

Queer Soundscapes

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Abstract

As a young, queer Filipino student navigating white, heteronormative space, I experience a lack of representation and opportunity for Asian bodies on campus. Queer is defined as existing outside of normative, hegemonic structures, exceeding beyond gender and sexuality (Cheves, 2023). Queerness is celebrated in modern culture, with TV shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but is simultaneously being weaponized to further divide America's political atmosphere. *The Human Rights Campaign* declared its first "State of Emergency" for LGBTQ+ Americans, with legislation criminalizing Queer Culture (HRC Staff, 2023). Additionally, research from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* finds a decline in campus social life since COVID (Hicks and Gretzinger, 2024). Queerness and post-COVID social trends contribute to a sense of isolation. Fortunately, Wayne State champions difference, and is Michigan's most diverse college campus (University, W.S., 2024). Alumni and Public figures, such as Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, and conceptual artist James Lee Byars, embody the kind of progressive action and greater consciousness found at Wayne State. Taking into consideration the weaponization of Queer Culture, the influence of local trailblazers, my personal experiences as a gay Asian male, and the celebration of queer bodies at this institution informs *Queer Soundscapes*. This paper traces my process in navigating *Queer Soundscapes* through four phases of conceptual development: first thoughts, contexts, drafts, and social tactics.

First Steps

Queer Soundscapes began in Fall 2023 Space Studio: a core art course at Wayne State that teaches visual communication through 3D practices. In class, I was prompted to make a dynamic object inspired by a natural form. In response, I sculpted a butt. I referenced scientific and pornographic images of the behind to build the form. Once the clay butt was sculpted and dried, I cradled and flaunted it around campus to friends, faculty, and strangers. I documented these playful interactions and designed a matrix of images, as seen in Figure 1. This performative action made me a vulnerable yet bold protagonist to passersby and those who engaged in conversation with me and the object. The passionate responses to the sculpted butt validated my efforts to advocate for marginalized queer bodies at Wayne State through creative action. If this quarter-scaled butt could generate so much creative discourse on queer theory, I wondered how a larger, more accessible queer sculpture could positively impact campus culture long-term through temporary installation. When imagining a bigger butt sculpture, I became thrilled by the idea of designing a spatial experience that could immerse the Wayne State community in queer culture. After much brainstorming, I determined to explore queerness through an interactive sound installation titled, *Queer Soundscapes*.



Figure 1. "Queer Manifestations of the Body" (2023).

Contexts

The very name *Queer Soundscapes* embodies two territories of art: *Queer* and *Sound Art*.

Art historians understand *Queer Art* as any art created by a queer person. One example is *The Fountain* (1917), by conceptual-queer artist, Marcel Duchamp (Tate, 2024). The work consists of an upside-down urinal, signed, and submitted by a nonexistent artist, “R. Mutt”, to the Society of Independent Artists (a powerful organization in 1916, dedicated to showing modern work, regardless of artist background) (Naumann, n.d.). Ironically, Duchamp was secretly “R. Mutt” and held a position in the very organization that rejected the work. Duchamp resigned and protested, questioning America’s commitment to free thinking and conceptual art. Duchamp spearheaded the space for unconventional gestures, such as the second area of my exploration: *Sound Art*.

Curator Barbra London, explains in “Soundings: A Contemporary Score” that *Sound Art* belongs “to no single art practice and can exist within film and performance” (London and Neset, 2013). It shifts the focus from visual, to mainly auditory experience. Music halls are not suitable for such sonic experimentation, forcing *Sound Art* to inhabit art galleries (London and Neset, 2013). Relatedly, the term *Soundscapes* was coined in the 1960s, as a way to understand culture and spaces, through auditory surroundings; further, to curate sonic experience to create aesthetic ways of listening (London and Neset, 2013). *Queer* and *Sound Art* are not new to art history. My project, *Queer Soundscapes*, explores the mergence of these contemporary art practices at a diverse campus like Wayne State—a creative framework to advance the celebration of queer bodies.

Drafts

The first concept for *Queer Soundscapes* included several temporary installations across campus, accompanied by conversations engaging students and faculty on their queer experiences at Wayne State. Such openness would serve to engage any member of the Wayne State community in queer rhetoric and experience. I began drafting paintings, drawings, and sculptures of enlarged butt installations (collaged in Figure 2). Participants, in theory, would be inside a space that represents the anus—a highly sexualized and queer body part. It was a provocative, tongue-in-cheek way to confront my shame with sexuality. Yet, these sketches did not forward the goal of aesthetic innovation through merging *Queer* and *Sound Art*. No single sculpture can capture the transformative, collective queer experience I aim to create. In recognizing that these sketches prioritized the object over collectivity, my shift in approach was redirected to my original fascination: social engagement through queer artistry. Reassessing my first sketches and butt sculpture, I reconciled that parading the quarter-scale butt manifested impromptu, queer interaction for me. I realized I was celebrating queer creative expression and expanding connection with members even outside the queer community. In favor of creating dialogue, my next thought was to initiate a monthly show-and-tell, where students share their art to establish a fantastical, queer, creative space.



Figure 2. Sculpted butt, painted butt, and sketches of installations.

Social Tactics

I turned from researching artists in the realm of queer performance and sculpture, to artists that engage in community. I observed conceptual artist Francis Alÿs's site-specific work, dealing with real, physical, and political landscapes (MoMA, n.d.). Using Alÿs as a precedent, I thought about a new approach to addressing space through mapping. I imagined for any queer art action made on campus, a subsequent locational dot would appear on an interactive map of Wayne State. (Figure 3). This representation of dotted space would function as a living archive, documenting queer-claimed territory. (Figure 4). Additionally, students could perform their art action and contribute dots through a website. The map would function as a symbolic gesture of the transformation of space through queer artistic expression. Feeling energized with the effort to activate these "dots", I made video portraits of my closest queer friends at Wayne State. By being behind the camera, my thought was to remove myself as an author and to co-create with other queer voices.

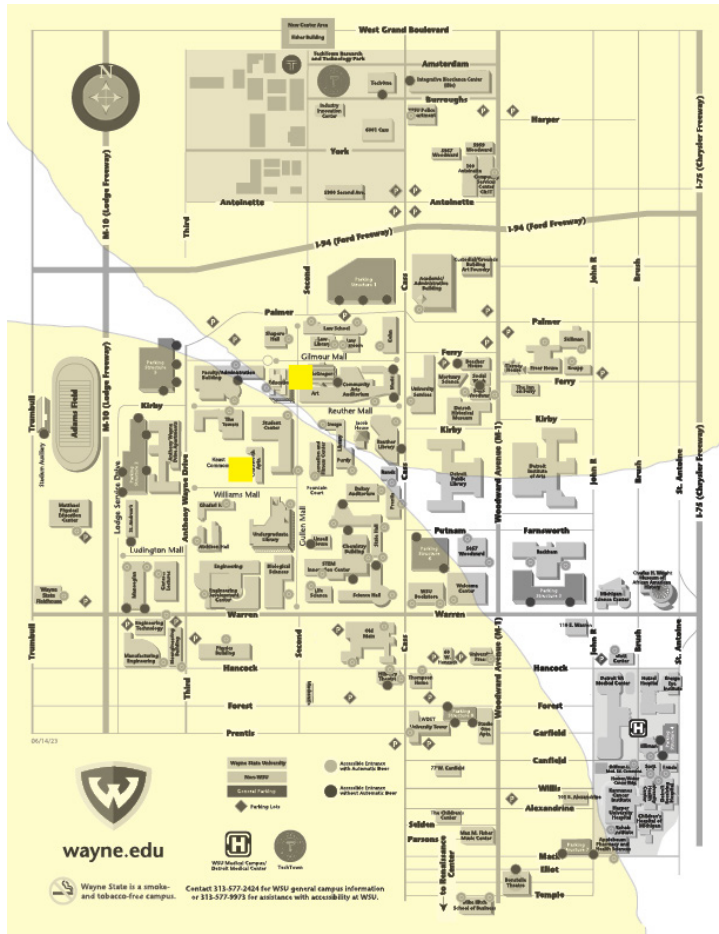


Figure 3. Overlaid map of Wayne State with yellow dots exemplifying potential sites for art action. Yellow shaded area is meant to portray a butt.



Figure 4. Painted map of greater-Detroit area with locational dots to mimic a butt.

It is important to note the significance of co-creating with the Wayne State queer community. My first encounters with queer folk happened at Wayne State. It was the first time I felt seen, embracing new identities, slang, and shared pop culture references. *Queer Soundscapes* has become an exercise of joy and a commitment to celebrate and document these everyday gestures of queerness at Wayne State with film. Though I am a painter exploring portraiture through video, I am expanding my interdisciplinary techniques, seeking less familiar aesthetic territory, in order to image what is familiar. The results are exemplified in Figures 5 and 6. Dewomani inhabits a liminal space on campus, a cubicle, where he quietly performs his work in a space of intimacy rather than congregation. In the video portrait, he answers the phone and scrolls through emails in the backroom offices of the Undergraduate Library. This portrait is the antithesis of my early sculptural butt experiment. It is not loud, bold, or overtly sexual. Conventional queer art often demands an outward performance of sexuality. In this work, I want to advance bold gestures, as well as the quieter, inwardness of queer bodies in everyday spaces, to further representations of greater inclusivity.

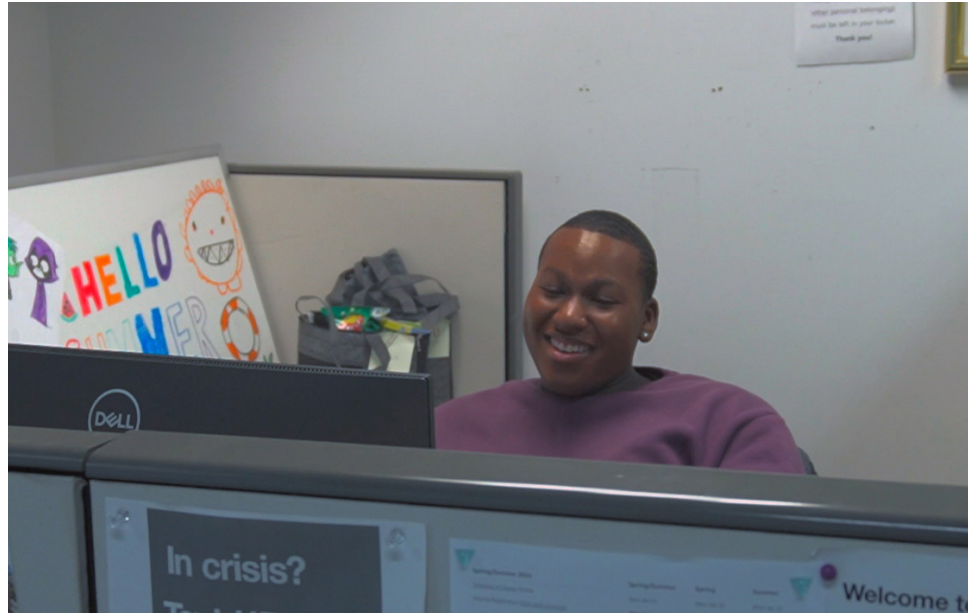


Figure 5. Dewomani, a black queer Junior, laughing at his desk.



Figure 6. Dewomani quietly at his lunch break at Kresge Library.

Queer Soundscapes will include the launch of a populated, interactive map that will be available for students to use tentatively by the end of Summer 2025. Additionally, conversations and *show-and-tells* will be welcomed to all members of the Wayne State community to advance queer creative territory and discourse during Winter 2025. As *Queer Soundscapes* documents the lives of my close peers, these videos mark the beginning of a bright cultural future of queer portraiture at Wayne State—a celebration that reveres queer bodies, enriches diversity, and honors the community.

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