

## **affective encounters in public spaces**

a skype chat between  
Lía La Novia (Mexico City) & Karin Michalski (Berlin)

Lía and I met in Berlin for a workshop on art education and queer politics and we were starting a conversation about queer artistic and political strategies. "Queer friendliness" or as we called it "radical friendliness" and "radical openness" seemed to be interesting strategies to make space for the negotiation of often not so positive and even violent feelings and affects towards people who don't meet common norms of bodies, sexuality and gender in public situations.

**KM:**

... shall we chat a bit?

**Lía:**

... of course.

**KM:**

... since we last saw each other in Berlin there are still  
... some thoughts in my head  
... I would like to talk about  
... when did you first start with the figure of the "mermaid"?

**Lía:**

... well, this is a very nice story for me.  
... I started to work with the archetype of the "bride" in 2007  
... I had four emotional encounters with the bride dress  
... then in 2008 I decided to start with the "quinceañera" ritual  
... you remember the "quinceañera" ritual and the meaning in Mexico?

**KM:**

... yes, I do remember. It is a special celebration when girls turn fifteen.  
... but I was wondering if it is a positive ritual for all the girls  
... or more also something very much based in the hetero-system  
... and so it can also stress out the girls  
... who don't want to be part of the hetero world  
... do you know what I mean?

**Lía:**

... definitely it is a ritual constructed for the heteropatriarchy  
... and it is complex because in some parts of Mexico  
... it is a very narrow tradition  
... but now we are also losing this tradition  
... because most of the girls prefer an iPhone or a mac  
... instead of the party because the party is for

... saying that "she is available"  
... ready for reproduction  
... in the words of a feminist friend: it is to „conserve the system“.  
... it is difficult to talk about my work  
... because I am not interested in changing the aesthetics  
... or image of the bride or the quinceañera  
... I like to *be* one  
... and celebrate it  
... I think that transgression happens in different ways  
... I mean that the transgression is not only in the image  
... a lot of queer discourses talk about how the transgression is  
... in the image of the body like androgyny or drag  
... but in my case I like to think the transgression  
... can be found in the practises  
... in the effects of the party, the emerge interacting with the public,

**KM:**

... maybe it is a matter of choice and desire  
... when you say that you like to be one then it is *your* decision.  
... that's a very important difference in contrast to a fifteen year old girl.

**Lía:**

... exactly.  
... because for a lot of them  
... it is an imposition  
... by the family.  
... yes, and with the thing the mermaid is something strong  
... because when I was a child "the little mermaid" was my favorite movie  
... and my mom organized for me a party with the topic of it  
... since my childhood I have a thing with this image  
... my mom, in one interview, told me about my connections  
... with the mermaid  
... this is important because there is a lot of transwomen in Latin America  
... that feel the same  
... there is a connection between our transition and the figure of the mermaid  
... in my case in 2012 I decided to investigate about  
... the history of the mermaid  
... the original, not Disney  
... and i found that in the tale of Hans Christian Andersen  
... all my work was there  
... because he wrote that the mermaid wanted to go  
... to the land when she was fifteen years old  
... and when the mermaid fell in love with the prince  
... her objective was to get married  
... but he discovered that he loves another girl  
... so both rituals (quinceañera and bride) were there  
... in the little mermaid tale  
... and well, in this tale I found a lot of symbols  
... for talking about my transition  
... like for example the question of the voice

... when she interchanges her voice for a pair of legs  
... and these legs  
... when she walks in the land  
... give her pain  
... in each step.

**KM:**

... when you made this performance as a mermaid in Barcelona  
... in the staircase of the apartment house and people were supposed  
... to carry you upstairs because you couldn't walk with your mermaid-tail  
... this reminded me of protests where people for example in wheelchairs  
... protested against city politics that many public and private buildings  
... are not accessible for people in wheelchairs  
... or for people who cannot climb stairs.  
... You said that you see a lot of aspects of transpolitics as part of it  
... but when we met in Berlin you were asking me if I see my „feeling bad“  
... projects in relation to "crip" politics and yes, I do and I can also see that  
... there is a connection to your work.

**Lía:**

... Yes, also when I constructed this encounter  
... I thought about the prejudices that the people  
... have about the transgender question  
... and also because to have prejudices sometimes is heavy  
... like my body  
... so maybe to carry me is something like  
... to carry their own prejudices  
... and feel them  
... and feel free to carry me  
... and then this is not enough for me  
... because this encounter has a second part  
... first the building and then the city  
... the experience was amazing because  
... everything ended up in a collective action

**KM:**

... as your performances take place in public spaces  
... you really go for the encounter with people  
... they can touch you, you touch them, it is very emotional  
... I was wondering if "vulnerability" is a keyword for you  
... because in my own work I often try to work  
... with "vulnerability" and „openness“  
... the way how I try to interact with people  
... and how I create spaces like for example the group exhibition  
... "An Unhappy Archive" in reference to Sara Ahmed's work  
... which is questioning the social norms that are related to "happiness"  
... but my last projects were also about how feelings should be part  
... of public life  
... and it became clear to me that even it is a lot about negative affects  
... we both work with a very friendly attitude towards public encounters

... I think that we also called it "radical friendliness"  
... or „queer radical friendliness“ in the workshop.  
... and I myself look at “friendliness” as a special coded language.  
... In a casual conversation that I had with the US–american theorists  
... Heather Love and Deborah Gould  
... who both work with affects and emotions  
... in their theoretical works  
... we found out by chance about the similarity of how we cope with the world  
... as “women“ that don’t look female in a traditional/conventional way.  
... and how we used friendliness from childhood on  
... to hopefully also be addressed with friendliness  
... in shops, in public transportation, in all kinds of situations  
... where you are in some kind of sociality.  
... but we also use friendliness to have a clear impact on socialities.  
... and I also use direct friendliness and some kind of vulnerability  
... as a strategy in seminars and workshops when I am teaching  
... to enable the exchange of feelings and experiences.

**Lía:**

... I don't know if I put a lot of vulnerability in the public space, because  
... I think that the power of these images is the memories that they construct  
... in the social imaginary  
... because if suddenly you find a quinceañera/bride in the public space  
... it depends on the context that they are remembered  
... the party question  
... the people automatically feel connected  
... or they look at me from another point of view  
... and this is the moment when my critique  
... towards the performance area is begining  
... I don't like to say that my work is a performance or an intervention  
... it is a political  
... affective encounter  
... or emotional encounter.

**KM:**

... but do you look at these affective encounters as artistic work  
... or activist work?

**Lía:**

... I like the term ARTIVIST  
... a concept used by a feminist mexican person  
... Monica Mayer  
... that combined the two and said that we are  
... ARTIVISTS  
... ACTIVISTS/ARTISTS

**KM:**

... that's cool!

**Lía:**

... and for me it is also pedagogical.  
... I like to think in the tradition of radical pedagogy  
... of bell hooks  
... and Henry Giroux  
... they deconstructed the idea of traditional pedagogy  
... and I feel in my encounters that it is not only my transition  
... it is a collective gender transition  
... because I'm changing and my body is the point of the beginning  
... of the social transition  
... I'm never alone in my pictures  
... I don't like to show my body changing  
... as a lot of transgender photography artist do  
... I like to show more than one transition  
... in the public space  
... because if I invite the people to participate and they accept  
... it is also a transition of the person that wants to get close to another body  
... and discover that is not a "normal" body but they continue  
... this is pedagogical because it constructs and de-constructs.

**KM:**

... I am curious: how do the interactions work in the street?  
... how do people "understand" that you want to be moved by them?  
... because the staircase situation is clearer to me.

**Lía:**

... I also use my body communication  
... not the voice  
... I let them understand that I need to move through the city  
... my voice only appears at the final moment  
... when they finished  
... when i say "Thank you for being part of this transition!"

**KM:**

... Lía, have a beautiful day in Mexico City!  
... kisses Karin

**Lía:**

... take care my dear  
... let's share more affective encounters  
... kisses to Berlin Lía

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**Lía La Novia** is currently completing a master's degree in visual arts at the Academy of San Carlos (UNAM). Her interests have focused on making her own gender transition a festive and intimate pedagogy, shared / continued-affective encounters and lovely communications as political action/ a proposal that starts from her own body. Her current project responds to these and more questions: What emotions are built when gender transition is shared? How can a political project include trans celebration? She has presented her work at Trans Barcelona, „El Palomar-BCN“ and Bethanien, Berlin. She has collaborated with the University Collective Sexual Diversity (CUDS Chile) as well as Extra, International Performance Festival organized by artist Pancho Lopez, Mexico. <http://jerrychinos.wix.com/transartivismosudaka>