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Conversation piece: "Instituting Queer Art in Britain"

Provocation by Theo Gordon and Laura Guy

Response by

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Adrian Street's Welsh Working-Class "Exotic"

I encountered this photograph of the late ex-coal miner cum Welsh professional wrestler, popstar, and artworld pin-up Adrian Street (1940–2023) rather unexpectedly while on a student trip to Paris in November 2008 ([fig. 4](#)). It hung at the doors of the Palais de Tokyo, announcing *From One Revolution to Another* (2008), an exhibition curated by the English artist Jeremy Deller. Based on elements of Deller and Alan Kane's *Folk Archive* (2005) of quirky British artefacts, the show explored the relationship between Britain's industrial and cultural revolutions and included Street as its charismatic mascot. I am interested in the ways this image tells another story. As a defiantly working-class image in which Street's queerness is assumed to be an elaborate act, it is also disengaged from the narratives and politics of gay and lesbian liberation of the time. As such it tells a parallel yet distinct story, where queerness is incorporated into a burgeoning neoliberalism precisely at the moment that it finds its liberation in the West but, importantly, not only this.



Figure 4 Dennis Hutchinson, *Adrian Street with His Father*, 2 November 1974. Digital image courtesy of Dennis Hutchinson / Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo.

I call this an encounter because this photograph stirred something in me that was both familiar and strange. I grew up in the south Wales valleys in the 1980s and 1990s, among the ruins of mine closures and in the aftermath of glam rock, which was transmitted via TV and radio into our house, often simultaneously. While I could not immediately put a name to the face or place in this beguiling image, I felt it in my bones: the damp air, the feathers, sequins, coal make-up, peroxide, and the steel toecaps. Seeing this image hung outside one of Paris's prominent centres for contemporary art also spoke to some as yet unexplored feelings about my own queerness and upward migration through the British class and education system.

I learned from Deller's show that this was a "revenge photograph": a "fuck you" to Street's father, who is featured, and to colliery workers who, according to Street, denigrated and mocked him as a fantasist for his aspiration to leave Bryn-Mawr Colliery to become a wrestling star.¹³ Street left the colliery for London in the 1960s, wrestling for money in funfairs and modelling for men's magazines, while setting up gigs and developing his outrageous "exotic" wrestling persona, which he took to the United States in the 1980s and where he remained until his return to Brynmawr in 2018, where he died at the age of eighty-three on 23 July 2023.

In the world of wrestling Street was a heel, a villain rather than a hero. His signature move in the ring was to pin down his opponents, put make-up on them, and give

them a lovely big kiss. Accompanied to the ring by his beloved wife, Linda, Street performed the straight man in sequins, or “sadist in sequins” (as he named his 1986 hit pop song and his 2012 autobiography), deliberately provoking a reaction from the often homophobic wrestling audience, much to Street’s delight. “I was getting far more reaction than I’d ever got just playing this poof”, he noted. “My costumes started getting wilder”.¹⁴

This photograph works to verify Street’s personal mythology, but for Deller it is also one of the single most significant images of twentieth-century Britain, prophetic in the way it foresaw Britain’s economic transition from a centre of heavy coal industry to a global producer of entertainment and services.¹⁵ While Street’s flamboyant act has gained him renewed attention in art, little has been said about his “exotic” homosexual gimmick as the vehicle for his success.

A contradictory figure in terms of queer history, Street apparently mingled with gay men and the Soho underworld and made repeated claims to have invented glam rock, which influenced artists from David Bowie and Marc Bolan to Elton John and Boy George.¹⁶ More recently, Street was featured in *Out in the Ring* (2022), a documentary exploring queer representation across a history of wrestling from the 1940s to the present. While Street’s exaggerated performance engages what I have called elsewhere “fictional realness”, I am struck by how this image poses challenges to the queer archive, which tends to recuperative narratives of liberation that can too easily sanitise, commodify, and eradicate class.¹⁷ Street’s life and work are completely devoid of the real-life struggles, politics, and lived experiences of LGBTQ+ folk during this period. A parallel, yet very different story of community and solidarity, is told in the film *Pride* (2014), a compelling look at the coalitions forged between queer activists and striking coal miners in south Wales in the 1980s. *Pride* serves as a heartwarming recuperative narrative, which contributes to its mainstream success, but it also eschews the broader complexities of Thatcher’s neoliberal entrepreneurialism and incorporation of queerness into the mainstream, especially when performed by a heteroflexible frontman. Nevertheless, to relegate Street’s contribution to queerbaiting—or to “gay-for-pay”, a legacy of queer exploitation in visual culture—would be to tidy up and straighten out the way class intersects with queerness in complex, often idiosyncratic ways.

While the coal mine serves as a backdrop to both Street’s and Britain’s past in this image, Street’s “exotic” queer embodiment suggests a future in which queerness may be employed as a tenable gimmick. For Street, his homosexual gimmick is what enabled his spectacular transit from the coal mine to mainstream fame. As James Baldwin once wrote of the gimmick’s fugitive function: it is most certainly a lever “to lift him out, to start him on his way”.¹⁸ Sianne Ngai reminds us that “the gimmick strikes us both as working too little (a labour-saving trick) and as working too hard (a strained effort to get our attention)”.¹⁹ In Street’s case the gimmick is also what makes his queer performance so spectacularly unconvincing. Unapologetically brash yet sentimental, camp but also straightish, this “revenge pic” refuses to line up neatly

with queer history. A homosexual satire, it remains parallel to queer history, exposing its doublings and multiple temporalities. Street's working-class act is a nagging insistence on queer's own fugitive possibilities.

I am not a wrestling fan, but for me as a kid in the 1990s there was a moment: two life-size posters of WWF wrestlers Bret "the Hitman" Hart and The Undertaker framed my bed like two mythic columns. I soon grew out of wrestling but I cannot deny how powerful it was to encounter Street's photograph at a Paris museum. A revenge image for Street, an economic prophesy for Deller, and some kind of reconciliation with sexuality, education, and class for me. It is a generous image that continues to fascinate and aggravate, effects evoked not so much by the heel's cue—that is, Street's deliberate queer farce and the potential maintenance of his audience's homophobic reaction—but rather in the messy feelings and residues of affect, including shame, that can arise in any recuperation or instituting of sexuality and class. For better and for worse, this photograph demands to be seen otherwise.

Footnotes

13. Jeremy Deller, *So Many Ways to Hurt You (The Life and Times of Adrian Street)*, The Modern Institute, 2010, digital video, 31:46, <https://www.themoderninstitute.com/viewing-room/jeremy-deller-i-so-many-ways-to-hurt-you-the-life-and-times-of-adrian-street-i>.

14. Simon Garfield, *The Wrestling* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 71–74.

15. Jeremy Deller, "Jeremy Deller Remembers 'Exotic' Wrestler Adrian Street (1940–2023)", *ArtReview*, 4 August 2023, <https://artreview.com/jeremy-deller-remembers-exotic-wrestler-adrian-street-1940-2023/>.

16. Chris Wood, "Wrestler Adrian Street: 'The Pit Pony that won the Grand National'", *BBC News*, 10 May 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-36205163>.

17. Owen G. Parry, "Fictional Realness: Towards a Colloquial Performance Practice", *Performance Research* 20, no. 5 (2015): 108–15.

18. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, [1963] 1993), 24.

19. Ngai's discussion of the gimmick as "capitalist form" is devoid of any reference to the gimmick as a long-standing element in professional wrestling, which I want to account for here. See Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).