



**Project  
Space**



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jes sachse, *Freedom Tube Lost in X Space*  
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As if buoyed by some invisible force, a forest of white-and-red straws float ethereally toward the ceiling, imposing a low threshold over a small room. Inside, a riot of ebullient pinks colour every object, transporting the viewer down an *Alice-in-Wonderland*-esque rabbit hole. This assemblage, aptly named *Freedom Tube Lost in X Space*, is the work of jes sachse. It attempts to communicate the experience of disability via prosthesis, opening the viewer's eyes to the infinite possibilities of a realm where accepted discourses of power are turned on their heads

In creating a liminal space through an assemblage of found objects and choreographed space, sachse attempts to build community through affinity. The low height of the sculpture inhibits anyone from entering the space unless they are either short or seated in a mobility device, inverting the everyday barriers faced by the disabled/Crip community and limiting the access of the able-bodied into this almost sanctum-like space. Obstinate repetition renders the straw, an object that is crucial to the survival and engagement of Crip folk with their everyday world, into a conduit for experiences across barriers of ability, gender, sexuality and race. *Freedom Tube* confounds our reading of the straw as a disregarded piece of refuse. It also actively posits modes of community building, philosophies of care and empathy that can be possible through the exploration of that which is often wantonly discarded.

In the context of an exhibitionary complex<sup>1</sup> that continually asserts the power of the center, rendering all that is not white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, heterosexual and male as 'other,' sachse's gesture is incredibly potent. *Freedom Tube* questions the value of 'visibility' and awareness in a surveillance society wherein visibility does not often equate to power.<sup>2</sup> When symbols of erstwhile emancipation become flattened containers devoid of meaning, destabilizing and confounding signifiers becomes imperative. *Freedom Tube* forces its audience to wade through a threshold of uncertainty. Enigmatically, the work possesses no outward markers of otherness and makes no outsize claims to being an insider-informant. Objects, stripped of their quotidian meaning and set afloat on this gentle psychedelic current, congregate of their own volition, finding in their formal and material affinity, a new home in a fantasy world. Although by accident, a pattern of reds and whites emerge, echoed in two book covers- Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* - and a red-and-white patio set- contemplates youth, desire, aging and the oppressive burden of normativity in a disabled body.

In a mild Duchampian nod, a pink toilet sits rooted to one corner- belying unrequited queer desire in its lush pastel pink. Upon closer inspection, it is found to have been lovingly cleaned and sanitized for presentation. sachse lets slip that this element is a literary allusion to Alice Munro's short story *Shining Houses*, which they encountered during a difficult episode of their life, cleaning friends' houses with their mother to make ends meet.<sup>3</sup> The story's curious protagonist explores their world by seeking motifs amongst the repetitive humdrum of life and toil. This poetic modality is not unlike sachse's process in creating *Freedom Tube*.

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowing from Tony Bennett's coinage, referring to Foucault's framework of power and knowledge when applied to the dissemination of objects in a museum/ gallery setting. See Bennett, Tony. "Thinking (with) Museums: From Exhibitionary Complex to Governmental Assemblage." *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, 2015, 3-20.

<sup>2</sup> Siddiqui, Ayesha. "Arts Journalism and Criticism in a Digital Age." Lecture, Superscript 2015, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis.

<sup>3</sup> jes sachse, interviewed by Vince Rozario, Toronto, ON, June 5<sup>th</sup> 2017

This passage in particular stands out as a possible means of approaching the work:

(...) Mary found herself exploring her neighbor's life as she had once explored the lives of grandmothers and aunts — by pretending to know less than she did, asking for some story she had before; this way, remembered episodes emerged each time with slight differences of content, meaning, color, yet with a pure reality that usually attaches to things which are at least part legend.<sup>4</sup>

The viewer is thus similarly asked to shed their preconceptions, and attempt, even if by pretense, to find an underlying beauty through repeated encounters with the unfamiliar. These objects congregate by accident, collectively finding affinity in colour. Quite similarly, the community around it gathers, seeking common ground and mutual safety. The commode also brings into sharp focus the drudgery of subsistence labour and the ever-present precarity of the artist-maker. In an intimate and vulnerable gesture, sachse effusively turns a critical gaze toward domesticity and all that is laboured and lost in service of social conformity; and to sanitize of the messiness of lived experience. Woven together, this assemblage of banal objects allows a whimsical, almost utopian alterity to emerge, in which barriers are inverted, care and labour are reciprocal, and in which an enduring queer futurity can be imagined. Yet, this alterity is a fragile one, sustained in hushed whispers in safe places, disappearing into legend under duress from a cruel material reality.

*Freedom Tube's* imagined alterity is not simply limited to the realm of metaphor, however. The work tangibly engages with social reality and strives to act as a counterbalance to the coercive power structures meted out by the institutional core. It accommodates difference and values an experience of the profound amidst the oppressively banal. "Rarely do we engage willingly with the magnificence of this unique terrain—that is with difference and abjection," writes sachse, poignantly about their

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<sup>4</sup> Munro, Alice. "The Shining houses." In *Dance of the happy shades ; and other stories*. London: Vintage, 2000.

work.<sup>5</sup> “The language of disability, for example, is an ever-shifting dance of ‘I see a person, not a disability,’ which simultaneously denies experience and legitimacy of voice.”<sup>6</sup> *Freedom Tube* dares to seize its positionality as queer and disabled, becoming a site of affective engagement in which the audience can interact with the multi-faceted barriers that disabled people face every day- the droning monotony of a life coloured in the familiar ‘disability blue,’ the sleights of passers-by, the sheer exhaustion of the body through labour rendered worthless by socio-economic norms. This ‘insider-informer’ position unwittingly conferred upon artists is a fraught one: the token inclusion places the burden of representing an entire spectrum of people within one enigmatic poetic turn. It others by its tokenism, extrapolates the intimate violence of everyday experience into an amorphous socio-political crisis with no seeming solution and a lot of hand wringing. But what happens when we, with force and intention, reconstitute the author in this field? Sachse’s work possesses an ebullient self-assuredness and a nonchalant flippancy that doesn’t tolerate the condescension and pity of the able-bodied.

The conceit of a threshold, a malleable and liminal space is an integral device in *Freedom Tube*. It represents a quagmire of shifting possibilities alluding to an identity crafted around euphemisms, erasures, and polite deferrals in sign. The knowledge here is not flagrantly demanded by the expanding bureaucracy of the institution, but lovingly granted by an artist to their community. Activating the banal and transporting it to the realm of the ethereal, Sachse makes it so that the presence of the banal and the monotonous objects such as the straw can be transformed through a series of incredulous encounters.

- Vince Rozario

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<sup>5</sup> Sachse, Jes. "Crip the Light Fantastic: Art as Liminal Emancipatory Practice in the Twenty-First Century." In *Mobilizing Metaphor: Art, Culture, and Disability Activism in Canada*, edited by Christine Kelly and Michael Orsini, 199. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid