



ARTICLE 16

An art essay by Eleanor K. Jones

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

- Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights



Sten Holmes-Elliott's *ARTICLE 16* takes its name from Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This statement is often summarised as the 'right to family life,' but as its wording makes clear, this supposedly universal right to a family is as restricted as it is protected. Can there be family life for those erased from this 'universality'? What is 'natural' to those of us deemed unnatural? What is queer life to this protected family? And what is the family to queer life?

ARTICLE 16 is an intervention that poses these questions. The work makes use of Super 8 film, a medium intimately entwined with mid-century domestic space and everyday familial nostalgia.¹ Even those of us born long after the 1960s heyday of Super 8 home movies understand their significance in cultural memory, as we see their slightly juddery frames reproduced in classic Hollywood film and contemporary TV, their saturated colour palette and granularity imitated in Instagram filters.² They carry an aura of authenticity, evoking the 'good old days' of an imagined past: one somehow purer and simpler and sunnier than whatever we have now. A past in which the family is a sealed unit, healthy and happy and safe. And from which queers are absent.



The idea of family, of the family home, is so bound up with our understanding of 'happiness' that the two are all but synonymous. Your wedding day is the 'happiest day of your life,' a precursor to 'domestic bliss.' Clichés these may be, but they hold within them certain cultural truths. As Sara Ahmed shows us, happiness is 'a form of world making' that makes 'certain forms of personhood valuable.'³ Happiness is culturally attributed to certain objects — marriage, children, health, capital — and we are directed toward these objects by means of happiness's promise. Happiness becomes not only the ultimate aim of our endeavours but also a reward for making the 'right' decisions. And as Ahmed affirms, within these rigid cultural frameworks queerness can only ever be an unhappy ending.⁴



But queers have always imagined and created our own forms of family that refuse to be shaped by either the rules of straightness or the assumption that breaking those rules can only end unhappily. Through the use of the Super 8 camera and Ektachrome film, placed into the hands of queer families themselves, *ARTICLE 16* reimagines these acts of world making as part of a queer archive. It presents scenes and spaces — a living room, a kitchen, a walk in the woods, a trip to the park, a fairground, a caravan site, a birthday party, a toddler blowing bubbles — that are familiar, even banal. The frame quivers, the sprocket flickers; the images seem slightly over- or underexposed. The effect is a sense of intimate authenticity. At the same time, though, there is something different here: these everyday scenes with their nostalgic auras are unmoored from straightness completely.

Rather than attempting to normalise queer life, then, *ARTICLE 16* instead uses queer life to pull apart normality. The late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz refers to this artistic strategy as ‘disidentification,’ which describes the tendency of marginalised people toward forms of expression that appear to conform with dominant culture while gesturing against it.⁵ For Muñoz, this way of dealing with normative culture, which ‘neither opts to assimilate within [it] nor simply opposes it’ but instead ‘works on and against’ it,⁶ is both a necessary means of survival and a potent form of resistance, producing for the queer subject ‘a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency.’⁷ As he puts it, ‘to disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject.’⁸ In its use of Super 8 film, *ARTICLE 16* takes a medium culturally associated with a particular form of straight purity and reconfigures it, allowing queers to read ourselves within the spaces, moments and memories barred to us. It is as if we had always been there.



Queer life is often imagined as a series of radical gestures. And yes: it is protest, it is spectacle, it is excess, it is euphoria. But as *ARTICLE 16* shows, it is also radical in the original sense of the word: it is rooted. It is putting down roots that crack through the foundations of domesticity, invade and overturn it from beneath. It is what Sophie Lewis refers to as ‘counter-kinning’: the daily realisation of new (and yet ancient), resistant forms of care, of nurture, of kinship and intimacy.⁹ Because we have always been here. We will keep growing.

ARTICLE 16, 2021 by Asten Holmes-Elliott. An art essay by Eleanor K. Jones

- 1 Diane Charleson, 'Modern icons: aura and memory in Super 8 still frames', Visual Resources, 32:1-2 (2016), 169-88, p. 173.
 - 2 Giuseppina Sapio, 'Homesick for aged home movies: why do we shoot contemporary family videos in old-fashioned ways?', in Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 39-50.
 - 3 Sara Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 11-13.
 - 4 Ahmed, pp. 88-89.
 - 5 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
 - 6 Muñoz, p. 11.
 - 7 Muñoz, p. 1.
 - 8 Muñoz, p. 12.
 - 9 Sophie Lewis, Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family (London: Verso, 2019), p. 148.
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In the summer months of 2021, ARTICLE 16 was exhibited via projection onto Guildhall Square from John Hansard Gallery, and onto Northam Road from Alfred Arcade, and screened at Solent University's The Spark on East Park Terrace.

During February 2022, John Hansard Gallery include ARTICLE 16 as part of their online exhibition programme to mark LGBT History Month 2022. Please go to www.jhg.art for details.

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Concepts behind ARTICLE 16 were developed in collaboration with Eleanor K. Jones, a lecturer at the University of Southampton. She is particularly interested in queer theory and disability studies, especially the ways that queerness and disability relate to ideas about the 'family', and histories of race and empire.
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