

Yours Truly, The Department of Homo Affairs

Jessie Boylan

On the warm autumn evening of 6 March 2021, a group of activist friends were waiting, dispersed among thousands assembled to watch the 43rd Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. Due to COVID-19, the celebration was moved from its regular Oxford Street site to the Sydney Cricket Ground so attendance could be controlled. Waves of nervous excitement washed over the activists as the stadium vibrated with dance music and masses of spectacularly garbed participants marching in celebration of Australia's LGBTQIA+ community. Dressed as cricket umpires in white coats, sneakers, sunglasses, hats and masks, four members of the group leapt over the barrier to the beat of Earth, Wind & Fire's 'September' and ran onto the field in front of the police contingent, who were carrying signs proclaiming, 'We are here for you'. The group's own banner had perfectly unfurled to reveal their message: 'COPS OUT – HOWZAAAT!!! #BLM #'78'. About fifteen seconds later, a Mardi Gras attendant who had been sprinting from far afield tore the banner out of their hands. The umpires held up their index fingers, yelling, 'YOU'RE OUT! YOU'RE OUT!' as if the police's wickets had been struck. The whole protest lasted for about three-and-a-half minutes before (non-parading) police escorted the umpires off-field where each activist received a fine of \$165.

The Department of Homo Affairs (DOHA) is the name of this collective of radical queer activists and artists. Working across Gadigal, Dharawal, Arrente and Wurundjeri lands, DOHA are motivated to destabilise 'neo colonial border politics, cultures of white supremacy and xenophobia.'¹ Their humorous collective actions consider how narratives and events of the past continue to inform the present, and how, by questioning these narratives, we can re-view history and, in turn, reimagine the future. DOHA targeted the Mardi Gras Parade to protest against the NSW and Federal Police Force and Corrective Services contingent as an action of solidarity with overpoliced communities and to highlight racist police violence and Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Founded in 2018, DOHA came together in response to what was happening at the Australian-funded Manus Island Regional Processing Centre. A play on the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs, DOHA parodies the authorities responsible for immigration and border policies, who have been criticised for indefinitely locking up refugees and asylum seekers in cruel and inhumane living conditions. Through creative activism—incorporating poster and zine publishing, costume design and film production—DOHA express their queer politics in ways that confront dominant settler narratives in Australia.

Inspired by the 78ers—those who protested on 24 June 1978 in what became known as the first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras—as well as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), DOHA are interested in using Mardi Gras as a memorial site and a monument. While Mardi Gras is a space for LGBTQIA+ people, DOHA claim that it no longer represents the original resistance and liberation struggle of the 78ers, who used joy and humour to protest in support of gay and lesbian rights in Australia—and were arrested and beaten by the police for doing so.

As 'a space where the past is invoked to inform the queer politics of the future,'² Mardi Gras could be a site for queer people to both commemorate their lineages and negotiate their existence within contemporary Australian life. In Mardi Gras's current form, however, DOHA declare that it is not a radical space, and that while it claims to celebrate the rights of some it simultaneously abandons the rights of others. DOHA asks:

If we think of Mardi Gras as an LGBTQIA+ monument, what past does it help us to remember? Does it stand for where we want to go? Or does it need toppling?

Rather than celebrating the expansion of the borders of neoliberalism to include queer people, 'queer

From top:
Department of Homo Affairs,
2021 Mardi Gras Protest.
Photo: Joseph Mayers

DOHA being escorted out of
the 2021 Mardi Gras.
Photo: Joseph Mayers

politics are about working to tear those walls down and listening to others who know what might be on the other side,' says DOHA.

DOHA's first action was to block the Liberal Party float at the 2018 Mardi Gras. It was the 40th anniversary of the event and a time for reflection on queer spatiotemporal history and rights in Australia. It was also the first Mardi Gras since the legislation of marriage equality, and the Liberal Party were there, celebrating their supposed role in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights. DOHA were disgusted at the party's participation in the event and 'wanted to get in their way', not only because of the damage that the postal vote and surrounding debate did to the queer community but also because, while the Liberal Party were marching, refugees were being tortured as a direct result of their policies. 'It's hard to celebrate one part of justice, or one good win, when not everyone has received justice,' DOHA said.

In response to a callout from RISE (Refugees, Survivors and eX-detainees) to use social privilege to amplify their demands and #SanctionAustralia³, DOHA staged a public intervention at a highly televised event. Dressed as Border Force agents and concealing their identities with masks, they disrupted the Mardi Gras parade by marching the entire route in front of the Liberal





Party float, holding a banner that read, ‘TURN BACK THE FLOAT! JUSTICE FOR REFUGEES’, playing on the Liberal election promise to ‘turn back the boats’.

The Liberal Party and their \$6.7 million plan to send the Endeavour replica around the continent was the target of another DOHA intervention, this time at Mardi Gras in 2020. In solidarity with 250 years of Gweagal-Bidjigal and First Nations’ resistance on this continent, DOHA confronted the Liberal Party float with their own replica Endeavour, accompanied by a replica Scott Morrison and Captain Cook, who cheerfully marched alongside DOHA’s message to ‘WRECK THEIR ENDEAVOUR’.

Although the issues are serious, DOHA’s use of parody, mimicry and satire is employed to take back power from the systems and structures that are designed to uphold it. In their

2021 Mardi Gras action, one of the group, Umpire Stonewall, used a bodycam to record the entire event to indicate to the police that they were being watched—a tactic that police employ and routinely try to obfuscate when using excessive force. DOHA’s costumes were designed to ‘undermine (not venerate, validate, or authentically imitate) authority’ because:

parody necessarily employs some level of visual simile to indicate what it’s criticising, right? So core elements of the DOHA costumes—the dominant colour palette, the uniformity, the basic silhouette—allude to authoritative force. But this is not ‘dressing-up-as’: both close-up and at a distance, in-person and on-screen, the costumes should instantly read as anti-authoritarian parody.

The use of humour is a strategy that makes it easier for people to digest the message. ‘We use humour to make fun of the structures that exist.’ As if holding up a mirror to authoritative forces, DOHA wants you to ask: who is the face of authority and what does this authority represent?

This kind of collective action enacts what Professors Erica Meiners and Therese Quinn call ‘defiant memory work’ or ‘using cultural forms to foster liberation’,⁴ of which recognition ‘emerges slowly, and without sanction.’⁵ Often led by marginalised individuals and groups, defiant memory work seeks to counter dominant white cisheteropatriarchal narratives and state-sanctioned tactics of dispossession in order to resist historical erasure and assert present and future visibility.

For example, this kind of work can be seen in the art practice of



Opposite, from left:
Captain Cook arrested
at Mardi Gras 2020.
Photo: DOHA

Department of Homo Affairs,
Mardi Gras Protest, 2018.
Photo: DOHA

Above:
DOHA Mardi Gras protest 2020.
Photo: Alex Davies



DOHA officers at the Pride
in Protest Take Over Oxford
Street Mardi Gras March
Oxford Street Rally, 2021.
Photo: DOHA

Trawlwoolway artist Julie Gough. From lutruwita/Tasmania, Gough researches colonial accounts to uncover hidden or conflicting histories which she then re-presents through performance, video, photography, text, artefacts and other materials to demand a re-examination of the past so that history can be renegotiated to highlight how it continues to ‘intersect with and perhaps infect our present and future.’⁶

The impact of the past can also be seen in the work of First Nations artists and thinkers that DOHA have been inspired and led by. DOHA’s work *IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING* (2020) again turned the Government’s own tactics back on itself, referring to the language of fear used in the counter-terrorism campaigns which arose post 9-11.⁷ Made during the upheaval of 2020 and amid the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, where monuments were being brought down all around the world, DOHA created high-vis ‘FRAGILE’ stickers that were handed out at the BLM rally in Sydney in July 2020. The stickers led recipients to a website listing the location and information of over 36,525 monuments across Australia.⁸ DOHA invited people take it upon themselves to ‘mark monuments in a state of pre-ruin’ as ‘anything but heroic, solid or permanent.’⁹

This project was inspired by work such as Nicholas Galanin’s

Shadow on the Land (2020), Tony Albert’s *You Wreck Me* (2020), Jason Wing’s *Captain Crook* (2013) and Travis DeVries’s *Tear It Down, Cook Falling* (2019), all of which:

*playfully rehistoricize and employ futuring¹⁰ in a way that highlights the ongoing violence of these colonial symbols, and invites us to imagine a world where they are in ruins, and where the so-called ‘heroes’ are revealed as ‘crooks’.*¹¹

By drawing on legacies from First Nations and queer (including queer First Nations) activists, DOHA recognise that they are taking part in an ongoing struggle and acknowledge that:

monuments are symbols as well as real sites of power and that struggle does not end with bringing down these manifestations of colonial power alone... The corrupt judicial and policing system is the biggest monument to bring down.

This is a challenge that centres on friendship, collaboration, trust and love in order to succeed.

Just as they are inspired and motivated by radical events within history, DOHA know that they are contributing to an ongoing lineage of

queer cultural resistance and consider how their actions ‘will be inherited by people in the future.’ In the tradition of joyful queer defiance, DOHA perform the meeting of radical imagination and radical resistance in a material act of bringing into being the worlds to come.

¹ The Department of Homo Affairs, “Communiqué from the Department of Homo Affairs – #resist250,” *Overland Journal*, 4 March 2020. <https://overland.org.au/2020/03/communique-from-the-department-of-homo-affairs-resist250/>² Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from DOHA in conversation with the author, 23 June 2021.³ RISE Refugees, “#SanctionAustralia: What can supporters located in ?Australia? do?,” 28 November 2017. <https://www.riserefugee.org/sanctionaustralia-what-can-supporters-located-in-australia-do/>⁴ Erica R. Meiners and Therese Quinn, “Introduction: Defiant Memory Work,” *American Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2019): 353.⁵ Meiners and Quinn, 353.⁶ Julie Gough, “Transforming Histories: The Visual Disclosure of Contentious Pasts” (PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, 2001), 67.⁷ Clare Cooper, “Futuring Ruins: Grassroots design activism and the Department of Homo Affairs” (unpublished manuscript, 2021), 14.⁸ Monument Australia, <https://www.monumentaustralia.org.au/>. Accessed 25 June 2021.⁹ Cooper, 14.¹⁰ Cooper claims that futuring is ‘a way of combining informed projections with imaginative critical design to invite us to think differently about our current predicaments.’ Cooper, 1.¹¹ Cooper, 3.

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