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7 June

12 April

10 May

First European
Assembly
of Contemporary
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*This Time
We Talk About
Gender*

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French National
Network of Contemporary
Art Centres

First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres

Experimental Tools for Ungendering Institutional Practices

Summary of the meeting on 7 June

This document produced by DCA – French national network of contemporary art centres, is a summary of the discussions held during an online roundtable on 7 June, 2022, in the framework of the First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres.

The video recording of these discussions is available on:
<https://europeanartassembly.org/en/programme/4>

Discussion 1

Mercedes Azpilicueta & Quinn Latimer
Chairwoman: Géraldine Gourbe

Political Practices and Performances of Language

Géraldine Gourbe: How can we make art differently, without the usual tools or formats? How can art education, social art actions, the relationship to the audience and all the daily work practices of the teams involved in art centers become relevant in creating safe spaces for experimentation? How can our use of language as a performative process help us generate a continuity with radical utopian narratives, or generate disruptive tales in our hypercapitalistic, patriarchal and anthropocene world?

Quinn Latimer: Through an early photograph of my mom and her girlfriend, who were lesbian housepainters, I transferred the image of a toolbox that we want to use today into a paintbox. The paintbrushes I always use as a poet, an art and literary critic, teacher, performer, and occasionally an editor, come through questions of gender and feminism as well as language and the performance of language. I'm often trying to trace what I think about as an ethics and activism of that language. Institutions and people working within them are often very well versed in the language of justice, equity, the anti-colonial and the non-racist, but their actions work exactly against this. In terms of my personal writing and my work within institutions, I try to find a language that is authentic to lived experience. The language of the contemporary art world can be exhausting in its specificity and its lack of connection to how we really live. My recent projects speak to a desire for the kind of relations and communities that we sometimes live in, and that we would also like to see in the institutions in which we work. *Like a Woman: Essays, Readings, Poems* is, as its title states, a collection of essays, poems and more hybrid texts that consider the mutable boundaries and borders between visual and literary production, that is, art and writing, as well as various forms and histories of feminism, women's work, protest, performance, and complicity. It indirectly became a memoir of my relationships and relationships with artists, whose work I engaged with as a means to explore their voices, conditions and ideas. This book is a personal piece of writing, but it also traces a geography, community and a movement between different forms of labor, power relations and aesthetics.

It is worth commenting on the name change of the *Institut Kunst to Institute Art Gender Nature*¹, which came from Chus Martínez, who is its director. She is

1. <https://www.fhnw.ch/en/about-fhnw/schools/academy-of-art-and-design/institute-art-gender-nature>

interested in peeling away the silence and shame of talking about these issues of gender, inequity, economic violence, racism, issues of culture and nature and so forth, by naming them specifically. Within the framework of this change we are doing a bi-annual symposia series in which we are inviting artists, thinkers, writers, filmmakers, poets and curators from around the world. The presentations take hybrid forms of performance, screenings, conversations or dance, in which the commonality is an almost utopian belief against all the odds of our worsening political and economic situations everywhere, that there is something else possible than the conditions in which we find ourselves now.

Mercedes Azpilicueta: I grew up in Argentina and live in the Netherlands now. Being a white woman in Latin America gave me a lot of privileges but there were many constraints. The *Ni una menos* movement against gender-based violence was launched in June of 2015. We have femicides daily. Shifting continents has been significant in my practice. While the writing scene is important in Argentina, I had the impression that there was a general fear in the Netherlands to speak from oneself. My works and projects always contain a piece of language, a script, or a song. I now work at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie as the head of the TXT department². When it comes to making, collaboration is crucial. There is a question of methodologies that continuously informs what we do. It is how we make things, rather than what we are saying, that is important.

Recently I had a child, I am an old mum, and that changed my way of seeing how institutions are approaching exhibitions with mothers. I recently had an unpleasant situation at a museum here in Amsterdam, where I was part of a prize, an exhibition and I gave a talk to its patrons about domestic and invisible labor, feminist labour, and wetnurses in the early 20th century. Right after that conversation I had to breastfeed my child, and I was kicked out of the museum because I was apparently obscene and making the visitors uncomfortable. That is a very clear example of how the discourse doesn't match what we see in reality. We need to talk about what our needs are, and whether they are met or not. I try to bring that to any project or even to the university where I teach.

Quinn Latimer: I'm thinking about the word "exhaustion", that comes with the fact that the same subjects and complaints have to be gone over for decades or centuries. Through practices that are based on relationships and building the world we want to be in, how can we craft a radical new artistic language so that exhaustion can be replaced by something energizing? It is amazing how little institutions move forward and how little power relations change. By building communities in which there is a reciprocity of care, we might be able to move beyond this.

Mercedes Azpilicueta: When reading, especially poetry, it is as if you are meditating through those words: it makes you slow down and use the senses

2. <https://rietveldacademie.nl/en/page/384/txt-textile>

differently. This state of full attention is missing in spheres of work at art institutions or at universities. The speed at which we are supposed to organize, create and work is outdated. The arts can feed off practices that can be intimate, solitary, unspectacular and boring, but require that you are fully present with your body.

Quinn Latimer: For years now, in every class I teach, I have spent an afternoon reading Etel Adnan's book length poem *The Arab Apocalypse* out loud in a circle with my students. This experience of an incredible poet, painter and thinker's words requires long-term endurance, and gets them paying attention, listening, practicing patience and moving through fluctuations of boredom. It creates a different register in the institutional room of the art school that makes it a space of intimacy, virtuosity and appreciation, which is refreshing and rejuvenating.

Mercedes Azpilicueta: My art is informed by my experience as an educator and vice versa. I teach methodologies and that is crucial in my practice: *how* are we making things and what are the ethics behind that? When putting up an exhibition, creating a long-term project or partnering with an institution, I find it important to create workshops, to bring educational institutions into the exhibition spaces and vice-versa, to stimulate a collective way of creating. Working with different generations is very inspiring. Having studied art twenty years ago at a traditional art school in Buenos Aires, the experimental pedagogies that I encounter at Rietveld mean that I learn from my younger students and that I am un-learning or transforming my ways of doing.

Quinn Latimer: You want to model a political, ethical, virtuosic practice for your students, yet it is often their work that leaves me inspired. Students have the ability to surprise you because they are not yet engulfed in the visual languages of the contemporary art world that calcify quickly and that we, in turn, discard quickly. The pedagogical or hierarchical distance between me and my MA student dissipates very quickly as they become friends and artists I work with.

Géraldine Gourbe: When we talk about language we like to talk about its political notion of performativity. This becomes abstract and theoretical, yet in reading texts aloud, we can experiment with questions of flesh, with putting our own or others' words in our mouth. It is something that is very transgressive for me to share with an audience or with students.

Quinn Latimer: As a poet I'm interested in tropes and clichés, such as the "O!" in English romantic poetry. This capital "O" often becomes a gendered mouth. Poet and classicist Anne Carson talks about a notation in Greek in the form of a series of vowels that represent the sounds that women make women that can't be read aloud: exclamations of grief and violence that become a contaminating force. While much has been written about women's language and mouths, this doesn't lose its power.



Mercedes Azpilicueta: I started reading poetry behind a piece of paper as a practice of declamation and later moved into performance, which involved my own body and that of others, as well as the institution as a space. I started making objects that I consider to be bodies in themselves. The vocality of poetry and language took me further into my own flesh, the flesh that surrounds me, that I make and that I take from the space and context where I work.

Quinn Latimer: As I started performing my texts, I modulated my rhythm and my voice so that it felt like I was breathing in unison with the audience. There is an awareness that you are taking in and releasing breath at the same time as they are; we're reading together even if I'm the only one uttering the words. When you perform language in a room, you are trying to do something through the medium of your voice: you can calm down or speed up the audience, put them in a trance or under a spell.

Discussion 2: Tominga O'Donnell & Marnie Slater Chairwoman: Géraldine Gourbe

Queer Tools: Incentives and Transformative Action

Marnie Slater: I want to focus on two feminist and queer collaborations that have been central to a research project that I'm doing at Sint Lucas Antwerpen. It is focussed on process and on how we can activate queer and feminist aims within our relations with each other.

*Buenos Tiempos, Int.*³ is a collaboration between myself and Alberto García del Castillo, a Spanish curator and writer, that started in 2013 as an online exhibition space out of an urgent need for a conversation about queer and feminist making in the Brussels art scene, that developed into us producing work and events together. We're currently experimenting with sub-granting: we apply for money within the French-speaking community in Belgium, and in turn do an open call for queer and feminist artist projects. We also use transvestism as a tool of celebration and of experimentation within the spheres of power within the art world. I transvestited as Beatrix Ruf to reproduce iconic images of her, and we performed a reproduction of Federico García Lorca's *The Public*, in which we transvestited as Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballé.

*Mothers & Daughters*⁴ is an ephemeral lesbian and trans bar that exists within Brussels for a limited period of time on an annual basis since 2017. Brussels had not had an out lesbian bar in around 15 years, it was simply the kind of space that my collaborators from *Girls Like Us* magazine⁵ desired to hang out in. Instead of programming an event for an institution's *Future is Feminist* season in Brussels, we negotiated to take over their bar for three nights. We use the bar menu as a tool. There is Menu A and Menu B which are exactly the same on each side, except the prices are different. Menu A is a serving price and Menu B is increased by the gender gap in Belgium, which, on top of the gender pay gap, includes elements like access to political representation or permanent job opportunities. In 2018 it was 24%, so Menu B was 24% more expensive. We invite people who engage with the menu to reflect on privilege in a broad sense which includes the intersection of gender, race, class, ableism, etc.

In 2019, within *Mothers & Daughters*, we started "doing the weather" at our meetings: we dedicate 10 to 15 minutes to everyone in the room to share how they are feeling on that day. This put the notion of productivity to the side, and

3. <http://buenostiemposinternational.com/productions/>

4. <https://www.mothersanddaughters.be/about>

5. <https://www.girlslikeusmagazine.com/>

brought emotionality and relationality into the space. It changed the sensitivity that we brought to each other in a meeting context.

Tominga O'Donnell: I ran the *Munchmuseet on the Move*⁶ project for 5 years, which took as its point of departure the move from where the old museum was situated when it opened in 1963, down to the waterfront where the new museum opened in October of 2021. There were 16 main art projects that highlighted marginalized or ignored aspects of the various neighborhoods it traversed in what I described as a queer curatorial approach. I used a very loose definition of queer: I invited artists who identified as queer in their personal lives, who had a queer approach to their project, but also those whose projects could only be seen as queer in a very expansive sense in order to open up to more things that had been othered by the dominant social order.

I had originally received funding for the inaugural project by Sam Hultin called *I'm Every Lesbian – Oslo*⁷ as a freelancer. When I joined the Munchmuseet – a museum dedicated to the work of Edvard Munch (1863–1944) it seemed quite important to find a way to critique the institution from the inside and to provide a space to circumvent this very male narrative that was being perpetuated by their programmes at the time in the so-called +Munch series. Hultin's project related to the notions of remembering and reclaiming. It gathered various personal and societal narratives which became different points on the map which were then retold in the form of a city walk. It allowed us to take up space in the city and move through it as a collective body, rendering queer histories physical and honoring the pioneers from the 1950s and 60s who had run illicit clubs and cafés from their homes.

The float for the Oslo Pride parade for *Trollkrem Import*⁸, programmed by Tor Erik Bøe, represents the concepts of celebration and joy. Though one can talk about Pride being commercialized, it is important to see it as an original expression of celebration. The parade float was just one iteration of a performance art tour that ran along the main street in Grønland in downtown Oslo and used buildings that were not typically art spaces, such as Ivars Kro, the old pub where Seth Bogart, Vaginal Davis and Dynasty Handbag performed.

The 16th and last project was a film cabaret by Danish duo Kirsten Astrup and Maria Bordorff⁹ called *Summer Night by the Beach*¹⁰, a title which was taken from a painting by Edward Munch. It departs from an historical cabaret stage that was active in Oslo in the early 1900s and reimagines it sometime in the future. A lot of the projects were anchored in a local context through some kind of historical connection, which then used speculation as a tool.

6. <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/munchmuseet-on-the-move/>

7. <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/exhibitions/archive/2016/im-every-lesbian---oslo/>

8. <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/exhibitions/archive/2018/trollkrem-import/>

9. <https://www.astrup-bordorff.com/>

10. <https://www.munchmuseet.no/en/exhibitions/archive/2019/summer-night-by-the-beach/>

Géraldine Gourbe: How does belonging to the queer community give you endurance, vision and the confidence to keep going inside the mainstream art institution?

Tominga O'Donnell: In Norway for the “Year of Queer Culture” in 2022, institutions that have not engaged with queerness before are now frantically trying to queer their programme in order to receive funding. I feel that in some sense I am in a privileged position to be embedded in some of the different queer communities because it enables me, in a very concrete way, to have a network to set up these conversations. At the same time, it is important to not become over-confident and to not lose sight of the shift in responsibility that occurs from being a curator on a short-term contract to becoming a representative of a big institution.

Rachel Anderson, one of the advisers at *Munchmuseet on the Move* who used to work at *Artangel*¹¹ and now runs her own project called *Idle Women*¹², pointed out that enthusiasm in the face of a conservative institution is a queer strategy. This is the expansive sense of “queer”. Having fun is regenerative and restorative, it is at least something we can do in this world of excess and exhaustion. You can't feel enthusiasm and joy all the time, but you can celebrate it when you do, and it can be contagious. You can get people on board by communicating “this is fun and you should be supporting it”.

Géraldine Gourbe: There is a difference between enthusiasm as a process and as a value. It can also be understood as a capitalist injunction that you have to be enthusiastic or happy.

Marnie Slater: SEHAQ is a collective for LGBTQIA+ refugees in Amsterdam, particularly focussed on lesbian and trans refugees. One of their main practices is to organize parties: it is a political imperative for them to create spaces of celebration and of joy for the refugee community. To say “we need resources in order to celebrate” is important. Within so-called minority positions there is almost an expectation that resources will be given if you're sad. We should also remember that pride itself is a celebration of resistance against police violence.

Géraldine Gourbe: Marnie, you used a definition of queer that I enjoyed: “queer for me is more a process and less about the question of representation”.

Marnie Slater: Part of the frustration with representation as an end goal within an institutional context is the assumption that institutions only have faces, whereas it has flesh, muscles, bones, people, architectures, processes, and money behind it. A queer feminist and anti-racist position is to demand a commitment to transformation beyond representation.

11. <https://www.artangel.org.uk/>

12. <https://www.idlewomen.org/>

Géraldine Gourbe: I get the impression that considering the creation of documentation or an archive before an event is important to both of you.

Tominga O'Donnell: I made a small book for every project in *Munchmuseet on the Move* and gathered them all in a box which became a sort of portable mini monument over the programme in its totality. You can't create an indexical relationship or equivalent experience to being present for a performance, but a more traditional image archive that exists separate from it allows you to put it in a referential frame.

Marnie Slater: In 2018, *Mothers & Daughters* had a sisterspace which was an exhibition on lesbian history in Belgium that focussed on ephemera. This year we're working on an exhibition on trans and non-binary history, which the archives that are supposed to be representative of our communities are often blind to. A refusal of documentation puts the imperative on oral storytelling which is powerful in intergenerational exchange. In the context of this 2018 exhibition, we organised *Herstory Sunday* which gathered some of the older lesbian generation in Brussels to share stories with each other and with a younger or other community. Within *Buenos Tiempos* and my own practice we use orality as a form of distribution of texts that we don't have the legal right to publish: we can think about the voice as a publishing medium.

Tominga O'Donnell: For Sam Hultin's project, stories were gathered, written down, printed, spoken and recorded in Swedish, Norwegian and English, and finally geolocated to the respective sites. Technology offers a possibility of rethinking how stories can be retold in order to reach wider audiences or to become more accessible. If we don't do the work of recording these important personal histories a lot of these voices will disappear. You have to fight people's resistance to seeing themselves as important to history at large.

Conclusion: Elvira Dyangani Ose

I want to revisit some of the moments in the different presentations and my responses to them, starting with the question raised by Mercedes Azpilicueta and Quinn Latimer on how art-making can be used in the formulation of an institution. Premesh Lalu, with whom I worked at the Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art 2015 (GIBCA), argues in his book *The Deaths of Hintsa* for a postcolonial critique of Apartheid and for new models of writing and narrating history. Through conversations with artists, we could apply this by thinking about the craft of an artwork in both history-writing and the making of institutions. Art and the strategies of artists such as Kerry James Marshall or Carlos Motta have marked my way of institution-making. Their work not only expands the notion of queerness but also demands a commitment to transformation of the establishment. Yet, as became clear throughout the sessions, it should be noted feminism and gender have been established both as a space of possibility and transformation as much as a space of burden. The notion of enthusiasm, however, is one tool that offers such transformative possibilities, and simultaneously speaks to a sense of collective agency.

The notion of the face as well as the privileging of the eyes and the gaze within institutions has a lot to do with representation. Sepake Angiama and Vanessa Desclaux discussed the possibilities of feminist institution-making by creating embodied institutions that offer spaces for mediation and slowing down in a manner that goes beyond the eyes, and involves our entire bodies. We can imagine a diverse institution that allows for all bodies to appropriate it, to feel like they belong, beyond ableist and heteronormative criteria.

The conversation between Émilie Renard, Dora García and Marthe Ramm Fortun called for honest discussions about working conditions in the art world and a need for transparency. While institutions advertise with notions of affection and care, they are not truly implemented. Questions on subjects such as funding, as raised by both Antonio Cataldo and Tominga O'Donnell, force us to consider our own complicity in neoliberalism for the sake of the survival of the institution.

Xabier Arakistain's and Elisabeth Lebovici's discussion showed that there is still a lot that can be done to create a feminist exhibition, let alone a feminist institution. One of my issues now is that perhaps I feel more African than I feel feminist. Sometimes it is very difficult to connect certain notions of feminism that are still charged by a lack of diversity or a lack of a narrative with which I can identify.

Nanne Buurman's account of the Venice Biennial brought forward that you cannot talk about beauty or joy without addressing the effort that precarious, marginalized positions bring to it: notions of pain and challenge, invisibilized communities, anonymous labor, the curatorial unconscious and the question of infrastructure. The harsher aspects that were treated, such as madness, are not necessarily about what is painful or challenging. While I come from an animist

culture, this cannot be addressed in Western terms, because Western parents educate their children to not have fear. There is a component in animism around fear that is crucial.

Building on the definitions of the notion of care proposed by Helena Reckitt and Julie Pellegrin, the creation of institutional spaces of care can be linked back to the “situated museum”. Within both frames of possibility and frames of restriction, we must be very conscious of the space that we occupy within socio-political, cultural, economic and pedagogical fields. We are hosted by society and a tool for cultural reproduction.

Recalling bell hooks’s notion of “*who’s in the classroom?*”, we must observe who is in the institutions and what conversations are needed. Gaining a sense of all the contributions of different actors in the scene is crucial. It is critical in the making of a feminist institution to have people come together to talk about the issues that matter to them in the communities that they live in, because what we are looking for in the end is something that perhaps hasn’t yet been defined.

As Elke Krasny posited, we are engaging in a production of time, beyond the production of normative space. While I admire *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre, I think he lost sight of what was happening in the French countryside and its former colonies. The pandemic has enabled us to recover a sense of time, and create spaces of care through these online conversations with people around the world.

Q&A with the audience

Tominga O'Donnell: Elvira, you seem to have assumed the responsibility that comes with the power and potential for change associated with of a directorial position, but maybe not its conventional expectations? How are things different when you're in the director's chair?

Elvira Dyangani Ose: We take the role of dissidents. All my life I have been responding to something. Every exhibition I would make would be an intervention into an institution or scene in order to create a platform for the unheard and unnamed. The fact of being in the position of director in an institution like MACBA is a shift in its structure, first because I am a woman, and second because I am black. But I still have all the work to do: I don't want to be tokenistic, I want to really change the institution, to set up the space, create a platform, and plant the seed, even if this transformation will not happen within the time I am here. Regarding temporality, I don't feel the anxiety of having to leave my mark. Through the *Possible Museum*¹³ project at MACBA, we try to understand what might have gotten lost in moving rapidly to the next season or next director. I want to help junior colleagues find their voices within their departments, because 95% of women working in MACBA have been invisibilized behind the position of the director. I do not want to be the face of the institution, I want it to be my entire team. I don't want to replicate a model in which I am the author of ideas that inform internal strategies. It must be said however that despite my position there are things I cannot do, but I will give a platform to those who have been invisibilized or are in precarious situations. Part of the project is to review the labor conditions of, and agreements with the artists that we work with, so that we can talk with much softer and gentler language about production within those relationships. We need to engage in co-production. In a project that we want to do with our neighbors we want them to tell us what they want from us so that institution-making can become a conversation.

Géraldine Gourbe: In all of the speakers' projects, something that is crucial is the resistance to the personal authority of the signature, whether you are in the position of museum or art center director, teacher or performer, and I think this is profoundly feminist.

Summary written by Eleni Pantelaras for DCA, 2022
Coordination: Marie Chênél

13. <https://www.macba.cat/en/about-macba/programme-2022/a-possible-museum>

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