

# Running with Scissors: Between Damage and Discomfort

2021 JANUARY A VIRTUAL CONVERSATION WITH ROB CROSSE AND ARTŪRAS TEREŠKINAS

Artist Rob Crosse was selected as a Rupert resident in 2020. In these edited extracts from an email conversation, Rob talks with sociologist and author Artūras Tereškinas about intergenerational care, intimacy and finding ways to remember and record collective histories of older gay men and LGBTQ+ communities. The conversation is interspersed with images from a film Rob is currently making. As part of this conversation, you can also [read here](#) an extract from Artūras' novel, *Endless Summer: A Memoir of Love and Sex* with images by Adomas Danusevičius.

## **Rob Crosse**

I've been meeting with a group called *Anders Altern* in Berlin who meet once a week to discuss topics of their choosing. Often, these discussions revolve around the idea of disappointment in relation to the body and insecurity around their desires. Although Berlin is certainly one of the most liberal cities in the world when it comes to sex there remains discrimination, often around age and ageing bodies.

Last year I met with a group in Hong Kong called *Gay and Grey* who also meet regularly to discuss topics of their choosing, and many of their discussions had similar topics. The older men felt they never fully experienced a sense of liberation from the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1991 because the bars and clubs built since then are aimed at the younger generation. Therefore, with the opening of designated spaces for meeting other LGBTQ+ people, many of their public spaces (such as toilets) for meeting other men were taken away.



Video stills from a work in progress, courtesy of Rob Crosse

From your essay it seems there are similar beliefs around the threat to family structures with the rise of LGBTQ+ rights in Lithuania, with those in Hong Kong. The younger generation, whilst being more sexually open minded seem reluctant to separate duty with family and sexuality with desire. There is very little presence in terms of imagery and discussion around older LGBTQ+ people. I wonder if this has an effect on the younger generation's unwillingness to think outside of the patriarchal family structure.

I have a number of friends I've been keeping in touch with who are older and unable to rely on support from their biological family during Covid-19. Berlin has been very organised with many grassroots organisations establishing support networks for older people. I hope these intergenerational support systems will remain in place. Are you aware of any groups in Vilnius to support the older LGBTQ+ community in a similar way?



Video stills from work in progress, courtesy of Rob Crosse

## **Artūras Tereškinas**

It was interesting to hear your ideas about older gay men's groups in Berlin and Hong Kong. I don't think we have anything similar in Lithuania. Everyone is left to fend for themselves. One of my young friends had an idea to do interviews with older gays (in their 60s) but he's not a sociologist and I am not sure whether he will do it.

I am myself approaching that 'gay and grey' age but my biography is rather different from other older Lithuanian gay men since I spent my formative years (1992-2000) in the US and did not witness a lot of social changes that took place in Lithuania in 1990s. That's why I would be interested to record people talking about 'gay spaces' such as toilets and other cruising grounds, underground clubs etc. and write something that remotely resembles a Lithuanian *queer* history. I hope it will be possible one day. Three years ago, I wrote a novel, *Endless Summer: A Memoir of Love and Sex* (in Lithuanian) which, to a certain degree, explores the intimate lives of Lithuanian gay men.

There are a lot of issues related to both younger and older generations of gay men in Lithuania. Although the younger gay generation is more open and adventurous, very few are active politically or participate in any civic initiatives. Many people are satisfied with

merely being private. This might also be the reason for why the younger generation thinks within the framework of heteronormative patriarchal family/support systems.

## **Rob Crosse**

I read the reference to *Endless Summer* from the essay you wrote that Yates sent previously. The idea of perpetuating precarity through seeking anonymous sexual encounters is something I can identify with.

I attended a talk in Berlin earlier this year about ‘the rise of masculinities and nationalism.’ One particular speaker gave a talk in support of drug-fuelled sex parties as an act against the heteronormative alternative models of seeking connections. He argued that these meetings often involve traveling across various parts of cities bringing people together from different ages and backgrounds. But the reasoning felt very neoliberal in the way the connections don’t seem to be maintained beyond the immediacy of these moments, plus the dependency on drugs and the apps with which to meet men weren’t fully explored.

Are you aware of any existing collective history from older gay men in Vilnius or Lithuania? I would be very interested in exploring this. I’m fortunate in Berlin with the openness of sexuality here but I can imagine that just finding one’s way in the privacy of your own space is hard enough when sexuality is not openly discussed. I had the feeling in Hong Kong that people don’t want to discuss the situation of older gay men because they had this image that everyone ended up lonely, which isn’t true, but can become a self-fulfilling prophecy without an awareness of an alternative.

I’ve been looking after a friend who is 83 here in Berlin since March. We met last year but since Covid-19 I’ve been offering more support as I knew he lived alone. As well as running errands for him and collecting shopping, we’ve become quite close and speak twice a week. I think these kinds of support structures are very frequent but not widely visible. I also met a friend the other day who lived in New

York from 1983 to 1994 and the trauma of that experience remains with him to this day. What were your experiences of the U.S during your formative years and how did that shape your relationship to Lithuania?

### **Artūras Tereškinas**

I agree with your argument that a lot of talk about sex and gender falls into the trap of neoliberal reasoning in which self-management or management of relationships according to the economic demand-supply model prevails. On the other hand, it is still difficult to talk about sex and sexuality without escaping the power-resistance paradigm when short-lived sex parties are conceptualised as a way of resisting heteronormative culture or even sometimes a revolutionary act. I don't know if you ever came across Tim Dean's book *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*. It's a good read but I am not sure whether he escapes these traps and paradigms.

I don't think there is a collective history of older gay men in Vilnius or Lithuania. Unfortunately, there are no historians interested in this topic. I know that currently a Lithuanian historian wrote a book about red-light district and sex work in interwar Kaunas, a temporary capital of Lithuania. It is indeed very heteronormative. Non-normative sexualities remain out of reach of any history or historical research here because, first, it is a dangerous topic for a researcher and, second, very few historical sources on largely invisible LGBTQ+ people are available.

### **Rob Crosse**

I haven't read Tim Dean's book but I've heard about it. I think a revolutionary act requires a goal that goes beyond the act itself. My difficulties with sex party spaces were in the lack of ending or goal. Chasing desires only ever resulted in more chasing, at least for me. At some point that act becomes destructive when the purpose is only for the desire to be maintained.

Is there a lack of interest in the history of gay men because there isn't an awareness of their presence? Or is there a lack of people wanting or willing to talk about their experience for fear of being visible?

By speaking with men within the groups I've attended there are often discussions about the lack of visibility for older bodies, particularly in terms of what is considered desirable. So, without a presence of those bodies or even a collected history of their existence I wonder what that does to one's sense of self-worth.



Video stills

from work in progress, courtesy of Rob Crosse

Part of a project I'm working on at the moment involves looking into the system of value and desirability in historical cars as a way to talk about the body. I'm interested in the idea that restoring a car is also a way of re-owning a place in time (as well as a status symbol) and how something that might be considered undesirable becomes more desirable with age. But what gets lost during the process of restoration if all the damage is removed and is no longer visible? In the same way, what happens if collective experiences are unrecorded or removed?

### **Artūras Tereškinas**

I don't know many older gay men in Vilnius but I have friends who do. Perhaps they could help me to get in touch with these people and to conduct interviews/conversations with them. The Lithuanian case might be interesting (even in comparison to a German one) because those LGBTQ+ memories/spaces experienced considerable political transformations and shifts from Soviet to post-Soviet, socialist to postsocialist, etc. A lot has been lost in the process of these transformations. Our memories and the sense of queer history are as fragile as human lives. Some of gay men whom I had known died in their forties and fifties.

As far as I remember there is some research on this topic done in other postsocialist countries but I cannot recall any artistic projects that focus on it. It is most likely that I am simply not aware of such artistic work that must exist.

### **Rob Crosse**

I attended a discussion with a group of older men in Berlin the other day in order to invite them to an exhibition I have in November in Berlin. This was part of the series of discussions I attended last year before Covid-19 struck. It was about forgetfulness. Sometimes they can be quite sad when someone is discussing the loss of a partner and their struggles dealing with the new situation, other times they are funny and light-hearted.



My presence in the group feels like an awkward one because, on the one side, I'm interested in the topics and what they have to say, as well as contributing to the discussion, on the other hand, I am researching by listening to their stories and collecting them. It feels like both a violent and caring act. So, I was thinking about this in relation to what it would mean to collect the history of gay men in Lithuania and how that information is documented. Who gets to tell the stories and why is such an important topic. It feels important with any process of documentation to acknowledge the framing.

### **Artūras Tereškinas**

As a sociologist, I have done hundreds and hundreds of in-depth interviews with people of different groups (many with people at risk of social exclusion). Almost every time one feels uneasy in the face of misery and suffering. It adds up to one's own depression and sadness. It is easier to say than to do, but one needs to be careful not to 'do violence' to the interviewees' narratives. It is difficult because, as you have mentioned, even the process of retelling other people's stories is framed by our own biographies and interests.

Moreover, very few people are comfortable talking about their intimate lives. When I question my respondents, I myself often feel like peeping through a keyhole and broadcasting what I can see there. But in my interactions with others, I attempt to transgress myself and, in the anthropologists Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson's words, 'to emphasise with and participate in the feelings and ideas of others', particularly in same-sex erotic desires and longings.

### **Rob Crosse**

Yates emailed me the other day and apologised for the delay. I think they have been very busy preparing for the opening of the new exhibition. He sent me an extract which you will present in the journal. He proposed to lead a conversation which could act as a pretext for your extract. Perhaps I could include some stills from the new video I'm working on, though I'm not sure it's so related. I'm making a video of someone stretching and bending a piece of metal into a curved form. I'll show this alongside a video of an older man's

back. At least, I think that's what I'm showing. I have a week to decide.

Finding acceptance in the discomfort is something I always think about when I'm entering a space to film. I'm often in spaces which feel highly charged with testosterone and masculinity, but this could also be my assumption. In every room of the car garage where I'm currently filming there is a topless woman calendar hanging on the wall. Perhaps this makes repetitive work more exciting, when time is always marked with sexual fantasy.

I can imagine that's a very difficult and sensitive position to be in when you're interviewing, particularly in relation to trauma. I've never engaged in interviewing people as I don't know how to distance myself from the situation. But when I'm behind a camera there is an immediate distancing which doesn't seem to require an explanation. Though I think this role is problematic unless the position of the camera (in this case me) is visible.

My boyfriend is an investigative journalist and it's taken him a long time to learn how to distance himself from people, because the expectations of the other person can be very high. I can see he's trained himself on this a lot and it requires a constant awareness which uses a lot of energy. But I think the frame for a television documentary is already quite clear and he at least has a defined structure for how to filter information.

I guess on some levels when reading a text written by someone there is always the assumption, that parts of those words have been drawn from experience. How to frame them and translate that into something else is the art.