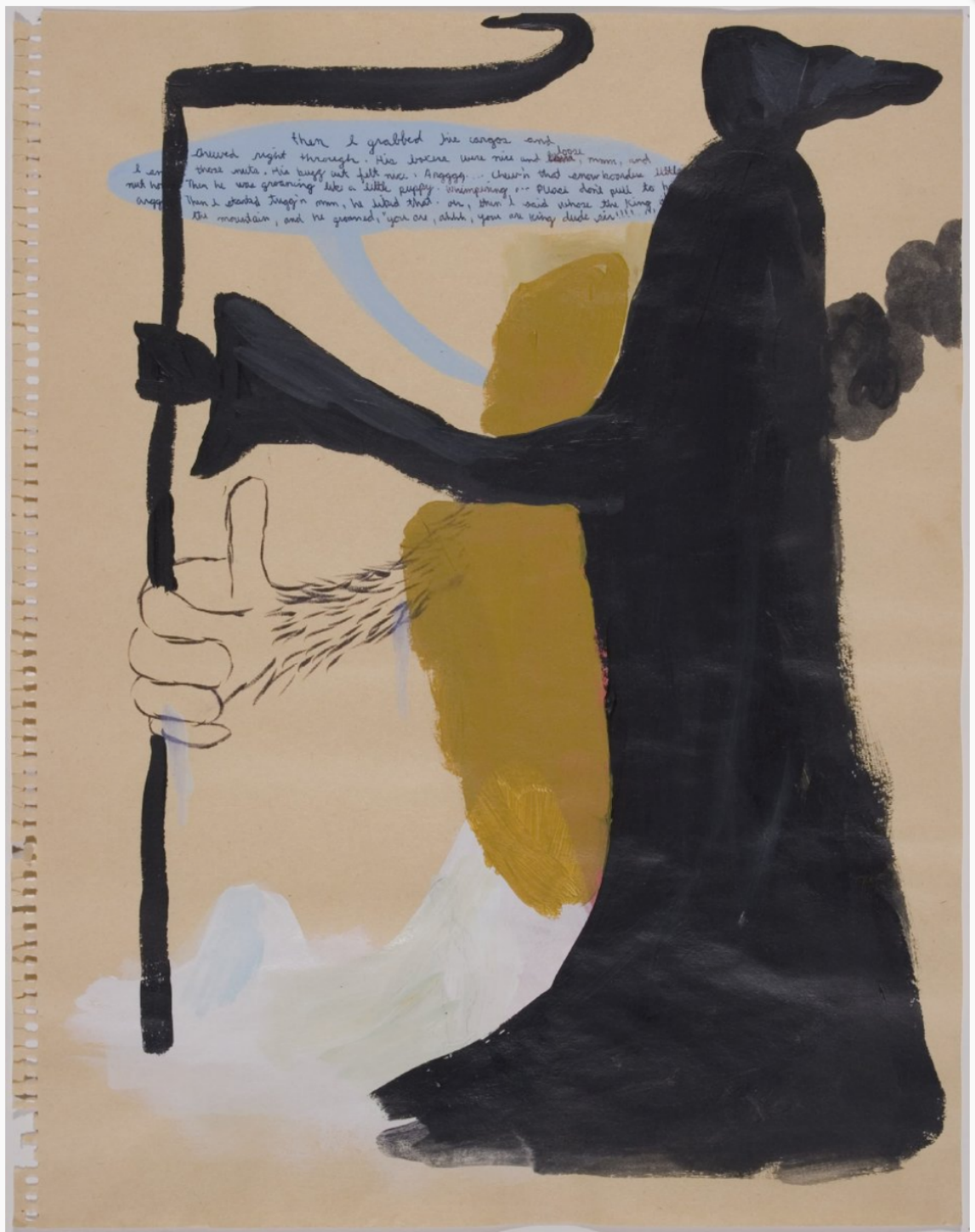


Figure 4: Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, 1995–1996, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Permanent Collection.



Figure 5: Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen, *The Lost Drawings of Geoffrey Farmer and Brian Jungen*, 1995–1996, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Permanent Collection.





Figure 6: Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.



Figure 7: Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.



Figure 8: Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.



Figure 9: Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.



Figure 10: Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.



Figure 11: Jonathan Wells and Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Sad Story of a Gay Skater* (video still), 5:00, VIVO Video Out Distribution, 1996.





Figure 12: Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Installation Without A Ship*, 1992 (installation detail), *Building Your Own Spaceship, Or Gallery*, 1996.

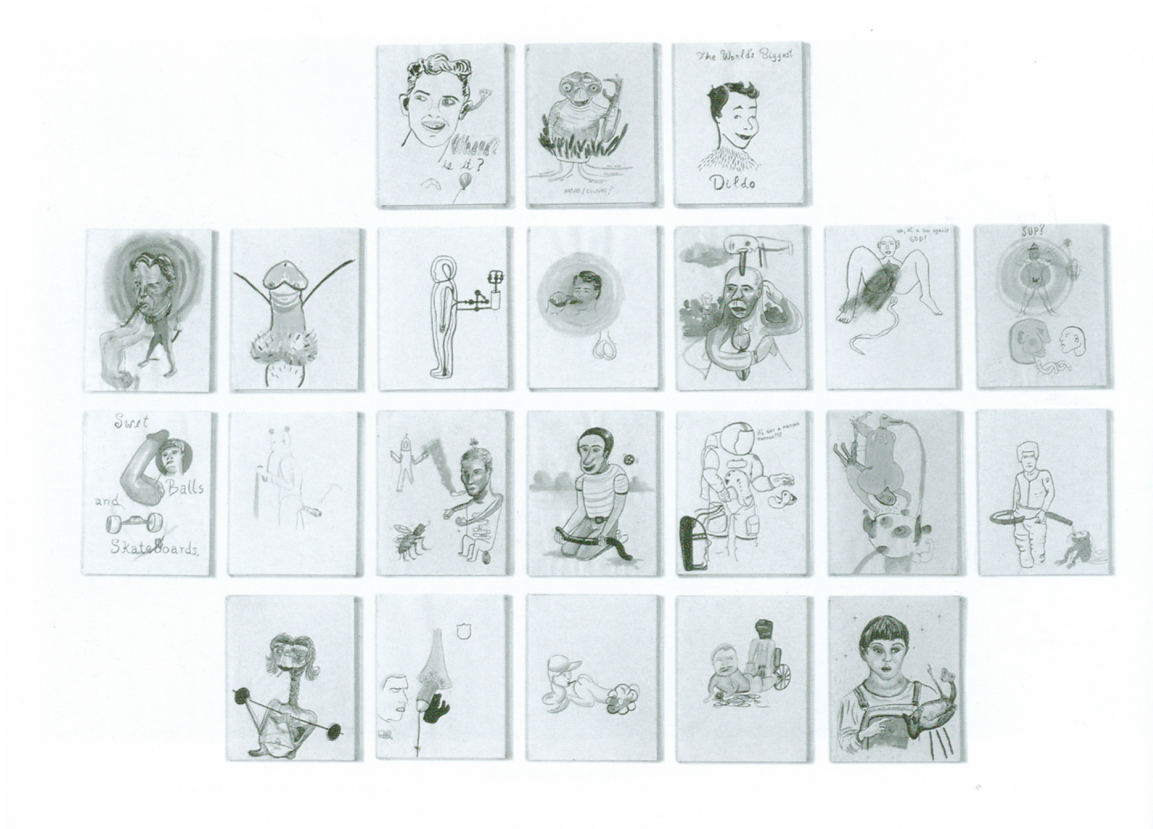


Figure 13: Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Untitled (series)*, mixed media on paper, 20 x 25 cm each, for the exhibition *Home Alone: How to Build Your Own Spaceship, Or Gallery*, 1996.





Figure 14: Geoffrey Topham (Farmer), *Untitled*, mixed media on paper, 20 x 25 cm, for the exhibition *Home Alone: How to Build Your Own Spaceship, Or Gallery*, 1996.



Figure 15: Geoffrey Farmer, *The day I floated away from the society I had known* (installation detail), 6: *New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 1998.



Figure 16: Geoffrey Farmer, *The day I floated away from the society I had known* (video still), from the catalog *6: New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, 1998.





Figure 17: Geoffrey Farmer. *Hunchback Kit*, (2000-), Vancouver Art Gallery collection. 2000.

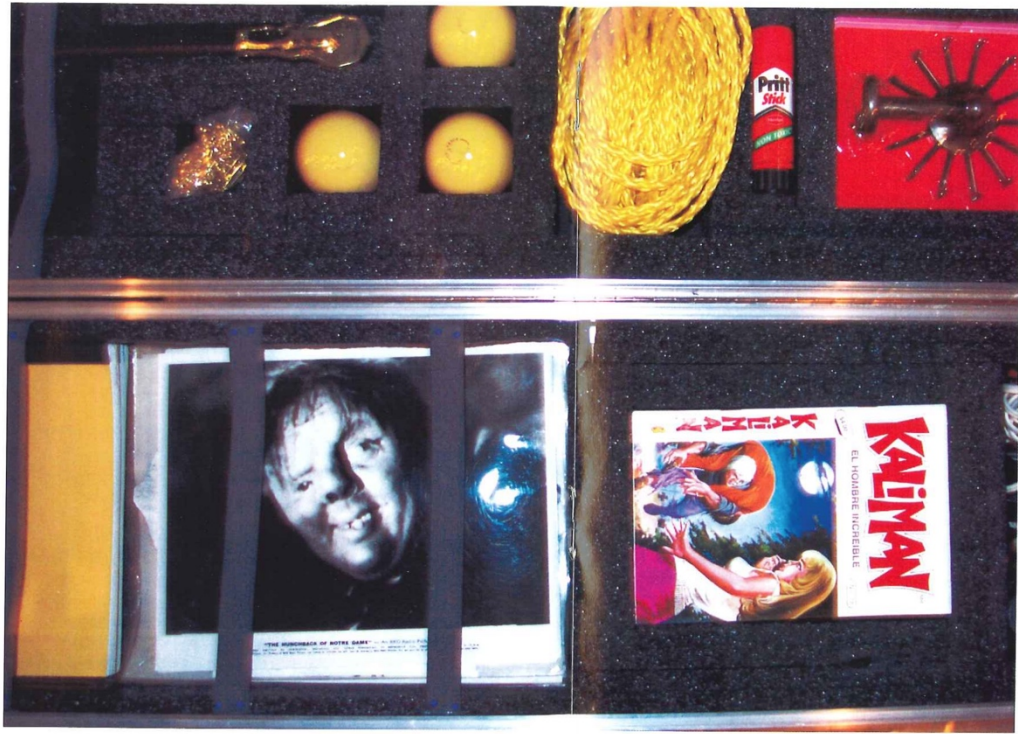


Figure 18: Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit* (2000-) (detail), Crate, lights, electrical cords, drawings, research documents, monitor, VCR, videos, dimensions variable, Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, 2000.



Figure 19: Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit* (2000-), mixed media, dimensions variable, Vancouver Art Gallery, photo credit: Don Gill, 2005.



Figure 20: Geoffrey Farmer, *The Last Two Million Years* (installation view), foamcore plinths, perspex frames and cutouts from selected pages of the history book *The Last Two Million Years*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, 2008.



Figure 21: Geoffrey Farmer, *The Last Two Million Years*, 2007, Installation view, *How Do I Fit This Ghost in My Mouth?*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2015.





Figure 22: Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass*, *Life* magazines (1935-1985), archival glue, miscanthus grass, floral foam, wood table, at documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.



Figure 23: Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass, Life magazines (1935-1985)*, archival glue, miscanthus grass, floral foam, wood table, at documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.



Figure 24: Geoffrey Farmer, *Leaves of Grass, Life magazines (1935-1985)*, archival glue, miscanthus grass, floral foam, wood table, at documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, 2012.





Figure 25: Geoffrey Farmer, *Boneyard*, 2013, paper cutouts, wood, glue, dimensions variable. Installation view, ICA Boston, 2016.



Figure 26: Geoffrey Farmer, *Boneyard*, 2013, paper cutouts, wood, glue, dimensions variable. Installation view, ICA Boston, 2016.





Figure 27: Geoffrey Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer* (installation view) paper, textile, wood, and metal, 365 figures, *Nomads*, National Gallery of Canada, 2009.



Figure 28: Geoffrey Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer* (detail) paper, textile, wood, and metal, 365 figures, *Nomads*, National Gallery of Canada, 2009.





Figure 29: Geoffrey Farmer, *The Surgeon and the Photographer* (documentation) for the exhibition *How Do I Fit A Ghost In My Mouth*, The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2015.

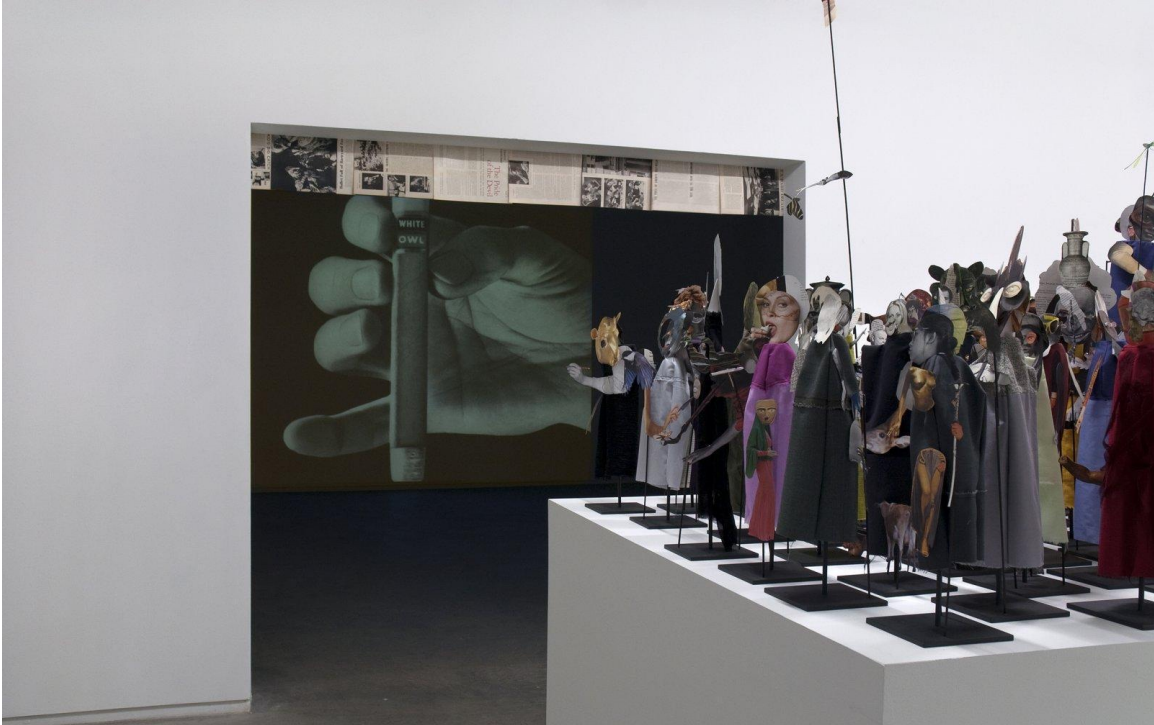


Figure 30: Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (installation view), computer-generated algorithmic montage sequence, dimensions variable. Catriona Jeffries, 2010.

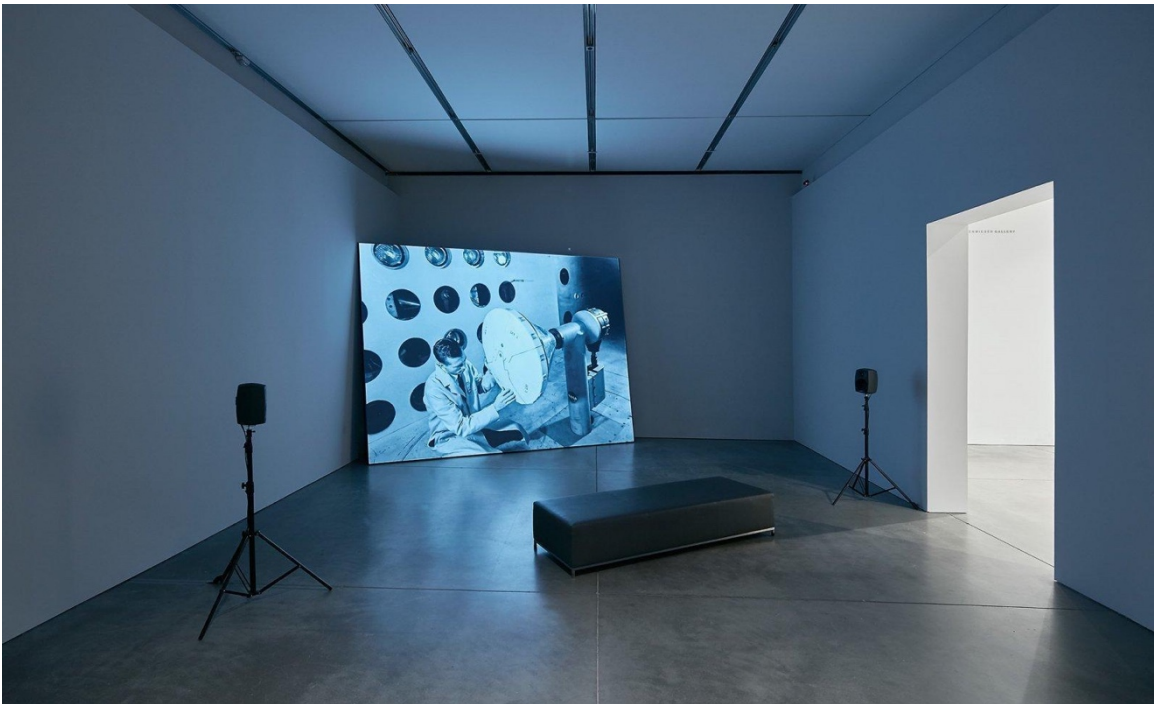


Figure 31: Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (installation view), computer-generated algorithmic montage sequence, dimensions variable. Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2016.





Figure 32: Geoffrey Farmer, *Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell* (installation view), computer-generated algorithmic montage sequence, dimensions variable. *The Care With Which The Rain Is Wrong*, Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, Germany, 2017.



Figure 33: Geoffrey Farmer (@anhourbeforesleep), *Gay and Proud (1970) Lilli Vincenz*. Footage of one of the earliest Gay Pride demonstration marches, the first Christopher Street Liberation Day parade, held in NYC, June 28, 1970, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Instagram, November 24, 2018, Accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqRhptAreS/>.



Figure 34: Geoffrey Farmer (@anhourbeforesleep), *Lonesome Cowboy- excerpts (1968) Andy Warhol*, Instagram, July 28, 2019, Accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqRhptAreS/>.



Figure 35: Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror* (installation view), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.





Figure 36: Unknown photographer, *Untitled (Collision)*, 1955, archive of the artist.



Figure 37: Unknown photographer, *Untitled (Collision)*, 1955, archive of the artist.



Figure 38: Geoffrey Farmer, *Wounded Man*, Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.





Figure 39: Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.





Figure 40: Geoffrey Farmer, *SFAI Fountain* (installation view), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.





Figure 41: Geoffrey Farmer, *SFAI Fountain* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.



Figure 42: Geoffrey Farmer, *Planks* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.





Figure 43: Canada Pavilion, Giardini di Castello, Venice, Italy, 2018.



Figure 44: Canada Pavilion, Giardini di Castello, Venice, Italy, 2017.



Fig. 45: Hans Haacke, *Germania* (installation view), German Pavilion, 45<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 1993.





Figure 46: Geoffrey Farmer, *A way out of the mirror* (installation detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.



Figure 47: Geoffrey Farmer, *Trough*, Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.





Figure 48: Geoffrey Farmer, *Praying Mantis* (installation view), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.



Figure 49: Germaine Richier, *La Mante Grande*, bronze with brown patina, HC2/11, 1956.





Figure 50: Figure 54: Geoffrey Farmer, *Praying Mantis* (detail), Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.



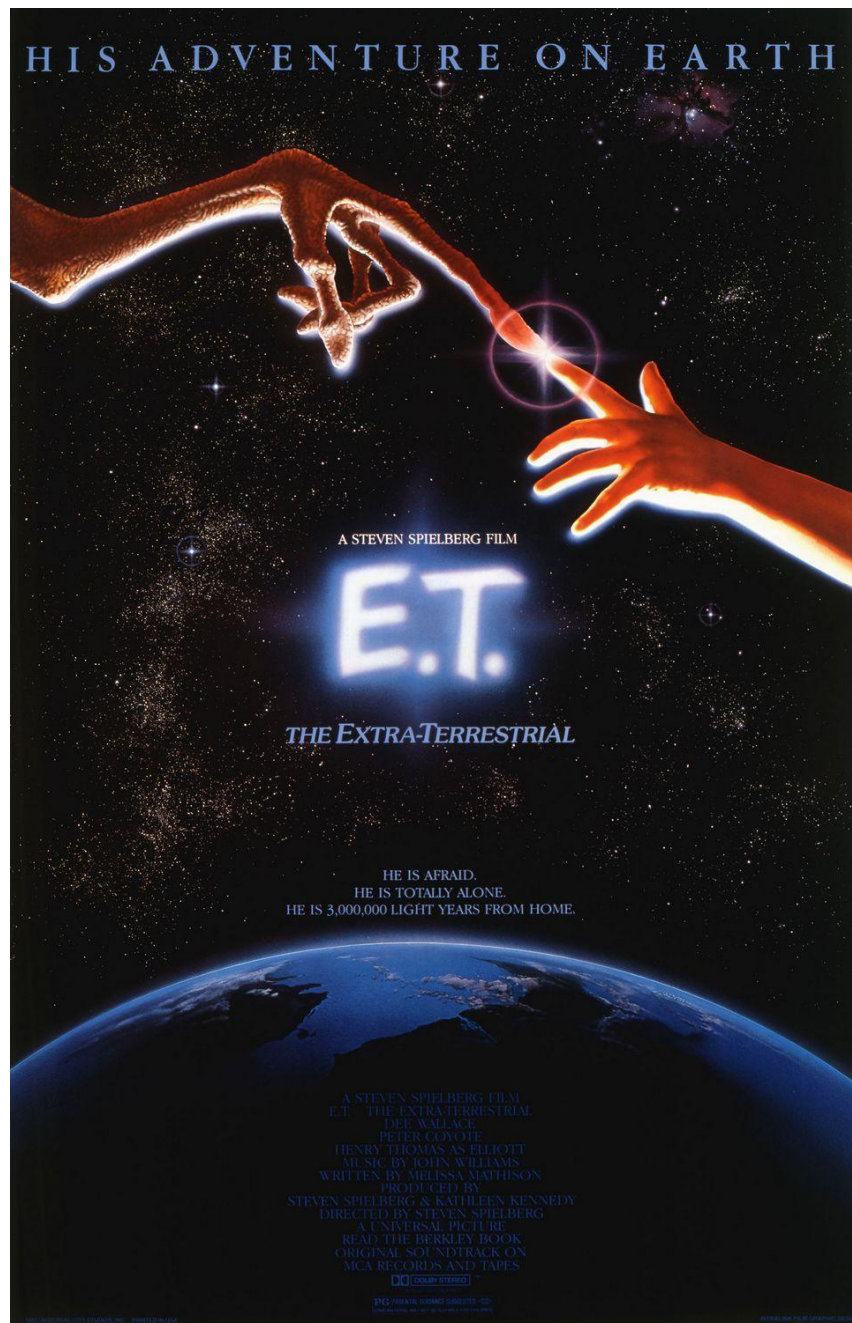


Figure 51: *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* (movie poster), 1982.



Figure 52: Geoffrey Farmer, *Duvet*, Canada Pavilion, fifty-seventh Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2017.



Figure 53: Geoffrey Farmer, *FATHER AND SON*, ink on paper, 12 x 9 in., Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York City, New York, 2018.



Figure 54: Geoffrey Farmer, *A DREAM OF OFFSPRING*, ink on paper, 12 x 9 in., Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York City, New York, 2018.





Figure 55: Geoffrey Farmer, *If You Want To See Something Look at Something Else* (Allen Ginsberg 1926–1997) (installation detail), 50 color photographs mounted on perspex, framed, Volunteer Park, Seattle, USA, 2019.

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