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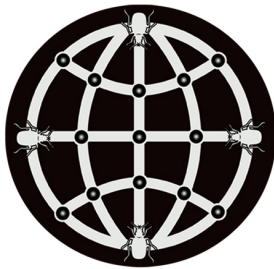
PhD Thesis

Presented by: **Graham Bell**

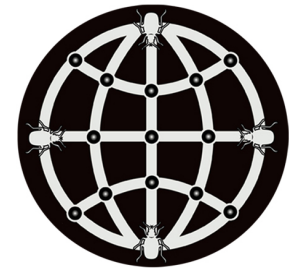
Directed by: **Dr. Juan Vicente Aliaga Espert**

# NATURAL HYSTERIA

*(a queer response to ecocide)*



An exercise in  
Living Art  
Participatory Rituals  
and Queer Ecology



-Or-

*How I discovered Geyserbird,  
the Transgender Shaman within*



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# Abstract

**Natural Hysteria...** is a trans-disciplinary practice led investigation which documents the process of production of a cycle of text based performances -rituals, street actions, theatrical presentations, and video presentations, songs and workshops.

It is an artistic response to the deterioration of our environment and the attacks on cultural and biological diversity being carried out by a capitalist system based on the accumulation of wealth at all costs which is leading us to the border of an ecological collapse.

It proceeds through an analyses of other dissident artistic practices which share a queer, feminist postcolonial or ecological perspective linking them to the concepts explored in my work in order to contextualise it in the expanded field of the contemporary arts.

The alternative “hysteria” that forms the conceptual basis of this project has its beginnings in the dawn of the modern age and traces a history of domination of those "others": focusing mainly on women, gender and sexual dissidents, people of colour and animals.

The exploitation of natural and human resources is a consequence of a worldview based on the establishment of binary oppositions that allow the “other” to be classified and dominated.

For example: man / woman, white / black, hetero / homosexual, culture / nature. The construction of these "others" – the "feminine", the "native", the "queer", "nature" – excludes these subjects from the construction of a master identity that, nevertheless, depends on these categories for its existence.

In the Renaissance the fields of the sciences and the humanities were not separated. The mechanistic view of the world had not completely overcome pagan beliefs in magic and in a spiritual force which resides in all beings. This vision was a relic of the pre-Christian era and would finally be eradicated by the united forces of State and Church through the processes of the Inquisition, the witch hunts, colonization and the new religion of "Science".

All of these processes have produced a huge change in our relationship with nature, currently seen as a totally inert entity. Nature is no longer part of our being and has become nothing more than raw material.

Colonisation continues today under a neoliberal politics which uses the concept of development to requisition territory from indigenous people in order to exploit its natural resources. This is justified by qualifying these people as primitive because their way of life is based on living in equilibrium with nature.

The function of a politically engaged artistic practise is to challenge the notion that no alternative exists to the current system.



The theoretical and artistic framework of this investigation has led to the development of a performative alter ego, the transgender shaman Geysersbird, and to the configuration of a series of performances which included participatory rituals, installations with presence and the queer appropriation of abandoned industrial spaces.

The transgender shaman is a spiritual being who goes beyond the limitations of the binary gender system and connects to indigenous cultures. The deployment of this figure in a contemporary context, invites the public to imagine other possibilities for themselves and for our society

# Resumen

**Natural Hysteria...** es una investigación basada en una práctica transdisciplinaria que documenta el proceso de producción de un ciclo de performances basadas en el texto: rituales, presentaciones teatrales, acciones callejeras y presentaciones de video, canciones y talleres.

Es una respuesta artística al deterioro de nuestro medio ambiente y los ataques contra la diversidad cultural y biológica que están llevando a cabo un sistema capitalista basado en la acumulación de riqueza a toda costa que nos está llevando al borde de un colapso ecológico.

Se procede a través de un análisis de otras prácticas artísticas disidentes que comparten una perspectiva queer, feminista, postcolonial o ecológica que las vincula a los conceptos explorados en mi trabajo para contextualizarlo en el campo expandido de las artes contemporáneas.

La "histeria" alternativa que forma la base conceptual de este proyecto tiene sus inicios en los albores de la edad moderna y traza una historia de dominación de los "otros": se centra principalmente en las mujeres, en el género y en los disidentes sexuales, las personas de color y los animales.

La explotación de los recursos naturales y humanos es una consecuencia de una cosmovisión basada en el establecimiento de oposiciones binarias que permiten que el "otro" sea clasificado y dominado.

Por ejemplo: hombre / mujer, blanco / negro, hetero / homosexual, cultura / naturaleza. La construcción de estos "otros" - "femenino", "nativo", "queer", "naturaleza" - excluye a estos sujetos de la construcción de una identidad dominante que, sin embargo, depende de estas categorías para su existencia.

En el Renacimiento, los campos de las ciencias y las humanidades no estaban separados. La visión mecanicista del mundo no había superado por completo las creencias paganas en la magia y en una fuerza espiritual que reside en todos los seres. Esta visión era una reliquia de la era precristiana y finalmente sería erradicada por las fuerzas unidas del Estado y la Iglesia a través de los procesos de la Inquisición, la caza de brujas, la colonización y la nueva religión de la "Ciencia".

Todos estos procesos han producido un gran cambio en nuestra relación con la naturaleza, que en la actualidad se considera una entidad totalmente inerte. La naturaleza ya no forma parte de nuestro ser y se ha convertido simplemente en materia prima.

La colonización continúa hoy bajo una política neoliberal que utiliza el concepto de desarrollo para requisar territorio de los pueblos indígenas a fin de explotar sus recursos naturales. Esto se justifica clasificando estas personas como primitivas porque su modo de vida se basa en vivir en equilibrio con la naturaleza.

La función de una práctica artística políticamente comprometida es desafiar la noción de que no existe una alternativa al sistema actual.

El marco teórico y artístico de esta investigación ha conducido al desarrollo de un alter ego performativo, el chamán transgénero Geyserbird, y a la configuración de una serie de performances que incluye rituales participativos, instalaciones con presencia y la reapropiación queer de espacios industriales abandonados.

El chamán transgénero es un ser espiritual que va más allá de las limitaciones del sistema de género binario y se conecta con las culturas indígenas. El despliegue de esta figura en un contexto contemporáneo invita al público a imaginar otras posibilidades para sí mismos y para nuestra sociedad.

# Resum

**Natural Hysteria...** és una investigació basada en una pràctica transdisciplinària que documenta el procés de producció d'un cicle de performances basades en el text: rituals, presentacions teatrals, accions al carrers i presentacions de vídeo, cançons i tallers.

És una resposta artística a la deteriorament del nostre medi ambient i els atacs contra la diversitat cultural i biològica que està duent a terme un sistema capitalista basat en l'acumulació de riquesa costi el que costi que ens està portant a la vora d'un col·lapse ecològic.

Es procedeix a través d'una anàlisi d'altres pràctiques artístiques dissidents que comparteixen una perspectiva queer, feminista, postcolonial o ecològica que les vincula amb els conceptes explorats en el meu treball per contextualitzar-ho en el camp expandit de les arts contemporànies.

La "histèria" alternativa que forma la base conceptual d'aquest projecte té els seus inicis en les albors de l'edat moderna i traça una història de dominació dels "altres": se centra principalment en les dones, en el gènere i en els dissidents sexuals, les persones de color i els animals.

L'explotació dels recursos naturals i humans és una conseqüència d'una cosmovisió basada en l'establiment d'oposicions binàries que permeten que l'"altre" sigui classificat i dominat.

Per exemple: home / dona, blanc / negre, hetero / homosexual, cultura / naturalesa. La construcció d'aquests "altres" - "femení", "natiu", "queer", "naturalesa" - exclou aquests subjectes de la construcció d'una identitat dominant que, no obstant això, depèn d'aquestes categories per a la seua existència.

En el Renaixement, els camps de les ciències i les humanitats no estaven separats. La visió mecanicista del món no havia superat per complet les creences paganes en la màgia i en una força espiritual que resideix en tots els éssers. Aquesta visió era una relíquia de l'era precristiana i finalment seria eradicada per les forces unides de l'Estat i l'Església a través dels processos de la Inquisició, la caça de bruixes, la colonització i la nova religió de la "Ciència".

Tots aquests processos han produït un gran canvi en la nostra relació amb la naturalesa, que en l'actualitat es considera una entitat totalment inerta. La naturalesa ja no forma part del nostre ésser i s'ha convertit simplement en matèria preval.

La colonització continua avui sota una política neoliberal que utilitza el concepte de desenvolupament per a requisar territori dels pobles indígenes a fi d'explotar els seus recursos naturals. Això es justifica classificant aquestes persones com a primitives perquè la seua manera de vida es basa en viure en equilibri amb la naturalesa.

La funció d'una pràctica artística políticament compromesa és desafiar la noció que no existeix una alternativa al sistema actual.



El marc teòric i artístic d'aquesta investigació ha conduït al desenvolupament d'un alter ego performatiu, el xaman transgènere Geyserbird, i a la configuració d'una sèrie de performances que inclou rituals participatius, instal·lacions amb presència i la reapropiació queer d'espais industrials abandonats.

El xaman transgènere és un ser espiritual que va més enllà de les limitacions del sistema de gènere binari i es connecta amb les cultures indígenes. El desplegament d'aquesta figura en un context contemporani convida al públic a imaginar altres possibilitats per a ells mateixos i per a la nostra societat.

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# *Natural Hysteria*

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# Introduction

“If straight is the identity of I am, then gay becomes I am not. Women are not men. Native people are not white. Nature is not human. Instead of talking about nonconformity, I want to talk about possibility and unnameably complex reality. What queer can offer is the identity of I am also. I am also human. I am also natural. I am also alive and dynamic and full of contradiction, paradox, irony. Queer knocks down the house of cards and throws them into the warm wind”<sup>1</sup>

This PhD thesis sets out to collect and document the process of production of a cycle of text based performances -songs, rituals, theatrical presentations, workshops, street and video actions- that I have grouped under the name of Natural Hysteria<sup>2</sup> and includes a revision of the 25 year trajectory that influenced in their development. This investigation includes work carried out during the Master in Artistic Production at the UPV which focused on cycles of ritual performances in public spaces, but during the PhD I expanded the field of action to include different contexts, such as art spaces, conferences and cabarets.

I attempt to communicate in a poetic manner an ethical stance which opposes oppressive systems of domination and control in society. This always includes a political slant which reflects my interests in gender politics and ecology. This cycle reflects my desire to communicate and realize social change at both the individual and structural level and continues in the general trajectory of my work because it is based on a great variety of processes and the use of different media. Natural Hysteria is a transdisciplinary project which consists of three areas of action: the political; the performative; and the personal.

As Donna Haraway explained in her essay on situated knowledge<sup>3</sup> it is important when reading a story to know where that story comes from.

I am a queer Scottish performance artist who grew up on the outskirts of a small town in rural Aberdeenshire in the north east of Scotland who currently works (mainly) in Valencia, a city on the Mediterranean coast of Spain.

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1 Alex Johnson, *How to Queer Ecology: One Goose at a Time*. Published in the March/April 2011 issue of Orion magazine.

2 **N.B.** The Spanish word *histeria* (*hysteria*) is similar to the word for history, *historia*. I prefer the term *hysteria* because this play on words implies for me a version of events where there are no exclusions. I use the term as an ironic reference to official histories which are constructed through archives which bring together documents which relate the version of a dominant heteropatriarchal power system. Until recently these archives excluded those who have no power: women, the LGTBQI community and colonised peoples world-wide.

*Hysteria*, a chronic, nervous disease, characterized by a variety of symptoms, mainly functional, and sometimes by seizures, was, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, believed to emanate from a disorder in the uterus, thus making it a disease which only affected women. The term has also been used to speak, according to Paul B. Preciado in their *Manifiesto Contrasexual* (2002) of the state induced by doctors to cure women with an “aberrant” sexuality, or those that showed no interest in intercourse for whatever reason, because reproduction was the purpose of sexuality. During the period of the Inquisition, *hysteria* was taken to be symptomatic of a possession by the devil and instead of treating the symptoms, victims were executed. I use the term to include all of these women in a queer genealogy.

3 “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and the splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.” Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, London 1991) p.190

I am an immigrant from the North which means that I experience first hand the north/south economic divisions in Europe which reflect wider geopolitical frontiers. Within the European context, Spain is one of the P.I.G.S. of the South that represent an economic risk for the neoliberal European project.

My research is an attempt to open a cross-cultural dialogue - similar to the Pan-American project of La Pocha Nostra - to exchange resistance strategies based on knowledge and respect. As a result of an Erasmus Internship scholarship I had the opportunity to return to Scotland for a series of extended stays and to see how the socio-political situation has changed there since I left in 2000.

This work itself is an act of translation between Anglo-Saxon and Latin cultures, a hybrid product of two different sets of values and beliefs. One simple example should help to make these cultural differences clearer: the use of the pronoun “we” when writing about personal opinions is common in Spanish.

For me, this connotes a group of people or body of thought and implies that the speaker is part of a collective, using “we” instead of “I” in deference to the group. In British English the use of “we” implies something quite different since the only current usage of this form is by the Queen of England, therefore it sounds as if you are upholding a hierarchy that I find antiquated and completely anachronistic. Since this text was originally written in English, and the opinions expressed herein are my own, I have written in the first person as I do not pretend to represent any queer or ecofeminist collective.

My story traces a history of sexual dissidence which began in the 1990’s with a focus on gender politics and has developed in recent years towards a more holistic approach which deals with the relationship between ecology and gender, in particular the exploitation of the feminine and queer within the current capitalist system.

This evolution took place within the context of a rebellious/anti-establishment practice which evolved in an uncomfortable relationship with both the academy and the wider art world- at once critical of the structures and methods whereby artists and their work become products, but at the same time aware that, without art, my life would be meaningless.

My eclectic approach is contemporaneous with our global era, where the great foundational myths of history have collapsed. My transgender, transvestite, and queer practice investigates the construction of gender and attempts to expand the concept beyond its anthropomorphic base and break down the artificial dichotomy of nature/culture. Until the Enlightenment the fields of science and art were united and studied under the name of natural philosophy.

The title **Natural Hysteria** refers to this interdisciplinary methodology and is a criticism of the specialization of studies encouraged by the current educational system, product of a society that compartmentalizes knowledge in order to maintain control through the development of forms of communication that are accessible only to an elite, educated in the subject. “The language in which ideas are expressed is never neutral. The language that people use reveals important information about who they identify with, what their intentions are, who they are writing or talking to ... Unnecessarily specialized language is used to humiliate those who are not supposed to feel authorized to understand it. It sells the illusion that only those who can handle it are capable of thought.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Aurora Levins Morales in *Otras Inapropiables: Feminismos desde las fronteras* (Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2004) p.68

The phrase “Natural Hysteria” was coined during a musical improvisation: “Natural history was the science which studied living organisms and classified them according to species, genus and family. But nowadays species are disappearing at such a rate that maybe its time we changed our system ... of classification.

Because under current circumstances

Histeria es natural

Bajo estas circunstancias,

Hysteria is natural.”<sup>5</sup>

The contrast in the spoken word introduction and the passionate singing of the final lines reflects the sudden mood change of the hysteric, who can be calm one moment then burst into a fury in a second. Hysterical behaviour, although generally associated with women is also often observed in the camp melodrama of homosexual histrionics, most fully expressed in the female characters in the plays of Tennessee Williams or the characters portrayed by Divine in early John Waters films.

Indeed Susan Sontag defined camp as a “love of the unnatural, artifice and exaggeration.”<sup>6</sup> Since the “unnatural” is the terrain typically assigned to the homosexual it is unsurprising that camp should play such an important role in strategies of representation used by gender dissidents. As RuPaul said: “We are born naked. All the rest is drag.”<sup>7</sup>

The ironic juxtaposition of the word hysteria with the adjective “natural” brings up the question of same sex behaviour which was seen for centuries as an abomination against nature and as a crime which was often punishable by death, torture or imprisonment.

But what is natural and unnatural?

It is important to note that in nature all different types of sexual behaviour occurs and many non-human animals also exhibit homosexual behaviour and hermaphroditism. This has been shown in many recent scientific studies<sup>8</sup> contradicting what generations of prudish or homophobic biologists either failed to note, or concluded was rare and aberrant behaviour.

Similarly, the idea of women being closer to nature, because they can give birth, is a social construction and the association of women with reproduction ignores the fact that some women may choose not to reproduce or be unable to.

Furthermore men are also closely linked to nature because their bodies are made of organic material, whether or not they wish to acknowledge it.

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5 Graham Bell Tornado, lyrics *Histeria Natural “Suite”* by Gran Tour (2014). I was accompanied by pianist Carlos Martinez in the first public performance of the song in La Erreria (House of Bent) at the beginning of the Natural Hysteria Theme Park Guided Tour in 2010. This composition eventually expanded to become a musical version of the How to Heal... ritual. It can be heard online at: <https://grantour.bandcamp.com/track/natural-hysteria-suite>

6 Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (1964) republished in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Vintage Books, New York, 1983) p.105

7 RuPaul, interview with Richard Smith, *The Queen of New York* (Gay Times, London, July 1993).

8 For example, Bruce Bagemihl in his exhaustive review of scientific literature *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (St Martin’s Press, New York, 1999) p.36, concludes that: “roughly one-fifth of all interactions, on average, are homosexual in mammal and bird species that have at least some form of same-sex courtship, sexual, and/or pair-bonding activities.”

Since humans began to use tools and wear skins, any claim that our behaviour is unnatural makes no sense. All human acts are natural.

The “unnatural” is a social construct which changes in different historical periods and cultures depending on their socio-political context. It arose in the colonial period as a means to justify the subjugation of other races whose sexual practises were not exclusively reproductive.

The white-heterosexual male was the “natural” barometer against which all were measured and found lacking: other races because they were classified as subhuman or primitive; sexual dissidents criminalized for being degenerate; and women seen as inferior because they were deemed irrational and without a soul.

Racist, misogynist androcentric discourses are still used now to control and subjugate women, minorities and the environment. Many religions and governments still condemn homosexual behaviour and transgender people and reactionary politicians such as Donald Trump claim that illegal immigrants “are not people, they are animals.”<sup>9</sup>

Natural Hysteria is the result of a restless curiosity and mixes different areas of knowledge and practices -video art, performance, writing- to find new combinations similar to the way in which the alchemists mixed different chemicals to see how they would react.

As the chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña explains, performers “theorize about art, politics and culture, but our interdisciplinary methodologies are different from those of academic theorists. *They* have binoculars; *we* have radars. Performance artists spend the bulk of our time “scanning” rather than “focusing,” as theorists do, settling on one spot and then pulling out the binoculars.”<sup>10</sup>

Through my studies in the fields of Biophysics and Genetics, and my activism within the LGBTQI movement I learned to relate biological organization with social organization. The cellular mechanisms of the body compose a system of interrelated processes in a complex equilibrium, which is the result of the slow process of evolution.

On the other hand democracy is the result of a series of struggles throughout history to establish a balance between the people and their rulers.

All the elements in an ecosystem have to function as a whole in order for the system to maintain its equilibrium, therefore it is necessary to protect diversity in all its forms: biological, sexual and cultural.

The neo-liberal politics of consumerism, based on a continued growth of the economy and a lack of market regulation, attack this balance and threaten it in an unsustainable manner.

Taking advantage of the fact that utopian promises seem to have become obsolete our politicians and religious leaders foster discourses that support corporations, banks and the industrial machine and threaten life itself.

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9 BBC News 17/05/2018 [www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-44148697/trump-immigrant-gangs-animals-not-people](http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-44148697/trump-immigrant-gangs-animals-not-people) - Accessed 13/7/18

10 Guillermo Gómez-Peña *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (Routledge, New York, 2005) p.21



## **Motivations**

My practice is an artistic response to the urgent necessity for all forms of community based activism – feminist, LGBTQI, environmentalist and indigenous rights - to unite and fight against the suicidal machine of neo-liberal hetero-patriarchy.

I am not interested in having just a local impact with my work. We live within a certain state of emergency and I think its important that queer ecofeminist voices are raised in order to change the direction of the dominant discourses leading us to the border of the abyss.

## **Objectives**

- to carry out a practice-led investigation which represents all areas of my practice -performance, video, music and graphics- and adapts itself to a wide range of contexts, making full use of the available resources.
- to link the concepts of eco-feminism and queer theory to the artistic project, establishing links between these concepts, works and authors that support my practical project.
- to develop a working practice which can raise awareness of the importance of protecting diversity in all its forms: sexual, biological and cultural.

## **Theoretical Basis**

The alternative hysteria that forms the conceptual basis of this project has its beginnings in the dawn of the modern age and traces a history of domination of those bodies defined as “other”: focusing mainly on women, gender and sexual dissidents, people of colour and animals although these are only some of a vast group which could be extended to include Muslims, the disabled and many more.

Only by understanding that these categories are porous and that diversity is something to be celebrated and not feared can we begin to break the schemes of domination.

Apparently we are living in the era of the Anthropocene, the name for the geological age in which human activity has begun to have such a powerful affect on the planet that important factors such as the massive reduction in biodiversity, biogeography (animals migrating to zones where previously they could not survive because of global warming) and climate change will cause the fossil record to change.

The term was popularised by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 who wished to draw attention to the negative effects of climate change and convince industry skeptics that scientific evidence overwhelmingly supported the arguments for reducing emissions caused by burning fossil fuels.

Unfortunately as the scientific community took up the idea, certain dangers in the model became clear.

The anthropomorphism implied in the term, posits human agency as being the only factor of change, considers humans as a general concept when in fact the activities referred to are corporate and therefore implies that humans are only those who live in “developed” countries.

Additionally it reinforces the idea of nature as an inert object and implies that just as technology created the problem -the age is generally supposed to have begun with the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century- it can solve it through a series of massive geo-engineering projects, most of which would have totally unpredictable outcomes. “Species Man did not shape the conditions for the Third Carbon Age or the Nuclear Age.

The story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again. Autopoietic, self-making man came down once again, this time in tragic system failure, turning biodiverse ecosystems into flipped-out deserts of slimy mats and stinging jellyfish.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore as Nabil Ahmed points out “The Anthropocene thesis claims that humans have become a geophysical force operating on the planet, as if humans were an undifferentiated whole. But which humans, to be more precise?... in focusing on the environmental consequences rather than the interrelations of capital, power, and nature, the Anthropocene argument misses the political problem: that the origin of the crisis is not humans themselves but the capitalism and production of capitalist subjectivity that shape them. And as so many counter-hegemonic, alter-globalization movements have voiced, we cannot hold “humanity” responsible; rather we must hold to account the ruling political and economic classes of both the Global North and the Global South.”<sup>12</sup>

For this reason the term “Capitalocene” has been suggested as a more accurate description of our era.

“The Anthropocene... functions as a universalizing discourse: it tends to disavow differentiated responsibility (and the differently located effects) for the geological changes it designates, instead homogeneously allocating agency to the generic members of its “human activities”. As such it avoids the politicization of ecology that could otherwise lead to the practice of climate justice which demands that the politics of equality, human rights and historical responsibility be taken into account when addressing environmental change.”<sup>13</sup>

This PhD investigation aims to find new ways of forging links between various strands of critical contemporary thought which are fundamental in this process: ecofeminism, queer theory, transfeminism and queer ecology.

This intersectional approach has proved to be highly ambitious and bringing together voices which have such different agendas has not been without problems. Although there is a long history of feminist thought which intersects and has enriched ecological thinking, the connections between queer theory and ecology/ecofeminism are less well explored.

An overview of the problems involved and the available literature in this emerging field will be undertaken in Chapter V: The Ecogender Project.

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11 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016) p.47

12 Nabil Ahmed, *Negative Moment: Political Geology in the Twenty-First Century*, (Issue 8 Documenta 14 2017)

13 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual culture and Environment today* (Sternberg Press, 2017) p.19

- **Ecofeminism**

The term was coined by Francoise D Eaubonne, a half French half Spanish anarchist, in the book *La féminisme et la mort* in 1974. Ecofeminism is a line of feminist thought which holds that there are important connections between the domination and exploitation of women and nature.

Our culture is based on the establishment of binary oppositions that allows the “other” to be classified and dominated. For example: man / woman, white / black, hetero / homosexual, culture / nature. The construction of these “others” – , the “feminine”, the “native”, the “queer”, “nature” excludes these subjects from the construction of a master identity that, nevertheless, depends on these categories for its existence.

“Gender and diversity are linked in many ways. The construction of women as the “second sex” is linked to the same inability to cope with difference as is the development paradigm that leads to the displacement and extinction of diversity in the biological world.”<sup>14</sup>

Patriarchy has established associations between women and nature: women’s bodies, which gestate and create life, make them seem that they are in close proximity to nature leading them to be identified with the primitive and irrational. Instead men believe that they dominate reason, making them somehow superior to nature because of their ability to control and transform it.

“As “Nature”, women have been distanced from reason and counted as disorderly, emotional and subject to a physicality conceived as chaotic and animal. The same ideology has been used to justify the inferiority of black races, (conceived as more animal) the supposed inferiority of “primitive” and “uncivilised” cultures, and the supposed superiority of master to slave, boss to employee and mental to manual worker”<sup>15</sup>

This reasoning justified the processes of colonisation, and an unbridled exploitation of nature, natural resources and colonised populations in the name of progress, human development, civilisation. For this mechanistic and sexist world view, whatever escapes the control of reason must be tamed and subordinated to it.

Therefore the exploitation of nature and women is at the base of the current economic system. As a result of the industrial revolution domestic production lost its value; only that which led to the production of goods for sale in the newly formed marketplace generated economic benefit.

A new labour force emerged which relied on the exchange of work for money in a capitalist economy; ‘non-productive’ work such as caring for children, the sick and the elderly, along with the economy of subsistence (which provides solely for the needs of the local community) lost its importance. In our patriarchal societies it is unsurprising that the invisible workforce that carries out this labour of caring is predominantly female.

“Only when men begin seriously to share in caring for children, the old, the weak and for nature, when they recognize that this life-preserving subsistence work is more important than work for cash, will they be able to develop a caring, responsible, erotic relationship to their partners, be they men or women.”<sup>16</sup>

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14 Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* by Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies. (Zed books, London, 1993) p.164

15 Val Plumwood, *The Ecopolitics Debate and the Politics of Nature in Ecological Feminism*, ed. Karen Warren (Routledge, London 1994) p.75

16 Vandana Shiva (Ibid) p.295

- **Queer Theory**

Queer is an insult which began to be used as a term of positive affirmation and self-determination in the 1990s by gays, lesbians and trans activists in the United Kingdom and United States who were fed up with continued attacks against their freedoms by homophobic governments who were manipulating the fear of AIDS to discriminate against the homosexual community.

They were also unhappy with the commercialization of the gay scene driven by the owners of gay establishments that excluded those who did not conform to gay stereotypes and the general assimilationist politics of many gays

“Wilful participation in U.S. Imperialism is crucial to the larger goal of assimilation, as the holy trinity of marriage, military service and adoption has become the central preoccupation of a gay movement centred more on gaining straight privilege than challenging power”<sup>17</sup>.

Influenced by the punk movement, queers began to make fanzines, music and films which questioned the stereotypes of gays as macho, consumerist, hedonistic, sexist and apolitical, and proposed alternative realities where sexuality and gender are fluid. “Queerness as utopian formation is a formation built on an economy of desire and desiring”<sup>18</sup> Queerness is a becoming, queerness is not yet here...an ideality. In face of the pragmatic demands of integrationist LGTB politics, queerness must strive, in the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there.

Queer theory has revealed how notions of masculinity and femininity are constructed socially through learned behaviour. That is, there are no essential or biologically inscribed sexual roles in human nature. According to Judith Butler, the reinforcement of stereotypical patterns of behaviour through repetition causes those patterns to “congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being”<sup>19</sup> whilst in fact gender is an effect of the performative rather than an original cause. Once gender is understood as performative, the connections between gender and desire, biological sex, sexuality, etc. collapse. This knowledge has informed queer and transgender identities which go beyond these limitations.

In the history of capitalism, success has been associated with “progress, accumulation of capital, family, ethical conduct and hope.”<sup>20</sup> Within a radical and queer context Judith Halberstam responds that failure is associated with “nonconformity, anti-capitalist practices, non-reproductive lifestyles, negativity and criticism.”<sup>21</sup>

In this context transgender can be read as a failed attempt to cross gender barriers. Failure always accompanies queers who lead an existence that is not accepted by heteronormative society but Halberstam’s theories are a subversive re-interpretation of this concept and claim failure as a form of queer activism which, in the context of an ecological meltdown brought about by capitalism, becomes a radical oppositional practice. The success of queer theory in the Academy is symptomatic of how the capitalist system integrates voices which attack it in an attempt to defuse their threat. This has generated a tension between queer theory and the radical anti system activist practices which inspired it.

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17 Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *That’s Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (Soft Skull Press, New York, 2004) p.1

18 José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York University Press 2009) p.26

19 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, New York, 1990) p.33

20 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, Durham 2011) p.89

21 Ibid



- **Transfeminism**

The Spanish transfeminist movement was born in 2001 out of a radical feminist activism and is based on ideas similar to those of the queer movement. It questions the concept of “woman” as the sole subject of feminism and defends sexual freedom, transgender and transsexuality, sado-masochistic practices, non-monogamous relationships, etc. According to a transfeminist manifesto “We come from radical feminism, we are the dykes, the whores, the trans, the immigrants, the black women, the hetero-dissidents”<sup>22</sup>.

Transfeminism criticizes the heterosexist model of our society and has developed as an underground movement in Spain in recent years through texts by activists and writers such as Itziar Ziga and Diana J. Torres, many of them related to the post porn movement

- **Queer Ecology**

In the course of my research I discovered that there is a current of thought and research called “queer ecology” which responds to the need for the environmental movement to become aware of the importance of gender in its struggle, and for the queer movement to fight to end the exploitation of natural resources. Queer ecology like queer theory is skeptical of the dominant definition of “nature” and “the natural” and celebrates the irony of our position as less than human since this brings us into close relationship with both the non human “natural” world and other oppressed and “less than human” groups. “The task of a queer ecology is to probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences and constitutions of that world”<sup>23</sup>

For centuries, society and the church banned and demonised all non-reproductive sexual practices, branding sodomy and same sex relations as unnatural. The term “homosexual” was first used in print by Karl-Maria Kertbeny in 1869 in a plea for the repeal of repressive laws in Prussia. It quickly became used by the medical establishment to describe people who engaged in same sex activity as medical abnormalities. These oppressive attitudes were internalised in the construction of a homosexual identity which began to see itself as against nature.

Queers have often embraced transgression and artifice in a rebellion against heteronormative society, identifying with an image of ourselves as decadent and anti-natural beings. Historically the anonymity of the city allowed more freedom to sexual dissidents who migrated there and began to form communities. Both these factors have led LGTBQI people to identify themselves within an urban context and have robbed many of their connection with nature.

As Diana J. Torres, a post porn writer and performer who uses her body as a fundamental element in her practice, says: “Maybe there’s something broken in me, like all the people who grew up in an urban environment - we have a series of breakages in communication with nature. I don’t know how to communicate with nature.”<sup>24</sup>

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22 Quoted in Diana J. Torres, *Pornoterrorismo*. (Txalaparta, Bilbao 2011) p.173 - my translation

23 Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Indiana University Press, 2010) p.5

24 Diana J. Torres, *Eco BDSM and extreme practices with nature* (La Erreria, Valencia, 2017). This

Queer ecology challenges anti-social trends in queer theory, and through a study of same sex behaviour outside of the city, reclaims a genealogy which includes Greek and Roman pastoral traditions and same sex practices amongst indigenous people in countries colonised by the Europeans..

At a time when existence itself depends on the actions we take, it is necessary that we seek links with the nature that has been stolen from us. As we have become more and more dependent on technology, more and more like cyborgs perhaps it is time we faced our hybrid nature and accepted our “joint kinship with animals and machines, (our) permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.

The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point.”<sup>25</sup>

We are like the creatures in the grotesque decorations of the Roman emperor Nero’s Domus Aurea which fused the human form with animal and architectural elements. These miscegenations were manifestations of a pre-Darwinian awareness of our close relationship with technology and other animals.

Queering the discourses of the destructive patriarchy has the potential to carry out a similar ‘miscegenation’ that includes not only the inorganic (machine/hormonal supplements) but reintroduces organic forms in a post cyborgian “grotesquerie”. This fuses animal and human in a holistic world-view that recognises the “unnatural” sexual practices we share with other species (such as bonobos, ducks, worms or protozoans) and accepts that our feelings (feminised and dismissed by the patriarchy) have a similar importance to our rationality.

In fact, recent studies have shown that “Homosexual behaviour occurs in more than 450 different kinds of animals worldwide, and is found in every major geographic region, and every major animal group.”<sup>26</sup>

Homosexual behaviour, along with hermaphroditism, asexuality and transsexuality are widespread in the animal kingdom. This information has been withheld by a scientific establishment which has supported the homophobic values of hetero-patriarchy. “Scientists are professionally responsible for refuting claims that homosexuality is unnatural.

The dereliction of this responsibility has caused homosexual people to suffer persecution as a result of a false premise of “unnaturalness,” and to suffer low self-worth and personal dignity.

Suppressing the full story of gender and sexuality denies diverse people their right to feel at one with nature and relegates conservation to a niche movement- the politics of a privileged identity.”<sup>27</sup>

Queer ecology combines the study of these processes of invisibilisation with studies on the heterosexist construction of non urban “natural” space which exclude queers and people of colour.

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pamphlet was the transcript of her lecture at the *Eco-gender: Sex and Ecology* conference organised by La Erreria (House of Bent) at the Faculty of Fine Arts, UPV, Valencia 2/5/2012 (See page 110).

25 Donna Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs and Women The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, New York 1991) p.154

26 Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* ( St Martin’s Press, New York, 1999) p.12

27 Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow : Diversity, Gender and Sexuality in Nature and People* (University of California Press, 2004) p.128

- **Towards ecotransfeminism, an alternative hysteria of queers, savages and witches**

In the Renaissance the fields of the sciences and the humanities were not separated. The mechanistic view of the world had not completely overcome pagan beliefs in magic and in a spiritual force which resides in all beings. This vision was a relic of the pre-Christian era and would finally be eradicated by the united forces of State and Church through the processes of the Inquisition, the witch hunts, colonization and the new religion of “Science”.

All of these processes have produced a huge change in our relationship with nature, currently seen as a totally disenchanted and inert entity. Nature was no longer part of our being and became nothing more than a raw material. “In the traditions of ‘Western’ science and politics – the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture, the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.”<sup>28</sup>

In the seventeenth century when the feudal system was replaced by capitalism, the enclosure of communal fields (used for grazing by peasants for centuries) forced thousands of peasants to emigrate to the emerging cities, where their labour could be exploited. These enclosures went hand in hand with the demonization of women in witch hunts led by the Catholic Inquisition in Southern Europe and the Protestant reformers in the North. Many women who had depended on the communal fields to survive, had to beg when these were enclosed and were often denounced as witches by the new rural capitalists. “Most trials for witchcraft in England took place in Essex, where most of the land had been fenced in during the sixteenth century, while in those regions of the British Isles where land privatization had neither occurred nor was on the agenda we have no record of witch-hunting.”<sup>29</sup>

Another reason for this persecution was the struggle for control of the body. It is documented that women had natural contraceptive methods in the middle ages but with the birth of medicine as a science, women who practised these and other forms of medicine using herbs and holistic potions were branded as witches. It was estimated that 100,000 women died during the two centuries of the witch-hunts. In this way men gained control over reproduction and women became instruments for producing workers since the emerging capitalist system required more labour. Other forms of sexual behaviour were criminalized because they were not productive.

The heresy of homosexuality had already been used in the fourteenth century to persecute the Templars - 5000 were arrested by the King of France for homosexual practices<sup>30</sup>. The Inquisition condemned homosexuality as an abomination, sending practitioners to the stake. Since then, homosexual acts have been pathologized, discriminated against and branded as unnatural.

When European explorers arrived in the “New World” and discovered that the natives practised polygamy and in some tribes homosexual acts were condoned, a similar logic was used to subjugate the local population.

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28 Donna Haraway (Ibid) p.150

29 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch- Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, London, 2004) p.171

30 Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*. Fag Rag Books (Boston,1978) p.92

The existence of a transgender or two spirit caste who enjoyed a privileged position in many cultures all over Abya Yala (an ancient Panamanian term for the Americas) was, for these colonizers, a sign of the presence of the devil and justified their massacre. “The original peoples were subjugated by economic interests, but colonization was legitimized by a moralization of their sexuality. Medieval theologians had developed a doctrine of war that demanded just grounds for initiating it.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus began the process of colonization that would “modernize” the conquered countries, according to the model and morality of the Europeans. Despite the centuries that have passed since then, the Eurocentric concepts of progress and development are still currently used to measure the value of a country’s economy, despite the fact that the economic model they are based on is no longer sustainable.

The philosophy of neo-liberalism is based on ideas developed from the theory of evolution formulated by Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century. Social Darwinist politicians and economists took advantage of Darwin’s ideas about competition and the survival of the fittest to support their beliefs in the supremacy of the virile white man and the savage capitalism of the free market. These ideas also supported the belief that homosexuals, the sick, the criminals and the “inferior races” posed a threat to the purity of the human species, and influenced the ideas of the eugenicists which were developed to their maximum expression by the fascists in the Holocaust.

The anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin’s evolutionary theory was an attack against the ideas of social Darwinists. In his book **Mutual Support** (1902) Kropotkin argued that competitive forces are only of importance between species and that within a species they are counterproductive.

Cooperation forms the basis of society, and successful animals form societies to protect themselves and survive. Lynn Margulis developed this theory in the 1960s in the field of microbiology, formulating the theory of symbiogenesis according to which many of the great leaps of evolution happened through cell associations and cooperation between organisms. Margulis argues that the complexity of our bodies is due to associations between bacteria that were incorporated into our cells millions of years ago.

In the 1960s and 70s different collectives which had been excluded and persecuted began to question the sexist, racist and homophobic model which had been imposed in the West and its former colonies.

Despite the advances that have been made as a result of these movements, capitalism has taken advantage of their demands in order to create new markets and through the processes of green, pink or lilac washing, has made concessions to these “others” in order to counteract their threat. As a result of automation and the fact that most physical work has been exported to peripheral countries, a massive labour force is no longer required in the West, therefore non-reproductive sexual practices have been legalized.

For the wealthy gays and lesbian who have gained from its struggle, the sexual revolution, which was originally intended to liberate all people including heterosexuals, has been won despite the fact that in many countries in the world non heterosexual practices are still heavily persecuted.

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31 Alicia Puleo, *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible*. (Cátedra, Valencia, 2011) p.254 - my translation



“It’s entirely conceivable that we will one day live miserably in a thoroughly ravaged world in which lesbians and gay men can marry and serve openly in the army and that’s it”<sup>32</sup> That’s why only a politics which takes into account feminism, post colonialism and queer theory for their intersectional perspective on the oppressions responsible for destruction of life on our planet will lead to a true liberation for all.

Meanwhile outside the Western bubble a worldwide occupation of land is taking place as a result of illegal agreements between governments and multinational companies grabbing territories and resources from local tribes and farmers. In Nicaragua the recently formed Empresa Nicaragüense de Minas (Nicaraguan Mining Company) approves settlements within indigenous territories in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve where slash and burn activities turn the people’s land into “pastures for large- scale livestock raising”<sup>33</sup> and gold mining. In 2016 the governmental agency responsible for managing Tanzania’s national parks repossessed the entire 5,500 acres territory of the Maasai tribe burning their houses to the ground and leaving them without shelter, food or water. Whilst in Ethiopia the government follows a policy of leasing out indigenous people’s land to foreign investors and recently banned social media in order to stop protests organised by the Amhara and Oromo people to protect their lands. “These lands comprise an estimated 11 million hectares and are the source of livelihood for about 15 million indigenous peoples – pastoralists, small-scale farmers and hunter-gatherers – whose customary land rights are being constantly violated.”<sup>34</sup>

There exist clear connections between these processes of land grabbing and violence against women since the majority of peasant farming is carried out by women, often from indigenous populations who are even more vulnerable to human rights abuse. The murder of the indigenous environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras in 2016 is symptomatic of these policies. As Guadalupe Martínez Pérez, coordinator of the Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico pointed out “violence has become widespread, there is no separate data on the issue of indigenous women, but the three countries with the highest level of femicide are Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. Violence against women in indigenous communities occurs to a greater extent, but this information is invisible.”<sup>35</sup>

The lifestyle and patterns of consumption of the developed countries has been gained at the expense of a hidden slave trade as production has been shifted out to the developing countries where a new human “sub” class, a workforce condemned to live and die in totally unhealthy conditions has been created.

“The Indian ecologist Madhav Gadgil and historian Ramachandra Guha place two types of socio-ecological classes in opposition. “Ecosystem people” are those who depend on natural resources in their immediate vicinity, while “omnivores” are those who have the political and economic power to consume resources on national and global scales.

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32 Tony Kushner in Gosine, A. *Pink Greens: Ecoqueers organise in Toronto* (Alternatives Vol 27:3, 2001) p.35 (available online at: [www.alternativesjournal.ca/sustainable-living/pink-greens](http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/sustainable-living/pink-greens). - Accessed 23/10/17

33 María Luisa Acosta in *The Indigenous World 2018* (Report of the International Work Group For Indigenous Affairs, Copenhagen, 2018) p.97 - Other information in this paragraph is taken from this report which is available online at <https://www.iwgia.org/en/resources/yearbook> - Accessed 15/7/18

34 Ibid, p.13

35 <https://reporterosenmovimiento.com/2017/10/16/femicidios-invisibles-en-pueblos-indigenas-alianza-de-mujeres/> - My translation. Accessed 15/7/18

They claim that in the conflict over resources between the two, the dominance of the omnivores has been central, and their control of state incentives, subsidies, and technological interventions has passed on the costs, such as resource depletion, environmental degradation, and species loss, to the ecosystem people. While the main use value of natural resources is subsistence for the ecosystem people, they are exponentially commoditized by and for the omnivores.”<sup>36</sup>

The imposition of monocultures in these countries has taken control over food production away from the local people. These monocultures are environmentally unsustainable and are designed for short-term high yields but have disastrous long-term results at a local level.

In the neo-liberal society the precarious nature of the current economic situation unjustly structures the varied profiles of an over satisfied and under reflective society where we are all potentially non human. This mirrors the way we exploit other species, categorizing them as useful (food source) or useless.

An ecosystem is dependent for its existence on the diversity of species it holds but this diversity is seriously under threat from climate change and current agro-industrial practices. The era of scientific specialisation is the era of mass species extinction.

As members of a post-industrial society, we often forget that we are part of the huge living breathing ecosystem that is Earth, that we too are animals, and though perhaps in some respects more evolved than our cousins the amphibians, bacteria and monkeys, in others we have allowed ourselves to become less well adapted to our environment and in the process have become highly destructive of it.

Our ways of acting are a combination of what queer theory has proved to be learned behaviour (socialization) but we are also influenced by instincts which are important mechanisms for survival.

The self-destructive behaviours that are currently developing within our societies are a reaction to the distancing of humans from the biosphere.

The history of the West has been a long process of alienation from the nature of our bodies and their physicality.

Experiments show that when animals are exposed to the effects of over-population their stress levels increase. The lack of quiet spaces in the city where we can be alone or reflect without a constant flood of stimuli has led to extreme behaviours which would not survive outside the urban environment.

The pharmaceutical industry has taken advantage of these toxic and self-destructive behaviours and created a new way of controlling the population, with prescriptions and drugs designed to alter the normal reactions of the organism in this situation.

Depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses are reactions to a hostile environment and the feeling that we lack control over our lives.

According to the World Health Organization by 2020, depression will be the second most common disease in the world.

We must stop this process and change the image of homo-urbis so that we learn to appreciate ourselves as part of an ecosystem whose biodiversity is rapidly disappearing under concrete.

Catriona Mortimer Sandilands’ theory of melancholy elaborates a new way of doing a queer and ecologist activism.

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<sup>36</sup> Nabil Ahmed, *Negative Moment: Political Geology in the Twenty-First Century in South as a State of Mind*, Issue 8 Documenta 14 2017 published online at: [http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/889\\_negative\\_moment\\_political\\_geology\\_in\\_the\\_twenty\\_first\\_century](http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/889_negative_moment_political_geology_in_the_twenty_first_century) - Accessed 15/5/18

Her ideas are based on Freud's theories about melancholy as a state of unresolved grief where the lost loved one is incorporated within the ego of the melancholic. She has developed these ideas within the context of a mourning for the loss of biodiversity and discusses a queer sensibility that can see beauty in what is damaged and can appreciate nature, not in its pristine version, but as it currently exists in a wounded and vulnerable state.

Furthermore because of the AIDS crisis, the LGBTQI community has learned how to channel grief into political activism. I believe that most of us live in a constant state of denial over the losses we are experiencing as a result of the ecological crisis. As a queer artist I hope my work can help in the activation of a movement against the economic forces that are causing the deaths of other species and cultures, deaths that the dominant forces in our society would prefer we ignore.

“Our argument is that we should reorient our politics and take on something like a queer ecological perspective, a transgressive and historically relevant critique of dominant pairings of nature and environment with heteronormativity and homophobia, in order to outline possibilities responsive to these relations and, equally, explicitly critical of the continued organisation of dominant metrosexualities through an environmentally disastrous (and often ethically void) lifestyle consumerism...Queer ecology suggests, then, a new practice of ecological knowledges, spaces and politics that places central attention on challenging heteroecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual and gender positions”<sup>37</sup>

It is important to replace the hetero-centric and anthropocentric world-view with a biocentric one where we see ourselves as another species in the great variety of beings that inhabit our planet.

Our adaptability is, in part, what led to the success of our species and created our civilisations, our technology, our gender. In the past we had to adapt our lifestyle in order to survive in the wide variety of ecosystems we encountered as the human race expanded over the face of the Earth. Now that we inhabit the whole globe, it is time we adapted once more to our new circumstances in order to ensure those ecosystems' survival and our own.

The force to resist the attacks on rights won throughout history lies in the coalition of all groups that are against hetero-patriarchy, neo-liberalism and globalization. This difficult task has to begin with a personal reflection in which we question all the self destructive concepts we have inherited from centuries of oppression and alienation from our bodies.

“Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always labouring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”<sup>38</sup>

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37 Sandilands and Erikson, *Ibid* p.22

38 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p.11



## Methodology

Natural Hysteria is a practice based investigation, and as such the research has both informed and been informed by the practice, in a continuous dialogue which is still ongoing. Overlap is inevitable since the subject under analysis: my “live” artistic practice is a work in progress.

The style of presentation is auto-biographical reflecting this practice and the continuous blurring of boundaries between my art and my life. I have “sought to cultivate performance art as a grammar to articulate the possible dissolution of sensible boundaries between art and life”<sup>39</sup> and am similar to other performance artists who have “become polymaths, folding every practice of their life into the continuous endeavour of artistic becoming”<sup>40</sup>

I incorporate all aspects of my life in an ongoing investigation which includes my sexuality and gender, my politics, my love of nature, insect and birdwatching, the physicality of art-making, performance and music.

Furthermore, autobiography has also been an historically important tool for trans people, as a form of resistance which allows us to make our real lives visible, empowering our identities.

In order to fulfil the objectives of this PhD, I undertook a theoretical investigation which led me to question the role of the artist in contemporary society and to investigate performers, artists, philosophers and writers who share similar concerns. This helped contextualise my work historically in a tradition of gender dissidence within contemporary art.

Furthermore, I consulted source material on a wide range of subjects relating to the content of the work I produced, texts on biological diversity, queer theory, ecofeminist philosophy, feminist economy, local history, etc.

Quotes were used when I felt a particular resonance between the author and my own philosophy and are included in the text in what may seem a rather impressionistic manner to illustrate my ideas somewhat in the manner of a collage, adding another perspective but for me it was important that they form a seamless whole with my own writing.

As a performer I am more comfortable scanning the overall panorama and playing with a wide range of complex ideas, disseminating them and bringing them into a wider public domain, in contrast to the practice of the specialist whose field of action may be more limited but who works in a more meticulous manner to justify their arguments.

This material was analysed within the framework of the cultures which have influenced it, (broadly speaking my Anglo-Saxon ethnicity and my situation as a performer who has lived and worked for the past 14 years in the Mediterranean) and formed the general theoretical framework of my production: “A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion towards disciplinary coherence.”<sup>41</sup>

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39 Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: an oral history of performance art* (Palgrave, London, 2015) p.1

40 Ibid

41 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998) p.13

The practical side of the investigation involved experimenting with different formats in the expanded field of performance to find the most effective ways to reach different types of audiences in order to make them realise that our future, and the future of the planet, depends on the protection of cultural, sexual and biological diversity.

The specific methodology used in the production of each performance will be discussed at length in the relevant chapter. The main elements that outline my work are:

- **The choice of spaces**

Generally, since my work is highly site-specific, the first step in formulating a proposal is choosing the space where it is going to take place, taking into account its social context, symbolic charge and public. Production begins with research to find a suitable site and often involves a close analysis of the site with the specific details of each performance being modified accordingly.

I am highly interested in finding opportunities to interact with a wide range of publics and present my work outside established circuits like performance festivals or alternative queer spaces and to work in strange and unusual contexts. I prefer to work in outdoor spaces because my work is an investigation into the links that human beings have - or not - with their environment. Places such as parks, gardens, empty lots, represent the modern landscape, spaces where we come into contact with the organic nature of our existence.

- **Text, presence and mise-en-scene**

The majority of my performance work is based on the development of texts I write, inspired by a wide variety of sources: my reading, world events, documentaries, etc. These texts mutate according to circumstance to form the scripts which are the basis of workshops, installations, video pieces, songs, academic conferences and personal and public rituals. The performances are elaborated to incorporate live music and video as well as text.

In general the spoken text can take two different forms, one of which is didactic and the other which is more lyrical.

The lyrics are usually developed into songs through collaborations with musicians and producers and are included in the live presentations almost as vignettes, accompanied by the musicians or audio recordings. Their live interpretation adds to the poignancy of the lyrics.

The difference Derrida mentions between spoken and written language, the presence of the word in the flesh is what interests me. The text must live in each representation. Therefore I use, reuse and recycle texts in different occasions, tailoring them each time to the new context.

These site specific texts will become developed further in the moment, since each performance is for me an opportunity to take risks, experiment with the boundaries between what is expected of a “performance”.

Frequently I break the barrier between stage and audience, because the shared experience I am seeking in my performances knows no boundaries.

For this reason I often work in public spaces or in the context of cabaret where these boundaries are more diffuse. I have coined the term “antitainment” to describe the presentation of social critique within the context of an entertainment. It is a radical drag practice which presents critical and political discourses which overturn public expectations that associate drag with frivolity and comedy.

Making work based on an introverted practise like writing can cause problems when reading these texts in public. To overcome this problem I create performative alter egos using make up and clothes to distance myself from my public persona.

- **Representation**

Queer Theory suggests that gender is a representation and not an original state. Video plays a fundamental role in my work because it provides an opportunity to construct a multi-layered discourse and to represent myself while being physically present.

The video camera is used as a tool to generate footage from live and private performances which is then revised and edited together for use as material for projection in performances.

These performances are in turn filmed for use in future presentations.

The process of revision of archive material of performances has also been important in order to contextualise the work being carried out during the period of investigation.

- **Recycling**

The props, costumes and other elements used in my work are the detritus of consumer culture, customized readymades, digital media.

Everything is recycled, from costumes to footage to songs and texts and the symbolic value of these elements changes every time they are reused.

- **Collaboration and community building**

The Natural Hysteria cycle is based around a series of participatory rituals and performances, but my work also includes collaborative processes where I invite other artists, writers and performers to take part in exhibitions and events.

Through these encounters I hope to encourage others to relate to the concerns which motivate my work, and help in the creation of a politically committed artistic and social community.

Furthermore through my collaboration with other artists such as **Beth Stephens, Annie Sprinkle, Rafael Tormo i Cuenca, Paula Valero** and **Anna Maria Staiano** and activist groups such as **AnArco** and **ideadestroyingmuros**, I learned new skills and gained an appreciation of different ways of working, which can both enrich my own practice and be complementary to it.

- **Documentation**

Depending on the work and on the purpose of the documentation, I use a combination of different media, such as photography, video or audio recording, to capture the essence of an action and represent its most important elements.

## Structure of Contents

The main body of the work (chapters v-x) is based on text based performance work produced since 2009, year in which my trajectory changed course as a result of attending the Arte es Acción festival in Madrid and seeing the performances **Dirty Sexecology or How to Make Love to the Earth** by the Love Art Laboratory (Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens) and **Mapa Corpo 3** by Guillermo Gómez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. In particular **Dirty Sexecology** gave me the courage to explore my interest in ecology and begin what would become the Natural Hysteria cycle of works.

Natural Hysteria is a wayward investigation, based on an anti-establishment and precarious practice which is politically committed with its contemporary reality. Its main sites of action lie outside the institutions and galleries of the mainstream art world, in the street, in cabarets, theatres and nightclubs. It has developed in these peripheral spaces, in the interstices of an increasingly bureaucratic culture, and seeks to infiltrate the system with an emancipatory discourse which refuses to accept that institutions, which should represent and be open to the widest range of publics, are incapable of change. In order to understand how this practice developed, the first part of the investigation (chapters i-iv) begins with a review of my performance origins, following a roughly chronological order in which the main themes being explored in each period are discussed.

### Chapter I

In the first chapter **Gender Dissidence and Performance** the focus is on the construction of a performative alter ego, an exaggerated version of my personality constructed as a “means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity”<sup>42</sup>

My early work as Jackie Derrida -“Scotland’s only deconstructionist drag ex drag queen”- was a reaction to growing up in the homophobic climate of the UK. I had enjoyed the freedom of being able to dress androgynously at university in the gender bending era of the 80’s but outside that safe haven, the safest way to experiment with breaking the codes of gender representation was through performance. Influenced by a wide range of sexual and gender deviants, I set out to break the binary by creating a performance persona based on a garish combination of make-up and costume. This was genderfuck: “a form of extended guerilla theatre.”<sup>43</sup>

### Chapter II

These experiments took place in the context of the lively rave culture which was developing in the UK in the early 90’s. This culture created an underground community where “class, ethnicity, gender and other social distinctions were imagined to dissipate.”<sup>44</sup>

In **Communities and the Death of Gay** I discuss how my experiences in that culture created a community of queer artists and ravers and in the culminated in a series of events and projects I organised at the Orchardton artist’s community.

Finally it explores my reaction to living with the violence and control of a metropolis-London- which had recently been shocked by a wave of hate crimes against blacks, jews and gays.

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42 Jack Babuscio, *Camp and the Gay Sensibility in Gays and Film*” VVAA (Zoetrope, 1984) p.126

43 Humphreys, L, *Out of the Closets: Sociology of Homosexual Liberation* (Prentice Hall 1972) quoted in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality* edited by Ronald Jeffrey Ringer (New York University Press 1992)

44 St John, Graham: *Rave Culture and Religion*, editor: Graham St John (Routledge, 2004)



### Chapter III

The processes of globalisation attempt to homogenise cultural differences in a colonial project which sees neoliberal capitalism as the future of the species. As frontier controls are tightened that future seems reserved for the economic elite of the global North. Perhaps one of the most urgent questions we must address is how to progress beyond the idea of the nation, to see ourselves as a species, a human community united by evolution.

Through her concept of the *mestiza* the queer chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa describes how to resist homogenisation and in the chapter **Border Crossing** I explore her ideas and relate them to a series of works where I explored Spanish and latin gender dissidents and carried out various experiments in cultural fusion using the popular forms of punk and flamenco.

### Chapter IV

The year 2009 marks a shift in focus in my work influenced by growing unease about the assimilationist politics of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement and by witnessing the **Dirty Sexecology: 25 Ways to Make Love to the Earth** performance by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens which documented their development of a new kind of sexuality: ecosexuality. This led to a series of collaborations with the artists on their ecosexual weddings documented in the chapter **Ecosexuality**.

### Chapter V

Researching their work further I discovered the field of ecofeminism, which links the oppression of women to that of nature, and decided to organise a series of events to fuse queer politics with this philosophy. The creation of spaces that allow the possibility of talking about concepts with people of various disciplines is very important and has greatly enriched my investigation influencing in the direction it has taken. The chapter on **The Ecogender Project** documents this process.

### Chapter VI

In many traditional cultures around the world there existed a role for those who lived between the two poles of the gender binary. Their practices were suppressed by the processes of colonisation but the chapter **Geyserbird: The Shaman Travesti** explores these traditions and their reemergence in a diverse range of contemporary artistic practices, from the anthropological archive-as-performance of Giuseppe Campuzano and the Museo Travesti del Perú, to the technological rituals of Johannes Paul Raether, the World Wide Witch. This wayward tradition influenced the development of my latest alter ego, the transgender shaman Geyserbird.

### Chapter VII

In a contemporary context, where political and religious fundamentalism is on the increase, it is crucial that we build new queer rituals that reflect the biological, and cultural diversity of our planet. Rituals serve as a complement to our political activism and help to unite us and create community.

“I think that the world political scene seems more and more like magic and there needs to be an advance in white magic, exorcism ceremonies, etc as street theatre”<sup>45</sup>

My response to the situation has been to conform a cycle of performances which are documented in the chapter **Participatory Rituals: How to Heal...** based on audience participation. The performances mix the symbolism of rituals with the language of political agitation.

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<sup>45</sup> Allen Ginsberg, quoted in *Francis Wheen, The Soul of Indiscretion Tom Driberg: Poet, Philanderer, Legislator and Outlaw* (Chatto, London, 1990)

## Chapter VIII

The devastation wreaked on the queer community by the AIDS epidemic at the end of the Twentieth Century parallels the environmental destruction currently underway as a result of the free market policies of neo-liberal capitalism.

The chapter **Queer Remembrance: War Memorial** describes my response to this loss in a trilogy of works where I constructed a series of symbolic architectures to commemorate those deaths which are normally described as “collateral damage” in the universal war currently being waged against nature.

## Chapter IX

**(E)femme(ral) Sites of Resistance** documents the re-appropriation of public space by queers and focuses on the **P.I.N.Q. Park Project** (2013-) which was a development of the concept of witnessing from an ephemeral performative act into the realm of the physical.

Inspired by Catriona Mortimer Sandilands’ text on queer film maker Derek Jarman and his garden of remembrance the project consists of the dedication of a series of abandoned spaces as sites of remembrance.

## Chapter X

Performance art often blurs the line between life and art. Throughout the period of investigation I have continuously documented actions which lie within this nebulous field and carried out personal healing rituals.

The chapter **The Camera is my Witness: Journeys of Personal Hysteria** analyses some of these and takes the more intimate form of a journal documenting family trips and artistic residencies in Scotland and Italy, where I explored the natural world and what is left of it. Autobiography is an important tool for transgender people. Too often our stories have been distorted by the sensation seeking media so telling them ourselves is the best way of making our lives visible to a world which would rather those stories remain untold.

## Chapter XI

The final chapter **Radical Pedagogy** documents the diverse means through which I have disseminated my philosophy.

In the final years of this investigation I began to present its results in a new context: the Academy, exploring my own practise and presenting it in a pedagogical way using performance and video to illustrate my findings. This led to the development of a series of workshops and dramatised lectures where I recontextualised video documentation of my work, combining different elements to construct a new narrative. This method allowed me to generate performance “events” which depending on the context would be more or less participatory.

**PART ONE**  
**PRE-HYSTERIA**



# CHAPTER I

## GENDER DISSIDENCE AND PERFORMANCE

- *Early Years: becoming Jackie*
- *Pansexual Pride* (1996)
- *Jackie Derrida 24 hour show* (1996)
- *Peepshow* (2001)
- *You Have Been Watched* (2002)

The line between art and life is often blurred in my work and has been transgressed by many artists since the romantic period when the idea of a life lived as art began. Perhaps the first examples of this current were the dandies, men who placed particular importance on their dress, cultivating an aristocratic appearance (although many of them were not) and professing a refined taste. Baudelaire described the dandy as someone with a “burning desire to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of the proprieties”<sup>46</sup>

One of the most famous contemporary dandies of recent years was Quentin Crisp (born in 1908) self described “stately homo” who turned his life into an art form, producing several memoirs one of which **The Naked Civil Servant** (1968) was turned into a film shown on national television in the UK in 1975. His performances, wit and aphorisms have been compiled in various books and he gave audiences as public performances throughout the later part of his life.

“The artful life is one wherein acts of resistance and affirmation, negativity and positivity, are concretized through the various modalities of existence. Creating an artful life depends on the ability to attend with care to the daily practices of maintaining and sacralizing the body, mind, earth, and others while also crafting a space for their realization.”<sup>47</sup>

In the field of performance, a discipline whose rise coincided with the social uprisings of the 1960’s which gave birth to the feminist, LGTB and ecologist movements, the life/art division is often unclear, and throughout this investigation we will study the work of artists such as Jackie Curtis, Lukas Avendaño and Jack Smith whose work centres on their gender and sexuality, Beth Stephens, Annie Sprinkle and Diana Pornoterrorista whose work deals with their feminist politics, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Daniela Ortiz and Helmut Psotta whose work tackles racial issues in the context of their status as immigrants.

But even historically there have also been artists in other fields whose life influenced their art and vice versa and who used art as a vehicle to express their social and political concerns.

In a fine art context, an early precursor in this field is Claude Cahun, whose photographs, collages and writing expressed her radical stance on gender and sexuality.

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46 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (Translation Jonathon Mayne, Phaidon Press, 1965) p.27

47 Zachary Simpson, *Life as Art: Aesthetics and the Creation of Self* (Lexington Books, 2012) p.11

In a series of self portraits taken between 1927 and 1929 we see her dressed as a man, with her head shaved, breasts exposed, wearing aviator goggles or heavily made up “in training” as if making fun of the necessity for women to wear make up in society. These are radical images for their time and show that “the perpetual masquerade that Cahun made in her life and work is a performance that does not conceal the existence of an underlying truth.”<sup>48</sup>

These “alter egos” and her writing, compiled in, amongst other works, the surrealist masterpiece *Aveux non Avenus* (1930) allowed her an escape from the normative codes of society, which ruled even amongst the surrealist circles in which she moved, and expressed what she felt was her androgynous soul: “mix the clues. Male? Female? But that depends on the case. Neuter is the only gender I always apply to myself.”<sup>49</sup>



Fig.11 Claude Cahun & Marcel Moore, *Aveux non Avenus* (1930)

When I began to experiment in performance I was influenced by these feminist and queer forms of confession and talked about my transgender identity, practising what has been described as “talking performance”, a format which uses “language, (speech, writing, and reading) as a medium for expression, construction of identity, and social change. These performances seek to empower disenfranchised groups and to educate and incite dispassionate audiences...In the late 1960s talking performances were energized and politicized by popular culture genres such as television, talk shows and newscasts, and by the “witnessing” and consciousness raising” strategies of civil rights organizers and women’s groups.”<sup>50</sup>

In this chapter I will discuss early works in which I explored these boundaries, using autobiography and fiction to create performances and texts, but before I will present a brief biography in order to more fully situate the roots of my discourse.

As an effeminate queer kid growing up in rural Scotland in the 1970’s I was an easy target for homophobic attacks. Scotland lagged noticeably behind other countries on the question of gay rights and indeed it was the last country in Europe to remove the death penalty for same sex sexual intercourse in 1889.

48 Juan Vicente Aliaga, *Claude Cahun* (IVAM exhibition catalogue, Valencia, 2001) p.44

49 (ibid) Claude Cahun quoted from *Aveux non Avenus* p.47

50 Angelika Festa in *Performance artists talking in the eighties*, compiled by Linda M. Montano (University of California Press, 2000) p.4/5

Sex between consenting adults over 21 was decriminalised in 1980, 13 years after England and Wales.

As a child I played with my sister whenever possible but spent a lot of time on my own, fantasising about escaping to England, in my mind an exotic country, home to the effete aristocrats, glam rock stars and camp or transvestite comedians on TV who were practically the only media representations of homosexuals available to me as a child.<sup>51</sup>

I was too young to have witnessed David Bowie's coming out as gay in 1972 (even if I'd understood what the word meant) and in the heteronormative atmosphere of the U.K. this was soon forgotten when punk came along and the glam period came to an end. In the early 1980's, things began to change as male pop stars started to wear make-up and gender bending but gay and bisexual pop stars still avoided talking about their sexuality for fear of damaging their career, with the exception of Marc Almond who dared to out himself as a polysexual.<sup>52</sup> This term conjured up limitless boundaries of desire which resonated with my adolescent feelings of difference.

However these gender benders were far from my day to day reality of being gay bashed and, like many queer adolescents, I felt totally alienated from my environment. In order to survive I constructed a version of reality where I was superior to my oppressors. If I was to be rejected by society I would embrace my eccentricity, my individuality, my outsider status.

This sense of isolation contributed to a particularly queer form of individuality: I identified with the thieves, traitors and queens in **The Thief's Journal** and **Our Lady of the Flowers**, Jean Genet's rebel masterpieces. These novels and the songs of Marc Almond changed my life and I began to write, inventing a lurid world of sexual fantasy.

Liberation from the homophobes, came at age 18 when, like so many in my generation (we would be amongst the last to receive a full further education grant), I left home to study Science at Leeds University in the industrial north of England. I was the only student in my year to go to an English university. Thus began my life as an émigré.

It's important to explain the socio-political context of the time. The city of Leeds suffered high unemployment and I arrived in the middle of the year long miner's strike which was widening the North/South divide in England. The highly political gay society at the university raised funds to support the striking miners, but their defeat on 3<sup>rd</sup> march 1985 signalled the victory of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal policies and the beginning of the end of the power of the trade unions in Britain.

In the left wing atmosphere of the University, I could finally dress as I wanted and express my sexuality. But venturing into the city I discovered a gay scene which had become highly commercial and conformist and had little place for my androgynous and quirky aesthetic sense. "The liberation movement at that time was very anti transvestite... people were handing out flyers at the Gay Pride march saying 'get these drag queens off our march!'"<sup>53</sup>

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51 This chapter reflects both my experiences and the period it describes, i.e. before the internet connected users worldwide and made it possible to find out about other cultures and generated an archive allowing us to learn about the past. At that time it was practically impossible to find out about underground artists from continental Europe, Latin America or elsewhere.

52 In an interview with Chris Bohn, *New Musical Express*, (IPC London, Sept 1981)

53 Jayne County, *Man enough to be a Woman* (Serpent's Tail, London, 1988) p.88



The Gay Liberation Front had been founded in the UK in 1970 as a wide ranging alliance of lesbians, gay men and drag queens. Indeed when Women's Liberationists were arrested for protesting against The Miss World Beauty Pageant held in the Royal Albert Hall in November 1970, radical drag activists turned up at their trial to support them in a street action which became known as the Miss Trial protest, "the first real manifestation of drag as a political tool"<sup>54</sup>.



**Fig. 1.2 Miss Trial Protest (1971)**

However by 1974 the GLF would splinter as lesbians, tired of the lip service being paid to feminism at the group's meetings by men who dominated proceedings decided to organise separately. "in the late 1970s and early 1980s... a movement had emerged which relied heavily on the idea that women constituted a unique identity, that we had special moral attributes, and that being or becoming a 'woman-identified-woman' was the best and most effective way to express feminist politics."<sup>55</sup>

This separatist feminist view was still dominant when I was studying, so when I joined the university gay society its meetings were almost entirely men-only. Rather like these *women identified women* I became a *man identified man* and this gender bias coloured my experience and artistic influences for many years to come. I didn't have any lesbian friends and as a science student, I had little opportunity to engage with feminist politics.

In my second year at University I moved into a household with 5 other gay men including the president, treasurer and secretary of the University's gay society.

Apart from the politics we also shared a camp sense of humour and began buying women's clothes at jumble sales and dressing up in drag. These experiments seemed like a natural extension of the androgynous look I was exploring at the time and were generally carried out in a safe domestic context. However, sometimes, we would wander out into the street or wear dresses at the frequent house parties which were an important part of the social scene.

<sup>54</sup> Kris Kirk and Ed Heath, *Men in Frocks* (Gay Men's Press 1984, London) p.96

<sup>55</sup> Kathy Rudy, *Radical Feminism, Lesbian Separatism And Queer Theory* (*Feminist Studies* Vol. 27, No. 1, 2001) available online at [www.lespantheresroses.org/auto-critique/radicalfeminism-lesbianseparatism-and-queertheory.html](http://www.lespantheresroses.org/auto-critique/radicalfeminism-lesbianseparatism-and-queertheory.html) accessed 20/11/17

Around about this time John Waters movies were released on video and we constantly watched the outrageous drag performance of Divine in such camp classics as **Pink Flamingos** (1972) and **Desperate Living** (1977).

These films, with their fast witty dialogue and trashy aesthetics were an attack on the idea of good taste and reflected an anti-establishment politics which had prefigured punk. In **Female Trouble** (1974) Divine portrayed the ultimate society outsider, an overweight transvestite assassin who goes to the electric chair after a killing spree during a nightclub act in which she posed the question “Who wants to be famous? Who wants to die for art?”.

Divine’s onscreen performance provided a rare glimpse of extreme gender euphoria and drag anarchy and were a welcome relief from the depressing homophobic climate of Thatcher’s Britain at the height of the AIDS crisis. With their trashy, cheap camp aesthetics, Water’s films would be a major influence in later years when I began making short films as they made me realise you could make films with very little resources, what was important were the ideas, the dialogue and the strength of the images onscreen.

My first live experience of subversive drag was in 1987 when **Bloodlips**, a troupe of radical drag performers, came to Leeds with their musical show **Teenage Trash**. The group had formed in the 1970’s in London at a time when gay communes had been set up in the city after the UK law banning homosexuality was repealed in 1967. These utopic spaces were the breeding ground for a variety of politically aware gay theatre groups like Bloodlips whose groundbreaking shows included **Just Myself** (1977) and **Lust in Space** (1980).



**Fig. 1.3 Bloodlips**

These groups used performance “not simply as a formal commitment, but as the ontological ground for a revolutionised way of living.”<sup>56</sup>

Bloodlips combination of political satire with drag, surreal costume and exaggerated make up, was a powerfully liberating experience at a time when most drag acts on the commercial gay scene were stereotypical parodies of women.

As one of the members, Babs Yarrankle said “We never make any attempt to convince the audience that we’re women... We never pad ourselves and we very rarely wear wigs and if we do they’re extremely exaggerated.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: an oral history of performance art* (Palgrave, London, 2015) p.3

<sup>54</sup> Kris Kirk and Ed Heath (Ibid p.102)



## Early Years: becoming Jackie

In 1990 I returned to the UK determined to concentrate on my writing career, after a few years in Madrid teaching English and enjoying the post movida nightlife of the city. I moved to the once industrial city of Glasgow and discovered a thriving scene of socialist poets and writers reading their work in pubs, community centres and libraries. At this time it was impossible to get queer prose published in the UK as publishers were afraid of censorship as a result of the recently passed local government bill Section 28 which outlawed the “promotion of homosexuality” in schools.

So, despite the fact that I was incredibly shy and the scene, like the city itself, was pretty macho, I decided that performing live was probably the only way to get my writing across to the public.

The agitprop style, that was popular at the time, didn't interest me but fortunately I met a group of like minded poets and musicians who were influenced by dada and jazz music. We formed **Paragraph 7** and began to organise alternative cabaret evenings. The group experimented with music, poetry and performance in a loose format which gave me the opportunity to try out different ideas, exploring the possibilities of sound, text and costume.

Thus began my days as a performer. “Just as shame is both productive and corrosive of queer identity, the switching point between stage fright and stage presence, between being a wall flower and being a diva, so too is it simultaneously productive and corrosive of queer revaluations of dignity and worth.”<sup>58</sup>



**Fig.1.4 Early Alter egos (1) Boadicea 2025 (2) Jackie Derrida (1995)**

In order to overcome my natural shyness I constructed an onstage alter ego through the use of make-up and costume, billing myself as **Jackie Derrida**, Scotland's first deconstructionist drag ex drag queen. These were really my first public experiments with drag. The name, Jackie Derrida, seemed highly appropriate as I felt I was playing with the signs of femininity, deconstructing gender. I was not interested in attempting to look like a woman, I wanted to look strange, otherworldly, androgynous.

<sup>58</sup> Douglas Crimp, Mario Montez, *For Shame in Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, VVAA p.65

My make-up was grotesque and I used lampshades, huge foam pads or balloons to pad my chest so that there could be no mistaking the prosthetic nature of my breasts. I made my own costumes from recycled materials found on the street and soon developed a method for making customised dresses from sticky backed plastic by sandwiching images I wanted to wear between two sheets and wrapping them around my body. This was my first look, a surreal mixture which was a tribute to my drag idols and reflected my interest in dada and literary theory.

As time went on I became more confident. The ritual of putting on make-up and dressing in costume in preparation for performances allowed me to play with gender whilst at the same time entering a liminal space from which my public persona would emerge. The feeling of release I experienced after going through this process of transformation was akin to the feeling of power described by Mario Montez at the beginning of the film **Screen Test Number 2** (Warhol, 1965) “I feel like I’m in another world, a fantasy... like a kingdom meant to be ruled by me, like I could give orders and suggest ideas.”<sup>59</sup>

As queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz explains: “Montez’s opening gambit is a dreamy insistence on feeling otherwise, a certain belonging to a world where he is not subordinated because of his position in the social.”<sup>60</sup>

My performances drew the attention of Toni Davidson, editor of **And Thus I Will Freely Sing** (1989), the first anthology of gay writing in Scotland, who invited me to perform at **Jessies with Attitude** an event he organised as part of the first Glasgay! Festival at the Ramshorne Theatre in Glasgow (3/11/1993).

For my first performance in a theatre, I devised a programme which was, in retrospect, my first variety show, and included one of my surreal fashion shows, a format I used frequently to combine music and costume with satirical social commentary. Whilst I read a previously prepared script, two models would alternate on the catwalk wearing my combinations of industrial waste, toys and second-hand clothes. That evening I also read the short story **Exodus**, a homophile version of the biblical text, and staged a fake interview with my drag persona with the help of fellow queer writer Gordie Agar.

It was a great experience, but unfortunately the gay scene in Glasgow at the time was not really ready for this kind of spectacle. And although gender and sexuality formed an important part of my work at this time, I hated the idea of performing on the commercial gay scene: I wanted to reach a wider audience. So we jessies<sup>61</sup> performed in the back rooms of pubs with writers and social workers, at drug rehabilitation centres, in discos and with the art school crowd.

In fact I developed the multi-media aspects of my performance at parties organised by the dj and design collective **Flow** in the Glasgow School of Art, setting up video booths in the chill-out areas and carrying out interviews with members of the public in miniature sets or face-boxes which I had decorated.

These sets were constructed using cardboard boxes from which the top and two sides had been cut to produce an open fronted structure. The remaining two sides, were decorated with wallpaper and paper furniture like a cartoon version of a dolls house, and had face-sized holes cut in them, so that I could interview a member of the public through the hole.

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59 José Esteban Muñoz, *Wise Latinas*, published posthumously in (Criticism Vol. 56, No. 2, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2014) p.253

60 Ibid

61 Jessie (definition) Scottish slang for an effeminate, weak, or cowardly boy or man.

These were my first participatory actions, and the boxes were framed by a video camera connected to a television screen outside the booth so that the interview was projected live to passing members of the public.

My close relationship with video began at this time, as the camera somehow became a witness to my experiments with gender. Very few people had their own personal video camera so I would borrow one when I wanted to film. Editing was also a complicated process which, in the days before the personal computer, required specialist equipment. Fortunately there was a film-maker's cooperative in Glasgow which offered affordable daily rates to hire editing suites.

### *Pansexual Pride*

One of the first videos I produced there, was **Pansexual Pride** (12 min, 1996) which was filmed during the Lesbian and Gay Pride march in Glasgow. This was the second Pride march in Scotland and the first in the city.

It was a curious mixture of marching bands, drummers, activists with banners, and trade unionists but there was nobody else in drag except for us. I was dressed as Jackie Derrida with psychedelic make-up and an outrageous outfit and accompanied by fellow jessies Toni Davidson and Cal King dressed as a drag king.

For my first street action I had prepared a pansexual pride banner to represent a queer transgender presence in an otherwise lesbian and gay event. My exuberant performance caused problems at one point when I ran towards the crowd lining Hope Street and one of the organisers pointed out to me that we were supposed to march "in" the street, and not harass the bystanders. The march ended on Glasgow Green, a huge park in the centre of the city where a concert was held and homosexual legend Quentin Crisp gave a speech.

The **Pansexual Pride** video documents the march and includes an action carried out in a secluded corner of the park. This was my first ritualistic performance and was inspired by the rumour that the only thing Divine refused to do for director John Waters was to burn her hair.



Fig. 1.5 *Pansexual Pride* (1996)



I had previously shaved my hair and saved the cut hair for the occasion, setting it on fire in front of an “effigy of the goddess” (actually the massive hat I had constructed for the occasion).

During the burning ritual I invoked the power of an exaggeratedly feminine spirit in a speech which included this decidedly queer ecosexy statement: “We’ll embrace the trees and we’ll make love to the soil, we’ll get down on the ground and do an Elvis impersonation<sup>62</sup> because we love you, ground. It’s pansexual...Who is Pan? He’s just an old drag queen.”

### **Jackie Derrida 24 Hour Show**

The video was projected as part of the **Jackie Derrida 24 Hour Show** at the Transmission Gallery in Glasgow (July 1996). During the ten day run of the exhibition I squatted the gallery, filming myself and projecting previous recordings on a screen behind the desk that was my centre of operations.

As a living installation, I was available to answer questions posed to me by the public, and in the meantime carried out my normal day to day activities -eating, making cups of tea, going to the toilet- always accompanied by the camera, which filmed everything.



**Fig. 1.6 Jackie Derrida (1996)**

I spent most of the time improvising song and dance routines to instrumental music and talking about my gender politics. I felt it was important to make clear that the decisions I had made about how I represented myself through clothes and make-up were political.

In a patriarchal society a man who uses feminine accessories and make up is in some ways giving up his masculine privilege and is therefore, in the eyes of that society, somewhat ridiculous.

<sup>62</sup> At this point in the video I am on the ground carrying out a series of exaggerated pelvic thrusts.

That's why female impersonators, drag queens, or transgender performers are generally limited to working with the language of comedy but I wanted to subvert that language to discuss more serious issues like gender inequality and LGTB rights.

The exhibition with its cheap, trashy aesthetics was also a critique of consumerism and the contemporary obsession with glamour, luxury and fame. My own 24 hour improvisation at the gallery became a video which was on display alongside the remains of the live installation for a week after the event. In **24 Hours...** I played the role of director and actor although the performance of gender on display was not a representation since the obsessions I discussed were indeed, to a large extent, my own.

The influence of Andy Warhol's films and the idea of the superstar was clear in my assertion that I would not leave the gallery until I got a Hollywood contract which in the logic of the exhibition (and my own exhibitionism) would represent society's endorsement of the transgender queer. Warhol had been, if not the first (as I was later to discover) certainly the most famous artist to incorporate drag queens as stars in his work and when his films were shown on British TV for the first time in the 1980's they had caused a major impression on me.

The success of Warhol's films had owed a lot to the rapid changes going on in US society in the 60's as the moral censorship of the 1950's broke down. "the artist-impresario opened the doors of an archaic manufacturing building to a gallery of marginal figures- drifters, drug users, transvestites, gays and lesbians... These fringe subjectivities, the exotic detritus of ordinary life were the 'superstars' of the Factory..."<sup>63</sup>

The series of underground films he made with director Paul Morrissey included **Trash** (1970) which starred Holly Woodlawn, a Puerto Rican street queen who, like many of the Factory superstars, lived in extremely precarious circumstances. The power of Woodlawn's performance in this film lies in the strength of conviction she gave to the character portrayed onscreen. We are watching Holly construct her own myth. For a Puerto Rican drag queen the validation given by the camera to her marginalised life encouraged the development of her own transgender subjectivity.

I had met Holly briefly in 1994 in Los Angeles at a Candy Darling look-a-like competition in City Lights bookstore where, after I had explained my problems with my residency visa, she had signed my green card "Never go back". Her electric Latina presence in the small bookstore was a testimony to a life of survival, a life she would candidly describe in her autobiography **A Low Life In High Heels** (1991).

Some feel Warhol exploited the superstars who appeared in his films but as Holly said "Andy didn't owe me anything. It was a trade-off. He gave many of us fame and we gave him something to talk about."<sup>64</sup>

The exposure he gave to these gender dissidents was truly shocking at a time when representations of this kind were practically non-existent. "There is no doubt that Warhol took a genuine interest in the subjectivity of his haphazard stars...with whom he carried out a process of collective experimentation..."<sup>65</sup>

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63 Brian Holmes *Unleashing the collective phantoms: Essays in reverse imagineering* (Autonomedia, New York 2008) p.162-3

64 Holly Woodlawn, *A Low Life in High Heels* (St Martins Press, 1991) p.24

65 Brian Holmes (Ibid p.42)



Another major influence was the renegade feminist Camille Paglia, author of **Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson** (1990) who gained notoriety in the UK and the US for her outspoken views in support of prostitution and pornography, and in fact defined herself as a drag queen feminist. Indeed, while I was travelling in the USA I wrote the text of an imaginary interview between Camille and my drag alter ego Jackie Derrida, which I staged with the help of a friend (Berkley, 12/10/1994). It was published in my first queerzine, a compilation of my texts called *Girlie Mag* (1994).

Paglia's work connected with my own drag queen practice, with its fast and furious put-downs and controversial statements, both forms of expression which I believe develop as a defence mechanism in response to growing up effeminate and queer in homophobic societies. Unfortunately these defence mechanisms often make us view the world in simplistic binomial terms, us against the enemy, and in the process we risk losing touch with our feelings and becoming insensitive to the feelings of others.

### **Peepshow**

This project, which was a hybrid between live performance and video, took place while I was collaborating with the Erotic Awards, a charity event organised by Tuppy Owens, long term activist for sexual freedom in London. The previous year, I was the first transgender artist to strip at the awards and I decided to experiment with the cliches of feminine striptease, using feather fans, gloves and lingerie to carry out the performance. For the following awards I decided to carry out a multi-media performance to explore voyeurism and expose the fragility of a feminized transgender body. For male to female transexuals and transgender subjects the desire they provoke in some males often leads to violent reactions, proving that the veneer of civilisation is skin deep, and that the impulse to destroy the feminine part which exists in all of us, lurks just below the surface.

I began filming various sequences for projection during the live performance. These would illustrate the story of a body which displays itself publicly as an object of desire and show what can happen when that body does not conform to the sex perceived by the viewer.

Two sequences in the video are important in this narrative: one of them begins on a close up of me being smacked across the face until I cry, at which point the camera pans out to a mid shot in which I am topless. The filming of this sequence coincided with a period when I was exploring the gay sadomasochistic scene in London. I had already had a few encounters with dominant men and experienced both humiliation and torture, and I wanted to film this scene with one of them. As none were available for filming, my bisexual lover, Anna Maria Staiano, whose experience on the lesbian S/M scene was quite broad, offered to stand in since the shot did not require the body of my torturer to be seen. At first I was reluctant to accept this change in gender roles, labouring under the gender-biased assumption that it would require the physical force of a man to dominate me. As I was to discover during the filming this proved to be completely wrong since it is mainly in the realm of the psychological that the submissive and the dominant roles are exercised.

The other scene was a parody of glamour and beauty and featured footage of my legs filmed and digitally multiplied on a colourfully patterned background, in a homage to the over the top musical sequences in the films of Busby Berkley and the camp classic **Pink Narcissus** (James Bidgood, 1971).

The shot was filmed from above with the body cut off at the waist. The sheer gold tights I was wearing, made my otherwise naked legs appear strangely doll-like and incredibly long.

The video was also shown as part of a performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (18/11/2001) and was projected on three screens while I performed an original soundtrack live with the musicians Andy Green and Johnny Borden.

The performance was filmed and the original silent film was re-edited including this footage and the live soundtrack.

The resulting film **Peepshow** (2001) was one of the first examples of a complex working process I would return to frequently over the years.



Fig. 1.7 *Peepshow* (2001)

In this case the result was a *mise en abyme* when images of the live performance in front of the kaleidoscopic projection of my legs was edited together with the original footage of the legs, creating a similar effect to that produced by the French artist Pierre Molinier's photograph **Grande Mêlée** (1968). For me the result causes confusion in the viewer and represents a crisis of representation which resonates with queer theory in its contention that gender is the copy of an original that does not exist. "Project your dreams, project your dreams and I'll be yours..."

### *You Have Been Watched*

This project was based on the use of a system of surveillance of 25 security cameras to film a one day location shoot on the Samuda council estate in east London. The resulting footage gave rise to a film trilogy<sup>66</sup>. Interrupting the normal workings of the security camera system enabled me to subvert its nature as an agent of control over anti-social behaviour on the estate.

I saw the cameras as a possible vindication of a transgender presence in public space. Often, transgender individuals attempt to pass unperceived in public space and only emerge from the safety of their domestic environment in controlled spaces such as nightclubs and private parties.

I wanted to give free rein to the full spectrum of gender possibility without the usual fears of having to pass<sup>67</sup>. I was interested in how the system could be used to PROTECT transgender people giving them the freedom to transgress the gender boundaries of public space. Effectively then, the security cameras brought to light examples of behaviour that exceeded gender norms and made apparent the performativity of gender.

<sup>66</sup> Daytime footage: *You Have been Watched* (2004, 10 min), footage from lifts: *Freaky Revelations* (2004, 2 min), night-time footage: *Being Watched* (2004, 8 min) which can be seen online at <https://vimeo.com/42758836>

<sup>67</sup> Passing refers to a person's ability to be regarded at a glance as a cisgender man (one whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth) or a cisgender woman.

In an article written about the project, Doran George analysed this further: “In this sense each emergence of gender is an opportunity to articulate its terms differently. For the transgender body this becomes particularly important because the more license that is created to move between genders, the more the bi-polar system opens up into something more fluid, creating more space for the transgender body to exist safely. Bell contends that CCTV is proliferating the self-scrutinizing paranoia of the panopticon, and this psychological architecture is already at work in the lives of transgender folk by virtue of the bi-polar gender system. The intention of his work is to turn this transgender psychology of paranoia on its head.”<sup>68</sup>

In the months leading up to the shoot I visited the estate frequently, contacting community groups to encourage them to take part. Together we worked out a rough script for the shoot based on the idea that the cameras formed part of a public access television station broadcasting on the estate. I was interested in reflecting how, in a society that is obsessed with categorising the body into male and female, the transgender body is subjected to intense scrutiny.

The CCTV network was a metaphor for the heightened self awareness that transgender people develop as a mechanism of self protection in societies where breaking the binary gender codes can lead to physical and verbal abuse and indeed, in extreme cases, to murder. I expressed this vulnerability at one point in the shoot by setting up a chase sequence during which my character, wearing a gold lamé dress and blond wig, falls over. “The most moving images are ones I continually seem to return to in my work: transvestites being chased, fleeing from a danger either imaginary or real, and the idea of falling over, which has always fascinated me. I think it’s the idea of a man in high heels and a dress teetering on the verge of gender, abdicating his masculine power and the consequent vulnerability that comes. Will he pass as female? Will he arouse desire or be the object of ridicule? When the transvestite falls over, this vulnerability is on display.”<sup>69</sup>

As part of the event, I had invited some performer friends from the underground queer scene to come and take part in **Freaky Revelations**, a parody of talk shows like Ricki Lake and Oprah Winfrey that were popular at the time. On these television programmes, transexual and transgender people were appearing for the first time ever on mainstream tv, but with their emphasis on drama and conflict, these shows were often more like freak shows than serious discussions of the issues involved. The guests lives were reduced to an onscreen tagline and the public audience would often give vent to their homo and transphobic feelings. I wanted the CCTV cameras to record a transgender presence in public space on the estate.



Fig. 1.8 *You Have Been Watched* (2001)

<sup>68</sup> Doran George, *You Have Been Watched*” *Dances between scrutiny and transubstantiation in the viewing of the transgendered body on closed circuit television* originally published in (Extensions; Online Journal of Embodied Technology, UCLA,2005) - Accessed 8/11/17.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid



This was the only sequence of the day which would also be recorded with a video camera because it was important that the guests should be able to express themselves verbally.

Nevertheless in a parody of the talk show format the guests on Freaky Revelations would each carry a sign-board with a short self description on it, so that they could choose the way in which they were presented to the security cameras.

Unfortunately when the performers arrived on the estate, some of the residents took great exception to what they felt was a homosexual invasion of their space and reacted with verbal abuse.

Therefore many of the guests felt unsafe in public so we filmed the talk show sequence behind closed doors in the community centre. Fortunately this space could be filmed from outside by one of the CCTV cameras. Ironically this black and white footage which showed the talk show guests behind metal security grilles probably reflected the day to day reality of many transgender lives more than the original plan would have.

**You Have Been Watched** was an interesting example of what has sometimes been described as the “parachute effect” where artists land in unknown territory and make work which does not connect with the local community because they don’t have the time, skills or opportunity to engage fully with the culture of that community. The four month preparation period had certainly not prepared me for the virulent nature of the homophobic reactions suscitated by the performers. I had created an extremely uncomfortable situation through a lack of understanding of the social context.

This was further exacerbated by cultural differences as several of the performers were foreign and their experience of the UK was limited to the metropolitan, liberal, atmosphere of central London. When accused of being gay by the children on the estate they had assented quite defiantly.

Most British queers, aware of the fact that a large sector of British society is homo/trans-phobic, would probably have been more guarded in their response to the question.

Of course it was my fault as I should have warned the guests that they were “not in Kansas anymore” and to be aware of the possible response they would receive to such an open display of queerness.

Since then I have been much more careful when carrying out performances in public spaces and generally expose myself alone to the possibility of homo/trans-phobic attacks. Fortunately, in the more liberal atmosphere here, in Spain I have never encountered such problems.

## CHAPTER II

### COMMUNITIES AND THE DEATH OF GAY

- *Akaraten: The Dreaming* (1998)
- *Dirk & Sawney's Theme Park* (1998)
- *OTV* (1998)
- *us-in-the-future* (1998)
- *My Death Experience* (1999-2001)

The atmosphere of the 1990s rave scene in Glasgow was a highly diverse, multi media melting pot of live art, poetry and music. The anarchic nature of the rave scene was a relatively safe space for queer artists to experiment and meet, forging the bonds of what was a small but closely knit community, one of many that were springing up around the country in similar circumstances.

Before internet made communication easier we were often unaware of the existence of these other artists and groups. In the USA, the mix of punk DIY ethics and queer politics had created the queerzine and information travelled quickly thanks to the existence of a well established distribution network through alternative bookshops in the major cities which had given rise to the transgender and queer scenes I had experienced in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles in 1993.

Amongst the many amazing performers on this circuit was the black drag queen Joan Jett Blakk who had run for mayor in Chicago in 1992: "Blakk used satire to call for an involved, participatory citizenship that at key moments provocatively pushed against humor's limits."<sup>70</sup>

This scene did not exist in the UK and at the time the media was still relatively trans and homophobic, indeed in 1998 tabloid newspaper The Sun published an exposé on the "Gay Mafia" they claimed were running the country.



Fig. 2.1 The Sun newspaper (1998) (2) Joan Jett Blakk campaign poster (1999)

<sup>70</sup> Solveig Nelson, *The life and legacy of Thing* (Artforum spring 2018)



There was very little in the way of alternative press so it wasn't until years later that these pockets of queer resistance could enter into contact and some kind of a network of festivals, events and artists began to appear.

Many saw the rave as a form of modern ritual, a “community of commensals”<sup>71</sup>, who instead of sacrificing an animal, shared the act of ingesting entheogens (psychoactive substances) and dancing to repetitive rhythms in order to reach an enhanced and ecstatic state. The rave was a space of liberation, where barriers between people broke down and concepts of personal space expanded to include the other, something which was quite revolutionary in British society since physical contact -particularly between males- was strictly controlled and rare outside of fights or sexual encounters. In the rave, people related to each other through dance and conversation. “Extolled as a source of growth, union, salvation or the sacred, raving is thus exalted as a site of becoming...With rave, class, ethnicity, gender and other social distinctions were imagined to dissipate.”<sup>72</sup>

This musical subculture was similar in many ways to the countercultural movement of the 1960s where people took psychedelic drugs and began to explore alternative forms of spirituality and ways of living. At the time studies were carried out which showed that small doses of psychoactive substances could help in problem solving as these drugs stimulate a form of lateral thinking which is conducive to creativity. In the early 1980s in the UK there had been a 1960s revival which had put me in contact with psychoactive substances so when their use reappeared in raves, I had already used them occasionally as a creative stimulus, whilst aware of the potentially negative effects of abuse.

In the context of the raves I used rap as a form of expression, since it allowed me to interact with the dancers without interrupting the rhythm of the music. The sexually provocative content of my song **Rude Drag Queen of the Rave Scene** (1994) referred to the physicality of the 12 inch vinyl format popular on the rave scene: “There's a little hole in the centre of the record, I want you to find that hole in your bodies, boys, find that hole, and stick your finger in it. Does it feel good?”

The drug culture and all night nature of raves had immediately caused problems with licensing laws and they soon began to be organised in a semi clandestine manner outside of city centres where they could take place without police interference. In Scotland, because of the low density of population outside the cities, parties in country cottages became popular as their isolated location and lack of neighbours meant they were ideal spaces for a rave.

The organisers would hire a cottage, then send out directions to friends and acquaintances so people could find the party.

An important part of the experience for me consisted in an exploration of the surrounding environment when the sun came up. This was the beginning of a reconnection to my rural upbringing and my childhood love of nature.

In July 1997 I was invited to take part in the Orchardton festival, set in the grounds of a Scottish baronial mansion in the countryside. Over 1000 people attended this “multi media bacchanalia” as it was described by journalist Polly Williams.<sup>73</sup>

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71 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, London, 2008) p.62

72 Graham St John, *Rave Culture and Religion*, ed.: Graham St John (Routledge, London, 2004) p.4

73 Polly Williams, *House of Spirits* (Frank magazine, August, 1998)

I spent the whole weekend in my new naïf drag alter ego Jackie TV. This alter ego was inspired by the androgynous American TV presenter Pee Wee Herman whose uncanny appearance and sexual ambiguity revolved around the fact he was a heavily made-up man impersonating a school boy. Jackie's costume was a colourful assemblage of plastic toys and garden accessories and I used her naïve appearance to explain my sexual politics in a playful and educational way on **OTV**, the on-site television station set up by local artists Chris Helson and Cath Whippey. Jackie's acceptance by both the adults and the children at the festival was a very powerful experience and working with Chris and Cath proved to me that there was hope for a queer life outside the city. I had lived in cities for many years, attracted like many les-bi-gay-trans people by the freedom city life seemed to hold out, but maybe it was time for a change.

Perhaps my bisexuality and the uncomfortable sense of not quite fitting in anywhere has led me to frequently question the contexts in which I present my work.

Although it is important to create and work within our community I have always felt a need to perform in public spaces, to go beyond the hermeneutic confines of the gallery, nightclub or arts festival and beyond the urban centres of queer activity. Despite the problems and dangers to which we are exposed when we venture outside these spaces it is of the utmost importance that we do so, otherwise we run the risk of isolating ourselves and creating a cocoon which does not reflect the reality of the day to day oppression of queer and trans people in our society. If we truly believe in the transformative power of art, we need to constantly challenge ourselves, to engage with society and create queer art and discourse in these public spaces where our presence has been negated for so long.

I feel an affinity with the queer performer Jennifer Miller who likewise has worked in a wide variety of contexts. "But the queerness is presented and set aside. It is normalized, not made the central issue, as are the life of the city, the distribution of money and riches... Everyday life is parodically assaulted from this ring, a space traditionally occupied by "freaks"."<sup>74</sup>

Official histories of the LGTB and queer movements tend to be heavily biased towards urban experience giving the impression that somehow the city is the only environment in which we can fully develop and create a queer lifestyle.

But this was not always so, for example the early gay rights activist Edward Carpenter, author of **Homogenic Love and Its Place in a Free Society** (1895), chose to live with his same sex partner in the rural town of Millthorpe (England), probably because the seclusion he found in the countryside meant an escape from the moral censure he would doubtless have been subjected to in the city. The back-to-the-countryside group Radical Faeries were founded in 1979 when three gay activists decided to organise a meeting in rural Arizona in order to explore a more spiritual side to their sexuality. Over 200 men responded to their invitation and there is now a loosely affiliated LGTBQI network of Faeries whose local groups organise rural retreats in various countries around the world with full time sanctuaries in the USA, Australia and France.

Orchardton was a privately run community set in a secluded bay on the south-west coast of Galloway where artists who sent in a proposal could live in residencies which varied in length depending on the needs of the individual. Despite the fact it was not a queer space the owners and residents of Orchardton had been very supportive of my presence at the festival.

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<sup>74</sup> Mark Sussman, *A Queer Circus: Amok in New York* in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology* ed Jan Cohen-Cruz, Routledge, 1998 p.270

Therefore as soon as the opportunity came up I applied and moved to Orchardton in the late summer of 1997. This was the beginning of a two year unofficial education in community living during which I produced an incredible amount of work and managed and organised many arts events.

At the time there were around 40 people living there and sharing facilities such as a woodworking workshop, a music room, a blacksmiths, various studio spaces and a pottery. The community living spaces included the main house, a nearby converted stables where the owners lived, a walled garden with attached house and various alternative forms of accommodation in the grounds, including a wooden hut, gypsy caravans, a converted trailer and several yurts. Swept by mists which rolled in off the sea, the community was set in a truly inspiring landscape near a promontory which led to some incredible beaches. In the nearby woods there was even a 19<sup>th</sup> Century folly.



**Fig. 2.2 Orchardton House**

It was my first proper experience of living deep in the countryside. The simple things that urban dwellers take for granted, like central heating or easy access to shops, were complex challenges in this new environment. These facilities make us believe we are somehow autonomous beings, as if we don't depend on the tubes of gas which connect us to the national grid or the chain of supply that stocks our supermarket shelves. After a few weeks of cycling 5 miles against the wind into town to get my shopping and foraging in the woods for kindling, I learned that this idea of independence is an illusion. The bubble burst and I realised I was now part of a community and depended on the help of others for my existence.

As the coldness of winter approached and the annual stock of firewood arrived I realised my skills at wielding a chainsaw were limited so I began giving singing and dancing lessons for children in exchange for wood chopping by parents well seasoned to country life. These and other small acts of cooperation caused bonds to be formed which in turn would lead to some interesting artistic collaborations. It was like “a colony of ants which work individually but bump into each other, and essentially, are part of a greater whole.”<sup>75</sup>

Over the years Orchardton had attracted a wide range of artists, makers and people seeking an alternative lifestyle. Tensions in the community reflected the heavily contested divisions between “art”, where ideas and expression are of great importance, and “craft” which is more based on technique.

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75 Ibid, Williams (1998)



“Craft” is usually associated with the decorative arts which experienced a revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Arts and Crafts movement and the work of the designer William Morris who began mass producing wallpapers and fabrics at affordable prices because he believed that everybody deserved to have access to beauty. These ideas would be highly influential and experience a revival in the 1960s with pop art. Indeed in the film **us-in-the-future** I proclaimed that I “don’t want to make anything except wallpaper.”

Many of the artists who were working in fine art forms such as painting or sculpture, were seeking a rural retreat to concentrate on their work, whilst those who were working in more traditional craft forms were interested in living an alternative lifestyle based on creativity. I began organising parties with my queer posse who would come down from Glasgow for the weekend, set the decks up and dj in the great hall, bringing the community together, opening up spaces of dialogue between the two worlds which led to some incredible collaborations including those described below.

“It’s that ability to wander around in a dream for a week that allows us to create... and in that you can become very vulnerable and take risks. And if you fall, people are here to support you.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Akaraten: The Dreaming**<sup>77</sup>

This event was the result of a collaboration with three other artists at Orchardton who were working with their bodies to explore gender, sexuality and new forms of spirituality, influenced by the work of artists like Fakir Musafar and Ron Athey. We were interested in going beyond the boundaries of theatre and performance, in creating rituals where all those who were present would in some way form part of the event. To create a basis for these actions we began to improvise together in the disused basement of the house where all manner of strange objects were stored including a huge amount of mattresses.

Our experiments originated in the exploration and experience of the physicality of our bodies in the cramped claustrophobic atmosphere of this liminal space where the furnishings of sleep were omnipresent. During these improvisations, time would expand and contract, sometimes it seemed to stand still as if the omnipresent bulk of the mattresses and bed bases had impregnated the space, generating a heavy feeling which was like that which happens in the state between sleeping and waking. Our experiments culminated on the spring solstice when we decided to carry out a cleansing ritual, **Akaraten: The Dreaming**, which would use the symbolic power of the mattresses to generate a transformation of the basement space and, we hoped, of those who took part in the event. This large scale performance installation was a participatory ceremony and the creation of a space where the transformation could take place involved special preparation and the use of different elements such as costume, music, movement and song or recitation in order to generate the appropriate atmosphere.

Using the brocade upholstery material and sack cloth of the mattresses, we made several ceremonial tunics for use by the members of the group and the volunteers who helped us in the staging of the event.

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<sup>76</sup> Chris Helson in *The Spark: Orchardton Dreams* (documentary, Border TV, 1998)

<sup>77</sup> Edited footage of this and the cycle of work *The My Death Experience* were included in the video *Ritual and Death* (10 min, 2009), which can be seen online at <https://vimeo.com/248298605> (password: geysersbird69)

The ceremony would take the form of a procession from the house out into the fields and both the initial gathering point and the field where the final act would take place were prepared previously.

The event began the day before with the invitation we delivered to each member of the community asking them to record their dreams on the eve of the solstice.

At the beginning of the ceremony the community gathered in the entrance hallway where John Whitehead, his whole body wrapped in sheepskin, had been strapped to a bed. I collected the invitation papers and stuffed them into openings made in the fabric of the mattress.

When the papers had all been collected, the bed was carried out of the house, down the front steps to the entrance where it was strapped onto a horse drawn cart in such a way that both bed and performer were dragged along the ground as the horses pulled them down the pot-holed avenue in a lantern lit procession.

John's only protection from the bumps and jolts was the sheepskin swaddling tied around his body. The horses, perhaps frightened by the crowd or the lanterns, cantered quickly down the road towards the field which had been prepared for the event.

On its arrival, the bed was unstrapped from the cart, at which point two towers constructed using the bed bases, were set on fire and the procession passed between them. Then, members of the community were individually led and invited to pass through a car in which a television set had been installed.

While they sat in the front seat and watched the flickering interference on the tv screen I whispered to them from my hiding place in the boot. Finally we all gathered in an area where several beds had been laid out.

The ceremony ended with an invitation to all the participants to "speak their dreams in unison to the stars" before the final burning of the beds and the mattress containing our dreams took place.



Fig. 2.3 *Akaraten* (1998)

This was my first public ritual as a transgender shaman, influenced by traditions of certain Native American tribes where "gay men and lesbians were traditionally regarded as 'two-spirited people'. Displaying both masculine and feminine aspects, they were highly regarded members of the community, and were thought to possess a higher spiritual development."<sup>78</sup>

This subject will be discussed more fully in Chapter VI.

<sup>78</sup> Cherrie Moraga *Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of the Chicano Tribe*, in *The Material Queer*, ed. Donald Morton (Westview Press, 1996) p.300



## *Dirk & Sawney's Theme Park*<sup>79</sup>

Another large scale collaboration with the community was the one day event **Dirk & Sawney's Theme Park**. With the help of a grant from the local council I commissioned work from 7 Orchardton artists who created site specific interventions in the landscape around the house. This event was, in part, inspired by the theatre company **Clanjamfrie's Desire Lines** (1991), perhaps the first site specific work I had witnessed which made use of the natural environment.

My idea of placing work in a natural landscape was to harmonise with the environment and enhance the way it was experienced without actually changing it in a permanent way. Our respect for its beauty led us to feel it should remain as it was before our interventions. The title of the piece was an ironic reference to theme parks where a simulation is presented as a lived experience to the public who are really only passive spectators with no possibility to interact or control the situation.

The possibility to interact with the performers, along with the physicality of walking over the land, with the difficulties involved in crossing terrain which was in some places rough or boggy, meant the public had to participate actively to experience the event. I took part with a performance and created two installations as part of the route.



Fig. 2.4 *Dirk and Sawney's Theme Park* (1998)

The public accessed these installations by day, via a marked out route, and by night, in a guided lantern lit tour. This gave different publics the opportunity to experience and engage with the work. In the daytime a wide range of people came including families, couples and even some little old ladies from the nearby village.

By night time around 100 people had gathered for the tour which was to be followed by a dance party.

When, dressed as Jackie, I gathered the crowd together to start the tour, a group of 3 young Glaswegian men made sarcastic comments about my appearance.

These kind of reactions are common in Scotland where public displays of gender dissidence are rare since they are almost certain to be met with some form of violence. Because the group realised they were in a minority they chose to express their feelings through humour.

At first we were unsure how to proceed since we did not want to risk exposing anyone to their violence but nevertheless were determined to go ahead with the tour. In particular I was worried about the safety of a gay friend who had come down from Glasgow and was dressed in drag with high heels so I gave him the keys to my flat and made sure he was not alone before setting off.

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<sup>79</sup> Documentation of this event is available online at <https://vimeo.com/13007346>

The group was mostly made up of city dwellers who had come for the weekend and many of them were unaccustomed to walking in the countryside at night so it was quite a challenge to guide them over the uneven and, in some places, marshy terrain. Despite the difficulties, the group were enthusiastic and with the help of several artists from the community and a series of strategically placed handmade lanterns, we managed to follow the 2 kilometre route in the dark.

The installations included a virgin's temple (by Nicola Naismith), the encampment of a shipwrecked mariner (Ratna Joti), a live sound installation (by Andy Green and Sarah Jackets), an interactive balloon sculpture (by Geraint Edwards) and several artworks I had made, including a karaoke housed in a 19<sup>th</sup> century folly in the woods where the guests were invited to sing along to a selection of songs.

A large part of the tour involved crossing the promontory which stuck out into the Solway Firth which separates Scotland from England and, as the devolution referendum had recently been successful (devolving power to a Scottish parliament with limited powers within the UK),

I made a short speech about the end of our joint 300 year history as we gazed across the water to the lights of Cumbria.

The tour passed several beaches composed entirely of shells, a peculiarity of that part of the coast which I had taken advantage of to create an installation of enhanced natural beauty by painting hundreds of the shells with nail varnish.

When we got back to the house after the tour, the Glaswegians were impatiently waiting by the marquee where the sound system had been set up for the party.

At that point I finished the tour by publicly cancelling the rave party. It seemed an important symbolic gesture against their passive expectations of a good time, something which was already being reflected in the commercialisation of the rave scene.

Excessive drug use was converting the scene into a caricature of itself, with little space for creativity and the queer community we had established was dissolving as its members moved away from Glasgow.

It was like the end of an era, an ending we had experienced both physically and symbolically on the tour as we gazed across the sea, an invisible frontier marking the division between Scotland and England, but also the physical beginning and end of the two countries.

For those of us who had shared such an intense experience together, it had been like an initiation rite and I believed that anything else would have been an anti climax. The physical exertion involved in following the tour and the difficulty and dangers involved in navigating over rough terrain in the dark, had made it of the utmost importance that the group stuck together, everyone making sure that stragglers were not left behind and encouraging each other to go on.

More than passive observers, everyone who had come on the tour had participated in creating the special atmosphere of something shared which had characterised the outing. In that respect the event had already occurred by the time we got back to the house and the relative safety of civilisation.

The controversial decision to cancel the rave was not to everyone's liking, but the party continued indoors in a low key way, allowing conversation to flow late into the night.

## OTV

Whilst at Orchardton, I collaborated on several occasions with Chris Helson and Cath Whippey who were using technology and exploring some of the same concepts I was interested in. They invited me to take part in their week long installation **OTV** (21-28 February 1998) a public access “television station” based in a local café on the high street of the town of Castle Douglas. The installation consisted of a blue screen background which was filmed and projected through a live feed onto the café window so that viewers could watch what was going on from outside.

On the opening night I was invited to participate and, despite my misgivings about appearing on a huge screen on the main street of the town on a Saturday night, I decided I had to take the risk and dress as Jackie.

The performance began with a still image being projected onscreen which was accompanied by a ten minute audio recording in which I told the story of how I had come to terms with being an “alien” and managed to overcome the difficulties involved with my public appearance on the programme. After this symbolic reference to coming out, I appeared live in the café and was almost immediately harassed by a member of the audience who shouted abuse at me while I was talking. “But Jackie TV sat him down and explained what he was trying to do and they ended up shaking hands on screen... In fact the man wouldn’t stop shaking hands, he seemed really quite moved”<sup>80</sup>

The entire event was broadcast live and the rest of the performance continued without problems. Over the course of the next week I became the unofficial OTV host appearing regularly and presenting a quiz show and a cabaret which gave me the opportunity to present songs and collaborate with members of the community in a choral presentation. Jackie was a surprise success and it was very empowering to be accepted by the local community and appear in drag in such a public way in a small town quite similar to the one I grew up in. I ended up being interviewed by a local TV station and **The Sunday Times** published a feature on OTV.

I talked about my experiences growing up in a rural environment: “I know what it’s like growing up in a small town in a rural area and to be having problems with your sexuality.”<sup>81</sup> As a protest on the generally negative representation of gender dissidents in the media I prepared a “Miss Represent” beauty sash for the photo session. Footage from the OTV performances was edited in the short video **Jackie TV is selling Retro Modernisme** (1999).

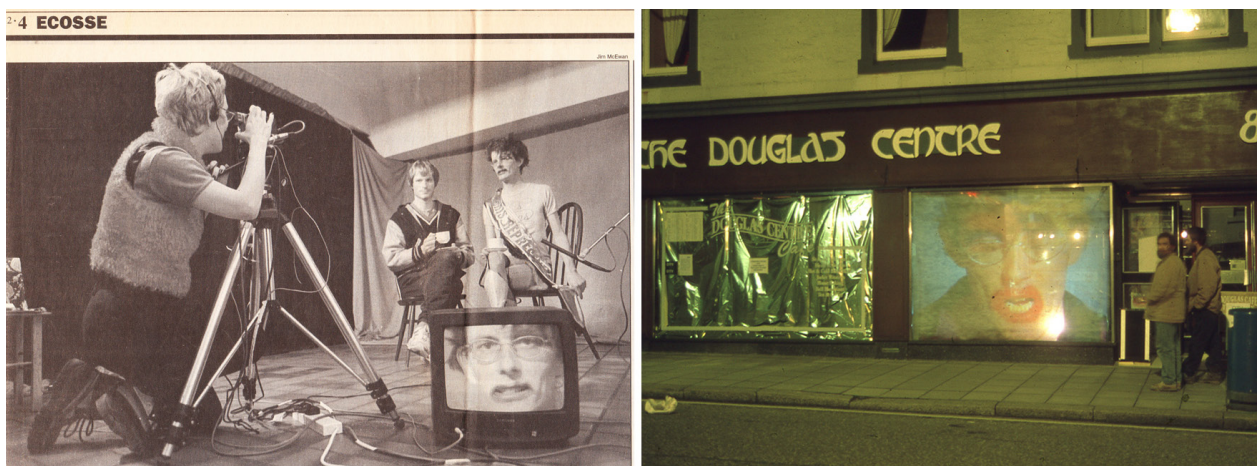


Fig. 2.5 OTV (1998)

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Nicol, *A flicker of fame, on a window near you* (Sunday Times, cultural supplement Écosse, 1/3/1998)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid



## *us-in-the-future*

As a result of the publicity surrounding OTV, a production company approached us to do a report on our work for the arts documentary series **The Spark**. By coincidence, at the same time, the fashion and lifestyle magazine **Frank** asked if they could come and do a report on the house and community. Opinions were divided over whether to allow the reporters to come, as many members of the community felt it would be an invasion of their privacy. But eventually we reached an agreement and both groups of reporters came to the house in the same week.

As part of the agreement the documentary makers allowed Chris, Cath and me to make video work to be shown as part of the documentary. We collaborated on each others videos, taking turns to film and appear while the documentary crew and the photographer from the magazine filmed us. The result of this bizarre experience was my short film **us-in-the-future** which was based around the adventures of Jackie as she is chased around the grounds of the house and eventually captured by members of the media.

The film was a surreal collage which I was determined to keep control over so I decided to speak Spanish throughout most of the filming to ensure that what I said would be broadcast uncensored. For the complex editing process we were invited to the television station where I filmed a sequence with Penny Macmillan, the local newsreader, and overdubbed the film in Spanish before subtitling it for broadcast. Foreign films and tv programmes are rarely shown in the UK, so British television audiences are unaccustomed to subtitling since the vast majority of programmes broadcast are American or British.



Fig. 2.6 *us-in-the-future* (1998)

Speaking in Spanish on a local television station was also a way of reminding viewers that other cultures exist in a medium which tends to reflect and support the hegemony of the English language. In the short I referred to myself as a *travesti* a term which is difficult to translate into English since it sums up a variety of forms of gender dissidence including cross dressing, drag and gender transitioning through hormones and/or surgery.

“The media kidnapped me... I thought that this *travesti*, a word which for me represents someone who is between and beyond the sexes, would be a repository of meaning which could bleed between the frames of the programme, and in this way I would hijack the kidnappers myself.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> From the broadcast video *us-in-the-future*(1998). A trailer for the film is online at <https://vimeo.com/73458176>

## *My Death Experience*<sup>83</sup>

Living in London was an experiment I had postponed for a long time, resisting the pull of the capital: media, financial and political centre not only of the U.K. but also of the one time British Empire (a fact it seems many were unwilling to accept had long since dissolved).

Of course, the political independence of Britain's former colonies had only changed the form, not the dynamics of colonial power.

The necropolitics which see "The Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security<sup>84</sup>" were to be made quite apparent a few years later when the "socialist" prime minister Toni Blair, under pressure from the United States, went to war against Iraq, ignoring the public outcry.

I took part in the anti war demonstration, which attracted between 750,000 and 2 million people, making it the largest demonstration in British history. The *entente cordiale* between our countries, with the unconditional support for whatever war-faring enterprise the US dreams up, has been to a large degree responsible for a New World Order which subjects millions around the globe to the policies of the free market.

Despite my reservations when an opportunity arose (rent-free) I decided to move to the city and enter into the belly of the beast. In 1999, as the millennium approached and rumours of digital meltdown had brought forth scenes of apocalyptic disaster, I moved to London. Shortly after, a wave of hate crimes broke out in the capital: a neo-Nazi sympathiser planted nail bombs in the Black, Jewish and gay communities: "Two people died and more than 60 were injured -at least 13 seriously- when a nail bomb ripped through a gay pub in the heart of central London last night."<sup>85</sup>

This affected me quite deeply and the morning after the bomb exploded in the gay pub the Admiral Duncan, in the middle of the highly touristic area of Soho, I went in full drag to lay flowers in mourning at its door. It seemed that some kind of drastic transformation was underway.

I expressed my discontent and my reaction to the horror of fanaticism creating a series of cathartic performances, **The My Death Experience**.

This series summarised my reaction to the alienating and anonymous environment of the big city and it evolved as my ideas developed and varied widely in response to the different contexts in which it was presented.

**The My Death Experience** reflected the spectre of AIDS, a disease which had decimated the gay population in the years since I had come out.

There were voices within the LGTB movement which questioned how the crisis had been handled by the government, given that faster, better information about safe sex and the means of transmission could have led to a quicker change in sexual habits and fewer victims, but since gay men seemed to be the ones most at risk, their lives had not been a political priority.

The disease affected especially the passive partners in anal sex who were much more likely to catch it and this led to an increase in anti-camp hostility within the gay community and the prevalence of "straight acting" masculine role models.

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83 Documentation of most of the performances which formed part of this cycle are included in the video-lecture *El Rito y la Muerte* (2009) available online at <https://vimeo.com/248298605> (password: Femme69X)

84 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics in Public Culture* (1) (Duke University Press, 2003) p.18

85 Rory Carroll, *Nail Bomber Strikes in Soho* (Guardian Newspaper 1/5/1999) Accessed 24/3/18



Perhaps it is stereotypical to link effeminacy with passivity but was it possible that flaming queens, those who had battled at the Stonewall for their rights because they had nothing to lose, those who were always on the margins of gay society, had been sacrificed in the crisis?

As the performance artist Ron Athey, who has been living with AIDS for many years, would conclude years later: “When HIV came along, in the 1980’s, I thought there was nothing to lose. Everybody died, including practically everyone I admired, and it seemed like the only people left alive were mediocre. Everybody died, and the mediocre people took a bigger seat of power, because suddenly there was space for them. What a crappy world. The community started to self-police... became monogamous, had babies.”<sup>86</sup>

As a queer transgender artist I felt I had lost a huge potential sisterhood in that crisis and began in my own satirical manner to mourn that loss.

Another major influence on the series was my disappointment with the excessive hedonism of the gay lifestyle in London. The radical politics which had characterised the gay movement in its beginnings had given way to a conservatism, as a new generation of gay businessmen took advantage of the “pink pound” since many gay men had no familial financial responsibilities and therefore had a larger disposable income than their heterosexual counterparts.

Many of these businesses paid lip service to gay liberation whilst exploiting their customers and workers in a market that was particularly lucrative.

Even the alternative queer performance scene at the time reflected an obsession with kitschy light entertainment which was, in the main, bereft of any real political message. The institutions that were supposed to finance live art in the UK at the time promoted work that was hermetically sealed within the concept of art.

Their current obsession with “work in progress” favoured art graduates who were exploring their processes, over drag queens who had practiced their art in direct contact with the public on the streets, in nightclubs and pubs.

I was more interested in finding a way to communicate radical ideas to a wider public but that was not financially viable in that institutional environment.

The idea that you would actually produce a work using a punk do it yourself methodology -without prior audience testing or going through the filter of what they believed was acceptable- was anathema to that system.

“You have never heard of me -I never played your ghettos- but I have come to announce... my DEATH!” My first performance in London was carried out in the financial centre of the City, Canary Wharf, the mini Manhattan which had sprung up in the abandoned Docklands area of East London and which at that time still provided a vision of shimmering post-modern beauty with its skyscrapers and overground monorail. The amazing panoramas of its architecture would later disappear as more and more transnational corporations moved their headquarters out of the City, leading to more buildings being built and the spectacular views disappearing.

At that moment, however, the complex seemed to represent some kind of futuristic utopia and when I discovered that a talent competition was to be held in the main conference hall of Number One Canada Square (the highest building in the country at the time) I went for the audition and was accepted as a finalist.

Over the years I have entered many talent competitions, safe in the knowledge I have little chance of winning but, using them as platforms to express my ideas to an audience generally accustomed to a different type of entertainment.

<sup>86</sup> Ron Athey in *Perverse Martyrologies: An Interview with Ron Athey* in *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art*, Dominic Johnson (Palgrave, 2015) p.210

On this occasion, the audience was mainly made up of teenage girls who were there to see the boy bands taking part in the competition. In complete contrast to the line-up of semi-professional entertainers, I staged a trashy, apocalyptic fashion show which culminated when I revealed myself to be a transvestite despot intent on a world takeover. This over-the-top and totally unexpected threat, made right from the centre of the financial universe, silenced the nervous giggles which had been caused by my appearance.

As part of the cycle I carried out a funeral for the **Death of Gay** (1999)<sup>87</sup> at a Pride event in Leeds based on the **Death of Hippie** action carried out by the Diggers in 1967. In a critique of how the commercialisation of the gay scene had led to a homogenisation of a term which once had political overtones I carried a coffin around Hyde Park, occasionally laying it down to weep and wail over it, whilst friends from the Luxury Voodoo collective passed out leaflets with the words “Death of Gay” printed on them. When the meaning of language is subverted by advertising using radical terminology to sell luxury products perhaps it is time to question the focus of our activism. The rights of certain sectors of the LGTB community, mainly white gay men had been gained whilst ignoring the needs of more marginalised members of the community. I mourned this loss of radical activism and respect for diversity on that day.



**Fig. 2.7** *Death of Gay* (1999)

In the Bonnington café and art-space in London, I carried out **Tableaux Morts** (2001), a series of installations-with-body where I reinterpreted the most cathartic moments of the life and death of famous heroines of history including Cleopatra and Ophelia. For each tableau I prepared the scene with candles and decorative furnishings to represent the scene and in response to the arrival of a public, simulated the jerky movements of automata, adopting the style of the macabre historical recreation slot machines I had seen as a child in the Edinburgh Museum of Childhood. These machines were the first cybernetic entities I had seen and inspired the tableaux, in which I imitated the movements of the machinery as an expression of the “uncanny”.

The choice of the moment of death was of fundamental importance for each tableau, treating the transcendental nature of the crucial point between life and death. That unique moment has been explored extensively in cinema, where the idea of a whole life that rewinds during its final moments somehow seems to make it easier for us to deny the existence of death.

<sup>87</sup> Documented in *Ritual and Death* (2009) available online at <https://vimeo.com/248298605> (password: Femme69X)



Fig. 2.8 *Tableaux Morts* (2001)

As part of the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2000, I wrote and staged a multi media dramatisation of **All of My Deaths**, a torch song tribute to drama queens and divas, where I read from behind a back lit screen. Abstract images projected overhead as my exaggerated movements told the story of an attempted suicide and the hallucinations provoked by self imposed starvation.

This piece developed on previous works, which had satirized advertising through the marketing of non-existent products, representing death as the ultimate consumer product. It was presented in the format of an extended info-mercial where I would burst into song at intervals.

“Hello this is my death, I am the comptessa jacqueline de Monte Banco broadcasting my death to show that I am not afraid of the ultimate experience. I passed through it, before they could rush me to hospital and pump me full of vitamins and glucose, I saw the whole make up kit and caboodle!!!! So if you haven’t already suspended your diss beliefs you really haven’t experienced the power of persuasion. But once you’ve seen my death- I know you are going to want one of your very own and yes that ultimate experience can be yours for free online with retro modernisme.co.uk - they said it couldn’t be done but I am here to tell you about my death experience!.. my death number two - In a hospital bed with just a camera crew  
 The papers said - no he’s gone too far this time  
 but the end’s not far enough in this game. - I had it all, who could ask for more!  
 The press, the attention I’d been living for -  
 but all of the boys and the drugs I could score  
 never prepared me to face - All of my Deaths!”

I felt like an exile in the city of London and this fictional narrative, summed up my feelings at the time, and was an attempt to dramatise my unease and explore a histrionic form of expression normally associated with female divas, which when presented in drag contexts is normally comic. But as Richard Dyer points out the gay sensibility “holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity...intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity”<sup>88</sup>.

I wanted to see how far I could push the boundaries of camp melodrama in a similar way to that in which Justin Bond, had done when singing cover versions of Nirvana and Hole songs in his drag persona the ageing, alcoholic Kiki Du Rane<sup>89</sup>.

<sup>88</sup> Chuck Kleinhaus, *Taking out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody in The Politics and Poetics of Camp* ed. Moe Meyer (Routledge, London, 1994) p.185

<sup>89</sup> Difficult to find because of copyright infringements, this Kiki and Herb medley ends with the line “I’m Miss World, somebody kill me!”. It can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WiliGX1At4>, - Accessed 20/12/17





Fig. 2.9 *The My Death Experience* (1998)

My appearance throughout this series as a mourner, a witness, and salesman to death, and finally as a black shadow projected on a screen, the contour of a body without features, reflected the general feeling of the time, a period summed up by Francis Fukuyama in his 1989 text **The End of History?**.

The fall of the Berlin wall and the end of Soviet communism seemed to have led to an idea that neoliberal capitalism had won and that experiments in any other kind of political economy were doomed to failure. The great narratives of history had been shown to be partial, biased and incomplete. The fiction of the individual, who fought against a tyrannical system was shown to be merely that, and we seemed doomed to be puppets of a system which was proclaiming its victory.

My feelings, reflected a general post modern malaise, and the idea, that “It seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; and perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination.”<sup>90</sup>

My despondent feelings may of course have been the result of the failure of an education system which indoctrinates male children (whether we are heterosexual, gay, trans or otherwise) with the fiction that they are autonomous heroic individuals who must compete and gain recognition.

As observed by Bruce Franklin, in his 1979 essay **What Are We To Make Of Ballard’s Apocalypse?**, J. G. Ballard was predisposed to “mistaking the end of capitalism for the end of the world”<sup>91</sup> because of his condition within imperialism, white supremacism and capitalism; a white petty bourgeois intellectual in the core of a challenged and crumbling empire.

As the capitalist system expands and adapts to incorporate the voices of those it had previously excluded, these dissenting voices, in this case, white middle class gays, are tolerated as long as they don’t rock the boat.

<sup>90</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 1983-1998 (Verso, London 1998) p.50

<sup>91</sup> Bruce Franklin quoted in <http://qlipoth.blogspot.com.es/2009/11/easier-to-imagine-end-of-world.html> - Accessed 4/1/17



# CHAPTER III

## BORDER CROSSING

- *Mundo Valenciano* (Valencian World, 2003)
- *1 ¡Aquí! 2 ¡Ahora! 3 ¡Mismo! ¡GO!* (Here! Right! Now! GO!, 2004)
- *Invocación de las Santas Traviesas* (Invocation of the Wayward Saints, 2005)
- *¡Fuera! Homenaje a Ocaña* (Get Off! Homage to Ocaña, 2012)

I do not see myself as belonging to a geographical nation since from an early age I have been discriminated as a gender dissident in my own country and I've never fitted in or conformed to the dominant social mores wherever I have lived.

The closest identification I feel is with the transnational queer and transgender community and since I don't find manifestations of transgender practices in my own culture I identify more with traditions from other cultures. I do not idealise them but use them as an inspiration to create contemporary trans symbologies and new narratives of visibility and resistance.

“We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other... The mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.”<sup>92</sup>

Some authors criticise the hybridity of the mestizo claiming it weakens political solidarity and the sense of identity within racialised collectives. Nevertheless “Mixture is not necessarily complicit with global capitalism, although the latter, with its usual predatory agility, may make use of ideas and practices of mixture to sell products and exploit resources – mixing old and new symbols of consumption... But mixture can also be deployed in different contexts, with different effects which challenge the status quo. It is a question of who deploys ideas and practices of mixture, in what context and to what effect. In a similar way, the effect of mestizaje depends on context.”<sup>93</sup>

I see similarities in the way that racial and sexual identities are constructed. In both cases there are identities that are invisibilised, marginalised or pushed to pass or identify as other in order to survive.

As with gender, identities based on race are fluid and can change over time and according to context. The interaction with society is an especially important factor in the identification process.

“While obviously a repository of distinct individual and collective experiences, identities have been increasingly conceptualised as dynamic and shifting and as a process of becoming rather than being.”<sup>94</sup>

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92 Gloria E Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, La Frontera* (Aunt Lute, 1987) p.106

93 Peter Wade, *Images of Latin American mestizaje and the politics of comparison* (Bulletin of Latin American Research, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2004) p.361

94 M. Harris, B. Carlson, E. Poata-Smith, *The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity* (University of Technology, Sydney E-Press, 2013) p.3 Available online at: [ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1850&context=lhapapers](http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1850&context=lhapapers) - Accessed 13/7/18

This applies in particular to emerging indigenous identities appearing in the context of processes of globalisation which pose a serious threat to the continued existence of these minority racial groups. In 1986 the United Nations Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities created the following definition: “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, considered themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them.”<sup>95</sup>

Nowadays all around the world, deforestation, damming and mining operations, driven by multi-national corporations, claim indigenous territories and cause irreversible environmental damage to their land and well-being. This has caused whole communities to be uprooted.

“narratives about who should count as indigenous have conflicting political implications for different groups of indigenous people in the present especially given the increasingly diverse circumstances in which indigenous people now find themselves. Indeed, colonial processes and practices have fundamentally transformed (and in some cases severed) the relationships that indigenous people have to place and to kin in a variety of ways.”<sup>96</sup>

In contemporary societies, indigenous people are not all living in the same way. Apart from differences between countries there are also differences within the same country, since some people may live in rural environments, some in the city, some may only speak their indigenous language, others may also speak the language of the nation. Some may identify as indigenous because of their origins and their culture and others for political reasons.

The focus of my research on indigenous identities has been Latin America because of the continent’s cultural and linguistic ties with Spain where this investigation was carried out. “Indigenous people in Latin America do not represent an immigrant group; nevertheless they face considerable pressures to assimilate or to adopt a non-indigenous identity, given the social, economic, and political dominance enjoyed by the non-indigenous population in Latin America and the high levels of discrimination against indigenous people.”<sup>97</sup>

In Bolivia, the vast majority of the population belongs to one of a variety of indigenous races, nevertheless the study quoted above revealed that most people choose to identify as mestizo, particularly if they are wealthier and more educated since they face more pressure to adopt non-indigenous lifestyles in order to advance in their careers.

It was also found that individuals are more likely to identify as indigenous if they live in rural communities or if they have gained a stronger political conscience through their allegiance to trade unions or groups like the Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti, the Kataristas, or La Via Campesina, an international community of peasants who cultivate the land reclaiming local people’s rights to food sovereignty. It is thanks to movements like these that the country’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales, was elected in the year 2006. But now after many years in office Morales has also been criticized by some indigenous communities for not delivering on his promises.

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95 Quoted in Raúl Madrid, *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2012.) p.6

96 Ibid (M. Harris, etc.) p.5

97 Raúl Madrid, *Politics, Socioeconomic Status, and Indigenous Identity in Latin America: the Bolivian Case* (2006) available online at: [www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/bolivia/2004-boliviancase.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/bolivia/2004-boliviancase.pdf) - Accessed 13/7/18

“Political experiences may shape ethnic identities by heightening people’s awareness of discrimination, instilling a greater sense of ethnic solidarity, and exposing people to new ideologies of race and ethnicity... ethnic self-identification may be a social or economic act, but it is also profoundly a political one.”<sup>98</sup>

Despite the colour of my skin I believe I am a hybrid monster mestizo perhaps more through the choices I have made than my origins. Perhaps my role is to bridge cultures, not fitting into any, to criticise and question both them and myself continuously.

When I moved to Valencia in 2003 I became one of around 82,000 ex-pat Brits in the Comunidad Valenciana. Most of them moved to coastal areas where, like many immigrants they lived in neighbourhoods and created their own subcultural groups. In this sense they are similar to any other ethnic minority which gathers together when they migrate. However since the majority of the U.K. immigrants are economically independent (the average age is 51 and many are retired) they do not rely on the local economy to survive and have no reason to integrate. The majority of these ex-pats do not speak Spanish and make little or no effort to learn it, which reveals their neocolonial attitude. They represent in microcosm the processes of globalisation which homogenise cultural differences in a colonial project which sees neo-liberal capitalism as the future of the species and through which Anglo-American culture imposes itself as the international representative of progress and development. The idea that all people should be “free” to worship in the temples of consumerism has led to the imposition of values which have destroyed communities and whole cultures. As frontier controls are tightened in Europe and the U.S.A., that future seems reserved for the economic elite of the global North.

The history of colonialism is of course, closely linked to the eradication of difference, whether that difference is racial or based on sexuality. When Europeans arrived in the “New World” they imported a hypocritical Christian morality which condemned homosexuality as an abomination against nature. When the missionaries discovered that the natives practised polygamy and that, in some tribes, homosexuals acts were accepted, this was used as an excuse for their conquest. The existence of a transgender caste - the *nadleeh* (in Navajo) or two spirit people - who enjoyed a privileged position in many tribes was a sign of the presence of the devil and justified their massacre. Perhaps one of the most urgent questions we must address is how to progress beyond the idea of the nation, to abolish frontiers and see ourselves as a species, a human community united by evolution.

As the Peruvian artist Daniela Ortiz observes “National borders and Nationalities are a system created by Europe; the Nation state is not a Natural formation. The independence of the colonies did not mean the end of the global colonial order. Native people are still oppressed by white supremacy and its Necropolitics”<sup>99</sup>

If capital and merchandise can circulate freely, it seems ridiculous that humans should not enjoy the same liberty. Our common genetic make-up belies the claims of those who use the concept of ethnicity to divide and conquer. Overwhelming evidence proves that our race evolved in Africa, spreading out to cover the globe which means that we are all migrants, descendants of that original group of humans. Intra-governmental agencies protect architectural ruins and immaterial culture as Patrimony of Humanity, whilst human genetic diversity is being reduced in a programme of slow relentless extermination of ethnic populations whose lands are in demand by the global market.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid p.27

<sup>99</sup> Daniela Ortiz, *The Letter N*, from the series *The ABC of Racist Europe* (2017)

The situation of Mexicans in North America is in some ways paradigmatic of the situation of many migrants worldwide and has created a rich body of work on border crossing.

Mexicans living in the U.S.A. coined the term Chicano to describe themselves when they began a political movement in the 1960s to fight for their rights and against a racist education system. In her analysis of Chicano politics, Cherrie Moraga stresses that freedom cannot be “parcelled out- class before race before sex before sexuality”<sup>100</sup> and calls for an integration of the revolutionary with the traditional. This viewpoint does not fetishize indigenous cultures since it accepts that these cultures may also be homophobic and patriarchal.

The poet and writer Gloria Anzaldúa, described the concept of the *mestiza* as a hybrid being which can act as a bridge between conflicting realities: the “confluence of two or more genetic streams...a hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool.”<sup>101</sup>

In Anzaldúa’s poetry and prose we experience the struggle between her queer and feminist values, the traditional left wing masculine values of the Chicano movement and the oppressive racism of the U.S. Government. She believed the *mestiza* consciousness was a network of kindred spirits, a kind of family: “The rational, the patriarchal, and the heterosexual have held sway and legal tender for too long. Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colours are banding and bonding together to right that balance.”<sup>102</sup>

Written in the 1980s, at a time when the politics of separatism held sway, her brave prediction speaks to our contemporary reality where this alliance is now more than ever necessary.

With the Schengen agreement and the control over the European frontier with Africa controlled by private security companies like Frontex, the situation has become exacerbated and reflects the xenophobic policy of exclusion which has led to the U.S. government’s current project to build a wall between the U.S.A. and Mexico.

The hybrid Chicano identity has inspired the work of the Mexican-born performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who also came to prominence in the 1980s when the art establishment started opening its doors to multiculturalism. “Gómez-Peña performs an ethnic and sexual transvestism to evoke the fragmented condition of the diasporic subject”<sup>103</sup>

As he was soon to discover, his presence was welcome as long as he didn’t actually challenge the dominant discourse. Gómez-Peña began his career as part of the **Border Arts Workshop**, a group who invited Americans and Mexicans to experience the physical space of the border together, invert their roles and inhabit the space of the Other. Since 1993 he has been working with Robert Sifuentes in **La Pocha Nostra**, a transnational collective of performers whose work explores boundaries between gender, race and class, focussing on experiences of migration.

I was present at their presentation **Mapa-Corpo 3** in the festival *El Arte es Acción* in Madrid (2009). This piece, subtitled **Interactive Ritual for the New Millennium**, began with an invitation to all the excluded members of society to cross behind the curtain of the stage to witness the show.

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100 Cherrie Moraga *Queer Aztlán: The Reformation of Chicano Tribe* in *The Material Queer* ed Donald Morton (Westview Press, Oxford 1996) p.302

101 Ibid (Anzaldúa,) p.99

102 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *La Prieta*, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Persephone, 1981) p.233

103 Antonio Prieto Stambaugh, *Cuerpos grotescos y performatividad queer* RE-D, Arte, Cultura Visual y Género, Year 0, no. 0, November 2009



An acupuncturist put needles, each with the flag of a nation, in the body of a performer. In another space we were invited to write texts on the depilated body of another performer.

The camp and cyber-ethnic aesthetics of the staging were a reference to Mexican films of the 1950s. As in most of his work Gómez-Peña mixed Spanish and English words in a hybrid language which represents the borderline between two civilisations and his mix of mariachi style with Terminator influences also reflects this fusion.

La Pocha Nostra's work questions the idea of the exotic and extreme – what he terms “the mainstream bizarre” and how our society has incorporated it so that it becomes a mere spectacle empty of any political content. The action and the journey that we made as spectators, from the theatre seat to the stage, mixing with the performers, our bodies incorporated into the show, represented this breaking of the boundaries between theatre and ritual that for me is essential for a performance to have an impact on the spectator.

“My troupe and I have embarked on a search for performance rituals that inspire our audience to make decisions on the spot and regain their civic voice, formats of rituals that invite them to participate actively in the act of co-creation of the artwork. In this sense, I see performance as a form of radical democracy”.<sup>104</sup>

In parallel with their performance work they do benefits for Chicano organisations and have organised town meetings where activists are invited to speak alongside performers in political happenings where the public can express their feelings and debate with the invited guests.



Fig. 3.1 (1) Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2) Sergio Zavallos (1983)

104 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Two veteran performance artists swap stories of flying in times in war* in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, eds Vanhaesebrouck, de Cuatrer, de Roo (Nai Publishers, Brussels, 2011) p.211

A particularly queer case of cultural border crossing, where the group itself was a mixture of highly different cultures, is that of **El Grupo Chaclacayo**<sup>105</sup>, a collective of artists made up of the European Helmut Psotta and the Peruvians Raúl Avellaneda and Sergio Zevallos who met at the Catholic University in Lima.

The group produced an incredible body of work, in an atmosphere of violent and bloody civil war between the right wing government and the maoist guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso, which claimed over 70,000 lives in two decades. Through performative acts and photographs they portrayed transvestite saints in blood stained cells, naked bodies in abject submission, bodies buried, laid out like corpses, grieving, or exposed: a searing critique of the military and religious institutions responsible for producing the confrontation.

Action and performance are thus integral components of the artistic self-knowledge and self-liberation of the Grupo Chaclacayo. Their performances become a modern version of the rites of mythical evocation seen in the dances of death, the danse macabre present since the very beginning of humanity.<sup>106</sup>

For their 1984 exhibition **Peru...un Sueño** (Peru...a Dream) at the Lima Art Museum, the group produced a poster which satirised tourist brochures replacing idyllic images of an exotic South with photographs of cemeteries, torture and burials. In a reign of terror where executed homosexuals and transexuals were the invisible victims, the work of El Grupo Chaclacayo suggests other forms of resistance and organisation which provide hope that we can unlearn the “idea of nation (that) continues to limit the capacity to imagine communities united through common political projects.”<sup>107</sup>

Current reasons for migration are more related to survival than the search for economic prosperity, because “a mix of conditions- wars, dead lands, expulsions- has produced a vast loss of habitat for a growing number of people. These, then, are not the migrants in search of a better life who hope to send money and then perhaps return to the family left behind. These are people in search of bare life with no home to return to.”<sup>108</sup>

This loss of habitat, which also affects animal populations, is evidence of new forms of colonialism where rich northern countries exploit the territories of poorer countries using them for a wide variety of motives including mining operations, waste disposal and agricultural production.

## **Mondo Valenciano**

For me it was of the utmost importance, since my work is produced as a response to its political and social context, to integrate as soon as possible into the local culture in Valencia. Fortunately, although both me and my bisexual partner Anna Maria were foreigners, we already spoke Spanish and had experienced living in Spain previously.

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105 Their work was first seen in Spain as part of the exhibition *Perder la forma humana. Una imagen sismica de los años ochenta en América Latina* organised by the Red Conceptualismos del Sur in MNCARS (Madrid) in 2013. A solo exhibition of Sergio Zevallos work was shown in Espai Visor (Valencia) in 2015.

106 Michael Haerdter *Images Of Death: Peru, Or The End Of The European Dream* in Chaclayo catalogue p.151

107 Miguel A. López, Toxic Exorcisms. Sergio Zevallos in the Grupo Chaclacayo, in *A Wandering Body: Sergio Zevallos in the Grupo Chaclacayo* (1982-1994) catalogue of the exhibition in Mula (Lima Art Museum, 2014) p.22

108 Saskia Sassen, *A Massive Loss of Habitat* in *Sociology of Development* vol 2 (University of California, 2016) p.205

We were particularly interested in meeting activists and artists from the local LGTB community so we began going to the Gender Identity group at the LGT (no B at the time) Lambda Collective which was a welcoming space run by trans men at the time and open to a wide range of gender identities.

We also went to regular drag shows and became friendly with many performers including Carmen Travesti, Tracy and Eurogloria. In fact one of the most unusual features that struck us about the Valencian scene was the popularity of drag shows in bars, restaurants and discos whilst in the U.K. drag queens only performed regularly in the more traditional gay bars. In Valencia at the time there were two restaurants hosting nightly drag dinner shows, Turangalila and Pecado, various gay venues with regular shows including Pols and Venial, a popular club for hen nights Ladys and a weekly drag night at the Deseo bar.

The popularity of the different forms of drag in Valencia reflects a very different attitude towards cross dressing from that of the U.K. At the time, we believed that the acceptance was related to the fact that these were performances carried out in the context of a show, but over the years through carrying out street actions and performances in the daytime without problems, I have come to realise that the attitude towards being publicly effeminate or dressing in drag in the street, is much more tolerant here in Valencia than in the U.K. where it often provokes physical and verbal abuse.

We were intrigued by the scene and decided to film a series of interviews and performances with local *transformistas*<sup>109</sup> and drag queens to question them about their views on gender and identity, and to find out more about the history of the scene and why these shows were so popular, not only amongst gays but also with the heterosexual population of the city.

It has been part of my practice since the 1990s to record interviews with other transgender performers to learn from their experiences and because as a fellow trans artist I believe I can represent their voices more faithfully. I see these interviews as important historical documents since until quite recently there was very little media representation of these practices and it was often patronising, unsympathetic, sensationalistic or misrepresentative. Anna Maria had previously produced queer shorts and documentaries and organised the filming.

In order to trace a genealogy, we also researched and contacted an earlier generation of performers who were still working and the resulting interviews revealed an interesting evolution in the scene. The older performers like Margot and Paco España referred to themselves as *transformistas* distinguishing themselves from the younger drag queens, who for them, were just gays who put on a dress to lip synch and show off.



Fig. 3.2 Paco España (2005)

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109 Transformistas are female impersonators specialised in imitating famous actresses and singers.



By way of contrast they emphasised the fact that they were actors, artists who played a part, generally singing live and imitating famous Spanish *folclóricas*<sup>110</sup>, divas and sex kittens.

For them, their sexuality had nothing to do with their performance. This, of course, may have reflected the changing times as many of this older generation had started working under the Franco regime or in the early days of the transition. For the younger generation, these distinctions were less important and many recognised the older artists as influences.

Most of them were reproducing a stereotypical vision of femininity which included fashionable clothes and make-up, padding and tucking but others, such as the queer feminist performer and activist Rampova, had a more radical view and a more gender-queer look. “It is important to clarify the difference of words that have infiltrated into Spanish, like drag queen, because, although I live in a monarchy, I am a Republican<sup>111</sup>, I don’t dress up like a queen because I consider all queens to be very ugly”

Rampova had bravely survived this change in regime, having been imprisoned several times for being homosexual under the Franco dictatorship and in the transition, and in 1980 started the cabaret group Ploma Dos, whose radical work carried “a political punch”<sup>112</sup> which annoyed both right wing conservatives and easy-going leftists and allowed them to bluntly criticize communist and fascist totalitarianism, through the expression of a refined and caustic effeminacy.



Fig. 3.3 Rampova

Our shared interest in combining popular cultural forms with social critique led us to begin a collaboration which continues to this day and we regularly perform together in cabaret shows. Thanks to Rampova I discovered Spanish underground culture, in particular the films, music and popular female icons from Rampova’s youth. And that’s how I became fascinated by strong female singers like Dolores Vargas (La Terremoto) and Antoñita Peñuela who interpreted the rumba catalana, a fusion of flamenco and pop which had become popular in the 1960s.

110 Female singers or dancers of popular flamenco styles.

111 A reference to the left wing Spanish Republic (1931-39). Rampova in interview for *Mondo Valenciano* (2003)

112 Juan Vicente Aliaga, *Demasculinizing: Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity in Spanish Art and Culture in Hispanic (LGT) Masculinities in Transition* (Peter Lang, New York, 2014) p.171



Furthermore Rampova introduced me to local musicians Natalia Perez (who played cello) and Luis Monter a Spanish guitarist with whom I began to collaborate and study flamenco rhythms and forms. A few months later I gave my first performance with this musical formation as El Tornado, my transgender flamenco alter ego, at a benefit organised by Rampova and some other friends for a trans activist, Joel Maldonado, who was returning to Bolivia. The fusion of rumba rhythms with my musical influences and extravagant make-up and dress was a success and led to a fruitful period of experimentation. I was fascinated by the performative possibilities of the use of the body to produce rhythm, and began to use hand clapping, finger snapping and *taconeando*<sup>113</sup> as gestural forms.

Composing bilingual songs in different flamenco styles, which mixed the traditional Spanish cadence with the strange modulation of the English language, I introduced rap over the rhythms produced by body, guitar and castanets. These fusions allowed me to express my ideas in a language the public understood whilst giving me the possibility to improvise in my own language. Form and content fused in a musical hybrid between South and North.

### *1 ¡Aquí! 2 ¡Ahora! 3 ¡Mismo! ¡GO!*<sup>114</sup>

In 2004 I began working with a new guitarist, Jesús “La Rata”, who favoured more serious and melancholy flamenco styles like *seguirillas*, *soleás* and *cañas* and encouraged me to immerse myself in the *cante jondo*.<sup>115</sup>

Flamenco is, of course, a form which is the result of the coexistence of gypsy and Andalusian cultures and as recent studies have suggested may even include African styles<sup>116</sup> which were incorporated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when Seville and Cádiz were important slave markets.

Flamenco is the music of oppressed people, and its visceral expression of pain and suffering for me resembles the angry passion of punk music, the voice of disaffected white youth which emerged in the economic slump of late 1970s Britain when unemployment was at an all time high.

Therefore I decided to experiment mixing flamenco and punk and called this cultural fusion “Flunk”, which in U.S. slang means to fail (an exam), in an ironic reference to the music's failure to fit neatly into any category, and its embrace of a queer aesthetic of camp inauthenticity. In my lyrics I dramatised my position as an outsider, a criminal encroaching on the sacred territory of flamenco, whose blood was tainted, whose very right to exist was in question, as expressed in the song **Delito** (Crime):

“Lo llevo dentro, en la sangre, lo llevo ¡escrito en la sangre!

I carry it inside, scratched within the cells of my blood

¡delito tu baile! ¡delito tu voz!”

It was perhaps a way of deflecting criticism in a flamenco scene which, I was soon to discover, was quite defensive of its traditions and often homophobic, but it also gave me a means to express my feelings about the reactions of heteronormative society to gender dissidence.

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<sup>113</sup> Rhythm generated by the heel and toe.

<sup>114</sup> A trailer of this performance is online at <https://vimeo.com/246847063>

<sup>115</sup> Cante jondo (trans) deep song. The oldest, most primitive and passionate form of flamenco.

<sup>116</sup> Musicologist Raúl Rodríguez traces the African origins of flamenco rhythms and the term “fandango” in the documentary *Gurumbé, canciones de tu memoria negra* (dir. Miguel Ángel Rosales, 2016)

Another song *Fuera* (Off!) was an ironic commentary on the fact that for centuries society condemned us to be contained by the stage “one of the few spaces where the unspeakable could occur.”<sup>117</sup>



Fig. 3.4 1 ¡Aquí! 2 ¡Ahora! 3 ¡Mismo! ¡GO! (2004)

The first public performance of Flunk took place in the abandoned lot beneath my flat, in the centre of Valencia, an area where drug deals and prostitution are rife. This contested space seemed the perfect context for the performance since the improbable fusion of my drag aesthetics and bilingual lyrics with a classical instrument (the use of cello in flamenco was virtually unheard of in that period), and the rhythm and melodies of flamenco did not fit comfortably into the mostly traditional and heteronormative musical scene. Our audience was a mixture of the usual occupants of the space and invited friends.

As part of the action we distributed a pamphlet explaining the action with song lyrics and our manifesto: “Three musicians are playing in the street. People pass, sometimes they give money, a camera is recording. What is really happening? Is it a pop video? ¡Go! Explores the meaning of looking, of “performance” and the barrier between the audience and the “artist”.”<sup>118</sup>

### *Invocación de las Santas Traviesas*<sup>119</sup>

I was particularly interested in one flamenco musical style called the *caña* with its haunting almost liturgical cadence, and wrote a tribute in that style to the Andalusian artist Ocaña, based on a play of words between Ocaña and *caña*, which became the basis for a short film.

Ocaña was a gay and trans activist, travesti and performer who was immortalised in **Ocaña: retrato intermitente** by Ventura Pons (1978) a documentary which includes two amazing performances.

One takes place in a cemetery and is an homage to Federico Garcia Lorca where Ocaña, dressed in full flamenco drag, sings a *soleá* dedicated to the poet.

The other performance takes place as part of the staging of a procession of La Macarena, one of Ocaña’s sculpted Madonnas, and includes *travestis* carrying candles and priests whipping altar boys, in broad daylight in the streets of Barcelona.

<sup>117</sup> Cabello/Carceller *Lost in Transition un poema performativo* ( IVAM, Valencia, 2016) p 154

<sup>118</sup> Graham Bell Tornado, 1 ¡Aquí! 2 ¡Ahora! 3 ¡Mismo! ¡GO! pamphlet (2004) published in Spanish - my translation.

<sup>119</sup> The resulting film is available online at <https://vimeo.com/37656870>

The apotheosis occurs when Ocaña appears on a balcony dressed in drag like a *claveriesa*<sup>120</sup> and sings a cappella to the Madonna.

I was fascinated by Ocaña's mix of Catholic traditions and sexual dissidence. His work was an example of a queer subversion of religious imagery, a practice also common in Latin America, where there are Saints and Madonnas of prostitutes, transexuals and queers. In these colonised countries where the Catholic religion was imposed, the original pagan deities were often incorporated into the imagery of the church through a process of syncretism where the original deity became fused with a saint. In many contemporary western societies where religion no longer plays an important part in creating images, the media has created new icons in the form of film stars, models and pop singers which cater to a deep human need for worship. I discovered a shrine to this pagan kitsch iconography in the bedroom of Rampova's flat which was papered from floor to ceiling with images of female film stars such as Marisol, Marlene Dietrich and Elizabeth Taylor.

The flat, which Rampova had recently redecorated, seemed the perfect place to film a live performance of my tribute to Ocaña. Every available surface had been painted in bright psychedelic colours including the furnishings, walls and ceiling, and amongst this kitsch excess I constructed an altar to Ocaña where I paid homage to him and other artists who were an important part of my trans-genealogy.

The resulting performance was an invocation of these outsider trans saints, and the psychedelic surroundings of Rampova's flat inspired me to edit the film in the style of underground film-maker Kenneth Anger who had made **Invocation of my Demon Brother** in 1969.

Ocaña<sup>121</sup>- Madre de la caña. Es a ti que debo todo,  
a ti, que no te vendiste-a los mercaderes.  
Ocaña, es a ti y tus santos, Holy Holly Holly y el beato Wayne / Jayne,  
te veo en la luz, la luz de la Divina,  
David y Bunny; y te veo quemando(te)!

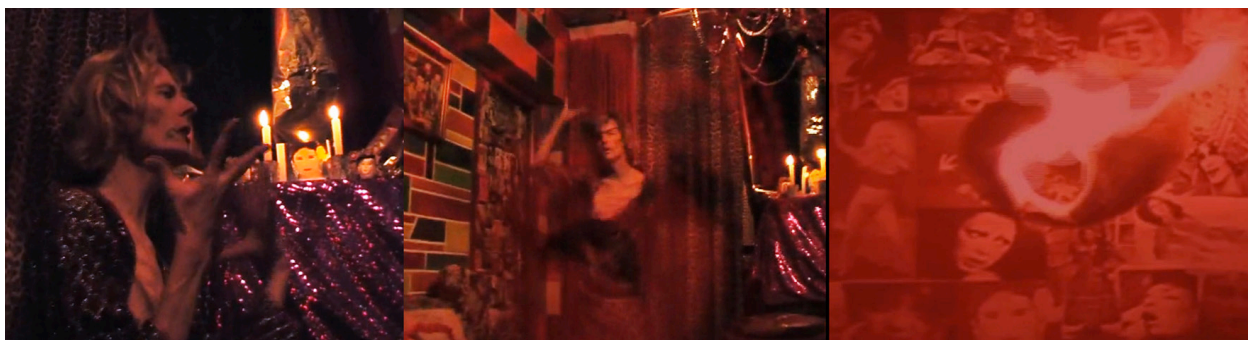


Fig. 3.5 *Invocación de las Santas Traviesas* (2005)

The edited film **Invocación de las Santas Traviesas** (Invocation of the Wayward Saints) mentions transgender punk legend Wayne County, underground film-star the Goddess Bunny and the performance artist Divine David who appear alongside other trans performers who have inspired me, such as Bloodlips, Divine, Holly Woodlawn, Jackie Curtis, Transformer and, of course, Rampova.

120 The *claveriesa* is a woman who dresses the Madonna for procession and wears a Spanish mantilla and black lace.

121 (Translation): Ocaña, mother of the caña, it is to you, that I owe everything, you who didn't sell yourself, to the merchant- owners of the temple, Ocaña. It is to you and your saints, Holy Holly Holly and the beatific Wayne/Jayne, I see you in the light, the light of the Divine, David and Bunny, and I see you flaming!, burning!



In Ocaña's adopted city of Barcelona in 2010 a group of artists from the local post-porn scene including Quimera Rosa, Post Op and Mistress Liar carried out **Oh-Kaña!** a transgressive homage to the artist where they took over public space in the same way Ocaña had done in an action which included sadomasochism and simulated sex.

At the end of the film I included a short biographical note on each artist in Spanish since many of them are unknown outside of the contexts where they lived and worked.

As Gloria Anzaldúa claimed, queers, as the "supreme crossers of cultures"<sup>122</sup> have an important role to play in linking people with each other, therefore I reproduce that trans genealogy here:

- **Bloolips (U.K.):** a radical theatre troupe who began performing in the 1970s in the era of the Gay Liberation front and continued working until the 1990s. They made musical shows with spectacular outfits, using elements of drag although as radical feminists they never imitated women.
- **The Goddess Bunny (U.S.A.):** drag superstar of the underground film scene in Los Angeles, who despite her medical problems (she has polio) performs and tap dances in the queer punk scene of North Hollywood. She has been the subject of a French documentary about her life and work and appears in the films **The Drift** (Aes Nihil, 2002) and **The Goddess Bunny channels Shakespeare** (Aes Nihil, 1989).
- **Jayne/Wayne County (U.S.A.):** singer and actress. Known as the godmother of punk she began taking female hormones at the height of her success with the song **Fuck Off** (1977). She appeared in Derek Jarman's film **Jubilee** (1977) and Rosa von Prauhheim's **City of Lost Souls** (1983). Her biography **Man enough to be a Woman** (1996) tells how she started performing in the streets of Atlanta in the early 1960s "wrecking" straight people with her outrageous look and attitude.
- **Jackie Curtis (U.S.A., 1947-1985):** Warhol Superstar, playwright and drag performer, Her plays include **Glamour, Glory, Gold** and **Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit** and she is the subject of the documentary **Superstar in a Housedress** (Craig Highberger, 2004).
- **Divine David (U.K.):** a transgender punk artist whose shows criticise the commercialisation of the gay scene often causing extreme reactions from his audience. He presented two television programmes about contemporary art before killing off his character in an ice skating spectacular in 2000 and started performing under his own name as David Hoyle.
- **Divine (U.S.A., 1945-1988):** film star and disco queen. Divine was an outrageous drag presence in many of John Waters early films including **Pink Flamingoes** (1972), **Female Trouble** (1974) and **Hairspray** (1988).
- **Glenn Meadmore (Canada):** singer and actor. His musical style is a mix of gay country, punk and electro. Records include **Hot, Horny and Born Again** (1998) and **Squawbread** (1985). He has a cameo in Bruce la Bruce's **Hustler White** and plays Audrey Hepburn in **The Drift** (Aes Nihil, 1989).

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122 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands, La Frontera* (Aunt Lute, 1987) p.106



- Ocaña (Spain, 1946-1984): singer, artist, legend who died when his carnival costume caught on fire. Some of his stunning performances and interpretations of flamenco can be seen in the documentary **Ocaña: an Intermittent Portrait** (Ventura Pons, 1978).
- Rampova: founder member of the cabaret group Ploma Dos (1980-1998) who hosted the shows **La Pinteta Rebel** and **Polster-Gai** on Radio Klara. She has appeared in various documentaries about the repression of homosexuals in Franco's regime and during the Transition. She writes songs and articles for the gay press as well as painting and drawing comics which are an acid critique of heteronormative society with a strong political commitment.
- Transformer (U.K., 1965-2002): drag artist who stood as a candidate for the 1997 general election, hosted the Erotic Oscars for many years and won the Alternative Miss World competition twice. He created surreal sculptural outfits which incorporated furniture, sound systems and mechanical devices.
- Holly Woodlawn (Puerto Rico/USA, 1946-2015): the drag superstar of Andy Warhol's movies **Trash** (1970) and **Women in Revolt** (1971). Her autobiography **A Low Life in High Heels** is a hilarious read.

### ¡Fuera! Homenaje a Ocaña

I showed extracts from **Invocación de las Santas Traviesas** as part of my impromptu performance **¡Fuera! Homenaje a Ocaña** (Get Off, a Homage to Ocaña) in the **Tropicamp** conference, organised at MACBA in November 2012, which challenged “the feminist, gay, lesbian and queer historiography of the English-speaking world...comparing them to the micro-political production of the South.”<sup>123</sup>



Fig. 3.6 *¡Fuera! Homenaje a Ocaña* (2015)

My late incorporation in the event meant I had to prepare the performance overnight and decided to use the opportunity to talk not only about Ocaña and Rampova as I had been invited to do, but also talk about my own position as an immigrant.

<sup>123</sup> Beatriz Preciado, in the programme of the conference *Campceptualismos del sur - Tropicamp, políticas performativas y subalternidad* (MACBA, 2012)

To illustrate some of the difficulties I had encountered, I sang **La Tierra de O/A** (pronounced wah! as an exclamation) a song I had written based on the gendered nature of the Spanish language. I had always wondered if the use of a language where the words are divided into masculine and feminine, and the way in which the feminine is invisibilised in the plural forms, affects the psychology of a country.

The song seemed perfect for the conference as it satirised the modern obsession (and incomprehension) with exotic native cultures, telling a neo-colonialist story of corporate power over a driving jazz rhythm:

“Everybody’s talking that jive talk o/a o/ao/a o/a ¡o/a!  
Llegamos a la tierra de o/a o/ao/a o/a ¡o/a!  
Todo es tan exótico/a. Everybody exótico/a  
We’ve invited you here as potential investors  
to show you the excavations  
being carried out under this Andean glacier,  
beneath which gold has been discovered.  
So, it’s going to be melted down,  
the river polluted and the natives  
who live downstream will probably  
become infected and die...  
EVERYBODY EXOTICO/A  
You can take it, but you can’t leave it.  
Believe me, you’re gonna believe it!  
Aquí no hay marinero/as, cocinero/as, verdulero/as, astillero/as.  
Only cars, malls and bingos.  
Cars here, cars there, cars everywhere in the tierra de O/A”<sup>124</sup>

The audience response was overwhelming. After two days of academics talking about cuir<sup>125</sup> artists, the physical presence of their “object of study”<sup>126</sup> along with my direct and uninhibited presentation made quite an impact. On this occasion I used the flamenco forms of the *caña* and the *rumba* to illustrate my discourse.

Of course my interpretation of flamenco could be seen as an usurpation of the form, a colonisation of an exotic cultural form by a white northern European searching for authenticity. “Is it possible to go back and forth between cultures when only some can be tourists while others find borders at every step? Is there hybridity or has it been transformed into neopopulist marketing?”<sup>127</sup>

The relationship between queer practices and the exotic<sup>128</sup> is discussed in the book **Disidentifications** by José Esteban Muñoz in his critique of the work of queer performer and film maker Jack Smith.

Smith’s fascination with the Dominican actress Maria Montez who portrayed exotic natives in Hollywood films of the 1940s such as **Arabian Nights** (1942) and **Cobra Woman** (1944) was expressed in his work through a disidentification with the

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124 Graham Bell Tornado, *La Tierra de O/A*, released as part of the EP by Gran Tour La Tierra de Wah! (2013). The central “rap” section of the song was sung in both english and spanish- for reasons of space only the english version is reproduced here. The full song can be heard online at <https://grantour.bandcamp.com/album/la-tierra-de-wah>

125 “Cuir” is the politicised and decolonial version of queer, widely used in Latin America.

126 Graham Bell Tornado, *¡Fuera! Homenaje a Ocaña* available on line at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YaDdP9IR1w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YaDdP9IR1w)

127 Cecilia Flaschland *Música y territorio ¿todo lo solido se desvanece en el aire?* in Archipiélago cuadernos de cultura 73-4, 2006 p.51

128 I will continue to explore my relationship with the exotic in chapter 5: Participatory Rituals and the Shaman Travesti

fetishistic representation of the other, the exotic, which led him to create “rich anti-normative treasure troves of queer possibility”.<sup>129</sup>

Smith believed that art, like everything, should be free and described his work as baroque: “I learned baroque art. I taught myself. I didn’t know until recently that that’s what I’d been doing. I just knew that it was an awful lot of work, that it was more work than others had to do, and I couldn’t really keep up... There’s an idealism in baroque art that is not in modern art”.<sup>130</sup> Smith survived in a very precarious manner but nevertheless managed to produce an invaluable body of work.

I see a lot of similarities between his baroque art practice and mine since we both carry out a critique of capitalism and the art establishment and our mixed media approach combines performance with film and music in camp extravaganzas. Smith recycled trash in his multi media performances, incorporating the detritus of consumer culture, “transforming life into art, and he managed to turn this into some kind of experience which could be shared so that people experienced with him some kind of freedom from being oppressed by the system which turned everything into a product”.<sup>131</sup>



Fig. 3.7 Jack Smith in the film *Love Thing* (2012)

At the time the importance of this approach, went largely unrecognised, but his work would be rediscovered in the post modern era of the 1990s, when this trans-disciplinary hybrid type of performance could be appreciated.

His most famous work, the film **Flaming Creatures** (1963) was a camp display of polymorphous sexuality where assumptions about gender were destroyed in a collage of images where breasts and male genitalia popped out of dresses and the boundaries between bodies were dissolved.

129 José Esteban. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota University Press, 1999) p.x

130 Jack Smith, *Historical treasures* in Nayland Blake, *In a different light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice* (City Lights, 1995) p.289

131 Sylvère Lotringer in the documentary film *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* (Mary Jordan, 2007)

The film was banned and became a cause celebre which haunted Smith for the rest of his life. As a reaction to what he saw as the commodification of his work, he never finished a film project again, instead editing his films and slide shows live in real time, in unique and unrepeatable performance actions where he provided the soundtrack, sets and commentary.<sup>132</sup>

“After Flaming Creatures, Smiths filmmaking increasingly became an element of an integrated live practise that fused film, performance, photographic slide shows and music into complex hybrid and partially improvised theatrical events. A central strategy of smiths ingrated practise was the transgression of the discrete boundaries between both the audience and the performance, and between the performance and his everyday life.”<sup>133</sup>

My practice is similarly excessive and open-ended, and attempts to avoid the processes of solidification which would close down its transformative potential. I also recycle my personal archive of video footage in presentations, performances and exhibitions, recontextualising it in an ever evolving discourse which, like life itself, only ends when the final curtain falls.

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132 I made a short film *I Know where Jack Smith's Dress Lives* (2001) based on an interview with one of Smith's neighbours at the time who lent me a dress Smith gave her which I used in a location shoot for the short. It is available online at <https://vimeo.com/37364961>

133 Duncan Reekie, *Secret Weapons of Underground Cinema in Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation* (ed Lieven de Cuatrecasas, Ruben de Roo, Karle Vanhaesebrouck, NAI Publishers 2011)



**PART TWO**

**NATURAL HYSTERIA**

# CHAPTER IV

## ECOSEXUALITY

- *Blue Wedding to the Sea*
- *Silver Wedding to the Rocks*
- *The Black Wedding to the Coal*

The last three chapters have been a brief hysteria of my early years, focusing on concepts and work which in some way have a relevance to this project. It is from this point on that the period I call Natural Hysteria begins, a period in which my work became more focused on environmental concerns. A reaction to a sequence of events in my life which can perhaps be summed up in the following quote: “It’s entirely conceivable that we will one day live miserably in a thoroughly ravaged world in which lesbians and gay men can marry and serve openly in the army and that’s it”<sup>134</sup>

In July of 2009 I travelled to Madrid for the *El Arte es Acción* festival organised by Marcel.lí Antúnez Roca, an event which brought an incredible line up of performance art to Spain including Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Tania Bruguera and Ron Athey. Annie Sprinkle was also on the bill with her partner Beth Stephens to premiere their performance **Dirty Sexecology**. This performance marked a before and after in my life, making me aware that other queer performance artists were also deeply concerned about the environment and were using their voices to bring attention to the crisis. “We engage metaphor in order to invite people to approach environmental (issues)”<sup>135</sup>

Up until then I knew Annie Sprinkle because of the censorship scandal which had broken out in the U.S.A. over (supposed) public funding of her **Post Porn Modernist Show** (1989-96), as part of which she had invited the public to inspect her cervix in what was known as the **Public Cervix Announcement**. She had popularised the term post-porn in the 1990s to describe a feminist and politically aware pornography produced by women or other subjects who are not usually seen as fit subject material: queers, the disabled etc. When I saw her talking about her recent work, her incredible positivity was infectious. I was intrigued by the latest performances she had created with partner in art and love, Beth Stephens.

As a renegade science student, the **Dirty Sexecology** performance really struck a chord with me. Beth and Annie began by using wall charts and graphs in the manner of a science class to illustrate how a significant part of the population is ecosexual without knowing it.

Their popular science approach referenced the work of Dr. Alfred Kinsey who, in the sexually repressed and homophobic 1950’s, demonstrated to the American population the existence of a surprisingly large amount of same sex activity in their midst.

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134 Tony Kushner in Gosine, A. *Pink Greens: Ecoqueers organise in Toronto* Alternatives 27:3 (2001) available online at <http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/sustainable-living/pink-greens> - Accessed 23/10/17

135 Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, *On Becoming Appalachian Moonshine* in Performance Research, “On Ecology” A Journal of Performing Arts, Volume 17 Issue 4, 2012



Fig. 4.1 Beth Stephens & Annie Sprinkle, *Dirty Sexecology* (2009)

They went on to explain their **25 Ways to Make Love to the Earth** and by the end of the performance were rolling around naked in dirt. The jouissance of sex and desire oozed from their performance, threatening to contaminate our toxic worldview with their infectious optimism.

“Dirt” and “filth” are terms which hold a sexual connotation, Sprinkle and Stephens reinvested these terms with a radical meaning, forcing the audience to look at ourselves and see how alienated we have become from our origins. The modern obsession with cleanliness is part of an alienation from our bodies, their smells, their fluids, their excretions that ultimately form the basis of this dirt, which is like the soil we eventually return to, and which provides us with the nutrients we need to survive. In his **Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages** Georges Vigarello describes the peculiar period of the seventeenth century when it was believed that water was a danger since it opened up the pores to infection. His study shows how cleanliness is a “history of the refining of behaviour, and of the growth of private space and of self discipline: the care of oneself for one’s one sake... it is the history of the progressive pressure of civilisation on the world of the sensations.”<sup>136</sup>

In contrast in *Dirty Sexecology* the relationship between the elements in an ecosystem become imbued with a sensuality which challenges the modern idea of the self as separate and somehow superior from nature. “We’re proposing a third alternative to Earth as Enemy Force and Earth as Mother. It’s a whole NEW paradigm. It’s positively revolutionary! It’s Earth as LOVER!”<sup>137</sup>

The performance was incredibly moving and was a timely wake up call. Ecosex is a philosophy which unites the fields of feminism, sexuality and ecology to make us aware of our bodies as physical entities in the here and NOW, in a world full of poisons, a world on the brink, a world which we may still be in time to save and, if we act now, may be able to support our race and the millions of other species who share this planet with us, for many more years.

It is time for a radical change of system and it seems unlikely we can expect such change to come from above when commercial interests have too strong a hold on the global economy and politicians are simply the puppets of the system they represent. Apathy and the belief that we have no power to change things will keep that system in place unless an organised resistance sets out to challenge the system.

<sup>136</sup> G. Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) p.2

<sup>137</sup> Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle in the performance *Dirty Sexecology* (2009)

“In this regard, contemporary visual culture at its best can play a critical role in raising awareness of the impact, showing the environmental abuse and human costs, of fossil fuel’s everyday operations, mediating and encouraging a rebellious activist culture... Such visual culture-whether documentary photography, indie media photos, or artistic projects... invites us to participate in what Isabelle Stengers terms the “cosmopolitical present” alluding to the progressive composition of a common world, where commonality is predicated upon thinking of “those who are so impacted by out-of-control, psychotic, bottom-of-the-barrel resource development, not just here in Canada but globally...”<sup>138</sup>

I believe that artists can contribute to that resistance movement using metaphors, dialectics and aesthetics to reveal other futures, other imaginaries, other lives and ways of living.

Annie and Beth represent an inspiring example since they started to work together in 2005 as The Love Art Laboratory in “response to the violence of war, the anti-gay marriage movement, and our prevailing culture of greed. Our projects are symbolic gestures intended to help make the world a more tolerant, sustainable, and peaceful place.”<sup>139</sup>

One of their main projects was a seven year cycle of ecosexual weddings inspired in part by Linda M. Montano’s **14 Years of Living Art**. Each year was themed according to one of the 7 chakras and its corresponding part of the body, colour and a specific aspect of human behaviour.

In each ceremony they married each other and a different natural element in order to champion the rights of queer couples to marry and encourage us to develop a more empathetic relationship to the Earth.

Theirs was a subversion of a ceremony which in a hetero-patriarchal society had historically celebrated the union of a man and a woman and symbolized the moment in which the bride recognized her submission before the groom.

“The weddings almost represent an occupy love movement; making it clear that the protections afforded to some should be extended to all, including the environment... Our projects aim to instil hope, create an antidote to fear, and act as a call for action. We are interested in how art can help create a more generous, more open society while pushing against the boundaries of what is considered art and what is considered life.”<sup>140</sup>

The weddings were public events fruit of a collaboration between the Love Art Laboratory and the invited artists who donated their performance to the brides. Beth and Annie, at the El Arte es Acción festival, invited us to take part in the **Blue Wedding to the Sea** which they were celebrating in Venice later that summer.

Thus began a collaboration which reached an incredible and highly creative climax when I officiated their **Black Wedding to the Coal** two years later in Gijon.

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138 T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual culture and Environment today* (Sternberg Press, 2017) p.58

139 Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle <https://loveartlab.ucsc.edu/> - Accessed 16/12/17

140 Ibid <http://sexecology.org/education/visiting-artist-lecture-presentations/> - Accessed 23/5/17



## *Blue Wedding to the Sea*<sup>141</sup>

For this performance I prepared a Blue Wedding book and worked out a performance which would include Anna Maria who, despite the fact she had never performed before, agreed to dress up and display the pop up wedding book which would illustrate the text my performance was based on.

The ceremony took place on 28<sup>th</sup> of August with the collaboration of over 40 invited artists and was part of the programming of the Fear Pavilion in the Venice Biennale. It started with a procession around one of the huge ship building cranes of the Arsenale followed by an evocative performance by sex activist and author Carol Queen who called the four winds to witness the wedding. Then the Spanish queer theorist Beatriz Preciado, who was coordinating and officiating the wedding as its “Anti Priest” (in a rather fetching hat with huge blue bunny ears), read a short introduction and the performances began. There were sexy blue mermaids who engaged in erotic games, the Fluxus artist Harry Ruhe exhibited his customized underwear and Lady Monster did a burlesque act.

We performed our tribute to the brides with our animated pop-up wedding book which illustrated my text **Radical Ecology**<sup>142</sup>: “Identity Politics are a capitalist smokescreen. The structure of power is based on a lack of respect not solely for those of us who fail to conform to the demands of the dominant power structure: the poor, the mad, women, the transgender /queer – but also a lack of respect for the ecosystem that supports us. Because the basic needs of the human – food, heat, water and a decent living environment- are not considered to have a high enough value in the capitalist system, the resources of the world are being plundered at a rate which will soon convert the bio-diversity of thousands of ecosystems into one huge concrete jungle. Ultimately capitalism sees the real estate value as the most important asset these ecosystems have. And as long as we have genetic samples, a few frozen specimens and some beautiful nature documentary footage of the millions of lifeforms we have destroyed it is not important that they no longer actually exist.” I then sang “What have you done to deserve this?” a twisted musical tribute to the Pet Shop Boys that I had recorded with Kapi Martinez. I customised the rap in the middle for the occasion dedicating it to Beth and Annie.

After us there was an amazing performance from German drag performer Tim Stuttgen who performed a ritual castration before throwing his cock into the canal and diving in after it. Throughout the ceremony Natalie Loveless was wrapping her head in roll after roll of fishing gut until her whole head was a huge plastic bubble. As the ceremony drew to an end she immersed her head in a bucket of blue water and let out a huge long wail as she emerged, spraying liquid all around. When she cut the tightly bound gut from her face, the flesh was heavily lined and distorted with scars showing the depth of pain, in reference to the use of the sea as a dumping ground and the island of plastic bags floating in the depths of many Oceans and seas.

Once the ceremony was over, we all gathered our belongings and began the walk back to the city in a gaggle of languages, colours and costume. Leaving the dock behind we passed alongside the lagoon on the metal walkway that connected it to the maze of streets and alleys that form the city. It was still hot and our route led through deserted streets but as we approached the centre, our costumes began to draw attention and a second more public part of the ceremony began, this time outside the safe protection of the Biennial and its Institutions.

141 Photos and a video based on the performance can be seen here: <https://loveartlab.ucsc.edu/2016/06/21/blue-wedding-to-the-sea-video-and-photos/> - Accessed 16/12/17

142 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDV1XJ8ZE8c>



**Fig. 4.2** *Blue Wedding to the Sea* (2009)

The reception was to be celebrated on the terraza of a pizzeria set in a beautiful square, overlooked by an incredible renaissance church. It didn't take long for our presence to be noted in the square. Julius Kaiser, a drag king performer from Rome, came over and warned me to be careful since we were under surveillance. My rather louche codpiece and attached string vest pants, held up by two thin straps of white braiding which act as braces, was all I had on (apart from the wig on my shoulder) so in a sitting position it looked as if I was practically naked, a fact which did not escape the notice of the Italian police officers watching us. In amongst the local crowd and tourists, we must have looked like a really bizarre group.

It was a real “grim reality” check: in a busy square of a tourist mecca, I, like others in the group, were “sitting ducks” in Berlusconi's fascist media state, a country where the Catholic Church still exerts a strong repressive force, and whose laws on public decency I was completely unaware of. I don't change my clothes, or take my make-up off after a performance because it is important to me that the world outside of the performance space is exposed to the transgender side of my personality. Years of heckling in Scotland have made me aware of the risks involved in wearing make-up and costume in public spaces so normally if I'm in the street I glide quickly past bemused passersby who often do a double take, asking themselves if they really did see what they think they did. These micro-political acts of public exposure are part of my radical drag politics, a contemporary form of “wrecking”: challenging peoples' assumptions about gender and appearing in situations where we are not supposed to.

After a slice of pizza, Beth and Annie passed around their wedding rings, inviting us to shout out our wishes for the sea we are about to marry. Then Beatriz led us in chorus as we took our vows to love, honour and protect our bride, the Ocean.



## *Silver Wedding to the Rocks*

In the summer of 2011, the Love Art Laboratory returned to Spain for a series of talks, ecosex workshops and performances organised in part by our good friend, the performer and author, Diana Pornoterrorista. The **Silver Wedding** took place on 29<sup>th</sup> of June at the Centre of Contemporary Culture in Barcelona.<sup>143</sup>

In the last decade a flourishing post-porn scene had developed in Spain with a strong base in Barcelona where it had been influenced by queer theory and the local punk scene.

The performers at the ceremony were a mix of queer punks, post-porn practitioners and artists who had come from all over Europe. Annie and Beth sat on a raised stage in the middle of the patio of the CCCB which was surrounded by photographers.

This created a strange atmosphere as if we were at a celebrity wedding with paparazzi in attendance, desperate to get that iconic shot for the press.

In those first frenzied moments, the photographers seemed like vultures feeding on the moment and became unwitting performers creating a barrier between the stage and the audience. Fortunately the majority seemed to disappear after the initial attack, perhaps rushing off to reach their print deadlines.

The ceremony began with an amazing performance by *Las Criadas* (The Maids) who performed **Stone Walls**. Dressed in silver gowns and veils, which concealed the fact that their “faces” were, in fact, masks artfully placed on the back of their heads, their movements had a surreal quality which was strangely unsettling.

They had previously passed out pebbles to everyone in the audience and began their performance with a searing indictment of how society treats those, like women and queers who do not conform to its rules.

Then they invited the audience to practice one of the traditional methods of showing the community’s disapproval and rejection of its outcasts, by “stoning” them.

A hail of pebbles fell around them as they collapsed to the floor. This was one of the most moving moments of the ceremony.

For our performance, Anna Maria was wearing a metal butchers apron and tricorne hat and I was dressed in drag with a back to front vintage silver dress open to the navel and an ethereal metal headpiece made by Anna Maria which framed my eye with a spiral extension which ended in a jewel. We had prepared a text in Spanish and English to introduce our action:

“We come here to this Silver Wedding to the Rocks to return the seeds of ecosexuality you planted in our hearts. These seeds” -at which point Anna Maria took out a branch with pussy shaped seeds and gave it to Beth and Annie- “formed part of the Ecogender exhibition you inspired, bringing together the work of artists from all over the world. This earth comes from the cave where I carried out my last experiment in sexecological research, and these rocks represent the protective stone circle we construct to bless this wedding.”

The stones had formed part of Anna Maria’s installation in the Ecogender exhibition and while I continued performing onstage she placed them, together with a mixture of the earth, at regular intervals around it.

In this way she created a protective circle which was a symbolic representation of the Palaeolithic stone circles which I grew up with in the North East of Scotland. Meanwhile I burst into song to the tune of **Anarchy in the UK** by the Sex Pistols:

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143 The whole ceremony is available online at <http://laquimerarosa.blogspot.com.es/2011/07/> Our performance starts in the 28<sup>th</sup> minute - Accessed 16/12/17

“I was an antichrist!!! Now I am ecosexual. I know what i want and I know how to get it. I want to destroy patriarchy and I, I wanna be ecosexy. Eco Sexuality. What lies beyond sado-post-porno? Trans-evolutionary-tantric bliss for you and me!!! It’s here. It’s now!!! And it ROCKS”

And then I continued speaking: “This ceremony is a celebration of EX-centricity. Men no longer form the centre of the universe. The authority of the patriarchal voice has been challenged by trannies, fags, dykes, queers and drag queens. We, ecosexual beings, far from the HETEROCENTRIC universe, do not rest happy in our marginality. No, no, no! We have come to embrace the centre, the HOMEopathic centre -the centre of the Earth- the rocks, the lava, the substrata which supports us, more and more of US. More and more and more, until the rocks themselves CRACK!!! OH, WHEN WILL WE STOP BURDENING THE ROCKS with our psychotic patriarcheology? It’s so tired, so old, so-so tired and old. As old as the hills you might say, but let the hills be!”

I then repeated this text in Spanish ending with the phrase: “until the rocks themselves explode!”

At this point once more I burst into song. This time in the flamenco style of the “caña” whose beautiful melodic structure circles round on itself hypnotically. There are various types of caña but in one popular lyric, the words are the lament of a poor agricultural worker, the trials and tribulations suffered at the hands of the land owning class as he is sent to war to fight for the king. I had adapted the lyric to give it an ecological message: “Tú que tienes muchas tierras,

pero no te pertenecen, las tienes prestadas...  
y los venenos que echas quedan por tus herederos  
y puedes confesar tus pecados,  
pero los pecados contra la Tierra no te perdonarán!  
Los daños que haces, los haces a ellos”<sup>144</sup>



**Fig.4.3 Silver Wedding to the Rocks (2011)**

144 Translation: You, who own so much land. It does not belong to you! You have it on loan... and the poison you administer will remain there for your heirs. And you can confess your sins, but the sins you commit against the Earth will not be forgiven. The damage you wreak, you wreak upon them.



I ended the performance singing along with a recording of the choir from Xàtiva:

*“A tu Dios/a Tierra, Reza por Ella<sup>145</sup> ...*

Ecosexuality is the height of ex-centricity! Love for each other and the Earth!!!”

The eccentric is a particularly queer figure, who represents an extreme form of individuality which rebels against the dull conformity of society, often exploring sartorial excess as a statement of intent. For generations outrageous homosexuals like Quentin Crisp, Oscar Wilde and others challenged the heteronormative rules of behaviour and fashion with a public exhibition of non-conformism.

The weddings were like a public celebration of this nonconformism with their mixture of performance, costume, nudity and surrealism.

Other performances that day included **Transnoise** a collective who created a body soundscape with natural elements, and **Quimera Rosa** who performed a post-porn moon landing, taking to the stage in a fantastic mix of science fiction probes in the shape of dildos, tubes and butt plugs.

The ceremony concluded when Beth and Annie invited us all to take the marriage vows and swear to “love, honour and protect” the rocks.

They then proceeded to circle the stage hypnotically, making love to each other.

While Beth groaned with pleasure, Annie stimulated her with a rock sculpture using it like a dildo. Then she pulled a string of flags of all the nations out of Beth’s pussy before they changed positions and Beth pulled a handkerchief showing the world out of Annie’s pussy and wiped it over her face while Annie intoned “We love you Earth”. The message of love for all nations and for the world which sustains us, was graphically represented by their actions and words.

The ceremony was followed by a short reception where we shared the wedding cake and toasted the brides and the rocks.

### **The Black Wedding to the Coal**<sup>146</sup>

**The Black Wedding** was organised quite differently to the others I had attended. A group of us met to take part in Beth and Annie’s week-long ecofeminist workshop at the Laboral Arts Centre in Gijon and collaborate on the wedding’s production. At the first meeting we introduced ourselves and discussed our work. There was a wide mixture of mainly local artists from different disciplines including the ecofeminist writer Rosario Hernandez (Charo), Ana and Usue from the techno art group Casicasiotones, renowned performance artist Cuco Suarez, the post porn singer Nuria Cu and the Australian artist Fairy Princess Amber who was a huge Annie Sprinkle and ecosex fan.

We talked about the ceremony and discussed our personal relationship to coal.

Asturias had been one of the main coal producing regions in Spain and until recently many people in the region had relied heavily for their survival on the industry so many of the participants had family who had worked in the mining industry and died in the mines. Beth Stephen’s family had owned a machine shop that serviced the coal mines of West Virginia where she grew up. My father grew up in the Lothians, the coal mining area of Scotland although he had moved away from there before I was born. All of this history gave this wedding a special poignancy.

<sup>145</sup> Translation: Pray to your God/ess. Pray for her...

<sup>146</sup> An edited version of the performance can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giP-kA3ia68> - Accessed 16/12/17

On the second day an outdoor ecosex workshop had been scheduled. It was overcast and cloudy and there was a sense that a storm was coming as we gathered in the forecourt of the arts centre. I had seen photos of the Barcelona workshop which had been held on a warm sunny day at a nudist beach on the outskirts of the city. People had experimented freely with the sensuality of the elements they encountered: the water, the sand, the cactus plants growing nearby. It was unlikely that such close physical contact would be possible on such a cloudy day in the well kept lawn beside Laboral but for me it was still a highly emotional moment since this workshop would be an important part of my preparation to officiate the ceremony.

Beth and Annie didn't let the weather curb their enthusiasm. They encouraged us to take off our shoes and feel the grass, so I took the opportunity to strip my clothes off and was soon tumbling on the grass, feeling that direct contact with the earth. We practised deep breathing with Annie, feeling the air pumping into our lungs, as she approached what she calls a *crygasm* of ecstatic breath. We made vows to love, cherish and protect the Earth and were presented with engagement rings, each of which was inset with a small piece of coal. As the group bonded and Beth and Annie spoke about ecosexuality, I became more and more emotional and approached the sapling tree in the middle of our circle, stripping off to my gold lamé pants to blend with the earth. As I lay, almost in a trance-like state, Charo covered me with a woollen shawl to protect me from the cold.

The next few days were spent in frantic preparation for the ceremony, making costumes and props in the workshop space of the arts centre. I made a papal crown using some uprooted shrubs I had found. I painted them black and decorated the crown with a scarab necklace Anna Maria had customized for the occasion. I liaised with the zen influenced theatre director Jordi Vall Lamora on my role as he was going to be the master of ceremonies. Local artist Maribel Sanchez who worked in media arts decided to make a documentary about ecosexuality **Ecosex, part real, part imagination**<sup>147</sup> and shot us individually in the grounds of Laboral talking about our reactions to ecosex and performing short ecosex scenes.

The ceremony took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July at midnight and it was the culminating event of the opening night celebrations of the *Semana Negra* (Black week), a Crime Novel festival held annually in Gijon. Locals told us that the festival was basically an excuse for a big booze up, which made me a little nervous after my experiences with drunks in Scotland.

The wedding was in the main tent of the festival which was held in a specially constructed area near the arts centre which reminded me of the typical American County Fair I had seen in movies, with fairground attractions and a big wheel. It was incredible processing through the crowds to the tent and with most of the performers semi-naked and painted or wearing black: it must have looked like we were on our way to celebrate some strange witches' sabbath. Princess Fairy Amber had to be pushed up the aisle in a wheelchair after an accident earlier in the day when she had fallen and been rushed to hospital.

We took our positions onstage facing the audience in front of a backdrop of the "universal cunt" painted by local artist Jorge Nava, which created quite a juxtaposition with the huge official backdrop which framed it: a reproduction of Delacroix's painting of the French Revolution.

<sup>147</sup> The documentary can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ1HW-vxS1Q> - Accessed 16/12/17

There were some incredible moments during the ceremony, not least when Princess Fairy Amber got up on her crutches, determined to do her ballerina dance despite her injury. It was thrilling as at any moment it looked like she might keel over on top of the audience or towards us. At one point Annie motioned to me to help her but she remained upright till the end, despite the fact that she had to manoeuvre her crutches carefully whilst pouring a thick black liquid, which looked like tar, all over her body.

I had decided to deliver my homily in a mixture of languages so that both the brides and the audience could understand the text. I sang in the style of a liturgical chant which blended eerily with the wailing of Jaime del Val, a queer performer whose voice and naked body were projected throughout the tent for the duration of the ceremony. “We are gathered here today to celebrate the Black Wedding to the Coal of Beth and Annie, two ecosexual human beings...

Coal, symbol of Nature, of mountains, rivers, oceans, the sky. A natural element which has been perverted by humans, ripped from the entrails of the Earth like a child from the womb of its mother.

Coal played an important role in the beginning of our age of destruction, powering the industrial revolution. We thank coal for the energy which illuminates the night. But there is also a dark history of coal, a history of deaths in the mine and pollution because it has formed an important part of our era of individualism, consumerism and neoliberalism.

But this wedding to the coal is evolutionary, revolutionary, because it celebrates not only the love of these two women but also a love that is ecosexual: a sexuality that includes heterosexuality, queer sexuality and goes beyond the prison of our bodies towards all the natural elements, air, fire, earth and water. We are animals and we form part of this Earth. This wedding is a celebration of love for the Earth and for its minerals, which form part of our bodies and are the driving force of our society.”<sup>148</sup>



Fig. 4.4 *Black Wedding to the Coal* (2011)

<sup>148</sup> GBT cited in, Jennifer J. Reed, *From Ecofeminism to Ecosexuality: Queering the Environmental Movement*, in *Ecosexuality: When Nature Inspires the Arts of Love* edited by Serena Anderlini and Lindsay Hagamen, (3WK, 2015) p.101.



I then asked if there were any objections and there were several, including Diana Pornoterrorista who voiced a queer critique of marriage as an institution. Then I asked the brides to vow to love, honour and cherish each other and the coal. Then they exchanged rings before taking their positions for the final act of the ceremony. They stripped off their wedding outfits before taking it in turns to bend over and present their arses to give each other a *beso negro*.<sup>149</sup>

Then they lay down together, entwined on the marital bed. The wedding party processed by them laying pieces of coal which had been dipped in pigs blood on their bodies. This blood represented the blood of those who die in mining accidents and the life force we are extracting from the bowels of the Earth. We then processed together out of the marquee whilst local pipers played a skirling wedding march.

Outside, on the main drag of the Fair, the wedding cake had been prepared: a huge tiered construction made out of tyres by Cuco. We gathered around it as Nuria Cu began to sing Santa Barbara<sup>150</sup>, a traditional song which was popular in Asturias. I had done a flunk cover version of the song many years before and arranged to sing it acapella in duet with Nuria as part of the wedding reception.

The original song is about a miner who dies in a mining accident but I had added extra verses to update the lyrics and give them a queer spin telling the story of an immigrant Rumanian prostitute who died at the hands of her pimp. “Traigo la camisa roja, trai-la-lai-la-la-lai-la-la con la sangre de un compañero, trai-la-lai-la-la-lai-la-la”<sup>151</sup>

A group of elderly women in the crowd joined in with her as she continued: “Mira, mira Maruxina mira, mira como vengo yo.” When I started to sing my updated version, accompanied by the hand clapping of the rest of the wedding party they strained to hear what I was singing: “Traigo el vestido rojo, trai-la-lai-la-la-lai-la-la, con la sangre de una compañera, trai-la-lai-la-la-lai-la-la...La mataron acuchillada”<sup>152</sup> We joined together in song for the finale: “ mañana son los entierros, trai-la-lai-la-la-lai-la-la, de esos pobres compañeros...”<sup>153</sup>

It was incredible to be out amongst the coloured lights of the Fair and I shall never forget the incredible image of Beth and Annie stark naked in the middle of a circle of performers, public and passers-by all raising their voices in a hearty cheer “Long Live the Brides!”

The weddings create a feeling of community amongst guests and performers who work together in the construction of the ceremonies. In performance theory, the change of state which takes place in rituals of passage is exemplified in the performativity of the phrase “I do” spoken when the bride and groom accept each other as part of the marriage vows.

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149 Literally a “black kiss”. The Spanish term for rimming.

150 The song can be seen online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAQGmEpUXhE> - Accessed 16/12/17

151 Trans.: I bring the red shirt, look, look how I come- stained with the blood of a (male) comrade.

152 Trans.: I bring the red dress, stained with the blood of a (female) comrade. They stabbed her to death.

153 Trans: Tomorrow there are the funerals, of these our poor comrades.



The ecosexual weddings subvert the traditional union of man and woman in matrimony, which upholds the heteronormative laws of patrimony and control over women by substituting the human partner for a natural element, thus when the wedding congregation vows with Beth and Annie to “love, honour and obey” the sky, the sea or the rocks, this enunciation causes a transformation in our relationship to the environment, generating a complicity between the participants and the planet.

These collaborations point towards a new citizenship of the Earth, in which we regain the ties that once connected us to the natural physical space we inhabit.

This sense of belonging to or ownership of a piece of land disappeared with the huge migrations which took place in the industrialised countries of the north of Europe and North America, as capitalism developed.

The alienations these migrations produced have been exploited by capitalism which creates a desire for material goods to replace this sense of belonging.

The Love Art Laboratory invite us to feel a deeper empathy with the natural elements that surround us, expanding our feeling of connectedness with them into the realm of the senses. Marrying the ocean, the sky, the rocks and the earth, Sprinkle and Stephens invite us to reconnect with these elements which are a significant part of our environment.

The symbolism of the wedding ceremony is used to structure a queer ecological ritual in which the traditional elements are subverted- for example, the procession up the aisle where the father hands the bride over to her husband, is replaced by a participative procession in which the whole queer congregation takes part, the rings which bind the partners together, instead of being made of a precious metal like gold are made of coal: “Their eco-sexual wedding rituals are collectively produced social experiences, in which the popular traditions of circus, carnival, freak-show and pornography are mixed with the political practice of demonstrations and mass meetings. Provoking an encounter between conceptual art and happening culture, trade union tradition and the sex workers movement...inventing other ways to produce “commons” and to enjoy collectively.”<sup>154</sup>

Each wedding was completely different, affected by its theme, the sociocultural context of the venue, the city and country where they took place and the event or festival they formed part of.

Thus in Venice the wedding was part of the Biennale of Art and attracted an international community of artists, in Barcelona since the organisers were part of the post-porn scene of the city most of the artists were queer artists and activists and in Gijon there was a greater local presence of artists and ecofeminists attracted by the ecosexual workshops.

The ecosexual weddings were a great platform to experiment within. Beth and Annie invited collaboration in their events but apart from making sure that everyone who took part understood their non discriminatory philosophy they followed the feminist practice of allowing each artist to express themselves freely.

They took care to make sure full artistic credits were included in their wedding programmes and supported their collaborators after the event.

This support helped us in forming what would become the **Ecogender Project**.

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154 Paul Preciado, *The International Cuir*, pamphlet published by MNCARS, 2011.

# CHAPTER V

## THE ECOGENDER PROJECT

- *The Eco\_Gender Exhibition* (2010)
- *The Natural Hysteria Theme Park* (2010)
- *Ecogender: A Day of Eco(trans)feminisms* (2012)
- *Ecogender: Sex and Ecology* (2012)

After our ecosexual experiences in Madrid and Venice, I felt the need to express my concerns about the environment and to create something that might help towards bringing about a necessary social transformation. The result was the Ecogender project which shares the same theoretical basis and concerns as the current Natural Hysteria investigation. “environmental politics has ...been dominated by a moral earnestness that has gone hand in hand with its over-estimation of the epistemic power of science and by a neglect of the way that meanings and values of nature are not just socially situated and partial but also shot through with ironies and aporias”<sup>155</sup>

I had noticed a huge difference in attitude towards nature, the countryside and ecology since moving to Spain where sometimes it seemed as if the only people interested in these fields were experts or government paid employees. This may be due, in part, to the different histories and political climate of the two countries. As the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, Britain was one of the first countries to experience pollution and the health problems associated with overcrowding in its rapidly expanding cities, a situation which was in part responsible for the rise of the Romantic movement around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which expressed a nostalgia for the natural landscapes which were being lost. “Solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.”<sup>156</sup>

In Britain the environmental movement had its beginnings in the anti nuclear campaign of the 1950s, which, combined with a growing awareness of the environmental costs of industrialisation and the publication of the findings of the MIT Study **The Limits to Growth** in 1972 had influenced in the founding of a nationwide grassroots movement which challenged the free market policies of the time. In the 1970s I grew up with hose pipe bans (if it didn't rain for over two weeks the local government prohibits the use of hose pipes for watering gardens) which made us aware of the importance of water conservation, and the government campaign “Keep Britain Beautiful” which exhorted us not to throw litter in the countryside. By way of contrast Spain, during the Franco Regime, had been internationally isolated and its economy was more rural based. After 40 years of dictatorship with the Transition in 1970/80s Spain experienced an economic boom fuelled by the tourist industry which was accompanied by a desire to join the consumer culture after years of repression.

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155 Bronislaw Szerszynski, *The Post Ecologist Condition: Irony as symptom and cure* in *Environmental Politics* 16.2 (April, 2007) p.352

156 John Stuart Mills, *Principles of Political Economy* (1859). Mills was an early defender of women's rights.

The biggest asset was the land and the unbridled exploitation of the Mediterranean coast by developers meant that the warnings of environmentalists went more or less unheard, although the campaign to stop development of *El Saler* in Valencia, carried out by the *Provincias* newspaper<sup>157</sup> and documented in the lithograph **Recollons Beach** (1977) by Josep Renau was a notable exception. There seemed to be an obsession with the city and with an urban culture which seemed to represent progress, whereas nature and the countryside were associated with a National-Catholic past of poverty and repression. These attitudes began to change finally with the economic crisis of 2008 when the property bubble burst and the myth of unlimited growth became apparent.

The Ecogender project developed from my interests in gender and ecology and the desire to bring them together to establish a set of practices to seek points of connection between environmental concerns and gender studies.

Despite a long history of ecofeminist thought which has engaged with and enriched ecological thinking, the connections between queer theory and ecology/ecofeminism have been less well explored. This is, probably in part due to the emphasis on the construction of queer identities in urban and metropolitan spaces, as if the existence of gender dissidence in rural contexts was impossible. However, according to Alfred Kinsey's research at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USA there was a higher rate of "sexual activity among men in the remote wilderness than there was in the city."<sup>158</sup>

Probably the first appearance of this transdisciplinary approach in the literature was the *Queer Nature* issue of *Undercurrents Critical Environmental Studies* in 1994 where Catriona Sandilands discussed how the exaggerated courtship displays undertaken by many male birds can cause us to question gender stereotypes: "Position drag "in" nature both to suggest that "nature" may be partially performative, and to challenge the boundaries between "truth" and "artifice."<sup>159</sup>

Queer theory's challenge to the nature/culture dualism and its occupation of a territory which lies between and beyond these categories can help to challenge patriarchal notions of nature as apart from the human and somehow inert, passive and "feminine" connecting with ecofeminist critiques which attack the master models that keep these dualisms intact.

Greta Gaard's *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism* (1997) introduced a queer perspective into ecofeminist theory through the analysis of the erotic/reason dualism.

"Today, all those associated with nature and the erotic continue to experience the impact of centuries of Western culture's colonization, in our very bodies and in our daily lives. Rejecting that colonization requires embracing the erotic in all its diversity and building coalitions for creating a democratic, ecological culture based on our shared liberation... As feminists have long argued, the way out of this system of endemic violence requires liberating the erotic ...through a genuine transformation of Western conceptions of the erotic as fundamentally opposed to reason, culture, humanity, and masculinity. A queer ecofeminist perspective would argue that liberating the erotic requires re-conceptualizing humans as equal participants in culture and in nature, able to explore the eroticism of reason and the unique rationality of the erotic."

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157 Documented in the exhibition *El Saler per al poble, ara!* in La Nau, Valencia University (2017)

158 Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds: C. Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Indiana University Press, 2010) p. 15

159 Catriona Sandilands, *Lavender's Green, Some Thoughts on Queer(y)ing Environmental Politics* (*Undercurrents Critical Environmental Studies*, York University, Toronto, May 1994)

Since then various papers have been published and in 2010 a wide range of voices were gathered in the anthology *Queer Ecology: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. The relatively slower acceptance of these ideas here in Spain may be due in part to the later arrival of queer theory but could also be due to the emphasis on the study of urban space seen as the context in which queer identities emerge.

Apart from events organised in the process of this investigation and a section dedicated to queer theory in Alicia Puleo's *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible* (2011), there has been little investigation into the intersections of sexuality, gender and ecology. Hopefully this vacuum will be addressed in the forthcoming *Territorios que importan. Género, arte y ecología* (Territories that matter. Gender, art and ecology) exhibition and conference at the CDAN in Huesca/ UNAM Madrid in November 2018.

Ecogender explored behavioural patterns outside of the limiting bipolarities – masculine/feminine, nature/culture, hetero/homosexual – and celebrated the diversity of different cultural models trying to bring together concepts of ecofeminism with queer theory.

It pointed towards the elaboration of a code of environmental ethics and set out to reappraise human behaviour outside of the anthropocentric and heterosexist world view that has dominated in our society for centuries.

The latter places its hopes for the future in technological solutions, instead of questioning a capitalist way of life based on the exploitation of both human and non-human resources. This has led us to the border of an ecological meltdown as we approach another major extinction event driven by the loss of natural habitat and bio-diversity and the rise of World temperatures due to the burning of fossil fuels. Still “the Anthropocene places technocrats and scientists in the role of bringing about a great awakening regarding climate-change and then conveniently places those same figures in the position of being the only ones that can fix the problem- via geo-engineering.”<sup>160</sup>

But as Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize laureate who popularised the Anthropocene theory, points out: “I share the fear, however, that researching geo-engineering will lead to an attitude that CO2 reductions can be postponed because sulfur injection technology will save us from dangerous climate change. That would be totally wrong. I am doubtful that geo-engineering will be used because of its cost and its side effects. We should definitely not count on it.”<sup>161</sup>

The **Ecogender Project** proposes a new position with regard to our relation with the ecosystem of the Earth, insisting that it is a change of system that is required, not the greenwash our governments are proposing.

To date Ecogender has included an exhibition, talks, conferences and various other activities focusing on work which reveals the performativity of gender and humanness.

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160 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual culture and Environment today* (Sternberg Press, 2017) p.28

161 Paul Crutzen in interview with Christian Schwägerl, *A huge variety of possibilities* Interview with Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen on his life, his career in research, and his views on the Anthropocene idea” for the *Welcome to the Anthropocene* exhibition, Deutsches Museum. (Munich 2014) [www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/anthropocene/huge-variety-possibilities-interview-nobel-laureate-paul-crutzen-his-life](http://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/anthropocene/huge-variety-possibilities-interview-nobel-laureate-paul-crutzen-his-life) - Accessed: 21/5/18



## *The Eco\_Gender Exhibition*

Once the basic conceptual framework of Ecogender had been elaborated, Anna Maria and I decided to organise the Eco\_Gender exhibition in our recently opened house-museum La Erreria (House of Bent) in Xàtiva, a market town near Valencia, in order to explore and criticize the dichotomy that exists between nature and culture from a queer perspective, understood as non-conformist, feminist and gender non-specific.

We felt it was important to include a mixture of both international and local artists in the project so we sent out an open call for work via our network of contacts in Valencia which led to a wide response from artists all over Spain. We publicised the call out throughout the exhibition and some local artists joined the project which thus became a work in progress, or as its subtitle proclaimed a (r)evolutionary project. In this way a wide variety of voices were given freedom to express themselves. creating a fertile ground for cross pollination of ideas and practises.



Fig. 5.1 *Eco\_Gender* (2010)

The process of curating work for exhibition was challenging as each piece had to function within the whole to illustrate different aspects of the general discourse. The exhibition included the remains of various performances, with a selection of photographs and documentation of the Love Art Laboratory's work, as well as our installation **Homage to the Love Art Laboratory** which included their wedding ribbons and the **Blue Wedding Book I** made for the **Blue Wedding to the Sea** which was also the subject of the documentary *Blue* by Francesca Fini.

The installation **Floricultura Subversiva** (Subversive Flower Growing - ten drawings and video, 2008) by the transfeminist collective **O.R.G.I.A.** (Reversible Organisation of Intermediate and Artistic Genders) was based on a performance where the group parodied the format of a scientific panel presenting a paper.

The accompanying illustrations showed a series of plurisexual botanical life forms whose overdeveloped genitalia exaggerated their hermaphroditic qualities, emphasising that more than just male and female phenotypes exist in nature and destabilising the myth that heterosexuality is the only natural behaviour. In the work of both Love Art Laboratory and O.R.G.I.A. we see the development of a critical and queer ecofeminist invasion of the site of rationality, a space historically colonized by science and from which women have been almost totally excluded. These works challenge essentialist ideas about women by using a parody of scientific language to infiltrate the fields of sexology and botany (respectively).

In an essay on her project **Great Apes in Feminine** (video and drawing, 2009) the artist Verónica Perales documented how women have infiltrated another important area of scientific study: primatology.

The work on display in *Eco\_Gender* was a reaction to her discovery of a significant lack of representation “It is simple, if we look for “gorilla” with any search engine, we find an immense number of male specimens; the females, or rather the image of the female does not have the same presence. I could not help but see a parallel relationship with the ‘absence’ or omission of women in the history of humanity”<sup>162</sup>. As a result she decided to draw portraits of all the female gorillas in Spanish zoos. In the video which accompanied one of these life size female gorilla portraits she explained how the gorillas she was drawing recognised her interest and returned her gaze, forming a profound connection which transcended the bars of their cages. She returned this gaze to us in her video-presentation, looking directly at the spectator and making a connection with us which mirrors the one she made with these, our ancestral primates. In this way, we are drawn into a one-to-one relationship with her: primate to primate, as she calls into question our self-appointed role as keepers of the Truth, guardians of the Earth.

The work of the British artist Samantha Sweeting on display also showed a form of complex interplay between species in an egalitarian ecosystem where the human is not the privileged outsider whose objectivity creates an artificial hierarchy. Her work is atavistic: like our cave dwelling ancestors, she paints with the raw materials of life itself. In **Bestilalia (I Never Imagined Life without You)** (2007, video 25min) she becomes Donkey-girl blurring the boundaries between species. We see her painstakingly writing on glass tablets with milk.

Using modern materials and the language of performance she reveals a side of human nature we often seem to try and avoid or escape from. In **Lamb and His fleece was white as Snow** (2008), she portrayed the image of a mother breast-feeding, caring, nurturing, the roles naturally assigned to women in our society. But her images shock because the established roles are challenged as the baby she suckles is not human: the lamb – offspring of a domesticated species raised for meat and wool – takes the role of the child who must be taken care of. Sweeting appears like a naïve milkmaid gone feral, succumbing to the desire for a return to innocence, a far remove from the reality of the factory farming that prevails today whereby animals are treated as raw material in a production line. As she explains “the transformation into animal form is seen as a movement towards ‘nature’ and a process of becoming-feral.”<sup>163</sup>

Her work questions the divisions between human and non-human and the privileging of the former over the latter. “Is ‘nature within’, those characteristics of humans such as sexuality and emotionality that are shared with nonhumans, and which bridge mind/body dualism, to be sharply separated, feared, denied, denigrated, kept under lock and key by reason and never fully admitted to the status of the human (seen perhaps as ‘mechanism’, ‘instinct’, or ‘id’)?...Or is it integrated, honoured and accepted, treated as a vital and creative part of human life and culture?”<sup>164</sup>

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162 Verónica Perales, *Arte, Ecofeminism and Great Apes in Ecogender: a (R)evolutionary Project about Ecology and Gender from a Queer Perspective* (La Erreria, Xàtiva, 2012) p.77 Available online at: [www.academia.edu/2400742/Arte\\_ecofeminismo\\_y\\_grandes\\_simios\\_Art\\_ecofeminism\\_and\\_great\\_apes](http://www.academia.edu/2400742/Arte_ecofeminismo_y_grandes_simios_Art_ecofeminism_and_great_apes) - Accessed 9/8/18

163 Samantha Sweeting, description of the performance installation *Bestilalia* [www.samanthasweeting.com](http://www.samanthasweeting.com) - Accessed 15/12/17

164 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, London 1993) p.123

The **Church of Euthanasia**, whose work was shown in the **Transexual Express Barcelona 2001 A Classic for the Third Millennium** exhibition (Santa Monica Arts Centre, Barcelona, 2001), is a collaborative project based around a new religion, whose four basic tenets are: sodomy, cannibalism, suicide and abortion.

“Every aspect of the deepening global environmental crisis, including climate change, poisoning of the water and atmosphere, reduction of biodiversity, and topsoil erosion, directly results from the over-abundance of a single species: homo sapiens”<sup>165</sup>

This project was initiated by performer and techno musician Chris Korda in 1992 and subverts the language of the evangelist churches which are so popular in the United States (and elsewhere), mixing it with a nihilistic punk aesthetic. Their website has a counter which shows how the human population is rising second by second and the front page carries the slogan “REAL MEN WEAR SKIRTS”.

The heavy irony of the group’s work can be seen in their slogans, eg: “Eat a queer foetus for Jesus”, which question the basic assumptions upon which our society is based: heterosexual privilege and reproduction, the superiority of humans over animals and the value of human life itself.

The extremism of their message may put some off, but it is couched in the language of the street, and reflects a hardcore punk aesthetic which has become more and more mainstream in recent years, as Hollywood, and the capitalist interests which control it, realised the box office potential of violence. The Church of Euthanasia’s pro-abortion message is important in a country where many states want to implement anti-abortion laws.

Their stance on sodomy brings attention to an important question which social ecologists should be asking themselves: “Wouldn’t an increase in non normative sexual practises be one of the best methods to reduce the world population?”.

Social ecologists failure to queer their discourse, along with their apparent lack of interest in ecofeminist ideas is a short sighted policy which reflects a deep seated heterosexism in the movement. Indeed if many of our current problems stem from over-population, homosexual behaviour would seem a more rational response than the alternative patriarchy prefers: war. If these two behaviours- the impulse to kill, and the impulse to have (gay) sex- are possibly evolutionary forms of controlling the population, The Church of Euthanasia seem to have chosen the right path to redemption.

Their billboard intervention **Save the Planet, Kill Yourself** was on display in the Eco\_Gender exhibition, slogans such as this invite a different response from consumers used to methods of marketing that employ similar tactics to give products a veneer of radical chic.<sup>166</sup>

Here the product is the consumer society itself, a society we are invited to destroy, through the destruction of the self.

As suicides in the most developed countries spiral out of control, the Church of Euthanasia questions the values of a system which seems to be failing even its most highly privileged members.

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165 Church of Euthanasia: <http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org>, - Accessed 15/12/17

166 “Radical chic” is a term coined by journalist Tom Wolfe in *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (Farrar, New York, 1970) which describes the adoption and promotion of radical political causes by celebrities, socialites, and high society and is often used to refer to the espousal of radical views which contradict the lifestyle of those who proclaim them.



In a piece specially made for the exhibition, **A Film about Architecture without Architecture** (2010) William James juxtaposed footage from nature documentaries with images of male bodies taken from gay porn videos set in natural landscapes. The urge to have gay sex is meant to be somehow naturalised in these videos, combatting centuries of repression where such acts were seen as a perversion “against nature” but of course the truth is much more complex. As James explains “the outcome is always uneasy, disjunctive and what becomes clear is the impossibility of the project given the history of representation and our culturally gendered reading of space. The male body must inevitably set itself against nature and ends up standing in for culture, the outcome of the centuries-old imposition of the gendered binaries”.

The images he selected represent a contemporary form of gay pastoralism, similar to that on display in the film **Brokeback Mountain** (Ang Lee, 2006) where two cowboys engage in sexual relations in the wilderness but return to the sanctioned path of heterosexuality when they return to “civilisation”. These kind of relationships between men in nature, form part of a suppressed hysteria which stretches back to ancient Greece and the homoerotic poetry of Theocritus, and is finally becoming studied in the emerging field of queer ecology which we will return to in later chapters.

Propelled by immigration and tourism, the landscape of Valencia has been altered to such an extent by development that it is virtually impossible to find a stretch of its coastline which has remained untouched. Prior to the bursting of the real estate bubble in 2008, developers had also turned their attentions to the interior where the towns were expanding at a rate which had little to do with population demand and a lot to do with speculation on the real estate value of the land. Nevertheless the video installation **Implosió impugnada 5** (Contested Implosion 5, 2006) by Rafael Tormo i Cuenca showed that resistance to the ‘empire of brick’ (as the construction industry is known locally) is strong. The video was based on a metaphorical landscape printed with images of pressure groups who formed to protest against these town planning developments. These images fitted the frame of the video as the camera panned over them and showed how these landscapes can be reconstructed and re-contextualised through the lens. New landscapes made to measure.

A wall panel documented the local government plans for each of the councils in the region of Valencia: a litany of urbanization, golf courses and leisure facilities. Here we see the politics of domination laid bare: nature’s only value is as real estate.

We felt it was important to reach as wide an audience as possible, both within the artistic community and beyond it so we carried out interviews with local media to talk about the issues explored in the project. We were featured in articles in *El Levante* (Valencia’s local newspaper) and interviewed by local radio and TV stations.<sup>167</sup>

The local television channel *MK Localia* transmitted a report of over 40 minutes on the exhibition which included my introduction to the general concept alongside interviews with the president of the *Cor Polifonic* and the artists Rafa Tormo i Cuenca, Cristina Polop and Verónica Perales talking about their work.

In order to get the local community interested in ecofeminist and queer art we also organised a series of events both within and outside of the gallery space. These included **¡Dejalo Limpio!**, an eco-awareness day in which we set up an information stand in a main square of Xàtiva, giving information on sustainable use of water, recycling of waste, etc.

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167 An edited version of these reports is online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUwkpBTPX-I>



The eco-day included an excursion to the countryside to clean up the local hillside and a talk from the ecologist group **AGRÓ Ecologistas en Acción**.

Other events during the exhibition included: a concert; film screenings of video art by Samantha Sweeting, Cristina Ferrandez, O.R.G.I.A. and Francesca Fini; a round table discussion of the issues involved in the project (with participants including the artists Verónica Perales and William James and the economist Raul Abeledo) and a presentation by local artists group **De Reull**.

We also organised tours of the exhibition and **The Natural Hysteria Theme Park**, a guided tour of the Xàtiva hillside where various invited artists had installed their artwork.

### *The Natural Hysteria Theme Park*

“I called it Natural Hysteria in order not to get confused with Natural History, because history is the objective version of events written by the powers that be, using a scientific viewpoint which classifies in order to understand and dominate. On the other hand, hysteria (from the greek word *hystera* which means uterus) was used to describe a diabolic possession which only affected women, and is thus the feminist version of history, the version of native peoples, of animals in danger of extinction, in other words, the queer version.”<sup>168</sup>

This event was a one day intervention which celebrated the summer solstice on 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2010, siting ephemeral works of art on a 2 km route on a hillside in Xàtiva. It included performance art, an Earth Mass and a short talk on the botanical interest of the area. These installations were presented ironically in the form of a theme park to which viewers could accede via a guided tour or individually by following the markers placed along the route. The guided tour started in the gallery with a musical introduction by Gran Tour before moving to the hillside.

Theme Parks are sites of controversy in an area where tourism is a major source of income and the idea that serious art can be contextualised in this form of populist entertainment challenged notions of how art is perceived.

The invited public on the tour were encouraged to see themselves as a part of nature, to engage with it on a level beyond the merely objective. In the high temperatures normal at that time of year in Spain, the physical effort involved in climbing to the hillside from the gallery space, placed them in a relationship with their bodies which created a more direct interaction with the environment.

“In order to see Natural Hysteria we have to adapt ourselves to a different rhythm, a much slower rhythm, because in the solitude of nature, we can contemplate, meditate, take in our surroundings, every aspect of our surroundings, passing from the usual macro-vision of the landscape to the microscopic vision of what is to be found within the vegetation.”<sup>169</sup>

In **Marcos** by Mar Juan Tortosa the structure of containment within which we are used to viewing art is used to isolate small details of the landscape. The frame is a way of focusing attention, a means of isolation, normally separating art from reality. These frames pose the question: “are we looking at art or nature?” and force us to see the world from a different perspective.

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<sup>168</sup> Graham Bell Tornado, extract from the text of the *Natural Hysteria Guided Tour*. An edited version of the tour is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD25bj9gWAE>

<sup>169</sup> Ibid

“What would it be like to live in a microscopic world? Or to have a life which lasts for just one day? Or what would it be like to live in a world where we respect our environment and treat others – people and species – as we’d like them to treat us?”<sup>170</sup>

In one of my installations **Fotomatón Algarrobo** (Carob Tree Photo-Booth), a hole in a tree formed a natural frame. The public were invited to enter this frame, crouching down behind it, to be photographed by a volunteer who was posted there during the event. Above this opening in the tree, a hollow held a deposit of riches of Natural Hysteria: a snail, dried flowers, leaves and seeds. These formed a perfect environment to take portrait photos of the visitors to the theme park in the Vanitas style: a form of still life popular in the baroque. In one genre of Vanitas a garland of flowers surrounds a classical scene, in the leaves of which a horde of creatures, such as lizards, snakes and crustaceans, animals which represent decomposition, are to be found. The message of these paintings was that human life is transitory. “Nowadays this message is being distorted by plastic surgeons and other doctors who try to sell us the idea that we can rejuvenate our bodies and stay eternally young. But at what price? In the past vanity was seen as a sin, today it has become a merit so please, step up and let us take a memento mori in our carob tree photo-booth”<sup>171</sup>

These ancient looking local carob trees had drawn my attention and they ended up forming a central part of many of the installations in the tour. Their growth seemed to obey no logic, often there was no central core to the tree trunk which had split and formed a twisted, spiderlike web of branches from its hollow centre. Indeed many carob trees are hermaphroditic and in their rhizomatic anarchy of form they represent for me the queers of the tree family.

In **Saloncito au plein air** (Open-Air Boudoir). Cristina Polop and Toni Cordero acted as hosts inviting us to see our culture as a part of nature. Visitors could share a cup of tea in an installation which represented a breaking down of the boundaries between in-door and outdoor spaces. The countryside became an open living room, where the trees formed the wallpaper, the grass a carpet and the hollow interior of a carob tree became a mini gallery of family photos.

The **Epifitas** (Epiphytes) of Inmaculada Abarca were an example of a plant which grows on top of another one, normally without harming its host. This installation was wrapped around the branches and trunk of a dead tree, the bright green colour of the cable ties it was made of, contrasting strongly with the pale dead wood. This particular form of Epiphyte had strangled the host in a form of parasitism. A wide variety of relationships exists between organisms apart from the usual “eat or be eaten”. In symbiosis both organisms derive benefit from the relationship and in fact the complexity of the human body is based upon a symbiosis which occurred millions of years ago. The cells which provide the majority of our energy (mitochondria) are descendants of a bacteria which invaded the proto human cell finding a rich and stable source of nutrients which it digested providing us with a source of energy.

In **El ascensor** (The Lift) a performance by Kuro (aka Josue Ormeño Cuevas) we see the modern man isolating himself in an artificial cocoon from which he must emerge naked and bloody to face the world anew with the innocence of a new born child. The philosophy of the Ecogender project, invited us to identify with other species and in this case the metamorphosis which insects undergo. The suppression of the hormone neotenin leads to the break down and reconstitution of their cells in adult form, perhaps our society needs a suppression of similar hormones which seem to be maintaining our society in a juvenile state.

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170 Ibid

171 Ibid



The format of the guided tour lent itself to an investigation of the performativity of being human and our relationship to an environment from which the majority have become alienated. With the help of the actress Elvira (aka Isabel Caballero), visitors were invited to become involved in a variety of activities that questioned this alienation and the artificiality of the nature/culture divide.

The ever-changing nature of the countryside was exemplified in **Dirt**, a sexecology action in homage to the **Love Arts Laboratory**. When the group arrived we found a herd of sheep and goats had occupied the space of the terraza previously selected for the performance. Whilst I herded the humans to the terraza above, Elvira incorporated the animals into her performance, inviting visitors to see the Earth as a lover: to kiss, caress and get down and dirty with Nature. “Dirt is an invention of the makers of detergents and washing up powders. Lets get dirty!”<sup>172</sup>



Fig. 5.2 *Natural Hysteria Theme Park* (2010)

Xàtiva is the town of the Borgia Popes and the Catholic religion plays an important part in the festivities which form a major part of the cultural life of the town. In the *Cova dels Coloms*, a huge cave which contains an image of the Madonna and which local people have filled with flowers, I set up a **Confesionario Ecologico** (Ecological confessional).

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172 Ibid

“We enter this sacred place remembering the moment in our hysteria when *Wu/man*<sup>173</sup> began to question the meaning of life. Searching beyond themselves this quest led to the formation of religions. Slowly these evolved to take the forms we know today but in the past, special places such as this would have held a particular significance in the mythology of the people... to this sacred space we come seeking absolution”<sup>174</sup>

In this performance installation, loosely based on the **Ten Commandments for the 21st Century** by Tea Makipaa, visitors were encouraged to share their sins against the Earth (and promise never to commit them again), confessing them aloud to be borne away by the winds or by writing them down on a piece of paper and placing it in the confessional box. These confessions were burned in a ritual which was carried out as part of the event marking the end of the Ecogender exhibition.

The guided tour continued, accessing a sixty foot long, narrow tunnel carved in the hillside. One by one, visitors entered the candle-lit space, where tourist souvenirs, snow globes and photographs evoked culturally important tourist destinations. At the end, the tunnel opened out into an 18th Century icehouse where the **Misa a la Tierra** (Earth Mass) performance took place. This mass was the result of my collaboration with the local choir **Cor Polifònic Ciutat de Xàtiva** and its musical director Francisco Tortosa Palop who had done a choral arrangement of **A tu Dios/a**, one of my flamenco punk songs. We interpreted it alongside a modified version of Dvorak’s **Gloria** (op86) in which we replaced the word “God” with “Terra” (Earth). The performance also included other songs from the choir’s repertoire which made reference to nature.

I had joined the town choir shortly after moving to Xàtiva, as a way of meeting people, but the experience of singing as part of a choir had been highly educational. For years I had sung solo, expressing my emotions freely through my voice with the only restriction being the rhythm of the music. But as part of a choir I was just one among many, and had to learn a part, blending in with other voices in order to create the overall effect. It was very moving to form part of this sea of voices and in the concerts we had given I had often found myself close to tears when a particular melodic chord combination caused something to resonate within me. The choir was funded by the council and its concerts formed an important part of the social life of the town with regular seasonal concerts and appearances in the Semana Santa and other processions. Since the Theme Park had been supported by the council this was the perfect opportunity for a musical collaboration and when I approached the director with my idea, he agreed to help and we convinced the members of the choir to rehearse the song and climb to the Icehouse where the recital took place.

“A tu dios/a reza, a tu dios/a reza, por ella...Gloria in Excelsis Terra! Gloria!  
Et in terra, pax hominibus bonae voluntatis”

Visitors thus entered the bowels of the earth to emerge beneath a 45 foot high dome where the celestial voices of the choir echoed to the hillside above. Other members of the public could watch the concert from above through the windows of the circular ice-house. The tour finished with a relaxation ritual to celebrate the solstice led by Elvira as the sun went down. “A ritual of love for the Earth. Stretch our arms up to the skies, take the energy from the sun, press it to your heart and send it to the Earth as you bend over and touch the ground”.

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<sup>173</sup> This onomatopoeic deformation of the word for woman makes clear that the term contains the word man, and is used in this context to bring attention to the way that when we speak about the human species we often use the term Man in a generic way, invisibilising the existence of half of the species.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid



## **Ecogender: A Day of Eco(trans)feminisms**

In 2012, we organized two days of conferences and workshops which aimed to explore eco- and trans-feminist theories in depth. During the preparations for the day Chiara Schiavon of the collective *ideadestroyingmuros* coined the term *ecotransfeminist*<sup>175</sup>. In her interpretation the trans relates, not only to those who cross the boundaries of gender, but also to border crossers and in this way includes those who have had to leave their country for economic or political reasons.

The aim of these events was to unite artists and activists working within the field of ecology with people from the post porn and queer community. From my recent studies of the history of feminism and my experience within the LGBTI community I had learned that it is important to build a base within a community and forge alliances with others groups in order to articulate a discourse that may have an impact within society in general. In order to reach as diverse an audience as possible we used social networks to publicise the events and thus ensure that as wide a variety of opinions as possible was represented in the debates.

The first, **Ecogender: A Day of Eco (trans)feminisms** was a collaboration between **La Erreria (House of Bent)** and **Abya Yala**, an intercultural association for community development, and formed part of the Week of Equality at the University of Valencia. We wanted to encourage a plurality of voices in the conference and invited guests included ecofeminist activist Verónica Perales, the transfeminist collective *ideadestroyingmuros*, and the artist Pilar Bressó, all of whom had their own understandings of feminism. “Ecofeminists must be concerned with queer liberation, just as queers must be concerned with the liberation of women and of nature; our parallel oppressions have stemmed from our perceived associations. It is time to build our common liberation on more concrete coalitions”<sup>176</sup>

We thought it was important to start the day with a different dynamic to that which is more common at academic conferences and had invited Pilar Bressó, a local painter who had studied indigenous dances, to lead the group in a series of dances influenced by different tribal traditions. Thus we began with a typical native American Dakotan dance to Mother Earth in the patch of grass outside the faculty building. Its important when we introduce traditions and practises from other cultures that we take into account not only the differences between our cultures but also how contemporary society has evolved since the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies. The concept of the Earth as a female force has been heavily criticised by many feminists since they believe it reinforces the idea of the woman as an irrational, passive and caring being. These stereotypes are, according to Elisabeth Grosz, the result of “patriarchal ideologies, discriminatory socialization practices, social stereotyping and role-playing.”<sup>177</sup>

Although it is true that in the first years of the feminist and ecofeminist movements some writers used this argument to prove that women were closer to nature and more equipped to care for the Earth, nowadays these ideas are not accepted by the majority. In discussions with Pilar we agreed that we should subvert the binary system normally followed in these dances, where the roles of men and women are generally very clearly marked.

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175 <https://orgullomadrid2014.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/este-sabado-taller-es-possible-un-orgullo-ecotransfeminista/>

176 Greta Gaard, *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism*, (Journal Hypatia, Vol 12. Issue: 1, 1997)

177 Elisabeth Grosz in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, ed Sneja Gunew (Routledge, London, 1990) p.337

Carrying out such a pastoral ceremony in the aseptic environment of the University appealed to my sense of the surreal and I was moved by Pilar's peaceful and joyful attitude.

Thanks to this experience I realised that the idealisation of primitive cultures is problematic. Often a misplaced sense of guilt for the atrocities our societies carried out in the colonial period makes us imagine other cultures to be more egalitarian but this is often not the case.

For example, as Pat Califia points out despite the fact that some gay scholars have seen the existence of third gender people in some north american tribes as evidence of an equality between the genders in these tribes, "there is very little evidence to suggest that women in most of these societies had true social, political or religious equality."<sup>178</sup>

I think its important to learn from these cultures but we need to develop modern rituals which overturn stereotypes and celebrate gender and sexual diversity.

After the dances we went inside to the conference room where Warmi and Rodrigo from Abya Yala introduced the day and invited everyone to present themselves. The group was very diverse and included post porn practitioners, feminists, artists, activists and social science students which led to an interesting discussion later.

### ECOGENERO:

Una Jornada sobre Eco(trans)feminismos

Lunes 26 Marzo



11-12:30 Charlas (Sala de Juntas):

**Graham Bell:** *Presentación de los conceptos de Ecogenero y Ecosexualidad*

**Verónica Perales:** *CIENT@S VOLANDO: subvirtiendo amar*

12:45- 2:00 Mesa Redonda

16:00- 18:00 (Sala de Exposiciones)

Taller Ecodrag impartido por **ideadestroyingmuros**

Facultat de Ciències Socials (Av. Tarongers)

Universitat de València

VNIVERSITAT  
ID VALÈNCIA

Delegació d'Estudiants  
Servei d'Informació i Dinamització **SeDi**  
Unitat d'igualtat

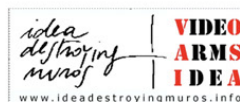


Fig. 5.3 Poster Ecogender: A Day of Eco(trans)feminisms (2012)

178 Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (Cleiss Press 1997) p.128

I introduced the day in the format I had already begun to learn as standard in the academic context- a powerpoint of images accompanying my talk on ecotransfeminism, ecogender and the work of the **Love Art Laboratory**. It is interesting how this multi media format has become incorporated in the modern classroom where often all we see of the speaker is the top of their head over a computer screen.

Often the focus in the modern university classroom is on the screen, not the professor creating a distance which makes interaction more difficult. Of course when the speaker is not comfortable in the classroom, this format makes things easier.

Despite my years of experience as a performer, the academic context was so different to that which I was used to that, in order to break the formality of the proceedings, I burst into song midway, illustrating my discourse accompanied by the music of Gran Tour:

“You always wanted the Earth. I only wanted a friend.  
Now I repent of your birth. How am I going to get through?  
You came here looking for money. I covered you in my glory.  
But now we’re heading for the wall.  
How could I give it all?  
I brought you life, gave you clean air.  
Water so pure, you had no care .  
The fruits were ripe, everything fresh.  
You turned it all into a market of flesh.  
So tell me do tell me -what have you ?  
what have you? what you’ve done to deserve this?”

When I first sang this **Pet Shop Boys** cover version in the **Blue Wedding** of Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens<sup>179</sup> it seemed to fit their ecosexual philosophy perfectly. The reinterpretation of the old lover-leaves-tears, regrets and destruction-behind-them-story changed subtly when the lovers instead of being a man and a woman became a human and the one he/she left behind... the earth. So tell me do tell me, what have you? what have we? What have you done to deserve this?”

The theme of love was expanded upon in the talk by Veronica Perales whose conference **Cientos volando, subvirtiendo amar** translates roughly as “Two in the bush, subverting love” since its title is based on the cliché that “a bird in the hand is worth more than 100 flying” (the Spanish version of “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” which exhorts us to stick with what we know and not risk anything).

Based on examples from her own experiences with birds and animals, she explained how our way of seeing love is limited by our human bodies and closed minds which cannot see the damage we do to our fellow species on the planet.

She spoke about love as recognition, emphasising that if we can see ourselves in other animals and feel strong emotions towards them, this will help us to see how they form an important part of our world.

“Subversive love is quite distant from the romantic fiction, the hypertrophied representation of the relationships between humans, which is non-existent between the human and the non-human.”<sup>180</sup>

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179 This can be seen online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKpEVVtEts>

180 Verónica Perales, *Amor, arte y ecofeminismo: cient@s volando, o subvirtiendo «amar»*, Ex æquo, n.o 27, 2013, pp.77-93. Online at: <https://www.academia.edu/4714754>

Love is an exposure to vulnerability, an opening up to another being (and hence towards the world) which is often much harder for men than for women. Men are taught not to express emotions, not to expose themselves, to be strong and self sufficient as part of our social conditioning.

In her talk Veronica told us about the famous Greater Spotted Eagle Ton who has appeared in many blogs and has been tagged with a radar sensor which transmits his position to a satellite. Apparently a female eagle Iti had begun to follow his route and when Veronica caught herself imagining their romance in an anthropomorphic – and heteronormative- manner she began to question our concept of love and how we relate to animals.

In our increasingly “remote” societies, virtual contacts occupy more and more of our time, resulting in a worrying decrease in direct physical contact. Nevertheless although this contact is necessary for normal development in humans, it is not the only way that love can be expressed or felt and as Veronica explained “art is an act of love” which can help us to love the world. She spoke about love as recognition – how we recognise ourselves in the other (or on the other hand, contrast that which we lack) and that if we can see ourselves in other animals, and feel strong emotions towards them it is because we recognise their importance in our world.

She affirmed love’s revolutionary potential to subvert not just as a “human or binary issue. We delimit and restrict its action from an anthropocentric vision, shutting down our senses while we wait for another body to touch ours. Love cannot be touched, love grows within and its subversive potential is incompatible with normalization. Subversive love is far from the romantic fiction, the hyper atrophied representation of relationships between humans and completely absent in relationships between humans and non humans.”<sup>181</sup>

Donna Haraway has discussed the emotions that we feel towards “companion species”, normally other mammals which arouse our empathy, because like us they are warm blooded and have similar physical characteristics. However, in general, we seem to be indifferent towards other non mammalian species, if not actually repelled by their difference.

The strong emotion Veronica mentioned when she saw two horses galloping in the sea was similar to the emotion I feel towards the incredible colours of certain beetles and other insects, a sense of wonder and awe at their natural beauty.

She mentioned that “when animals are born, they are born into a world that is made to their measure” because of course they evolve within ecosystems which contain all they need to survive- food, companionship, etc, this is their “niche”.

But humans have moved beyond our natural niche and nowadays we live within societies which are often constructed to protect us from our habitat because these ecosystems are, in fact, not ideal for our survival.

When the population was smaller the impact this had was not too great but now, when we switch on the air conditioning or light a fire because the heat or cold makes us uncomfortable, we are part of a mass “switching on” movement and consequently form part of a vast demand on a limited pool of energy reserves. Feminist critiques focus on how love has often been used to subject women to a patriarchal tyranny, keeping them in the home as part of the reproductive economy, since only then can the paternity of the offspring be assured. Thus womens’ energies are focused on child rearing and taking care of the “productive” worker and his emotional needs.

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181 Ibid



Ecofeminism goes further to expose this type of “care” - made invisible within the capitalist system, a system based on the idea that no-one acts disinterestedly for another, in other words an exchange must take place which benefits us or we will not act.

In the discussion that followed it was interesting to hear Warmi, who was born in rural Peru speak of how love in her culture was directed towards the earth and its inhabitants (the spirit of Pachamama worshipped by many indigenous people in South America) and how this love had been learned through the generations. I certainly feel that my love of nature was fomented by my parents who took us out in the countryside at every opportunity. What becomes natural for a child is of course conditioned by these early experiences, and children who grow up in the city have a totally different experience as Diana would make clear in the second Ecogender day. But as a child Warmi had learned to love the birds that surrounded her and even though her family moved to the city, and later she emigrated to Spain she still feels that love as something important in her life.

We picnicked in the well kept gardens of the university, where the hunt began for organic “waste “ to be used in the **Ecodrag Workshop** in the afternoon. Fortunately some of the trees had just borne fruit and I collected together some seed pods which had escaped the notice of the gardeners.

Giulia Perli and Chiara Schiavon from ideadestroyingmuros introduced the workshop with a talk about the traffic of waste between countries, relating it to transgender border crossings. Just as they began their short introductory talk on the traffic in waste between countries the sound of pneumatic drills on a nearby construction site reminded us that here in Valencia we are in a different kind of territory, known in Spain as “Brick Empire”, since the Valencian coastline has practically disappeared under bricks and mortar in the last few decades since tourism became big business here in another form of north/south movement.

The concept of waste and how we decide whether something is useful or useless was one of the issues the workshop raised, in a critique of how “the highly contaminating capitalist economic system and the heteronormative structures commodify all human diversity exploiting it until it is reduced to a waste product.”<sup>182</sup> Then we began experimenting with food scraps, and the leaves and seeds we had collected from the park. The idea was to build human, vegetal and animal hybrids and explore the different possibilities of interaction these corporal extensions gave us.

Chiara explained how the workshop used the term drag in its sense of a playful subversion of roles and encouraged us to use our imagination to go beyond the typical masculine and feminine roles evoked by the term and expand that movement to explore beyond our human form imagining other species and focussing on the possibilities for new sensual interactions between each other, de-localizing the usual erogenous zones to experience other forms of sensuality and imagine producing work for a possible veggie porno magazine. They suggested subverting the typical phallic vegetable symbols to create new organs.

In Valencia -a region traditionally known for its rich agricultural and gastronomic heritage - there are many expressions of a sexual nature which involve fruit or vegetables and in fact until recently there was even an agroerotic festival in the town of Alcudia.

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182 Ibid

## Ecogender: Sex and Ecology

The second Ecogender conference took place in May 2012 in the Arts Faculty and was organised in collaboration with the Erreria (House of Bent). It was provocatively subtitled Sex and Ecology and I designed an eye catching poster to advertise the event.



**ECOGÉNERO: El Sexo y la Ecología**

Facultat de Belles Arts de Sant Carles - UPV, València  
Miércoles, 2 de Mayo de 2012  
Aula B-0-6

**10:30h Graham Bell (performer)**  
Introducción a la jornada: *Hacia el ecotransfeminismo*  
Proyección del video "Silver Wedding", de Lucía Egaña

**11:30h María Llopis (autora de El Postporno era eso)**  
Diez pasos para la instauración de una sociedad matriarcal, ecofeminista y autogestionada en el ocaso del capitalismo patriarcal

**13:00h Rosario Hernández Catalán (autora de la obra de teatro Chernobil, paraíso natural)**  
Rescatar a Perséfone, revivir Eleusis. Agroteatro, enteógenos y ecofeminismo.

**14:00h** Picnic y preparación del Rito por la Tierra. Jardines UPV

**15:00h** Rito por la Tierra. Jardines UPV

**16:00h Diana Junyent (autora de Pornoterrorismo)**  
Eco-BDSM y prácticas extremas con la naturaleza

**17:00h Graham Bell**  
*La Sexecología de Beth Stephens y Annie Sprinkle*  
Proyección del video: "Ecosex Part real, Part Imagination" de Maribel S. Forero y Jorge Nava

**18:30h** Mesa redonda y puesta en común con **José Albelda (Profesor UPV, coautor de La construcción de la naturaleza)** Aula B-0-5

**EVENTOS ABIERTOS AL PÚBLICO**  
Más información: [www.houseofbent.blogspot.com](http://www.houseofbent.blogspot.com)

Aquesta activitat està finançada per l'Àrea de Gestió Cultural de Vicerectorat d'Alumnat i Cultura a través de les ajudes concedides en la convocatòria de projectes culturals 2011/2012

Fig. 5.4 Poster Ecogender: Sex and Ecology (2012)

There are so many events organised in the faculty but often they are given very little publicity, and therefore they don't reach a wider audience beyond the campus. I was determined this wouldn't happen and that people from outside the University would be attracted by the programme and attend as well as other students and faculty members.

Therefore I had organised a varied programme of speakers that included the ecofeminist writer Rosario Hernández, the post porn performers Diana Junyent and Maria Llopis (all of whom had been at the Black Wedding in Asturias), faculty members Pepe Miralles, a gay activist who had carried out a cartography of cruising sites in the Valencian region, and José Albelda member of Greenpeace and teacher of a course on Ecology and Environmental Art.

Since many of the speakers were coming from outside Valencia I'd invited them to come a day early and spend some time in Xàtiva at the Erreria in order to prepare together for the day.

The event was timed to coincide with the First of May which apart from being International Day of the Worker (a traditional day for riots in Britain) is also the pagan festival of Beltane, a spring fertility ritual celebrated in Scotland with fires and all sorts of revels.

In the traditional celebration couples go romping in the woods at night so I had planned to take the speakers on a midnight tour of the hillside to charge our energies.

The silence of the night was broken only by the chirping of crickets. Once beyond the last houses of the town we took a path up towards the oldest church in Xàtiva which loomed in the darkness. There was a waxing moon so we had enough light to see the path which took us along the scrubby hillside past the icehouse and to the cave of the virgin where Diana mounted the altar and blessed it with her piss.

The day after we had an early breakfast and returned to the city where I began the conference with an introductory talk about Ecofeminism and the work of Love Art Laboratory followed by a screening of the video of the ecosexual **Silver Wedding to the Rocks** (2009) by Lucía Egaña.

Later Maria Llopis, author of **El Posporno Era Eso** (That was Post porn) gave a lecture based on her study of the mosuo culture in China, one of the few matriarchal societies that still exist. The mosuo are a community of over 56 thousand people who live in extended family units based around the women who take all the day to day decisions of the community and carry out most of the important work.

The interesting aspect of this society from a queer point of view is that it is not based on the traditional set up of the nuclear family: “the structure of society is not based on the one person who is the object of all your romantic passion because these emotions are seen as fleeting.”<sup>183</sup> At the age of 13 or 14 girls are given their own room which communicates with the interior of the dwelling but also has a door to the exterior. The girls have control over who enters their room, but their visitors must leave before sunrise. No form of commitment is expected of the lover-visitors and the children conceived are brought up within the extended family unit.

“Men have responsibility for the children of their sisters and love and take care of all the children in the unit, unlike men in a patriarchal society who only take care of the children they presume to be their own because their offspring will inherit their property and continue the family line. In this way men take care of their blood relatives – but no form of sexual control is exercised over women.”<sup>184</sup>

She pointed out that according to anthropological studies the patriarchal model has only been in existence since around 8 thousand years BC, and that with a collective history of over 200 thousand years (since homo sapiens took our current anatomical form) this means that the patriarchy has only been dominant for a very short time- and may not be so for much longer! The lake around which these communities live is venerated as a goddess. In Mosuo society aggression and violence are looked on as shameful and a respect for the autonomy of the person- male or female- is of utmost importance. Jealousy is not tolerated.

“We are all desiring beings, who want to love and be loved- in fact that is what we would most like, to take off our breastplates and armour, leave aside our weapons of defence, let ourselves be led by desire – offer and receive our bodies without measure or calculation, abolish money, abolish property, live in reciprocity and harmony from the emotional state of the creature inside us, looking back at our neolithic societies for inspiration and to find truth.”<sup>185</sup>

The next speaker was Rosario Hernández Catalán (author of **Feminismo para non-feministas: Vane versus Patrix**). In her lecture she spoke about the origins of theatre and the myth of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, who was abducted by the god Hades and taken into the underworld.

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183 Maria Llopis, transcription of the conference, *10 pasos para la instauración de una sociedad matriarcal, ecofeminista y auto-gestionada, en el ocaso del capitalismo patriarcal* (UPV, 2/5/2012)

184 Ibid

185 Ibid



As she explained, this myth is echoed by a present in which “we are living a new abduction, this time not a mythical abduction, but a real one, the abduction being carried out by multinationals like Monsanto. The transgenic seeds they sell are sterile and their aim is to end traditional seed reproduction methods whereby peasants maintain a stock of seed from year to year”<sup>186</sup>

Associated with Demeter and Persephone, the Mystery of Eleusis “was based on taking entheogens to be in communion with the inner god. The Mystery was a way of self-managing spirituality. We should all be our own shamans or each other’s shamans. Future communities will need new rituals.” Rosario went on to speak of “recovering the concept of the party as something which elevates. We need more outdoor parties where we dance on the land, where we massage the Earth.”

In an eclectic and wide ranging talk she also mentioned the **International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers**, a group of indigenous women who continue to perform rituals with entheogens in their communities. Formed in 2004 to save the Earth and its children, they come from Brazil, Tibet, Gabon and other countries. We had asked for permission to use the garden of the university to have a picnic followed by a short programme of open air activities during the lunch break (including a ritual) but that morning had received the news that our request had been denied. Fortunately we had a plan B as Diego, one of my class mates, had discovered an olive grove round the back of the recently extended arts faculty. In fact the grove is part of the last remaining vestiges of the Valencian “huerta”(agricultural land) and the faculty owes its existence to the cities lack of a green belt policy, its construction part of the process of destruction of this once prosperous agricultural territory.

We ate in the patio outside the conference rooms before heading to the olive grove for the practical sessions which started with a short session of kundalini meditation given by Eirini Delaki, followed by a **Workshop on Cruising** given by the artist Pepe Miralles. His work concentrates on the appropriation of public space by gay men for sex practises and he has produced a map of these cruising areas in the Valencian region. Many of them are on remote beaches, woodlands or motorway services so we thought it would be interesting to talk about this practise of having sex in natural spaces and reproduce a cruising ground as part of the days events.

Pepe talked about the heavily coded behaviour which is used in these spaces where a rule of silence is the norm. Normally they are divided into two zones- one where contact is made and which can be more open, and another which is normally more secluded where the sex takes place. Communication takes place through gestures and there is a heavy focus on genitality. As he pointed out it is dangerous to try and transfer codes used in one community to another and cruising grounds are masculine territories- in his studies he had come across no female cruising grounds. His intention was to make us think of “different ways of organising how to fuck in public spaces.”

We discussed two experimental practises carried out in London (in Hyde Park ) and Barcelona (Montjuic) where groups of women got together and tried to reproduce the cruising experience but there are many factors which caused these experiments to be short lived- not least I imagine being the fact that the anonymity and chance meetings that arise spontaneously in a gay cruising ground are absent when the activity takes the form of a pre arranged event.

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<sup>186</sup> Rosario Hernández Catalán, transcription of the conference, *Rescue Persephone, Revive Eleusis, Agrotheatre, entheogens and ecofeminism. Myths and rites to liberate the Earth and enjoy life* (UPV, 2/5/12)



It is, of course, much more risky for women to wander around alone in a park than for men and a woman is much more likely to draw unwanted attention from straight men in this context. It would have been interesting to discuss whether there are differences in male and female sexuality which might also play an important factor in sexual practises but unfortunately there was not enough time for this discussion or to carry out the practical part of the workshop.

After the talk I carried out a **Shamanic Hairdressing Ritual** (discussed at length in chapter VI) grooming all the participants before heading back to the University for the second part of the day. As we were running late, I went ahead of the crowd in my leatherette miniskirt to open the conference room and as I left the olive grove behind and entered the aseptic modern architecture of the faculty somehow my transvestism seemed much more transgressive in the aseptic context of the Academy.

More people had arrived for the afternoon sessions which began with Diana and her talk on **Eco BDSM** (Bondage, Discipline and Sado Masochism). She explained that she felt uncomfortable with the abstract sensualism and metaphorical side of the ecosex philosophy, echoing my feelings about its apparent ingenuity. "I find it really hard to connect with- probably because there's something that doesn't function inside me. Like everybody who grew up in an urban environment I think there's a communication breakdown with nature... I grew up between cement, asphalt and the trees in the park which were probably totally toxic..." but as she went on she explained that nevertheless - "I really do want to re-establish that contact in some way, I feel it was robbed from me because I grew up totally alienated from nature, in the city. When I talked to Annie about it, she said to me: 'Look for your hottest turn on and exploit it' so I said 'Could I take nature as my mistress, a dominatrix, something I can expose myself to and be punished by?' and she replied 'Yes, but be careful because nature has no safe word'"

She went on to talk about giving her body up to the overwhelming power of the forces of nature, invoking the power of pain and endurance experienced in extreme forms of being with nature (which reminded me of many experiences of having to cross a huge tangle of thorny undergrowth in the midst of a forest). She then opened up a debate based on the concept of the "safe word" which is pacted between the people who take part in sado masochistic practises so that when the boundaries of the submissive partner (generally) have been passed they can let their partner know that they have reached their limit and need to stop.

Because it is not possible to make a verbal pact with nature a whole bundle of questions are raised- first and foremost concerning how we protect ourselves since if we throw ourselves into a gushing waterfall, we can't scream to the river to turn the flow off and stop ourselves getting swept off our feet and carried away. From the many times when I have been falling down the side of a mountain I can relate to that.

The debate also raised the interesting philosophical question of consent which relates to ecofeminist ideas about agency. In my ecosex practises I often wonder if I am exploring a new way of relating to nature in a positive way or simply finding a new way to exploit it to get sexual satisfaction. In certain cases of zoophilia (sex with animals) as described by some participants it may be possible to communicate and generate a complicity (for example with cats), although in too many cases the relationship is clearly one of abuse.

But with lower forms of animals, plants and natural elements it is impossible to "ask" permission. The natural element I stimulate myself with cannot grant me its permission to touch, caress or interact with it.

In this case questions of abuse are probably not relevant and in Beth and Annie's workshops on sexecology they encourage a feeling of empathy towards these elements which is a metaphorical way of redressing the balance of power in the relationship. Nevertheless, as some of the participants pointed out, it can also be argued that when we "get our rocks off" (sometimes literally!) with nature we are reproducing the typical human relationship which sees nature as a passive recipient of our actions. However I see no comparison- there is a huge difference between a gentle frottage with a mossy rock and the hacking down of huge tracts of tropical rainforest.

We ended the day with a lively round table discussion co-chaired by faculty professor José Albelda, a representative of the environmental group **Greenpeace**. I had taken his course on ecology and art as part of the MA, a course which had touched on a wide variety of subjects, emphasising the importance of an ethical philosophy of life. "It's important to focus on the collaborative and synergetic possibilities that can arise between different groups of activists- queers, ecologists, etc... because one of the things which unites us is a focus on diversity. The processes of evolution tend towards greater diversity and ecosystems which have a low biodiversity are often highly unstable. The fight for the ecosystem and the fight for rights and social justice are the same, in fact Greenpeace also defends the rights of the people who live in areas like the Amazon working to empower these local agents, since the sector of the population most affected by environmental destruction is invariably the weakest – women and children. Our relationship with nature has gone through various phases in our history...The idea of nature as an erotic force, a source of enjoyment, as that which fulfils our biological necessities, connects our bodies and our senses is very powerful and will help us to see nature in a new way. This can help to lead us from a culture of excess to one of thrift and self control."<sup>187</sup>

A wide range of concerns were expressed by those who spoke in the round table discussion but all seemed to agree that a radical change of system was required but that this would have to be accompanied by changes in perception that would begin from the personal and grassroots level. This lack of faith in political solutions from within the system reflected the recent political climate since years of political corruption scandals had, in part been responsible for the rise of people power and the *Indignados* occupation of public squares all over Spain in 2011. In the *15M* a wide ranging coalition of groups with different demands had come together to practise a participatory form of politics based on a non hierarchical structure and although this had often led to interminable debates with no resolutions, a new optimism had invaded Spanish society.

One of the main reasons for organizing the conferences and Ecogender events was to provide a meeting space for people from the artistic, queer, transfeminist and environmental communities with an interest in social transformation to gather and exchange ideas. Possibly the least represented group throughout were ecologists perhaps because many still do not see the importance of gender in the environmental struggle, or the ways in which art can help to get their message across.

This shows how important these kind of events are and the following year we organised an informal talk in the queer vegan restaurant and cultural space *La Mandragora* to continue the discussion.

The talk was part of **Open Wounds** an event which included the opening of the first **Post Industrial Natural Queer Park** which will be discussed in Chapter VIII.

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187 José Albelda, transcript of his talk at the *Ecogender: Sex and Ecology* conference (UPV, 2/5/12)

# CHAPTER VI

## GEYSERBIRD: THE SHAMAN TRAVESTI

- *Extinct or Alive?* (2012)
- *Shamanic Hairdressing* (2012)
- *Ritual of the Waters* (2012)

The **Ecogender Project** was an attempt to define a new queer ethics in relation to ecology, and with it I felt the possibility of a truly contemporary post identitarian politics. The next logical step was for me to begin an investigation into different expressions of queer spiritualities and their relation to the environment.

I have had a long standing fascination with the figure of the shaman and in 2012 when I began work on the Natural Hysteria cycle of performances I felt a need to develop a new alter ego to carry them out: the transgender shaman *Geyserbird*. I wanted to involve the public in the performances in a similar way to that in which members of a community are involved in ceremonies and rituals and the persona of a transgender shaman seemed a perfect way to do that and to introduce the concepts of ecofeminism and queer ecology.

In fact, shamans are natural healers who are deeply in touch with the Earth and there is evidence that in many so-called primitive cultures individuals who did not fit the gender binary contributed to the spiritual or social life of their community by following this path. For example amongst the Chukchi and Koriak tribes of Siberia it was common for both men and women to adopt the customs and dress of the opposite sex and carry out roles as spiritual healers or shamans.

It is believed that the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics is what gave these transgender shamans a special ability to act as a bridge between the spiritual and the terrestrial planes.

In many North American tribes there existed a wide range of gender options.

“Native Americans have often held intersex, androgynous people, feminine males and masculine females in high respect. The most common term to define such persons today is to refer to them as ‘two-spirit’ people... Since everything that exists is thought to come from the spirit world, androgynous or transgender persons are seen as doubly blessed, having both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman. Thus, they are honoured for having two spirits, and are seen as more spiritually gifted than the typical masculine male or feminine female.”<sup>188</sup>

Young men who showed a preference for female work were encouraged to dress and live as women, often taking a husband from among the tribe but they could also be warriors at the same time. Chronicles from as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century show that important decisions in the lives of Illinois and Nadouessi communities were taken in consultation with these highly respected beings<sup>189</sup> and as far south as Patagonia<sup>190</sup> there

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188 Walter L Williams, *The ‘two-spirit’ people of indigenous North Americans*.

[www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/two-spirit-people-north-america](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/two-spirit-people-north-america). - Accessed 05/01/18.

189 Jesuit Jacques Marquette quoted in Leslie Feinberg *Transgender Warriors – Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Beacon Press, 1996)

190 Thomas Falkner, *Description of Patagonia* (1775) quoted in Edward Carpenter, *Intermediate*

are reports of a special role for transvestite “wizards” in tribal communities. In a study of machi shamen, anthropologist Anna Mariella Bacigalupo shows how they move between “masculine and feminine polarities or combine the two”<sup>191</sup> in the healing practices they carry out, guided by spirits who sometimes lead them to exhibit sexual variance from the strict gender norms of a Chilean society which brands them as witches.

Around 1800 the Russian traveller Dawydow reported that amongst the Konyagas in the Alaska region: “There are here... men with tattooed chins, who work only as women, who always live with the women-kind, and like the latter, have husbands —not infrequently even two. Such men are called Achnutschik. They are not by any means despised, but, on the contrary, are respected in the settlements, and are for the most part *wizards*.”<sup>192</sup>

In the archive of the Transvestite Museum of Peru we find the following description of “men disguised as women”<sup>193</sup> in the culture of the Incas. “The truth is that the devil has introduced this vice among the people of the highlands and the Yungas under guise of a form of sanctity. Each temple or site of adoration has one or two or more men, depending on the idol. These men dress as women from infancy and speak as such, and in their manner, dress and all else imitate women. During feast days and other important occasions, men of importance in the community have carnal relations with these men of the temples.”<sup>194</sup>

The vast body of evidence shows that all kinds of gender variance and same sex activity existed in many cultures worldwide and even within the christian tradition in Europe there are examples of the acceptance of a third gender.

In Naples and the surrounding region there is an ancient tradition which survives to this day, related to the *femminiello*, who is a transgender person, born as a male who “is both masculine and feminine and when these are truly mixed you cannot distinguish between the two. There is no need or desire to define yourself as one or the other...In the *Figliata*, an ancient ritual where men act as if they are giving birth, the *femminielli* are the ones to go into labor.”<sup>195</sup>

This ritual has been portrayed in the book **The Skin** by Curzio Malaparte and in the homonymous film by Liliana Cavani (1981) and **Naples in Veils** (2017) by Ferzan Özpetek. The *femminielli* are part of a traditional folk culture in the poorest sectors of neapolitan society who have an accepted role in the spiritual life of the community. Described by Charlotte Garson as “superior beings who bridge the gap between the sexes but also between life and death.”<sup>196</sup>

Their continued existence and rituals are shown in the documentary **Pagani** (2016) by Elisa Flaminia Inno.

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*Types among Primitive Folk. A Study in Social Evolution* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1919) p.36

191 Anna Mariella Bacigalupo, *Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power, and Healing among Chilean Mapuche* (University of Texas, 2007) p.4

192 Ibid

193 Giuseppe Campuzano (whose work is discussed below) in interview with Lawrence La fountain-Stokes for E-MISFÉRICA Vol 6.2 (2009), <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/es/campuzano-entrevista> - Accessed 10/1/18

194 Pedro de Cieza de León, *Crónica del Perú*, 1553

195 Ciro Ciretta, interviewed by Luca Fortis *Femminielli Napoletani* <https://medium.com/@kwilsonwriter/femminielli-napoletani-aead72d3ad92> - Accessed 3/6/18

196 [www.cinemadureel.org/en/archives/programme-2017/first-films-international-competition/pagani](http://www.cinemadureel.org/en/archives/programme-2017/first-films-international-competition/pagani) - Accessed 3/6/18





Fig. 6.1 Scene of the *Figliata* from the film *Naples in Veils* (2017)

"In the rituals described, the *femminiello* assumes different roles which range from the protagonist of a *mise en scène* (the *figliata*), intermediary between man and the world of spirits (interpretation of dreams, worship of the spirits of purgatory), interpreter of destiny (good luck), to a figure whose characteristics resemble those of the shaman (song and dance in the pilgrimage to the sanctuary). In my opinion, the four manifestations described constitute a symbolic-sacred complex that links the transgressive dimension of sexuality, death and luck, and the *femminielli* are important actors of this symbolic group by virtue of their undefined gender."<sup>197</sup>

Nevertheless Christian doctrine has been generally homo and transphobic, and when the Europeans colonised Latin America they condemned and in many cases wiped out sexual and gender practises they considered immoral. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, the first European to cross the Panamanian isthmus in 1513, was so incensed by the gender bending natives he encountered that when he discovered "a brother of the king and other young men, obliging men, [who] dressed effeminately with women's clothing"<sup>198</sup> he threw forty of them to be eaten by his dogs.

Similarly when European settlers arrived in the North American territories centuries later, they imposed their Christian values upon the Native Americans. The curative practices carried out by two spirit people were suppressed and they were taught that homosexuality was a sin.

"Both non-Western and Western, including indigenous, cultures have played a role in the emergence of transgender as an umbrella term. Gilbert Herdt's 1993 book **Third Sex Third Gender** is a good example. The anthology includes cross-cultural anthropological and historical examples of lifeworlds that contest the paradigm of male and female in a way that suggests a third identity is a universal phenomenon... Nevertheless, activists and scholars have acknowledged that applying the term universally can flatten out differences and impose Western assumptions."<sup>199</sup>

<sup>197</sup> Marinella Miano Borruso, *Femminielli. Los Travestis Napolitanos En El Ámbito De Lo Simbólico Sagrado*, in *Estudios De Antropología Biológica*, Volumen Xiii Mexico 2007 P.1112 My translation.

<sup>198</sup> Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, *De orbe novo decades*, 1516

<sup>199</sup> Doran George, *Negotiating the Spectacle in Transgender Performances of Alexis Arquette*,

Generations of First Nation people were educated in Christian residential schools and lost awareness of the rich gender diversity their cultures once embraced. Nowadays it is not uncommon for two spirit members of the community to be disowned by their families and banished from their territories but fortunately there is a network of groups across the USA where two spirit people meet to socialise and carry out their traditional dances and rituals. They have uncovered the past the European settlers tried to eradicate, and are fighting to regain the respect they once had in their communities. They raise interesting questions about sexual identity since for many their spirituality is critically important in how they define themselves in terms of gender and sexuality. Often their identification as two spirit (rather than homosexual, bisexual or transgender) individuals is spiritually motivated and it is similar to people who for political reasons choose to identify as queer instead of LGTB. In both cases a role within the community is being claimed whether it is that of activist, healer or indeed both.

One of the principal roles of the shaman in many societies is to carry out rituals of physical and psychic healing and to resolve conflicts between members of their community. In the same way, I believe art can carry out a similar function in the symbolic realm, helping to resolve social conflict through the use of metaphor. I believe there are many similarities between shamans and performance artists as pointed out by Gómez-Peña: “my shaman friends say that I am a ‘shaman who lost his way’. I like that definition of performance art.”<sup>200</sup> Often in our art practice, the spiritual calling of the shaman is replaced by a calling to express ideas, ideas which we hope will transform those who experience our work in a similar way to the cures brought about by the spells and healing potions of the shaman.

“Becoming an artist, even in the West, is not unlike becoming a shaman. The techniques and ambivalent social status of artist and shaman approximate each other. In modern Western cultures it might be said that the impulses from which art is made- the experiences of the artist (the shaman’s ‘call’, the artist’s ‘raw material’)- originate in difficult confrontations between daily life and the unconscious.”<sup>201</sup>

The appeal of an authentic “native” culture outside of my own is tempting but nevertheless it is impossible to exist outside of one’s socio-political context. Similarly, the Chilean artist and film director Alejandro Jodorowsky described his relationship with shamanism in intellectual terms, explaining that because of his upbringing in a rational materialist culture he could not inhabit the magical world of the Mexican shamans he studied. “To be a witch or a shaman it is necessary to inhabit a shamanic world”<sup>202</sup> Nevertheless magic influenced his art practice and he used its symbolism to heal people and transform their reality. “The way of handling the language of objects and the symbolic vocabulary, in order to produce certain effects in people; in short, the way of directly addressing the unconscious in its own language, whether through words, objects or acts.”<sup>203</sup>

During the course of my investigation I have discovered other contemporary artists whose work combines performative and symbolic representations of spirituality to reclaim an historically significant role for non binary gender individuals in the wider community.

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Zackary Drucker, *DavEnd, niv Acosta, and Tobarón Waxman*, (Transgender Studies Quarterly vol 1. Duke University Press, 2014)

200 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *In defense of performance art* [www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz\\_pocha2/mainpages/in\\_defense.htm](http://www.pochanostra.com/antes/jazz_pocha2/mainpages/in_defense.htm) - Accessed 18/06/2017

201 Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*, (Routledge, 1993) p.238

202 Alejandro Jodorowsky, *Psicomagia*, (Siruela, 2004) p.136

203 Ibid p.137



A Latin American artist who uses ethnographic material in the creation of his work is Giuseppe Campuzano (1969-2013) whose project **El Museo Travesti de Perú** (The Transvestite Museum of Peru) includes historical documents and newspaper reports which rewrite the history of Peru through an archive of “indigenous androgynes and *mestizos*<sup>204</sup> *travestis*.”<sup>205</sup> Campuzano has created an alternative to the official history of Peru, which erased these characters, and these articles are displayed alongside images of popular processions and festivities in which cross-dressed characters take part. “Performativity – as a relational act that transcends the field of the performance, not in the movement from the fabulous to the real but in the act of migrating that which is fabulous to everyday life– is the aesthetic and social goal of the Museo Travesti, in which folklore, performance, happenings, passing and its interlocutors, constitute constant strategies of subject transformation and the subsequent transformation of its environment”<sup>206</sup>



Fig. 6.2 *El Museo Travesti de Perú* (2008)

While Campuzano lived, the Museum was usually displayed in his presence accompanied by performances devised as a response to the local context. In the performance which accompanied the presentation of the Museum’s catalogue, in the Centro Cultural de España in Lima (2008), a variety of drag queens, performers and dancers dressed in traditional costume were present, in a happening which ended up as a lively party within the exhibition space which then moved out into the streets of the city and became a public manifestation of this living archive of transvestism. In the 2006 general elections he took the archive out into the streets as a protest against the homophobic attitudes of the political parties bringing this discourse into the public space.

In the performative dance piece **Réquiem para un Alcaraván** (Requiem for a Stone Curlew, 2012) the Mexican artist Lukas Avendaño carries out a study in trans auto ethnography, presenting religious feminine rites of passage in his native Tehuantepec.

204 One of the main roles of this mestizo (lit: half breed or mixed race) is as to act as a go between, as we saw in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, acting as a bridge between communities, Campuzano acts as a bridge between his trans travesti community and the wider Peruvian society.

205 Giuseppe Campuzano quoted in Miguel López, *Chamanes, Danzantes, Putas y Misses: el Travestismo Obseso de la Memoria: Diálogo sobre el Museo Travesti del Perú*, (Journal Ramona vol 99, Buenos Aires, 2010) available online at [http://70.32.114.117/gsd/collect/revista/index/assoc/HASH01d0/4634e885.dir/r99\\_34nota.pdf](http://70.32.114.117/gsd/collect/revista/index/assoc/HASH01d0/4634e885.dir/r99_34nota.pdf) -Accessed 9/1/18

206 Ibid (Campuzano E-MISFÉRICA Vol 6.2 2009)

Lukas identifies as *muxe* a third gender option for homosexual males in the local community who wish to live as females, although they must accept their condition as subordinate in a highly sexist culture, where their attraction to men can only be reciprocated sexually. Lukas carries out a cuir subversion of this role, performing nude from the waist up, emphasising his masculine body, whilst using elements of traditional costume associated with the female. “The only way I can enter the performative space is through autobiography, but I do so from an anthropological basis, with the clinical eye of an anthropologist, although I direct my view towards the spectator. I am interested in playing with the signs and symbols of culture, twisting its structural framework.”<sup>207</sup>



Fig. 6.3 Lukas Avendaño, *Requiem for an Alcaravan*

Both of these artists disidentify with the subordinate role society imposes upon them. They share what I describe as a vocation, the vocation of the cuir, trans activist, who acts as a representative of their community, embodying the struggle in their work. Their performances carry out a form of healing for those communities which have been erased from the official histories whilst simultaneously drawing attention to how these erasures continue to take place in contemporary societies where even when homosexuality is accepted it must remain within certain norms unthreatening to the binary construction of gender.

An artist who shares my Anglo-Saxon background and also identifies closely with the values embodied in trans shamans of other cultures is the transgender singer and artist Anohni, formerly known as Antony. Born in Britain, she moved to the USA as a child and began performing in the underground queer scene of New York in the 1990s as part of the performance collective **Black Lips**. Throughout her musical career Anohni has explored spirituality, exposing her emotions in a highly visceral way in songs which are a modern fusion of gospel, dance and chamber music. In the spoken word piece **Future Feminism** (2012) she claimed “I’m a witch, I debaptised myself... what’s great about being born transgender is that you’re born with a natural religion, none of the patriarchal monotheisms will have you... in most of those religions you’d be put to death”<sup>208</sup>

207 Lukas Avendaño quoted in the interview by Antonio Prieto Stambaugh in the magazine *Diario de Campo* (2015) <http://diariodecampo.mx/2015/10/29/lukas-avendan%cc%83o-me-interesa-rasgar-el-entramado-cultural-del-espectador/#> Accessed 9/1/2018 - my translation.

208 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npYAImVa7qw> - Accessed 9/1/18



Anohni's recent album **Hopelessness** (2016) is a highly political work which harshly critiques the way we are decimating our planet and includes songs about climate change, extinctions and surveillance technologies.

She uses her voice to raise awareness of these destructive processes and believes there is a role for transgender people in society since our outsider perspective makes it possible for us to "model the potentialities"<sup>209</sup> of both men and women.

"My focus is ever more on the connectedness between trans consciousness and Future Feminist consciousness and ecological consciousness. We're talking also about indigenous connection, indigenous role models, and returning back to Earth-centered spiritualities... I don't think I could separate a conversation about trans feminism from a conversation about indigenous governance and ecology. You know what I mean? For me, that's the same conversation because we don't have any time left."<sup>210</sup>

Another eco-artist with a totally different approach is Johannes Paul Raether, a German performer whose work is based on the creation of genderless cyborgian characters who embody specific issues and represent a satirical critique of technology.

Raether's work is a combination of theatre and installations such as the **World Healing Forest** (2011), a circle consisting of differently sized selfie sticks, which has been used in a series of healing rituals which aim to reconstruct community and undermine our societies fetishism of the smartphone.

One of his most successful characters is the *WorldWideWitch Protektorama* who believes that "humankind is possessed by the abstract principles of capital, and thereby has rendered itself a prosthesis of its own digital devices."<sup>211</sup>



Fig. 6.4 Johannes Paul Raether, *The Witch and the Swarm* (2015)

209 From the interview by Kelly McCartney, *Transcending The Gender Spectrum: An Interview with Antony Hegarty* in Cuepoint (2014) <https://medium.com/cuepoint/transcending-the-gender-spectrum-an-interview-with-antony-hegartye5a865395dc2> - Accessed 9/1/18

210 Ibid

211 Eva Birkenstock, Johannes Paul Raether, *Identitecture*, information on the exhibition at the Goethe Institute (New York, 2014)

Raether carries out actions in a wide variety of contexts ranging from Apple Stores (where he was searching for rare earth elements used in mobile phones) to standing stone circles and mountain tops. When his highly artificial, drag influenced characters appear in such unexpected contexts, they create a suspension of disbelief amongst the public which Raether exploits to expound his theories, overturning the expectation that these clown-like characters will express a comical discourse.

With the character of *Protektorama* he reclaims the importance of the figure of the witch (historically vilified by the Church and the medical establishment since the Renaissance) as a wise practitioner of healing, in line with current feminist discourse.

On the other hand, my alter-ego, Geyserbird, reflects my mestizo position, combining the pagan Celtic figure of the witch with that of the transgender shaman to insert both of these figures within a multi-cultural queer genealogy. When I use the term shaman I am referring to a practise which is normally a calling and requires a lifetime devotion. Geyserbird blurs the lines between being a performance alter ego and a part of my life, like most of my alter egos have done over the years. “Shamanism...is undoubtedly theatrical”<sup>212</sup>

The choice of Geyserbird as a name was highly symbolic because it had been given to me many years before, in a unique and striking manner, on what was possibly my first public outing in drag in the streets of Leeds in the 1980s, by a leather clad biker who shouted out “Geezer Bird!”<sup>213</sup> whilst whizzing by. At the time neither I, nor my gay Northern companions had ever heard the term but when I returned to the city for a performance years later, the collection of stuffed birds in my host’s flat reminded me of it. Somehow the mixture of genders the term conjured up, together with the hybrid of human and animal forms, seemed perfect for my new transgender persona and furthermore by simply exchanging the homonym geyser for geezer, it called up a wild uncontrollable force of nature.

Costume is very important in the development of my alter egos because for me clothes represent the performativity of gender and I wanted to create a eye catching look of organic glamour which would mix elements which were highly artificial-sequins and leatherette- with more natural features. In this case I used an item of costume that had a history charged with symbolism: the huge ornamental attachment of a showgirl’s feather hat I had been given by a friend whose family worked in the theatre. As Gómez-Peña says “the more we use our performance ‘artifacts’, the more ‘charged’ and powerful they become”<sup>214</sup>. Since the hat was too small for my head, I recycled the accessory, using it to create a bustle of tail feathers for my new alter ego Geyserbird. This movement of feathers from head to tail seemed appropriate since proportionally their size made them appear more like tail feathers, thus it felt like a return to their animal origins. Of course in birds, it is the male which has the more striking plumage and carries out a display to attract females, whereas in humans such ostentatious displays amongst males are discouraged and it is generally the female who uses clothes and make-up to attract a mate.

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212 David George, *On Origins: Behind the Rituals* (Performance Research, “On Ritual” A Journal of Performing Arts, Vol.3 no.3 Winter 1998)

213 Geezer Bird (definition) (1) A pre-operation transsexual. A man with make-up, (2) A female who displays desirable male characteristics (such as toilet humour or alcoholism) without sacrificing their femininity. (3) British Female that behaves without normal feminine grace or decorum. With inhibitions lowered or removed by peer pressure and typically fuelled by alcopops or lager, they are often observed in the vicinity of or within the nightclubs of The North East region of the UK.... also appear in small groups at the popular cheap European tourist destinations frequented by the British; typically Spanish South Coast, Canary Islands and The Greek Islands. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=GeezerBird> - Accessed 22/12/17

214 Ibid



In Spanish “tener pluma” means to be camp, therefore this “feathery” iconography can be inserted in a radical queer histeria as can be seen in this description of the one of the departments of the Museo Travesti de Perú which includes “the great imperial dress of Manco Cápac - first leader of the Incan empire - and that continues with the baroque paintings of arquebusier angels of the Cuzcan school .. (a pictorial current result of the mix of a European catholic imaginary and the visions of indigenous and creole painters) and with the costumes of contemporary showgirls and drag queens.”<sup>215</sup>



Fig.6.5 Geyserbird- Dress and Amulets

In addition, Anna Maria used her skills as an artist-jeweller to make a necklace which incorporated my totem insect charm, and a series of talismans which hung from my ceremonial dress. These were based on the charms we had seen in the costume of siberian shamans but where they had used metal and other materials to make their talismans, Anna Maria used animal print fabrics and hair from coloured wigs which gave the charms a semi-atavistic kitsch drag aesthetic.

### *Extinct or Alive?*

My first public appearance as Geyserbird took place in the *Clandestino Corrosivo Charivari Cabaret* in March of 2012 as part of the video shoot for the song **Extinct or Alive?** by the musical group **Gran Tour**<sup>216</sup> which describes the battle being waged against nature by the forces of neoliberal capitalism.

“Extinct or alive?  
Has the drive to a new world economy,  
made natural history obsolete?  
Wonder if the dinosaurs knew about evolution  
or the Final Solution?  
Did they look down on all the others, like we do, and say:  
- aw such a shame you have to go, but that’s progress -

<sup>215</sup> Miguel A Lopez, *Robar la historia: Contrarelatos y prácticas artísticas de oposición* (Ediciones Metales Pesados, Santiago de Chile 2017) p.187

<sup>216</sup> The band at that moment, was composed of Graham Bell Tornado(vocals) and Kapi Martinez (keyboards and programming).

Extinct or alive?  
Insecticides may protect our crops  
but there's so many billions  
and they'll survive no matter what  
Extinct or alive?  
We can wipe out millions of bacteria,  
but mutations make sure that they'll still be there  
when we're dead and gone...  
Far, far away - and if compassion dies and evolution thrives on change:  
Isn't it time we changed? Before we join the list...  
Extinct or alive?"<sup>217</sup>

I developed a script for the video which involved the discovery of Geyserbird living in freedom in an abandoned zoo who was then captured and forced to work in a cabaret. Zoos are sites of conflict where animals are kept in captivity with the excuse that seeing them in the flesh is somehow educational.

Zoos are an anachronism in a world where a whole industry of "green tourism" has developed so that people can visit wild animals in their natural habitats where special areas are protected as reserves. This process is criticized by Catriona Mortimer Sandilands because she feels it represents a fantasy where nature becomes "a fetish that can be bought to extend the reach of capital rather than prompt a criticism of the relationships that produced the loss in the first place"<sup>218</sup>

For the main sequences of the video I wanted to show Geyserbird in the natural environment of the abandoned Valencian zoo which had been closed since 2006 when the animals had been moved to a new Safari park on the outskirts of town. The zoo's state of abandon revealed how the local government was incapable of managing its public spaces properly since it could easily have been landscaped and incorporated as part of the adjacent city park.

This space was an incredible discovery made on one of my urban explorer outings when I had seen a gap in the fence and, wondering where it led to, clambered through. I found myself in an incredible surreal landscape of banana plants, peeling information boards, overgrown enclosures and dried up pools where rhinos, giraffes and camels had once lived a sorry existence.

Nature had run wild since it had been abandoned and it had a spooky post apocalyptic feeling as if everything had been left in a hurry for some unknown mysterious reason. I loved the idea of squatting it, if only temporarily, (in fact while we were filming we discovered a pile of belongings which belonged to a homeless person, in one of the abandoned animal shelters) and bearing silent testimony to the exploitation of the animals who lived there.

On one of the broken windows that separated the public from the animals we found a caption directed at children which read "Be Rational don't be a Critter". The plants which now grew over the ruins of the past transformed what was once part of a 19th Century vision into one which was scarred and toxic but still strangely beautiful. For the new hybrid species Geyserbird this environment was perfect for the ritual of display I wanted to film for the video.

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<sup>217</sup> Lyrics of the song *Extinct or Alive?* by Graham Bell, music by Gran Tour. Video online at <https://vimeo.com/115116211>

<sup>218</sup> Catriona Mortimer Sandilands, *Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies* in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Indiana University Press, 2010) p.337



It was a sunny day when we broke through the fencing and I climbed down into some long gone animals pen, making an ersatz bower amongst the broken glass and leaves, to emerge onto the fallen over trunk of a tree. I slowly climbed up its length to pose near the top, surrounded by cameras.

The bougainvillea were in bloom so they created a gorgeous contrast to my crimson tail feather headdress.

The longing expressed in the song for a time and space before or beyond neoliberal capitalism was poignantly captured in the faded colours of the dyed ostrich feathers of a showgirls headdress, the nostalgic remnant of a long gone past of glamour and innocence, in a site which had once represented the dreams of the many children who must have visited the animals over the years, their excitement and possible disappointment when they realised how sad the animals were on display in captivity.



**Fig.6.5 *Extinct or Alive?* (2012)**

For the second part of the video shoot Geyserbird carried out the same display in the context of the C.C.C. Cabaret. The format of a cabaret is perfect for combining social criticism with flamboyance and provocation. In his discussion of an alternative genealogy of performance to the generally accepted history which traces its origins in avant garde artistic movements such as dada and futurism, Marvin Carlson explains how cabaret “more closely prefigures the dynamic of modern performance than these avant garde forms in its eclecticism and combination of popular forms.”<sup>219</sup>

Certainly the early influences on my practice come more from the cabaret, and its modern equivalent, the rave or dance party. Traditionally cabarets are sexually permissive spaces where audiences can go to feel the vicarious thrill of mixing with sexually depraved beings.

In some ways they are a sophisticated form of the carnival freak show attractions and I was interested in exploring this voyeuristic exchange and presenting Geyserbird as an exotic species, captured and forced to perform for the public like a trained seal.

<sup>219</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: a critical introduction* (Routledge, London 1996) p.87

In the musical interlude in the song I made my way out into the crowd and got up on a table to dance using the techniques of a burlesque dancer I had practiced whilst working as a volunteer for the Outsiders charity at the Erotic Awards in London. Under the artificial lighting of the cabaret, the mating dance of Geyserbird, like a peacock or bower bird displaying for a potential mate, somehow became a grotesque parody of eroticism.

### ***Shamanic Hairdressing***<sup>220</sup>

As part of the events organised during the second Ecogender conference (2/5/2012) I carried out a **Shamanic Hairdressing Ritual**. My guiding principles are ethical and synchronistic therefore chance occurrences are highly important to me. So I felt it was deeply significant when, a few days after my performance, I discovered this text by the Peruvian artist and travesti Guiseppe Campuzano, which captured my motivations and described the action perfectly: “The occupations of contemporary travestis<sup>221</sup> – prostitution, hairdressing, shamanism- are at the same time occupations which involve social mediation in a postindustrial society.”<sup>222</sup>

The ritual took place in the seclusion of an olive grove where I prepared a circular area, placing rosemary leaves (a herb which signifies remembrance) round its perimeter. I changed into my ceremonial Geyserbird robes: the showgirl headdress and a red leatherette mini dress that Anna Maria and I had made.

In the **Extinct or Alive?** video I had worn a one-off garment designed by a friend, but as the alter ego developed, I realised it was important that all elements of the wardrobe be made specifically with the purpose of being used in ceremonies and rituals. The fake red leather, which reminded me of the puffed up breast of a Frigate Bird, was the recycled upholstery fabric of an old Chesterton sofa which, with its buttons still intact, looked strange and surreal.

There was a poetic synchronicity as well since the ceremonial dress I had worn in the first transgender ritual of **Akaraten: The Dreaming** had also been made from upholstery fabric. Covering myself in the skin of a functional object was a homage to the cyborg and the highly baroque decorative forms of the grotesque<sup>223</sup> where the human body is incorporated into a design with elements of vegetation, animals and architecture. The dress represented perfectly the hybrid nature of Geyserbird.

After a short introductory speech I led the participants to this space where they were invited to enter the circle one by one and sit in the centre where I would place a satin cowl over their shoulders. I explained that we were going to circulate energy with the Earth and for them to concentrate their thoughts on what they would like to share with it.

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220 A short film of the ritual by video maker Manu Marpel can be seen online at <https://vimeo.com/43105460>

221 Travesti is a term which in South American Spanish covers a range of practices which challenge gender roles including crossdressing and transsexuality.

222 Giuseppe Campuzano, *Andróginos, hombres vestidos de mujer, maricones... el Museo Travesti del Perú*.

<http://revistavozal.com/vozal/index.php/androgenos-hombres-vestidos-de-mujer-maricones-el-museo-travesti-del-peru> - Accessed 9/01/18

223 The grotesque is a decorative style of the late Roman period that was rediscovered in the 17th century when Nero's Domus Aurea palace was rediscovered. It had a major influence on Italian interior decoration at that time.



Then I raised the hairbrush high above my head and began the gentle sweeping motion which massaged their head. This act of caring for the participants depended on the trust they showed in me.



**Fig.6.7 Shamanic Hairdressing (2012)**

The way we wear our hair is an important part of our self expression, how we define ourselves and how society defines us, short hair is seen as masculine, whilst long hair is feminine. In the LGTB community these codes have solidified in femme and butch identities, particularly for women, since a woman with short hair is still seen as having renounced her femininity.

As there was a wide mixture of people, both trans and non trans in the public, each participant in the ritual brought their own history into the circle, and when I brushed their hair I was interacting with their own, often carefully prepared self image. It was important to establish a relationship of trust, since the ritual relied on our mutual dependence, as they entrusted me not to destroy that image, whilst I depended on them to carry out the ritual.

As I worked, I sang, feeling the contours of each head as I stroked it with the brush. Each person inspired a different song and brushing motion, some fast and hard others long and sweeping. I imagined the hair and skin returning to the earth, or being used to line the nest of a bird.

One by one the people entered the circle, and as they left I anointed them on the forehead with a mixture of honey and amaranto seeds to symbolise the earths fragility and resistance. Amaranto is the plant which caused havoc in Monsanto's fields of genetically modified crops in the USA, somehow managing to resist all pesticides and strangle the life out of their plantations.



## *Ritual of the Waters*

I carried out this ritual as a response to a cyber action called by the **International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers**. They had sent out an invitation worldwide for people to take part in a collective “Lighting of the lights ceremony” in celebration of the transit of Venus on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012, an astronomical phenomenon which occurs once every 8 years, when Venus passes between the Earth and the Sun. I decided to undertake a ritual as part of this global event in a secluded natural pool fed by an underwater spring in a beautiful canyon of the Albaida river a few miles from the town of Xàtiva. The pool was hidden from sight by tall reeds and few people knew of its existence so I thought it would be the perfect place to carry out a private and personal ritual.

I wanted to reach the spring at dawn so I knew I’d have to travel through the dark to get there in time for the sunrise. The night was cool and I dressed for the journey in warm clothes I had brought from Scotland that had belonged to my father. Somehow it seemed appropriate to wear them since it was he who had taken me on my first camping expeditions into the mountains and in some way instilled a love of nature in me. In this way the ritual became a kind of homage to him. Despite the fact he had been brought up by a strict father who he called “Victorian” in that prehistoric time when gays were just a shadowy rumour, he had come to understand and respect my sexuality as part of my waywardness and eccentricity.

As I left the last lights of the town behind me, I was glad there was a bright moon to light up the steep road which rises up the hill separating Xàtiva from the river canyon. The night was still and quiet until I passed off the main road to start the descent on the other side through the zone of Bizquert where many locals have built chalets to escape the summer heat. A chorus of guard dogs set up as I passed along the road, making my mission seem even more surreptitious and dangerous.

Fortunately I passed them quickly and was soon in wilder country following tracks I knew well from my frequent bike runs along the gorge. The stillness of the night returned...until at one point when I was passing through a particularly dark patch of woodland and heard a heavy rustling in the undergrowth. Immediately the atavistic reactions kicked in and my body prepared itself for fight or flight with a huge rush of adrenaline as I quickly began to wonder what the hell I was doing out in the forest in the middle of the night. God knows what creature might be lurking in the undergrowth waiting to attack although logically the probability was far greater of a human attack since any natural predators in this region have probably been long wiped out.

Nevertheless my body’s reaction was a real wake up call, reminding me of the instincts we have developed over millennia, instincts which taught us to stay by the fire, in the safety of company, in the tribe’s encampment. Moving swiftly along I was soon back in open country where somehow I felt safer. At least here I could see an enemy coming to get me. It didn’t take long to get to the fording point in the river where I crossed to the other side and where the pool lay hidden behind the canes. The moon was still high so I sat down by the dam to wait for the sun to rise before approaching the sanctuary of the pool which was the goal of my pilgrimage.

The rocks were still warm from the days sun so I decided to strip off my clothes and bathe in the last rays of the moon. I had literally just lain back to feel the warmth of the rock on my body when I heard a strange sound from across the valley. Looking up I saw a strange light which looked as big and round as a moon.

It was coming towards me fast from the other side of the river and I realised I wouldn't have time to get my clothes on before it reached me. I froze, hoping I wouldn't be seen at the side of the path by the early morning jogger who must have gotten the biggest fright of her life as she made her way right by me.

Soon the first light of the sun began to appear and I could see my surroundings. The rhododendrons which lined the path were in bloom and already losing their luscious pink flowers and I went back and forth casting them into the pool in an homage to their transitory beauty. Despite my attempts to create a kitsch Hawaiian style setting for the ceremony, the flowers were slowly carried away towards the river by the current and in the end all that remained was the act of offering itself.

I had gone to the spring with no preconceived ideas about what form the ritual would take as I wanted it to evolve spontaneously from the feelings evoked by the situation reacting to the elements I encountered. During the walk I had decided to carry out a symbolic metamorphoses through a change of clothing from a "business man" represented by my father's formal clothes to the transgender shaman symbolised by the red leatherette Geysersbird dress.

I waded into the pool to carry the dress and one of Anna Maria's crowns onto a rock which stuck out of the water where I laid them down in preparation for my transformation. Stripping off the formal shirt and tweeds of my fathers trousers I dedicated the ceremony to my "father the moon and my mother the sun" before pissing in the spring mingling my own waters with its own. I performed a first baptism, letting myself fall backwards into the shallow waters.

Then I dressed in the robes of the Geysersbird, crowning myself, before once again repeating the act of self baptism. Finally I sang the names in Latin of extinct insect species, inviting them to enter the pool with me.

The cold touch of the water reminded me of the importance of the body and its presence, and shivering I put my clothes back on and headed home as the sun rose.



Fig.6.8 *Ritual of the Waters* (2012)

The ritual felt like a necessary return to nature after a year in the city. The difficulties involved in travelling through the countryside in the dark had given the journey a special value, as if it were a personal pilgrimage, a search for wisdom or redemption, achieved through physical effort and the hardships of the trip.

Although the only one witness to the ritual was my video camera, carrying out the ritual in response to the global call made by the 13 grandmothers gave it a social character that was important in the process of construction of the Geysersbird alter ego.

## CHAPTER VII

### PARTICIPATORY RITUALS: HOW TO HEAL...

- *The Cantar/Encantar Workshop* (2012)
- *How to Heal the World Bank* (2012-)
- *Cabaritual* (2014-)

With **How to Heal...** I wanted to configure a cycle of participatory performances based on a ritual structure which could be repeated, changing and adapting itself to a wide variety of contexts.

The ceremony would combine the symbolism of a ritual with political and activist participatory practices and would be officiated by my alter ego Geyserbird, a transgender shaman who inhabits a symbolic space between the physical world and the spiritual world. Shamans and priests officiate ceremonies and rituals that form part of their communities' traditions, therefore participants already know what their role in the event consists of.

Because I was creating an unorthodox queer ritual with no precedent, as well as officiating the ritual, I would have to take on a pedagogical role, explaining the steps of the ritual and its meaning.

The influence of rituals on the performing arts can be traced from Artaud in **The Theatre and its Double** (1938) and his fascination with Balinese theatre which would lead him to elaborate his theories on how the actor has to search for their spiritual and magical side. In the convulsive years of the 1960s, several avant-garde theatre groups (Living Theatre, Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium) found in ritual the way to break the barriers between the stage and the public and do works where the representation of an author's text would be replaced by the collective work of the actors, forming an affective community which blurred the lines between their lives and the theatre.

In the emerging field of performance Hermann Nitsch developed his Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries carrying out visceral actions which incorporated the excess of Dionysian ritual. "One of the wonderful aspects of performance is the permission it gives artists to create initiation rites and ordeals. In our initial innocence, our work often looks like ancient ritual"<sup>224</sup>

Rituals and ceremonies exist in all cultures responding to an essential human need for symbolic representations of processes of change: birth, death, changing of the seasons, etc... and providing for an atavistic human need to sublimate our fears, and desires. They also represent changes in ourselves and mark transformative moments in our lives, affecting how we see ourselves and others, bringing communities together in celebrations which mark their identity.

"The ritual structure is composed of three phases: separation from the original state, transition and transformation to the new condition ..."<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Linda M. Montano, *Performance artists talking in the eighties*, (University of California Press, 2000) p.366

<sup>225</sup> Oscar Cornago, *La vanguardia teatral en España (1965-1975): del ritual al juego* (Madrid, Visor, 2000) p.27



In our secular societies state and religious powers continue to carry out rituals which have, for the main part, lost their significance and which serve only to uphold their power. Many of the Christian holidays have usurped previous traditions, for example in Valencia the midsummer solstice is celebrated with bonfires on the beach as the night of Saint John despite the fact that the saint's day rarely coincides with the shortest night of the year and the Fallas festivities of Saint Joseph's day have replaced the spring solstice celebrated in Northern Europe as Beltane.

The original pagan significance of these ceremonies and rituals which marked the natural cycles of nature has been lost, and we are becoming increasingly more alienated from the natural environment. For this reason it is important to create new rituals which keep us in touch with that nature. Our societies are living through an era of cynicism, an era where it seems almost impossible to fight against the forces that shape our lives. Fatalism is the product of the relentless hypertrophy of the consumer society. "The majority of us realise that we are in a time of historical crisis, but nevertheless we believe we are unable to cause this to change, so we remain seated, watching, we become the audience of the apocalypse"<sup>226</sup>

Rituals are ways to incorporate symbolic acts in our lives which can provide us with a meaning beyond that of the passive consumerism society tries to impose and I believe they have the power to transform the people who take part in them. "My troupe and I have embarked on a search for performance rituals that inspire our audience to make decisions on site and reconquer their civic voice, ritual formats that invite them to participate actively in the act of co-creating the artwork."<sup>227</sup>

It is essential to fight conformity and banality (two of the evils most prevalent in contemporary societies) and revindicate eccentricity as an act of rebellion. Dressing up, imagining ourselves in other bodies, carrying out other roles in society - these are ways to challenge the roles imposed upon us by a society which demands that, as adults, we should carry out our functions unquestioningly fulfilling roles pre-determined by our sex, social class or sexuality. Rituals are also a way of reconciling the romantic ideal of the artist visionary, living in isolation high on a mountaintop, far from the corrupting influences of society, with the idea of the artist as social activist, who instead forms part of the community, using that vision to enrich the lives of its members.

Robert Legorreta aka Cyclona is a mixed race (mexican/basque) transgender performer who lives in L.A. and was involved in the early Chicano protests in 1968 (when high school students in East L.A. staged walk outs to protest about the low standard of education in their schools) and took part in various protests against racist policing. In this period he realised the strong impact that drag had on people and decided to use it as a tool in activist performances such as **Caca Roaches Have No Friends** (1969), a play written and directed by fellow gay Chicano artist Gronk. "It was important for me now to work for people, for humanity, to get them out of the situation they were in and to make them aware of what's going down. So I started to do that, and performance art and being a live art artist, and bringing art to life on stage, and giving out a subliminal political message through my pieces through entertainment"<sup>228</sup>

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226 Isa Fremeaux, *The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination: Art, Activism and Permaculture-an interview with Isa Fremeaux and John Jordan* in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation* (Nai publishers, Rotterdam, 2011) p.303

227 Guillermo Gómez Peña, *Two veteran performance artists swap stories of flying in times in war*, in *Art and Activism in the age of globalisation* (ed Lieven de cuatrer, Ruben de roo, karle Vanhaesebrouck, NAI Publishers 2011) p.211

228 Cyclona interviewed in the documentary *Cyclona; Fire of Life* (Krystal Leach, 2012). <https://vimeo.com/17344312> (2:10 min.) - Accessed 1/4/18

One powerful and inspiring example of art meeting activism is the attempt to levitate the Pentagon in 1967, organised by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. Several hundred people led by members of **The Fugs** and the queer beat generation poet Allen Ginsberg chanted and sang as tear gas was fired upon them. As Ginsberg said “I think that the world political scene seems more and more like magic and there needs to be an advance in white magic, exorcism ceremonies, etc as street theatre.”<sup>229</sup>



Fig. 7.1 Levitation of the Pentagon (1967)

The action may have failed to levitate the Pentagon but it created a media spectacle that would inspire political actions like the kind that the queer activist group **ACT UP** would carry out years later in response to the AIDS crisis, taking to the street in highly theatrical actions which generated media attention and opened up a public debate which helped change attitudes towards the disease and its treatment.

Another example is the artist group **The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination** who organised a Rebel Clown Army to protest against the G8 meeting at Glen Eagles in 2005. They describe their actions as experiments-“because we want to revindicate the right to do experimental politics. It seems to be ok that there is experimental literature, art music and science but not politics. The idea of creating new political forms is not acceptable”<sup>230</sup>.

In my practise I regularly invite participants to help in the creation of queer rituals which have a contemporary relevance and keep us in touch with nature. I think its important that as queers, feminists and ecologists we configure new rituals and ceremonies which act as a complement to our political actions. These participatory events have a strong ethical content and reflect anti-capitalist, eco-transfeminist beliefs thus replacing the worn out traditions which uphold the values of a State run religion backed by the forces of Capital.

These rituals contribute to building transitory communities where we can experiment with new ways of relating to each other and give us the possibility to imagine other possible futures. They function as an alternative way to strengthen the bonds of those who take part, creating a sense of community based on the equality of all its members.

<sup>229</sup> Allen Ginsberg, quoted in *Francis Wheen, The Soul of Indiscretion Tom Driberg :Poet, Philanderer, Legislator and Outlaw* (Chatto, London, 1990)

<sup>230</sup> Ibid Fremeaux, p.303

**How to Heal...** is my longest running series of participatory rituals and began in 2012, in response to the **United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20)** in dates which would coincide with the summer solstice. The decisions taken in the Conference would affect a large part of humanity in a very direct way, with the possibility for decisions to be taken which would protect those rights and stop land grabbing, the imposition of transgenic crops, etc...

But unfortunately it is often these transnational non governmental organisations which condone practises that attack the autonomy of the people in “underdeveloped” countries to control their own water and land resources. With such high stakes there was a great risk that the conference would be nothing more than a green wash for multinationals and financial organisations, instead of laying down the guidelines for the change of system necessary to protect biodiversity and the rights to a decent life of all human and non human lifeforms on this planet.

The series of events carried out as a run up to the Rio +20 Conference (which included the **Ritual of the Waters** discussed in the previous chapter, the **Cantar / Encantar** workshop and the **How to Heal the World Bank** ritual) expressed my desire to do something symbolic which might influence world events. How To Heal the World Bank is a conceptual ritual of possession, based on the idea that our leaders, heads of banks and multinationals, etc... have lost awareness of themselves as organic beings and imagines that within their bodies there lies a scared and defenceless animal in danger of becoming extinct. In the process of the ritual, extinct species are invited to take over and possess these world leaders (such as those who were at the time, meeting in Rio).

In the Christian tradition, possessions are associated with the devil and demonic forces taking over innocent souls.

I wanted to invert the usual Christian symbology and carry out a benign act of possession, inviting the spirits of innocent, extinct species to take over the bodies of the diabolic characters whose machinations keep the exploitative processes of late capitalism going.

These characters include the corrupt bankers who engineered the “crisis”, heads of multinationals whose practises enslave workers in countries outside the westernised bubble, arms dealers, heads of pharmaceutical companies, politicians, etc...

Being possessed by the animals which represent that part of our being which is connected to the physical, it was to be hoped that these characters would realise that they are part of an ecosystem on the verge of meltdown and begin to make decisions and laws to protect the planet and the diversity of cultures and species it holds.

Since the 1970’s environmental groups have been alerting us of the destruction our industrial society is causing, leading to our age to be dubbed as the Anthropocene, since changes which normally take place over millennia as a result of slow geological forces are now happening at a much higher velocity as a result of the activities of our species. Extinction and the processes of destruction which lead to it have been recurrent themes in contemporary art since then.

**The Sixth Extinction** is the title of a 2016 exhibition of paintings by the Cuban artist Rubén Fuentes in which portraits of extinct species are formed from elements of landscape -trees, hills, plants- in dreamlike representations which emphasise how inseparable the animals are from their environment. As mentioned in chapter 5 the artist group **Transnational Temps** have carried out a series of workshops **Safari Urbis** in which they point out that many of the mammals used by companies to promote their products are in danger of extinction.



But the majority of these artistic manifestations tend to focus on birds and mammals, orders of animals with which it is easy to identify since they share similar physiognomies to our own and generate an empathy other species, such as lizards, fish and bacteria, fail to.

With the How to Heal... rituals I wanted to concentrate on extinct insects, because in many ways they are the queers of the animal world. For the majority insects are abject, disgusting, diseased - adjectives which have often also been used in association with homosexuals. Normally seen as pests, bugs, annoyances to be eliminated by insecticides or simply squashed, the fact that many insects carry out vital work in pollination and decomposing organic material is often forgotten. For this reason I felt that insects were a powerful metaphor for all those who are excluded from the official histories. Furthermore the metamorphoses that their bodies undergo is highly symbolic, proving that nothing is fixed and immutable. They have adapted to fill niches in almost all the ecosystems on the Earth becoming amongst the most numerous organisms on the planet (over one million species have been identified; there are probably between 6 and 9 million in total). I researched and compiled a list of Latin names of extinct insects and consulted on their pronunciation with a teacher of the language, transcribing the names phonetically. The insects were to be incorporated into the ritual framework by evoking their presence through the process of singing their scientific names aloud.

Decisions about symbolic and practical elements used in the ritual evolved through practice and investigation. One of the most important elements in the configuration of the How to Heal... ritual is the creation of a symbolic space so that whatever context it is carried out in, the participants enter a special area which represents the ritual phase of transition.

The logo of the World Bank, a circle divided into four sectors with two bisecting arcs, seemed the perfect symbol to delineate this space. The logo is drawn on the ground to a scale which is based on my own biometrics: the radius of the circle is calculated by measuring three times the distance between my shoulder and my arm and from there all other measurements are generated. Therefore the diameter of the circle is calculated as six arm lengths which creates a design where the people who take part in the ritual are in close proximity to each other without impinging on each others personal space. This level of intimacy is important in generating a sense of complicity between them and it has generally meant that everyone takes part in the proposed exercises.

The space is generally prepared before the public are assembled and involves the help of an assistant or volunteer. The World Bank logo is traced in chalk or flour depending on the texture of the ground where we are carrying out the ritual.

The chalk (or a stick, if the ground is not smooth) is attached to a rope which is used to measure out and draw the form. First a centre is chosen and my assistant places the rope on the ground to act as a central point while I rotate around this axis with the rope tightly extended to trace the form of the circle. Then the rope is placed on the ground and I trace a radius before moving it 180 degrees to finish drawing the other half of the diameter. This process is repeated at 90 degrees to create the second diameter, then my assistant moves outside the circle placing the rope in line with the continuation of the diameter so that an arc can be drawn from one end of the perpendicular diameter line to the other. After repeating this process on the other side we use the same method to draw the final smaller bisecting arcs at the poles. The ritual space is now prepared and ready.

“The preparation of a suitable space, now converted into an elementary set, which often consists of a circular space or an altar-like central table, the use of very precise clothing and a series of specific instruments...”<sup>231</sup>

A circle has no beginning or end and thus represents the cyclical nature of things, but since the World Bank logo also incorporated two perpendicular diameter lines this created four quadrants which would help to organise the ritual, giving the possibility to create a simple structure which could be repeated with variations in each of the four sectors.

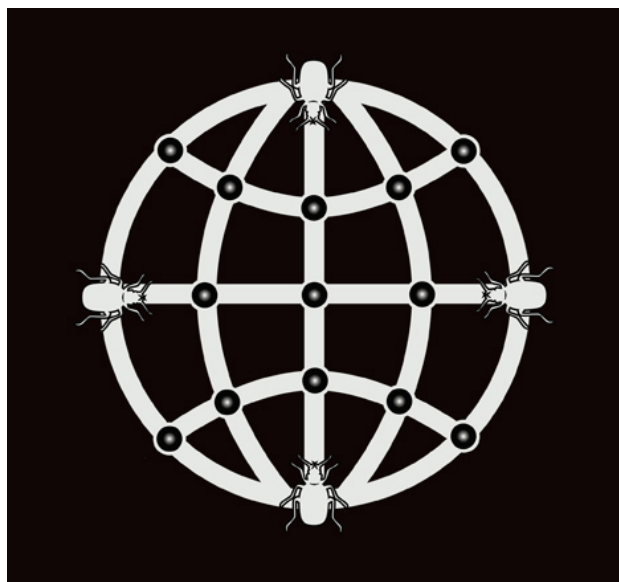


Fig. 7.2 How to Heal logo (2013)

The ritual begins with an introductory speech, which I generally read from a previously prepared script. This reflects the more serious side of the ritual, and could be compared to a political speech or religious sermon where I explain the ethics and philosophy which motivate the celebration. It is of the utmost importance to find the right balance between seriousness and playfulness in this section since the success of the ritual depends on motivating the public to take part. If the speech is too long there is the risk the public will lose interest, but if it is too short the purpose of the ritual is lost. My experience performing with difficult audiences helps me gauge the optimum length for the speech and introduce more theatrical and exaggerated phrases when required to keep their attention.

Once the speech is finished I invite the public to enter the circle and the participatory part of the ritual begins. This is often a moment of tension since it is unclear what response my invitation to enter the circle and participate will receive.

At first the public may be apprehensive about taking part in something so unusual, not knowing exactly what will be expected of them so it's important to reassure them. Once the initial hesitancy has been overcome and the first volunteers take their places, others soon follow. The fact that they form part of a group gives them a certain licence to behave in ways which would not be socially acceptable in a normal context.

My experience is that most people are self-conscious in public spaces and need to feel a certain level of trust and connection in order to join in, whereas often there has been a great response from children who seem to connect more directly, perhaps because they see the ritual as a game and are less inhibited.

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231 Ibid: Cornago (2000) p.27

The base used to structure the ritual was music. The magical power of song and its expression in many different cultures has always fascinated me - from the power of rock and the passion of soul music to the cathartic expression of keeners at funerals in Ireland<sup>232</sup>.

In Australia, the aboriginal myths of origin recount how the ancient beings traced the shape of the landscape whilst walking across the country, calling the animals and other elements into being through song and creating the routes known as “songlines”<sup>233</sup> which their descendants follow to this day. For Buddhists, chanting is a form of preparing the mind for meditation and in the Christian tradition it features in the celebration of the mass.

“For in prehistoric times music, like the dance and every other artistic endeavour was a branch of magic, one of the old and legitimate instruments of wonder-working”<sup>234</sup>

The element of song is of great importance in ritual and in many cultures it is believed that these songs come from spirits which use the shaman to communicate with the terrestrial plane.

“The spirits also endowed the Shaman with their own sacred song or melody, with which they would accompany each Kamlanie rite they participated in.”<sup>235</sup>

The French composer Messiaen believed that birds were God’s musicians, their song a form of praise to creation, and with Geyserbird, a hybrid of human and bird, I was interested in developing song as a combination of praise of the natural world and enchantment or spell to bring about a transformation.

I began improvising with the cellist Sara Galán in order to explore the musicality of the scientific names of the extinct insects. The sombre tone of the cello and Sara’s sensitive playing evoked the feeling of loss that would be an important part of the ritual and the next series of works, **War Memorial**, discussed in Chapter VIII.

Since the insect names were in Latin I decided to experiment with the melisma style of singing, which consists of singing variations of tone around a syllable, a style which is used in Gregorian chants and also in the flamenco music I had studied for several years. The liturgical singing style added an air of gravitas to the ritual and the Latin language adapted itself perfectly to the role.

The use of Latin was highly symbolic since it had once been spoken all over Europe as the official language of the Roman Empire. It had then become the language of the Catholic religion and once more been used to colonise and subdue other cultures, as that religion was imposed in the New World by the Spanish conquistadores.

As the power of the church waned with the Renaissance, so too did the use of the language although it would be retained in scientific nomenclature, the naming of animals by genus and species. It thus combined the material with the spiritual and its use was a form of empowerment

When discussing the origins of performance in the circus, music hall and even earlier forms, Marvin Carlson describes the performer as a kind of technical virtuoso, who uses a set of skills to entertain, amaze or move the public, but in the ritual if I limited myself to this register the public would remain passive observers.

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232 The tradition of keening will be explored more fully in chapter 8.

233 Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (Franklin Press, London 1987). The book recounts the authors experiences with indigenous Australians. This author spent many years studying nomad cultures around the world.

234 Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game* (Picador, London 2002) p.21 (originally published in 1943)

235 Dr Gorbacheva, V, Solovyeva K, *Entre los Mundos: El Chamanismo en los pueblos de Siberia* (Catalogue of the exhibition in the MUVIM museum, Valencia, 2013)



Since my objective was to involve them in the ritual it was important to combine this display, which I hoped would motivate them to take part, with another register which would encourage them to participate. I would need to develop a series of direct and effective interventions which would involve everyone and keep them motivated throughout.

I had experienced the feeling of forming part of a greater whole in the choir in Xàtiva where I had realised how the power of voices joined together singing in chorus could be highly emotional. I decided to use this experience and create a simple musical structure which could easily be taught to participants, based around the word “entra” (enter). Thus the extinct insect species I had previously invoked would be invited to accompany each and every one of the participants in the ritual process. The chorus would provide an accompaniment to the liturgy and reflect the more serious part of the ritual.

I thought it was necessary to incorporate an element of abandon, of hysteria, excess as part of the ritual as a counterpoint to the rationality of singing in chorus. The scream seemed the simplest and most practical way to achieve this aim. Furthermore, since it requires no training, it would allow participants to feel more uninhibited whatever their musical ability.

Screaming involves entering a different energy state and I was interested in exploring the possibilities this expression would give to make people think and experience strong emotion. We scream for help, to express anger, grief or even ecstasy, all extreme emotions which society discourages us from expressing. The scream represents the irrational part of our being and is a highly gendered form of behaviour normally associated with hysteria and women, men are supposed to keep their emotions under control, it is even less acceptable for them to draw attention to themselves in such a way. The loss of control is associated with a feminine incapacity, a lack of rationality. Although screaming can be highly cathartic for all participants I believe it can be even more so for the males who take part. I chose four different screams to express and explore the strong emotions linked to the most important moments in the cycle of life: birth and death.

Each scream would be personified by a volunteer from amongst the members of the public who would be given a symbolic element which would represent the persona or emotion being expressed. Thus a further level of participation is encouraged for those who are attracted by the archetypes each scream represents.

The first scream was the scream of exhilaration of the “drag” (queen or king) and I “crown” the volunteer with a blonde wig which represents the mask of gender and the excess of a hyper femininity. I chose the figure of the drag queen because at the beginning of the sexual revolution in the 1960’s they were the ones who rebelled against the police repression at the Stonewall bar in New York, the event which marked the beginning of the fight for LGTBI rights: “and since this is an hysteric ritual and it represents an alternative version of history, a feminist history, a history of indigenous people, of endangered species of animals, in other words a QUEER history, this scream is dedicated to them.”<sup>236</sup>

The second scream, was the scream of the witch and the volunteer was presented with a silk purse filled with seeds and herbs which symbolised the knowledge these women, who were burned at the stake during the Inquisition, had of how to cure ills with natural herbs and remedies.

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236 From the How To Heal ritual.

The archetype of this scream are the camp histrionics of Margaret Hamilton whose portrayal of the wicked witch of the west in **The Wizard of Oz** (1939) fuelled my young queer imagination.

The next scream was the scream of a dying animal in a municipal slaughterhouse and was represented by a feather. This unusual choice was made because the feather comes from an animal and has a queer symbology (previously discussed in chapter VI) since feathers are used for decorative purposes in the boas and headdresses of cabaret costumes like the one Geyserbird wears.

I also wanted to avoid the simplistic representation of death through skulls or bones because this would have created a more sinister atmosphere. Feathers are light, ethereal and suggest flight and a possible resurrection after death. The final act of cruelty in the life of animals fed on hormones and deprived of their freedom invites participants to consider their complicity in this process if they eat factory produced meat. This scream, as the moment of death approaches, is an opportunity to express profound feelings of fear and extreme pain.

Finally there is the scream of a new born child. No volunteer is requested to fill this role as it is an open invitation to experience the dawn of a new ecotransfeminist consciousness and finishes the ritual on a climactic and positive note.

Through the use of these simple elements- music, the ritual space, the costume and props used, and the symbolic power attributed to them, I hope to include everyone who is present at the rituals in some way, implicating them in the actions taking place.

The basic structure of the participatory part of the ritual is the following:

- Preliminary speech outlining the motivations behind the ritual
- Invitation to the public to enter the sacred space of the circle
- First of the Latin incantations
- The “Entra” chorus with all participants
- First scream
- The group turns to face the next sector
- Steps 3-6 are repeated in each of the remaining 3 sectors

### **The Cantar /Encantar Workshop**<sup>237</sup>

The first event in the How to Heal... series was a practical workshop on chanting and enchantment (8/6/2012). As a first step in configuring the ritual I organised this workshop as part of *Espai Cel Obert*<sup>238</sup> (Open Sky Space), a project which was an invitation to musicians, theatre groups, associations and artists to carry out their activities within a marked out area in a public space.

I had applied to the call out with the idea of carrying out the first public experiment and presentation of my new transgender persona Geyserbird with a completely wide range of people outwith the usual queer transfeminist circles.

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<sup>237</sup> The root of the Spanish word cantar – to sing- is found in the word encantar which has many meanings including “to make happy”, “to haunt” or “to cast a spell”.

<sup>238</sup> Documentation of my intervention in the blog of the project: <http://espaicelobert.blogspot.com.es/2012/07/taller-cantarencantar-graham-bell.html> - Accessed 16/1/18

If I wanted my work to have an effect on society it had to be presented in public, despite the risks this might involve.

“One aspect that interests me about the practice of performance is that it can be done in the street, and this is important, because it reaches an audience that would not necessarily frequent cultural institutions. Another interesting thing is that it is the most democratic art that exists. In order to carry out a performance, it only takes the will to want to do it and from there to invent the technique, the dynamics, the form and the content, freely.”<sup>239</sup>

It’s never possible to predict the reactions the public display of genderfuck will generate and although, in general, Spanish society is much more relaxed in this respect I will always carry the memory of being harassed by homophobic alpha males in Britain.

The original plan for the event to take place in a public city square in Benimaclet (Valencia) was changed at the last minute and instead it took place in the courtyard of the Faculty of Social Sciences in the University. Since the campus is on the outskirts of the city this meant that instead of the wide cross section of people I had hoped for, the public would be limited to students and faculty members. Nevertheless prejudice exists everywhere and there were people who didn’t want to interact with me in any way because of the way I was dressed.

While the conference went on in the main building I put on my Geyserbird make up, my ceremonial mini dress and an insect charm in the form of a necklace. Once ready I ventured out into the almost deserted forecourt which separated the lecture halls from the café and library. There were a few students around in the terraza outside the café and one or two people passing by but nobody seemed to notice or care about my strange appearance.

Once the space had been prepared by tracing the World Bank logo on the pavement in chalk, I began to hand out the leaflets I’d prepared earlier with the structure of the workshop and the Latin names of the extinct insect species.

I went over to the café where groups of students were sitting and began to approach the students. At the first table a couple completely ignored me, then a couple of girls looked at me aghast as if I was a door to door salesman, so I made my way over to a larger table of girls who loved the idea. From then on people seemed to be more interested, perhaps because through my conversation with the girls I had become more accepted by the group. Initial reactions, and how we respond to them, are of the utmost importance in determining how this kind of participatory event will develop, since the attitude we display is communicated to the public.

I have learned that it is important to strike the right balance between being over confident and being sympathetic to the other. It is important to know when to approach or not a person, and sometimes this can only be gauged through intuition. My experience performing in a wide variety of situations where I have received wildly varying reactions from the public help me to accept rejection under these circumstances.

Once the people were assembled, to create a dramatic impression, and mark the beginning of the workshop I burst into song “Histeria es natural!... bajo estas circunstancias, histeria es NATURAL!!!”<sup>240</sup>

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239 Esther Ferrer in an interview published (Efimera Revista, Vol.7 Num.8, 2016) p.2

240 Translation: “Hysteria is natural!... under these circumstances hysteria is NATURAL!!!” lyric taken from the Gran Tour song which forms part of the *Histeria Suite* (2014)



I began with an improvised speech explaining what the workshop would consist of and the concepts behind it: “In this ritual, whose form we will create together, because I feel its necessary to create modern rituals which reflect our experience, we’re going to try and carry out an en/chantment of our country’s leaders and heads of the World Bank... so that when they meet in the Rio conference they can take the right decisions which can help towards creating a good life for indigenous people, for the women who work in the fields trying to save the seeds which companies are attempting to kidnap, to save the waters which companies are trying to do business with, basically to construct a life worth living for everybody.”<sup>241</sup>



**Fig. 7.3 *Taller Cantar/Encantar* (2012)**

I then invited the public into the circle represented by the World Bank logo, pointing them towards the energy points on the design where two lines met. To break the ice I started the workshop with the series of screams, the easiest exercise since they require no musical experience.

This section of the workshop worked very well with the group many of whom gave free rein to their emotions, screaming wildly, although the gender divide was evident with much greater enthusiasm from the women in the group. Their dedication created a strong feeling of positive energy in the group.

In the second part of the workshop we practised singing the word “Entra”(enter) accompanied by a movement of the arms upwards and then towards the body in an invitation to the extinct species to enter our bodies, in symbolic representation of the “corrupt” bodies that were to be possessed.

This functioned really well as the simple phrase and melody were easy to learn and the harmony of voices created unity within the group, whilst the movement gave people the opportunity to express themselves freely. Since the group seemed enthusiastic we then passed on to the most difficult part of the workshop.

Following the notes on the leaflets I’d handed out at the beginning, we practised singing the latin names of the extinct species in the chanting style of a gregorian mass. The power of voices joining together in chorus to recite the Latin names of insects would, through the process of naming, be an evocation of those extinct species calling up their presence for the ritual of possession.

The combination of having to explain the liturgical singing style and making sure the participants in the workshop correctly pronounced the strange names was extremely complicated.

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241 Graham Bell, *Taller Cantar/Encantar*

The phonetic nature of the Spanish language made this process much easier than it would have been in English. A combination of humour and patience was important to motivate the public who persevered well and meant that in the end we managed to chant all seven names together which was quite an achievement.

In the context of the public art project the workshop had worked well but I was worried that the difficulties involved in teaching the Latin chant to the people taking part in the ritual would interrupt the dynamic of the group and create a tension which would be hard to resolve. Furthermore I wanted to be able to perform the ritual in different contexts in the street where such lengthy processes might not be possible. So in order to simplify the public participation and reduce the difficulties involved I decided it would make more sense if I sang the names in Latin alone, leaving the movements and screaming to make up the participative part of the ritual.

### **How to Heal the World Bank**

The ritual evolved and developed after the experience of the Cantar/Encantar workshop and has been so successful in motivating public participation that I have returned to it on many occasions, adapting it each time to the new context, whilst retaining the same basic structure. It has been carried out as a healing ritual, not only for the World Bank, but also for the Public Education System, Valencian Art and my local neighbourhood.

The How to Heal project has been my most long running performance series and represents a continuous investigation into how to adapt the same performance to widely different sociopolitical contexts and remits in urban, and rural environments in Spain, Holland and the UK.

It has ranged from occupying very public spaces without permission where random passersby were invited to take part, to performing open air at arts festivals or in fully organised arts events in theatrical spaces. There is a great difference between presenting work to an invited audience or one which simply comes across the performance as they go about their daily routine: shopping, sunbathing, queuing. In public space there is an opportunity to present ideas to people who may not otherwise come into contact with them. This is an exciting and risky challenge and the level of commitment that can be expected from the public is less than that of an invited audience.

Even though the ecological transfeminist conceptual basis is always the same, the way the public experiences the performance is dramatically different, sometimes it can very political, sometimes more playful or theatrical depending on the space, the public and the mise-en-scène.

One of the most political actions took place in the financial and shopping district of Valencia in the midst of the Christmas shopping spree. Together with a small group of friends dressed as Geysersbird, we appropriated the space in front of the main branch of the Banco de Valencia armed only with a piece of chalk and some string. With these tools we drew out a symbol of the World Bank with a six metre diameter on the pavement. It was a real challenge to carry out the ritual in such a highly surveilled area and in fact within minutes we were stopped by the police!

The ritual organised by Amnesty International as part of the Valencian School Meet was definitely the most playful of the cycle so far. It took place in the middle of the street surrounded by a multitude of stands and activities for children.

I had to try a different approach to transmit the message and keep the attention of the children who took part, some of whom were very small.

It was quite a chaotic ritual and I felt quite self-conscious to carry out the ritual for children and their families, since, in similar circumstances, my transgender presence would have been highly controversial in the over-protective UK.

The most theatrical ritual was part of the **Transformer** event<sup>242</sup> organised by Paula Valero where the audience was invited onto the stage of the Teatro Musical. They were encouraged to experiment with costume and gender and take part in a colourful happening which had been widely advertised by the council. This meant it was very different from other rituals because everybody was dressed up and willing to participate and perform. “With the action we were looking to create a state of vibration with a critical component, not in an escapist way, but as a form of rearmament to face the world that we do not like, to reconsider our desires and to reconnect with ourselves and others.”<sup>243</sup> The action had a different atmosphere thanks to the theatrical setting and technical resources including a large scale video projection, professional lighting and a multitude of props and costumes. The ritual took place at the beginning of the event and functioned as a bonding experience for the audience, helping them loosen up and be more receptive to experiment and play.

I mix elements of theatricality, political experimentation and playfulness in all of the rituals, like an alchemist mixes chemicals in an experiment. Each time the results are quite different depending on outside influences such as the energy of the public, the space and the context. The outcome of each ritual is unpredictable because it depends on so many variables, but the experience is also very rewarding as the rituals change all the time and provide many unexpected situations. This is one of the main reasons why I have felt motivated to continue this line of investigation and why this cycle of rituals has been so fruitful and enduring. It is an open-ended process which has developed from its origins in public space and expanded into a more experiential and durational series of actions followed and preceded by workshops.

I have carried out several introductory workshops to prepare participants for the ritual which will be discussed in Chapter 12 but I believe that it is equally important to gather feedback from the participant afterwards and give them an opportunity to discuss how they felt during the ritual. It is easier to do this in a comfortable and safe space than in the street.

The first time I organised an after-ritual discussion was at the III European Bisexual Conference in Amsterdam. It was the ideal situation as the ritual was programmed in the main conference venue and the one and a half hour allocated time-slot gave us ample time for the preparation and the discussion afterwards. It was really interesting to see how the ritual worked in such a varied cultural context, with people from all over the world. Some commented on the difficulty of screaming “since we are taught not to”.

This investigation has also led to some important insights in the realm of the personal. I began the ritual whilst studying the Master programme at the UPV and its title *How to Heal the World Bank* reflected my response to that environment.

I had specialised in public art and most of the classes I had attended were theoretical, so I had spent the year rediscovering the pleasure of reading, a pastime I had always enjoyed but neglected in recent years.

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<sup>242</sup> This action can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/252576748>

<sup>243</sup> Paula Valero Comín, *La puesta en situación como dispositivo en la práctica artística contemporánea: propuestas realizadas entre 2003-2016 por Paula Valero*. (Tesis doctoral, UPV, 2017) p.324 - My translation.



However for most of my life fiction had been my main interest and in the University I had enjoyed the guidance of experts to learn about contemporary philosophy in the field of the arts as well as feminism, ecological and postcolonial political theories.

My interest in feminism, a subject I had been quite ignorant of until a few years previously, had grown and as I carried out the ritual in different spaces, it was upon reflecting on some of the basic and I believe most revolutionary, aspects of feminist principles that I began to realise the irony of my own position.

Despite my long term gender dissidence I have been conditioned by my upbringing in a traditional Scottish environment where men are not in touch with their feelings because the expression of emotion is seen as a sign of weakness. I realised that my anger over the injustices in the world was poisoning my relationships and that I would need to do some work on myself and find a way to get in touch with my own emotions in order to express them in a less destructive way and thus avoid uncontrolled and disruptive outbursts. In recent years I had found it difficult to deal with emotions around the death of my parents which had caused me to isolate myself.

If I wanted to heal the World Bank I needed to begin with myself, examine my life and carry out a desperately needed emotional healing. “that which terrifies the neurotic the artist seeks to play out publicly. Or, as is frequently the case, the artist-neurotic (or shaman-neurotic) is compelled to explore the very process that terrifies her/him. It is fashionable today to say that artists are healthy while neurotics are sick- that ten years of art are equivalent to a psychoanalytic cure (Sartre on Genet 1963:544). Maybe. But from an operational perspective, art and neurosis are closely linked because both behaviours are generated by a porous and shifting boundary between the unconscious and the conscious. And what art manipulates on an individual basis, ritual does collectively.”<sup>244</sup>

I continued to carry out the rituals, since through them I could feel the possibility of connection with others and the sense of community and friendship I needed, and in tandem with that I began to seek strategies for healing, one of which was to carry out more personal rituals without a public. These investigations are documented in Chapter 10.

Here is a list of the rituals carried out so far:

### **How to Heal the Public Education System**

Faculty of Arts, Polytechnic University of Valencia, (21/6/13)

### **How to Heal the Velluters neighbourhood**

Mercado Central (Valencia, 9/11/13) as part of the Ciutat Vella Festival.

### **How to Heal...Valencian Art**

Kessler Battaglia Gallery (Valencia, 1/2/14) as part of the CabaRitual.

### **How to Heal the World Bank**

Solar Corona (Valencia, 21/6/12)

Banco de Valencia Bank (Valencia, 21/12/12)

M.N.C.A.R.S. (Reina Sofia National Centre of Contemporary Arts, Madrid, 25/5/13)

Space Station Sixty Five, Art Gallery (London, 12/7/13)

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<sup>244</sup> R. Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* (Routledge, 1993) p.238

Palau de la Vila (Ontinyent, 21/9/13) Raspallog Festival of Performance  
 Scottish Parliament (Edinburgh, 20/7/13) as part of the UK Bisexual conference  
 Valencia School Meet (31/5/14) in collaboration with Amnesty International  
 Alternative Fair (Valencia, 6/6/14) in collaboration with Amnesty International  
 Taller de Pistolo (Valencia, 21/6/14) as part of a Solstice party  
 Palau de la Vila (Ontinyent, 27/9/14) Raspallog Festival of Performance  
 Neomudejar de Atocha (Madrid, 17/5/15) as part of the CabaRitual  
 The Poetry Club (Glasgow, 29/10/15) as part of the CabaRitual  
 Palau de la Vila (Ontinyent, 13/12/15)  
 TEM Theatre (Valencia, 13/12/15) as part of the Transformer event  
 Valencia University (25/4/16) for the Conference on Education for Gender Equality  
 Rambleta Arts Centre (Valencia, 14/5/16) as part of The Ritual Box II exhibition  
 Entre olivos (La Victoria, 5/6/16) in the Festival Art Sur  
 European Bisexual Conference (Amsterdam, 30/7/16)  
 Lo Pati - Centre d'Art (Amposta, 6/11/16) as part of the Bouesia festival  
 CCCO, Octubre Centre for Contemporary Culture (Valencia, 17/12/16)  
 Valencia University (30/3/17) Festival for Equality  
 Festival Art Sur (La Victoria, 3/6/17) as part of the Cabaritual Victoriana  
 La Nau, for the TransMaking Spring Academy (Valencia, 7/3/18)

In the following I will discuss more in depth a selection of the How to Heal... rituals. A video compilation of them is included in Appendix: Video Documentation.

- **Solar Corona** (Valencia, 21/6/12)

As the first ritual of what would become the cycle, I was still working out its structure and experimenting with ways to include the public. I wanted to carry out this ritual at sunset on the eve of the summer solstice in a natural space which had to be easily accessible to the public without the need to travel there by car.

The Solar Corona, a space which had once been one of many derelict lots abandoned in the historic centre of Valencia, was the perfect place to perform a ritual of queer ecology and I took full advantage of its special characteristics.

There are many of these “solares” (vacant lots) in Valencia but in recent years many have been fenced off by private owners or the local government in an attempt to keep trespassers out, since otherwise they are often used as illegal carparks, rubbish dumps or dog toilets.

I had explored this lot many years before, climbing through a gap in the fence to find an incredible paradise tucked away from view, a stones throw from the hurly burly of a neighbourhood which at the time was the centre of Valencian nightlife.

It seemed like an archaeological dig which had been left abandoned, as the remains of the buildings that had once been there were below ground level and formed a labyrinth of walls and open spaces which had become completely overgrown with palms, bushes and trees.

An association of artists, architects and neighbours had revitalised the lot, clearing the upper part of the space and organising concerts, film screenings and talks in one area whilst the other was used as a community garden. The lower level had been left more or less as they'd found it, so it retained that strange atmosphere.

The combination of these highly contrasting spaces within such a small area interested me greatly for the possibilities it gave to trace a path between them and in this way introduce different elements in the ritual.

The solar was ideal for the symbolism of a queer rite of passage which would begin in the ruins below ground, going from this hidden, semi overgrown area to the bare ground of the space above where the graffiti covered walls created a gritty urban atmosphere.

Taking advantage of this I decided to introduce a crowning ceremony as part of the ritual since this would involve the public in the symbolism of the ritual. I decided to use wigs as well as crowns for the ceremony to represent the power of capital, whilst the wigs gave a queer touch to the event and represented the superficiality and hedonistic nature of modern culture.

The crowns had a special and personal meaning since, alongside Anna Maria Staiano, I had already carried out a series of coronation performances in different locations. In the most recent ceremony, celebrated as part of the International Bisexual Conference in London, we had crowned all of the guests.

Coronations are very significant rituals in monarchic societies like Spain or Great Britain where royal weddings and events still draw huge crowds.

The ceremony represents the hierarchical nature of these societies and the taking of power of the new monarch.

In our alternative coronations we had subverted the symbology of these events and in the course of the ritual the guests would be crowned in different roles by Geyserbird.

To create the atmosphere of a ceremonial crowning chamber, we cleared the lower area, placing embalmed insects and a Vanitas box on the ledges.

The box contained a miniature coffin surrounded by a garland of ivy in the leaves of which a collection of insects embalmed in resin were arranged. The form in which these elements were displayed alluded to the still life style of painting of the “vanitas” which was very popular in Holland in the seventeenth century.

These paintings represented the transient nature of life by juxtaposing symbols of wealth, beauty and human activities with fruit, flowers or skulls, and other elements which symbolised putrefaction and death. In the Vanitas paintings of Jan Davidsz de Heem or Jan Bruegel (the elder) insects and lizards appeared in the floral garlands which surround the central motif. Their presence appealed to their role as agents of death and decay but with our current knowledge about the cyclical nature of many ecological systems they are also symbols of how life continues, only its form changes.

The central chamber was divided from the main antechamber where people would gather by a big palm tree which was growing in the space at the end of the underground labyrinth of rooms. In this chamber we laid out the selection of wigs and the crowns which Anna Maria had made for the occasion, using beads and aluminium so they could be fitted to different sizes of heads.

This space was only accessible by clambering over ladders and walking over stepping stones, making it perfect to instil a feeling of pilgrimage in the participants. Discussing it with Anna Maria we had decided to include a ceremony of investiture in this space as part of the ritual since we wanted to encourage the people participating to explore alter egos and alternative personalities outside the binary gender divisions.

We prepared the upper area of the solar by tracing the World Bank logo with salt, a material used in many cultures to purify spaces and create a protective barrier against evil spirits.



As the sun began its slow descent, and the people gathered in the upper area I began an explanation of the hysteria cycle and the significance of the characters the participants could choose to represent in the ritual- the “excluded”, animals, indigenous peoples, queers and women who would remain outside the circle, or the “corrupt” who would be within it. The corrupt would be represented by two groups - the “queens” who would represent heads of corporations and financial organisations, and the “rockers” who would represent sports personalities, film stars and other rich people who hide their money in off-shore financial paradises to avoid paying taxes. These celebrants would take up their positions within the circle and would be crowned in the ceremony of investiture.

We then rehearsed the chorus of invitation chanting “entra entra” and the screams that would form part of the ritual.

I then led everyone down through the underground rooms to the antechamber where Sara Galán began to play the cello. I went behind the palms to the inner part of the ceremonial chamber and began to change into my ceremonial Geyserbird outfit. Once I was ready, I began to sing, accompanying the sound of the cello with the liturgy of latin names. Anna Maria began to show the people into the chamber one by one asking them whether they wanted to be a queen or a rocker before we crowned them. The rockers were given the choice between a selection of long blonde wigs, and the queens a selection of Anna Maria’s minimalist aluminium crowns.

When we had 17 celebrants we moved up into the area prepared for the ritual and I showed the queens and rockers to their positions on the intersections of the World Bank logo. With all the intersections on the diagram filled by the queens and kings who were to be the subjects of the possession ritual, I instructed them to face the first cardinal point of the circle so the ritual could begin. At this point Sara began to play the cello once more accompanying my liturgy in Latin “Campsicnemus Mirabilis, Hygrotus Artus, Atelopus Longirostris...” Once I had finished I invited the participants to join me in the possession chant whilst inviting the extinct insects into the circle with an upward movement of the arms.

We then carried out the first of the ritual screams in homage to drag queens and kings. Turning to face the next cardinal point on the circle the ceremony continued with another litany of names of extinct insects, then I invited the people from the surrounding buildings who had come out on their balconies to watch the performance to join us as we chanted the invitation to the spirits to “enter”.

Then we gave the second scream, dedicated to the animals slaughtered in the meat trade. We repeated these steps facing each of the four cardinal points of the circle, with a final scream which was “the scream of birth signifying the new life we hope for”.

To finish the ritual I invited everyone to wipe out the diagram, eliminating all traces of the World Bank logo. By now it was almost completely dark. It had been a highly charged ritual, the nervous and sometimes slightly mocking laughter of the workshop missing as the invited people were aware that they were taking part in something symbolically powerful.

The ritual had two important functions: as an act of political experimentation demonstrating how creativity is an important form of resistance and as a collective celebration on a specific date marking the cycle of the year. Indeed on occasion of the winter solstice I carried out a second version of the ritual outside the Bank of Valencia



Fig. 7.4 (1) Solar Corona (2) Bank of Valencia (2012)

- **Bank of Valencia** (Valencia, 21/12/12)

This was the first of many celebrations of the ritual in public space and involved adapting it to the new context by simplifying its structure. Since generally I do not ask permission to carry out the ritual and there is always the possibility that the police may interrupt it, I had to concentrate and condense the ritual into its most important elements.

The crowning ceremony had been added for the event at the Solar and was too complicated for a space which could not be easily controlled so I had to find another way to introduce symbolic elements which would get the public involved in the action. I decided that each scream would be personified by a volunteer who would be given something to represent the character being expressed. This gave people the opportunity to take a more active role in the ritual and there was often competition to embody the different roles.

I decided to carry out the second How to Heal... ritual outside the Bank of Valencia to celebrate the winter solstice which coincided with the last day of the Mayan calendar, rumoured to mean the end of the world. This, along with recent events in the city, gave an extra poignancy to the occasion.

As we arrived outside the building and began to draw the logo of the World bank on the pavement a police car drove up. Fortunately the officers got out of their car and began talking to a driver who had parked illegally beside us. When they asked Anna Maria what we were doing she explained that I was a student at the art school and we were preparing a performance. "I don't know anything about art" replied the police officer and left us alone to continue preparing the space.

After I had finished drawing the logo, I began distributing pamphlets about the ritual to passersby and christmas shoppers. I felt it was important to use the opportunity to publicise my ideas to the general public and when I began the ritual a few minutes later, a small crowd joined us to listen.

With the police in the side street behind me, the words of my speech seemed strangely appropriate:

"As we approach the end of the solar cycle and the end of this long year of police violence<sup>245</sup>, high unemployment and abusive practises by banks which reclaim

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245 Earlier in the year the riot police had been called out to stop a peaceful demonstration of students at the Lluís Vives high school in Valencia. They had used extremely violent methods to break up the crowd lashing out at old people and students alike causing a national scandal.

houses and continue to charge the evicted owners for their mortgages, whatever your political leanings its obvious that neo liberal politics and capitalism are not going to stop the ecological meltdown fast approaching.

Now we're in a hysterical age, an age which exists outside of history- the history told by sexists, homophobes, racists and capitalists who robbed the riches of the earth to create the neoliberal Empire of Self destruction...In the west a desexualised caste of priests played an important part in condemning the body, sex and women as sources of sin, temptation and debauchery.

In the last few centuries these priests made a pact with the men in suits who preach the religion of money and control over nature now seen as a feminine force and ready to be raped and abused.

The role of the queer-tranny-whore-shaman is crucial in contemporary society because this figure represents the end of that era of patriarchy and masculine domination. It may seem naive to invoke the symbolic to bring about a radical change but public events like these rituals give us the opportunity to gather as a community, experiment with new ways of relating to each other and imagine other possibilities for an ecosexual future.

While fundamentalists appeal to an unthinking majority raised on monotheistic religions which emphasise the difference between the mind and the body, the new ecosexual paradigm, influenced by feminist and post-porno philosophies reconnects them to reintegrate the human animal into a world ecosystem which may, if we act in time, still sustain life for generations to come.

We all carry a tranny shaman inside us- I baptised mine with the name of *Geyserbird*. It is also known as "Doubt". It's time to put our Doubt into action and bring about an end to the assassination of our ecosystem, an end to the exploitation of workers in precarious situations, and question the basic foundations of our sick, sick society."<sup>246</sup>

I had decided to introduce the concept of doubt on this occasion in order to overcome the sometimes unsure or skeptical response of some members of the public. This was a means to express the fear participants in the ritual might have of making a fool of themselves and invite them to overcome that apprehension.

For me it was very important to claim eccentricity as an act of rebellion and give a powerful example of shamelessness. Peer pressure encourages us to conform and fear embarrassment, but for me the ritual was a way to express a wild individuality and integrate art and imagination into our everyday life.

It was very moving to carry out the ritual in the financial district of Valencia, surrounded by banks and expensive hotels, only a few hundred yards from the main city square which had been squatted the year before by the Indignados of the 15M movement which had been a major source of inspiration for the "Occupy the City" and "Occupy Wall Street" movements in the UK and US.

- **M.N.C.A.R.S.** (Reina Sofia National Modern Art Museum, Madrid, 25/5/13)

This ritual was timed to coincide with the presentation of Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle's **Assuming the Ecosexual Position**, a conference organised by Beatriz Preciado which formed part of Somateca which attracted a large audience of queer and transfeminist activists from all over Spain.

Carrying out an occupation of the space outside the institution was a way of celebrating that radical voices were being represented there and taking advantage of the opportunity to make those voices heard beyond the walls of the museum.

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<sup>246</sup> Graham Bell, *Como Sanar el Banco Mundial* (21/12/12)



In the call out advertising the ritual I asked members of the large drag king community in Madrid to come dressed in business suits to represent the bankers alluded to in the ritual. We carried out the ritual in the large square in front of the museum, and as it was a Saturday afternoon there were lots of people about.

This meant that when I asked for volunteers there was an interesting mix of invited guests and members of the public who had been passing which included a group of young male adolescents. When I asked for a volunteer to be crowned drag queen one of the boys got very excited. I wasn't sure if he understood what a drag queen is, but decided to crown him with the ceremonial wig despite my reservations, and went on as usual to explain the significance these characters hold in the ritual.

After the ritual had finished a friend reported to me afterwards that this had led to an interesting discussion about performativity amongst the adolescents as the boy asked his friends if whilst wearing the wig he had "become" homosexual. Throughout the ritual and afterwards he and his friends had been totally respectful so obviously this brief transformation had not generated the kind of hostile reaction which might have been expected.

The public nature of the ritual is what generates the potential for situations like this to arise which more than compensate for any difficulties or risks involved.



Fig. 7.5 (1) M.N.C.A.R.S. (2) Scottish Parliament (2013)

- **Scottish Parliament** (Edinburgh, 20/7/13)

This ritual took place during the annual UK Bisexual conference, a residential event which takes place in a different city each year. I had publicised the ritual on the noticeboard inviting people to accompany us on the 2 km walk from the conference centre through the park to the Scottish parliament building.

This ritual had a special poignancy for me because it would be the first open public ritual I had carried out as Geyserbird in Britain and my first appearance in such circumstances for over 10 years. I didn't know what to expect but knew it was important to take advantage of the circumstances since the recently completed parliament building was the visible sign of the autonomy granted to the country after the 1997 referendum.

It was a blazing hot day and there were a lot of people taking advantage of the pools of water in front of the building to cool down when we arrived.

After my usual introductory speech the volunteers for the ritual came forward and included several passersby, a young boy and a local working class lad who had been sunbathing.

In order to gauge their reactions slowly I changed the order of screams moving the scream of the drag queen to a later point and was pleasantly surprised when they all joined in enthusiastically. Once the ritual was over several of the people stayed on to discuss the concepts behind the performance with us.

- **Lo Pati Arts Centre** (Amposta, 6/11/16)

This action was commissioned by Bouesia “pluridisciplinary” arts festival as part of their Menjarse la Delta (Eat the Delta) event and took place near the Delta of the river Ebro Nature Reserve. Artist Rafa Tormo i Cuenca had prepared a 3x3 metre pie in the shape of the Delta as the centre of the action which explored the concept of cannibalism as a logical end result of the objectification of the human and the anthropomorphism of the object.

Once again the ritual had to be adapted and integrated into an event with a different conceptual background from mine. The challenge was interesting and given Geyserbird’s transgender nature I felt it was important not to fall into a stereotypically exotic representation of cannibalism. Of course the communion is a representation of such practises where bread and wine are substituted for the blood and body of Christ and it would be difficult to avoid references to christianity as well.

Cannibalism is of course one of the 4 tenets of the previously discussed Church of Euthanasia. I considered referencing this group for the performance, but decided that presenting myself as a member of the church might not be the best way to connect with the local public in the context of an event held on a Sunday at midday in a small Catalan town.

The best way to integrate into an event is to use similar elements or ideas to those present in the event itself and since bakery was the art form being used I decided to bake gingerbread men to be consumed as part of the action. I downloaded the recipe of this typically British biscuit from the internet attempting to substitute ingredients which were unavailable for those which I could get in the local supermarket but unfortunately this changed the consistency of the mix making it almost impossible to cut out the shapes of the gingerbread men without distorting them. Nevertheless the misshapen forms, some headless or armless seemed somehow appropriate as they thus represented a distorted humanity with a broad range of functional diversity.

Since the Delta pie was an exact geographical representation of the area, I decided to use the four cardinal points of the map to structure the actions that would form the ritual which began with us all accompanying the pie and its poll bearers as it was processed around the streets.

After the pie had been placed in the centre of the arts centre patio I introduced myself in catalan “Soc geyserbird chaman travesti” and began the ritual. Since it was quite windy instead of attempting to delineate a circle on the ground with flour as planned I threw the flour into the air as I circled the pie, thus creating a sanctified space within the perimeter of my actions.

Taking position by the northern edge of the map I talked about the North as the site of rationality inviting the public to explore their rational response to my presence in an embarrassed titter. This seemed symbolically important in the context of the action. As I’ve mentioned previously, attitudes in general to the public manifestation of drag or transgenderism in Spain are relaxed, even outside the cities.

I have been in many local fiestas, where men dress up as women, and humour is the most common reaction. Of course normally these men adopt stereotypical visions of women and are renouncing their masculine privilege.

Geyserbird's political message troubles these usual responses and I had decided to defuse the situation as soon as possible, and also attempt to make the public question their usual response, by inviting people to laugh: whether it was at or with me would depend upon them.

Turning to the East I lamented how certain utopian ideals have been lost, using as examples the eastern spiritual philosophies which arrived in Europe in the mid-sixties and the way in which the communist ideas which had sustained the eastern european countries were ignored after the Berlin wall came down and those countries embraced capitalism wholeheartedly, while the West congratulated itself on what has become a pyrrhic victory.

These reflections were accompanied by the invitation to join in a keening chorus of "Woe is me, uh-uh-uh".

I skipped over to the western edge of the map to continue discussing the rational, and since the Delta nature reserve was nearby, I talked about the queer critique of conservation and eco-tourism which markets a nostalgia for what has been lost whilst encouraging us to consume, creating spaces frozen in an idealised time.

I emphasised that we should connect to the earth as one ecosystem we form part of and preserve biodiversity wherever it is found, not only in nature reserves.

For the final round on the southernmost edge of the map, I turned to the pie, and spoke of the sacrifice we expect from the countries of the South, inviting the public to devour the gingerbread men ("no women") before inviting the public to clap in the rhythm of the rumba catalana while I broke into a customised version of my flamenco punk song

**Consumible:**

“Compraré tu Delta- todas las casas y los arrozales  
serán mi papel de pared-  
consumible consu-consumible.<sup>247</sup>

Cos its time for your delta to be destroyed.

your money your lifestyle's null and void

I don't buy it. Don't want to try it.

I'm gonna BOMB logic, bomb reason.

Strap myself to this machine

while time ticks away in this take away

take take take me away!

I'm consumible consu-consumible ...

Lap me up! Lap me up! Up up up up!"

And I finished the ritual biting the head off a gingerbread man.

After the applause Rafa Tormo invited the public to take a piece of the Delta with its corresponding flag (each one with a message) and have their photo taken before eating it.

The catalan response to my performance was very subdued, quite different from the usual response in Valencia but as the crowd mingled after the event some gay and lesbian participants came up to me and congratulated me saying they had never seen anything of the like before in the town, and thanking me for making another reality visible.

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247 Translation: I'm going to buy your delta, all of the rice fields and the houses will become my wallpaper- consumible! An adaptation of my song "Consumible".





Fig. 7.6 (1) Amposta (2) La Rambleta (2016)

- **Rambleta Arts Centre** (Valencia, 14/5/16)

This performance was programmed as part of **The Ritual Box** exhibition (curated by Johanna Caplliure and José Giner Borull) and was supported by the **Laboratorio de Creaciones Intermedia** of the Polytechnic University of Valencia.

After discussing the possibilities of carrying out the ritual in a space outside the building I decided it would be more interesting to use the resources available in the arts centre- lighting, sound system, video projections- to create a different atmosphere and develop the musical elements of the ritual.

Carrying it out in an indoor space would also mean that the public would only consist of people who had been invited and come along with the express intention of coming to the advertised performance, and meant that I could experiment more knowing their interest and motivation was high. To this end I borrowed a series of percussion instruments and a loop box from the university in order to incorporate elements of rhythm in the ritual.

I was also interested in exploring musical harmonies and creating more complex choral figures, so I divided the public into three groups depending on their voice explaining that instead of the usual gender based distinctions where female voices are divided into sopranos and altos and male into tenors and bass parts we would have only three non gendered vocal parts in our choir: *bajas*<sup>248</sup>, the deepest voices, *alternores*: the middle range and *sopranas* for the highest voices.

Once the public had divided into groups I assigned each group a vowel sound to sing “O” (which is a masculine ending in Spanish) for the *bajas*, “A” (the feminine ending) for the *alternores* and “I” (pronounced like an “e” in Spanish this vowel is sometimes used as a modern non gender specific ending) for the *sopranas*.

Each group would hold a sustained note which would blend with that of the other voices in the **Coro para derrocar el patriarcado** (Choir to overthrow patriarchy) which finalised with the exclamation “Basta Ya!” (Enough already) in reference to the artificial division of the genders.

The other addition to the ritual structure was the introduction of rhythm which we generated using the body. From my studies in flamenco I have learned how the body can be used as a percussive instrument. The finger snapping (*chasquidos*), hand clapping (*palmas*) and *taconeo* (rhythm made with the heel and toe of the foot) are an effective way to build a rhythmical structure.

<sup>248</sup> In Spanish the lower male voices are *bajos* (bass). With the change in gender to the feminine *baja* reference was also made to the “fallen” which is how casualties of war are described.

The second part of the workshop was dedicated to building up a rhythm with these practises. Then I introduced a series of percussion instruments handing them out to the participants to slowly build a base over which I rapped a short introduction to the ritual.

In the third section of the ritual I invited the participants to build up a rhythm over which I rapped an ecosexy invitation to make love to the earth, love nature and generate a worldwide orgasm, through a chorus built up using a more rhythmic use of the vocal sounds “OO”, “A” and “E”. To end the ritual, after the final birthing scream the insect species we had invited into the circle were sent out to seek the bodies of the corrupt with a movement of expulsion accompanied by a final collective chorus: whoosh!

All of these changes gave the ritual a more dynamic feel which worked well within the exhibition space which had been prepared with red and green lights to generate a psychedelic atmosphere accentuated by the video projection I had prepared.

- **La Nau**<sup>249</sup>, Valencia University (7/3/18)

I was commissioned by the organisers of this event to carry out this ritual in English as it formed part of the **TransMaking Spring Academy**, a conference with people from all over the world.

The neoclassical patio of the one of the oldest Universities in Spain was a highly symbolic setting for the ritual and was enhanced by the recent installation of political protest banners hung from the gallery which formed part of an exhibition of Art in the Street.

To implicate the participants in the action and to help them visualise the processes of extinction the ritual describes, I placed cards on each of the intersections in the circle with the Latin name and a drawing of an extinct species on it. Instead of me singing names I had previously memorised I invited the people to read out the name on their card before handing it to me, and when I had four cards I improvised a musical piece based on the information they had given me.

This was also a way for me to experiment with different singing styles and I introduced a rap section where the participants generated rhythm through clapping and finger snapping.

Although the international group were initially more inhibited than the Spanish normally are, which meant it took a while for the seventeen positions in the circle to be filled by volunteers, when we began the ritual everyone seemed to take part and enjoy the process.



Fig. 7.7 La Nau (2018)

249 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbKbheu-ak](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbKbheu-ak)

At the end of the ritual I asked the participants to fill in a survey giving feedback about their impressions about the ritual, how (and whether) it had affected them and how they felt the experience could be improved. I had recently sent this survey out to previous participants in the ritual via email and social media but this was the first time people had the chance to fill it in on the spot, recording their immediate reactions.

## **Cabaritual**

The **Cabaritual** is a development of the How to Heal ritual expanding its original format in a more playful and celebratory action. It fuses two performance registers which break the divide between performer and audience: cabaret and ritual. This development is a way of adapting the ritual to different contexts where the guerilla tactics required to carry it out in public space are not required and there is the opportunity to use technical resources such as video and sound to enhance the experience.

The first Cabaritual featured different acts in a variety show format, whilst recent Cabarituals blur the lines between cabaret and ritual and involve the audience in an extended improvisation where rhythm, dance and choral work are combined in an exploration of what a contemporary happening might consist of. Here follows a description of the Cabarituals carried out so far.

- **Kessler Battaglia Gallery** (Valencia, 01/02/14)

The first Cabaritual was organised for the closing night of my solo exhibition **The Catalogue: A Living Artist's Book** at the Kessler Battaglia Gallery in Valencia.

In the week leading up to the event while I was resident in the gallery I had invited collaboration from musicians in an online call out asking for mp3 files which I would use to create the experimental sound pieces which would form the basis of the event. I also invited performers to collaborate and present work and in this way local legend Rampova, pataphysicist Sieur Demodé and drag artist Liz Dust performed as part of the event. Members of the **Plañideras Culturales** (Cultural Mourners) a collective I formed part of were also present and I rehearsed a new chorus for the ritual dedicated to them which consisted in the lyric "Woe is Me" followed by a melodramatic series of sighs.



**Fig. 7.8 Kessler Battaglia Gallery (2014)**



These would alternate with the “Entra chorus”. Liz Dust, who was also a member of the Plañideras, carried out an audition for new members who were then dressed in black mourning outfits by Anna Maria to appear in the final ritual.

The performer and musician Ulises Pistolo accompanied me with live music on the hang (an instrument whose sound is similar to a steel drum) in a special version of the ritual which took place at the end of the evening in the public square outside the gallery and was dedicated to healing Valencian art. The hypnotic sound of the hang gave the ritual a different rhythm, a calmer energy and perhaps prompted one of the female participants to give a spontaneous speech asking “Who will stop this wheel from turning?”

- **Neomudéjar de Atocha** (Madrid, 17/5/15)

For the second Cabaritual in queer art space La Neomudéjar in Madrid, I used video projections, music and performance to create a one-trans solo variety show. The event coincided with the **International Day of Peasants’ Struggle** so I carried out a street action in support dressed like a camp aristocrat in silk dressing gown with a placard which read (in Spanish) “I support the peasants struggle”.

The irony of my decadent appearance contrasted with the earnestness I expressed carrying the placard and posing for photos en route from the popular Lavapiés neighbourhood with its multi ethnic cultural blend to the art centre located near the main train station of Atocha (target of a terrorist attack a few years previously). The area is also where the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture is located so there was a high security presence of soldiers and police.



Fig. 7.8 La Neomudejar de Atocha (2015)

The variety set in this Cabaritual included several specially created short songs and the recently produced **Antitrenimiento** (Antitainment) video action which summarises my live art philosophy in this way:

“Antitainment - is where aesthetics and politics meet: the encounter of a chorus girl and a pamphleteer. Mixes light entertainment- fashion, music, theatre- with social critique and political compromise.

It is cabaret in its most politically committed form because it breaks all moulds, mixes performance, art and sexuality.

It is totally against all elites- whether they're financial, academic or artistic, resists the limitations of the gallery and goes out into public spaces, represents an ambiguous gender criticising neoliberality and its destructive patriarchal practises which are devastating the environment and the diversity of both species and cultures. It interrupts the usual way of things, breaking into song in museums and galleries, giving a political speech dressed in sequins.<sup>250</sup>

To shift between the different registers required for the cabaret and the more introspective ritual I made use of the **Invocation of the Wayward Saints** video with its accompanying soundtrack of the hypnotic *caña* musical style. The transgender artists mentioned in the film were thus summoned in the preparations for the How to Heal the World Bank ritual during which I traced the symbol of the World Bank on the floor before introducing the ritual. The event included the opening ceremony of the third **P.I.N.Q. Park** (see chapter 8) in one of the open spaces behind the gallery.

- **The Poetry Club** (Glasgow, 29/10/15)

At the invitation of the **Modern Institute** I carried out an English language version of the Cabaritual in the multi-use art space The Poetry Club in Glasgow. I made full use of the flashing lights, lasers and smoke machine, normally used for club nights at the venue, to provide an atmospheric finale with the How to Heal ritual.

In my work, there is a continuous cross pollination between music and performance and while I was working on the ritual cycle I was also performing with the musical group Gran Tour. We had recorded a song cycle based on the How to Heal ritual which included a musical introduction with a short spoken introduction, the insect lament with cello accompaniment and a final rhythmic groove where I rapped over the music.



Fig. 7.10 The Poetry Club (2015)

<sup>250</sup> From *Antitiationment*, lecture performance at Queen Mary University, London 27/4/2017 as part of Cunteremporary's Power, Subcultures & Queer Stages conference, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLqdh5o2Ptg>

This final section of the song used the same *Entra* chorus as the ritual. Indeed in the intimate atmosphere of our concerts I presented a queer interpretation of this chorus slapping my buttocks as I sang “*Entra*” in a suggestive manner which left little room for doubt that the spirits which were being invited to enter the bodies of these leaders, might possess them in a more physical way  
This was a clear allusion to the “anal terror” many heterosexual males have, in their fear of being penetrated.

In the Cabaritual I used this instrumental backing to introduce the ritual and explain the participatory actions we would carry out in a dynamic way with projections from the *How To Heal* rituals. In this way the audience were prepared before we entered the circle to begin the ritual.

- **Festival Art Sur** (La Victoria 3/6/17)

In my second visit to the three day festival *Art Sur* in the village of La Victoria I wanted to carry out a customised version of the Cabaritual including musicians from the town and the large contingent of artists (over 70) who take part in this experiment in collective living.

The festival is totally community based with artists staying in the houses of the organisers, town mayor, local residents, and even in the community hall. This generates an atmosphere of complicity since in a town of only 3000 inhabitants a large percentage of the community is actively involved in the production of the festival. Furthermore the previous year I had experienced the local people’s acceptance of transgender and gay people which meant that I was less tense than I might have been about performing in such a rural atmosphere.

In the days leading up to my performance, which had been programmed to take place on Saturday night, I made contact with the local **Guadalmazán** *coro rociero* (a flamenco-based musical choir which includes guitar and percussion) attending their rehearsals and adapting the texts of some of the traditional songs in their repertoire to fit in with my ecotransfeminist philosophy.

I also collaborated with some of the other visiting artists who played instruments working out a couple of musical pieces to be used in the ritual. The Portuguese artist Rui da Silva who played the berimbau, an instrument with an unusual sound which is used in capoeira, interpreted a customised version one of the traditional songs as part of the ritual.

The theme of the festival was *Underground Culture and Trash* so I had decided to create a special trash costume for the occasion from some brocade cushions I had found in the streets of Valencia.

When I asked if anyone in the village could help me sewing, the organisers of the festival put me in touch with local seamstress Petri Pino Zamora who helped me create an amazing dress with flamenco ruffles, and when I asked if anyone could cut my hair I was sent to another house where another festival volunteer had a salon.

The relationship I developed with these women and the female members of the choir (most of the males wanted to watch the cup final of the football and didn’t come to the event) gave the Cabaritual Victoriana a real feeling of sorority.

Despite the serious competition from the football the patio of the community centre was packed for the event.



As a special tribute to the local flamenco culture I began the Cabaritual dancing on the recycled headboard of a bed found in the street and now converted into an ersatz *tabla* (stage), before singing along to the musical backing of Gran Tour and our version of the classic rumba **La Desagradecida**.

The music of the coro rociero and the other artists alternated with the usual participatory practises of the ritual into which I had incorporated several of the flamenco style rhythmic interludes, similar to those I had experimented with in the Rambleta performance.

Both communities -the artists and the locals- participated enthusiastically throughout and the mixture of traditional forms with my avant garde queer philosophy seemed to work well together.



Fig. 7.11 La Victoria (2017)

- **Centro de Cultura Contemporánea del Carmen** (Valencia 14/7/18)

As part of the Art D'Acció cycle of performance and live art I carried out the **Cabaritual Claustrofílico** in the renaissance cloister of the arts centre, inviting people to take part in a chorus singing “Ser Animal es anti capital ( To be an animal is anti capitalist) in an evangelical Southern Baptist style. I stripped and installed the cloister with a series of ecoqueer symbols including my feather head-dress, heels and Geyserbird dress. A gold frame containing a map of the world was installed in the well in the centre of the cloister through which I broke stripping the fabric to create a hand sewn dress which members of the public helped sew on my body.



Fig. 7.12 Centro del Carmen (2018)

## CHAPTER VIII

### QUEER REMEMBRANCE: WAR MEMORIAL

- *Monumento a lxs caídxs/War Memorial* (2012)
- *War Memorial II: The Keening* (2014-2015)
- *War Memorial III: Memory P(a)lace* (2015)

In parallel to the How to Heal ritual I began work on an installation based project **War Memorial** which would create a physical space to experience extinction. I wanted my body to form part of a symbolic architecture, immobilised within its structure in voluntary submission to the ethical codes of a queer environmentalism. A video compilation of this trilogy is included in the Appendix.

The project was inspired by the idea of recording these deaths that are never commemorated with memorials, which are only figures, collateral damage in the endless war that the forces of patriarchy have been fighting against nature. In this war there have been many victims both biological (species) and cultural (races) that have become extinct or are currently in danger of extinction. In the How to Heal cycle extinct species were given a form of agency through a symbolic evocation of their spirits, but in War Memorial, I was interested in commemorating those deaths as final and irrevocable.

After the first World War in towns and villages all over Britain memorials were erected to commemorate the soldiers who had died in the war. These memorials usually include a statue of one or more soldiers and a list of names of those who died fighting for their country. In certain cases there is an “eternal flame” which symbolises how the memory of these heroes will never die.

Apart from the famous Holocaust monuments, civilian casualties have rarely been commemorated in this way. In response to the horror of the Holocaust many artists reacted against the monumental form leading to the anti or counter monumental current in commemorative sculpture and art which opposes the practise whereby authority exhibits its dominant narrative via public statuary.

The anti fascist monument in Hamburg, work of Jochen and Esther Gertz was an invitation to the citizens of the city to mourn and be vigilant by adding their names to the base of a 12 metre high steel column. Once the base had been filled with names it would sink one metre into the ground. Through this collaborative process the column slowly disappeared until only a plaque inscribed with the words “Monument of Hamburg against fascism” and the memory of what was once there.

“The target of the counter-monument is to fulfil a counter-memory in which unofficial history and the victims’ experiences and testimonies are utilized to encourage a version of history seeking truth and justice about the past.”<sup>251</sup>

<sup>251</sup> Domingo Martínez Rosario *The artwork as counter-monument: Nazi period commemoration and memory in contemporary art*. Paper presented in Newcastle University (Nov 2015)



An example of this is the **AIDS Memorial Quilt** which commemorates the lives of those who have died from the disease. Conceived in 1987 as a way to draw attention to the large numbers of deaths amongst the gay community in San Francisco it has grown into the largest community arts project in the world. Family members, friends and lovers have contributed panels to the quilt and often when it is displayed the names of the people commemorated are read aloud. “The numbers of deaths are unthinkable but the rest of society offers little or no acknowledgement.”<sup>252</sup>

In an essay on the casualties in the Israeli-Palestinian war Judith Butler points out “grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters.”<sup>253</sup> And how we decide which lives matter depends on the perceived importance of those who die.



Fig. 8.1 (1) AIDS Memorial Quilt (2) Doris Salcedo, *Palimpsesto* (2017)

In *Palimpsesto* (2016), an installation in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid (2017), the Columbian artist Doris Salcedo has commemorated those who have drowned in the Mediterranean and Atlantic over the past twenty years attempting to emigrate from their countries of origin in search of a better life.

The names of men and women who died are temporarily and intermittently written with drops of water on stone slabs made through a complex hydraulic engineering system. “of the earth crying these names because we are unable to mourn collectively.”<sup>254</sup>

The piece is the result of a long investigation in the international press, followed by interviews with the family of the deceased.

Apart from their oppositional stance to the hegemonic discourses of history, one of the important defining characteristics of anti-monuments is their temporary nature.

**The Bunker Hill Monument Projection** (1998) by Krzysztof Wodiczko is an example in which during 4 days features interviews with mothers from the nearby Charlestown neighbourhood where murder and violence is a daily occurrence. Interviews with these women were projected with sound onto the 70 metre high obelisk which celebrates a decisive battle in the US war of independence.

Performance, as the art of the immaterial, is of course the most ephemeral form and is thus perfectly adapted for the creation of anti monuments.

In the field of the performing arts, **Feral Theatre** a UK based company, have organised the **Remembrance Day for Lost Species** (2011- date), an invitation to artists worldwide to collaborate and produce artworks which commemorate species which have disappeared. The group emphasises “that these losses are rooted in violent, racist and discriminatory economic and political practices.”

252 Douglas Crimp, *Mourning and militancy*, (October no.5, 1989) p.15

253 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso, London, 2009) p.14

254 Doris Salcedo in interview with Tim Marlow, *Palimpsesto*: [https://whitecube.com/channel/in\\_the\\_museum/doris\\_salcedo\\_palacio\\_de\\_cristal\\_2017](https://whitecube.com/channel/in_the_museum/doris_salcedo_palacio_de_cristal_2017) -Accessed 27/3/18



Their **Funeral for the Great Auk** (2011) consisted of a procession with an effigy of this extinct bird through the streets of Brighton accompanied by a mixed group of musicians. The procession ended on Brighton pier where the effigy was placed in a canoe and carried out to the sea, which was once its natural habitat. “How do we grieve for extinct species when there are no set rituals, no extinction funerals, no catharsis for the pain caused by a loss that in many ways is simply beyond human comprehension?”<sup>255</sup>

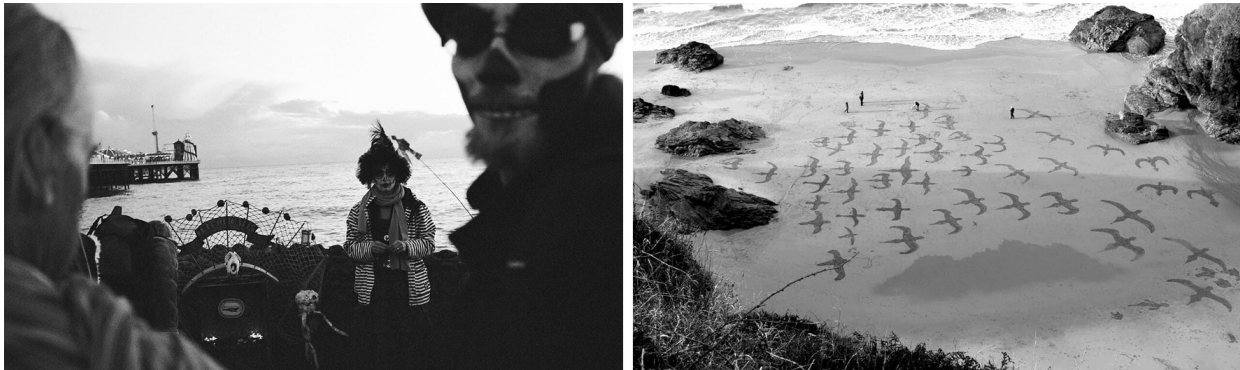


Fig. 8.2 Remembrance Day... (1) Feral Theatre (2012) (2) Emily Laurens (2014)

Robert “Cyclona” Legorreta’s benefit performance **Death becomes life, life becomes?** (1992) at the Catch One disco in Los Angeles, was “a ceremony for the riot victims, the Aids victims, the raped victims, the murdered victims, the politics of blood. Let the ceremony begin and heal this Earth.”<sup>256</sup>

As part of this investigation I decided that instead of rejecting melancholy I would attempt to experience it fully, and through its expression reach a kind of catharsis that might help myself and others, not to overcome it but to accept that pain, grief and loss are part of the cycle of life and death. “melancholia, for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives... It is...part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men. I have proposed a different understanding of melancholia that does not see it as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism.”<sup>257</sup>

Melancholic expression, in the form of the vocal practice of keening, is a highly important element of the War Memorial project. Keening is a traditional form of lament normally practiced in funerals or wakes. Although practised in different forms around the world, it generally involves a style of singing which uses vocal exercises also used in crying.

In Naples there is a transgender ritual based around “the Death of Carnival. It is part of European folk culture and in Campania it is closely linked to the world of *femminielli*, to the old women who still know the ancient art of funeral lamentation, and to the singers of Neapolitan drum songs. The widow and her friends sit in a circle surrounding the deceased “Vicenzo”. They cry and wail, but they also make fun of him. There are many puns and jokes with double meanings about his lost sexual prowess, intermingled with cries and moans (and winks).

255 Jeremy Hance, *Why don't we grieve for extinct species?* (The Guardian newspaper (Manchester, UK) 19/11/16 available online at <https://www.lostspeciesday.org/?p=483> Accessed 20/1/18

256 Cyclona interviewed in the documentary *Cyclona; Fire of Life* (Krystal Leach, 2012). <https://vimeo.com/17344312> (3:10 min.) - Accessed 1/4/18

257 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p.74

In towns like San Marzano sul Sarno, people come to participate in the “death party”. Grandparents, grandchildren, mothers and fathers crowd around to pay homage, and make fun of, the corpse.”<sup>258</sup>

In the Celtic tradition it was generally women who were keeners as they were believed to cry with words whilst men cried only with their eyes.

Keeners expressed the collective grief of the community, improvising eulogies to the dead which normally began with a salutation to the dead person which “consisted mainly of the name of the deceased being repeated with embellishments”<sup>259</sup>

In the seventeenth century the practice was banned in Scotland by the Catholic church, since such an uninhibited expression of grief was seen as savage and uncivilised, although it survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In Ireland the practice has suffered a similar fate, surviving only in isolated areas although its influence has been traced in folk and contemporary protest songs. I adopted the deeply personal expression of keening to express my feelings around the mass deaths currently being experienced as we head towards a huge extinction event. The act of remembering is a kind of mourning.

Catriona Mortimer Sandilands believes that queers can act as witnesses to the destruction and deaths of other species and cultures that we are causing, deaths that the dominant forces in our society urge us to forget.

Her theory is based on Judith Butler’s interpretation of Freud’s late writings on melancholy, which she sees as describing a state of unresolved grief where the being who has been lost is incorporated within the ego of the melancholic. This means that by accepting “the loss one undergoes one will be changed by it, possibly for ever.”<sup>260</sup>

Sandilands suggests that mourning may be a new form of carrying out a queer environmentalist activism, in tune with the contemporary situation of massive loss of biological diversity. “There are few, if any public rituals of environmental mourning (which are different from public announcements of environmental catastrophe, of which there are plenty) little keening and wailing for extinct species or decimated places (which are different from lists or maps of them, of which there are also plenty). In short there is lots of evidence of environmental loss, but few places in which to experience it as loss, to even begin to consider that the diminishment of life that surrounds us on a daily basis is something to be really sad about, and on a personal level.”<sup>261</sup>

Sandilands reflects upon a queer sensibility that, as a result of the community’s closeness to death with the AIDS crisis, can see beauty in damage and appreciate nature, not in a pristine, untouched and nostalgic version of the past, but as it currently exists in an injured and vulnerable state.

This melancholic witnessing is a new form of political activism where grief is channeled into positive action in order to wake our society up from a sleep induced by the forces of the neoliberal hetero-patriarchy.

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258 Ciro Ciretta, interviewed by Luca Fortis, *Femminielli Napoletani*: <https://medium.com/@kwilsonwriter/femminielli-napoletani-aead72d3ad92> - Accessed 3/6/18

259 Narelle McCoy, *Madwoman, Banshee, Shaman: Gender, Changing Performance Contexts and the Irish Wake Ritual* published in *Musical Islands: Exploring Connections Between Music, Place and Research*, edited by Elizabeth Mackinlay, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet and Katelyn Barney (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009)

260 Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, London, 2004) p.21

261 Catriona Mortimer Sandilands, *Melancholy Natures* in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds: Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Indiana University Press, 2010) p.338

The melancholic has always been important in the work of Anohni, since she began working with the **Blacklips Performance Cult** in New York in the 1990s.

Their moving tribute to Leigh Bowery,(1995) included a young Antony, with gaffa tape breasts and cleavage singing the Sam Cooke classic **Stand by Me** while Johanna Constantine, covered in what looks like blood dances and a taped voice recites about the melancholic nature of things.

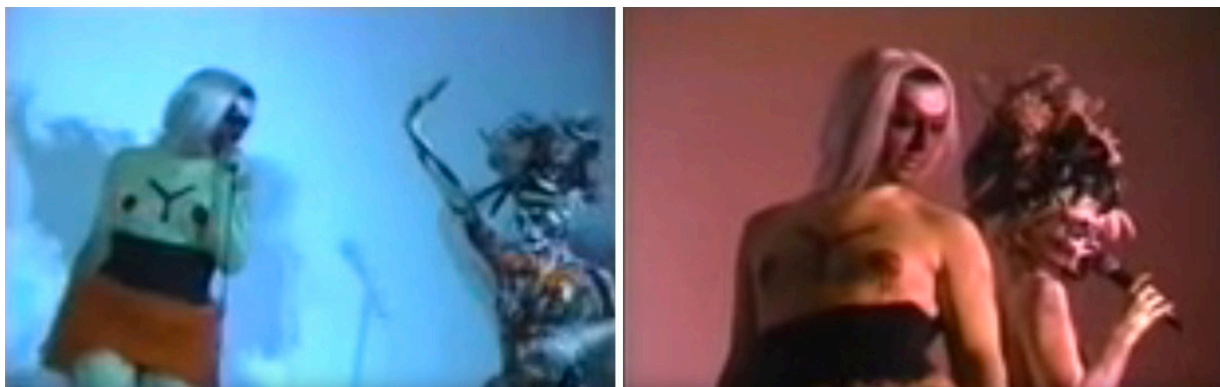


Fig. 8.3 Antony and Johanna Constantine at the Leigh Bowery memorial (1995)

The desire and longing expressed in early songs such as **I Fell in Love with a Dead Boy** (2001), has changed to righteous indignation in recent works where the same soulful voice sings of the loss of biodiversity and denounced our passivity in works like the song **Manta Ray** from the documentary **Racing Extinction** (Louie Psihoyos, 2016)

“I’m nothing. It’s like I never. Existed  
Without my home, with no reflection, I cease to exist  
And my children, are dying now. Inside me  
All I love, all I know, all I’ve known  
I am dying now. Inside me. My children”

### **Monumento a lxs Caídxs/War Memorial**

In 2012 I erected the first War Memorial, an installation-with-presence, that is, my body as an element within a group of objects configured to create a space in which to experience loss. I was immobilised within the installation, chained to the wall of the building to act as a guardian commemorating, through song and the power of lament, species which have become extinct as a result of human activity.

“Centuries ago a war broke out, a war we’ve been fighting for years in the name of Liberty, Progress, Equality and other great ideals. It seems we’re further than ever from achieving those goals. There have been many victims in this war and some have had their names written high in the history books. I have decided to construct a memorial to those species and cultures that have been destroyed in the name of progress and civilisation and whose names have not been commemorated”<sup>262</sup>

My original idea was to form part of an installation in the Valencian Museum of Natural History, for a course I was studying on the subject in the Master in Artistic Production at the Polytechnical University of Valencia. This practically unvisited museum with its extensive collection of insects and crustaceans displayed in large wooden cabinets was like a relic from a previous century.

<sup>262</sup> Introductory text of *War Memorial (Monumento a lxs Caídxs)*, Installation, Faculty of Arts, Valencia 14/6/12



According to postcolonial thinking museums are institutions which represent the domination of time by the West, since they structure a history based on the selection of the objects included in their collections. These collections, classified according to a system of thought which is highly rational, unite objects which are the result of the sacking of the colonies, exotic objects expropriated from their original context. Many of the specimens on display in the museum were indeed from the former Spanish colonies in Latin America, although there were insects from all over the globe. “Museums have always been spaces of memory and reflection. They have also been spaces of sanctification and dogma. Collected artworks emerge and flow, all within a canon that either absorbs or rejects them. *As transvestite muses, we encourage interpretation and challenge authority.*”<sup>263</sup>

This heavily symbolic environment seemed perfect for a performance by Geyserbird, the archetype of the exotic specimen removed from its original context: a transvestite shaman dressed in the borrowed ceremonial headdress of the long gone music hall character, the showgirl. It seemed inevitable that this character should make an appearance in the collection, forming part of this installation, in the final room of the collection singing the extinct species litany I had developed through a series of improvisations with the cellist Sara Galán. It was a perfect site for an installation of *Natural Hysteria*: with a few minimal interventions, inside the glass cabinets or in the form of information panels beside them, the public would be immersed in a bygone age.

Unfortunately when I contacted the museum I discovered it was about to be closed due to lack of funds. The uncertainty about the future of the collection meant that the curators were very unmotivated and did not want to collaborate in a public project so I had to change my plans. They agreed to let me film in the space during opening hours but I was not allowed to invite a public.

Therefore I decided to make a film of Sara playing the cello in the main room for use as part of an installation elsewhere where I would sing along with the recording. I invited video makers Mery Favaretto and Patricia Aragón to film Sara in the museum. We recorded her in front of a huge termite colony, the wooden structure of the cello reflecting the wood of the display cabinets which surrounded her.



**Fig. 8.4 War Memorial, Valencian Museum of Natural History (2012)**

263 Giuseppe Campuzano, Presentation: <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/campuzano-presentation> - Accessed 22/1/2018

Cut away footage was filmed of the exotic insects pinned on display in these cabinets along with shots of the information panels which discussed certain aspects of their lives. On one of the panels, the phenomenon of parthenogenesis was discussed – the process by which females produce offspring without the need for their eggs to be fertilised. These single mothers are just one example amongst many of species which have developed alternative forms of reproduction which overturn the heteronormative view of human sexuality which claims alternative sex practises to be “unnatural”.

I had already decided that I had to make use of this unique opportunity to film Geyserbird in action in the museum environment. In case my scantily-clad appearance caused problems with the administration, I waited until after we had filmed the main sequences of Sara and the collection, before changing into my Geyserbird costume to interpret our litany for extinct species.

The song structure was in two parts, for the first one I used the melisma flamenco technique to express grief and for the second I used a more liturgical style of singing to roll call the dead, like that used in a religious mass or the gregorian chant. As an accompaniment to my litany the resonance of the cello was perfect. It was an extremely emotional experience to carry out the keening lament in such a highly charged atmosphere, surrounded by the bodies of insects which had been captured, killed and mounted to form part of the collection.

Afterwards, the video footage from the museum was edited for projection in the one-day installation which was to take place in one of the project rooms at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the University.

In the video, images of Sara playing were interspersed with footage of the collection, pinned-for-display specimens crossing the screen in a slow panning movement, which was meant to evoke the panorama of crosses in the war cemeteries of Flanders in Belgium where the soldiers who died in the First World War are buried.

The video was a crucial element of the installation in order to evoke the atmosphere of the museum in the otherwise completely neutral space of the white cube setting of the UPV project room. Thus one institution, the museum, would be represented in another, the university. The other main element of the installation was my physical presence as Geyserbird.

Despite the bland, modern architecture of the Faculty, this symbol of the Academy which I had re-entered after an absence of over twenty years, was in no way neutral and had great symbolic meaning for me.

I had spent many years as a practising outsider artist but had recently decided to get some formal education in the arts, undertaking the one year Master course parts of which would eventually form the basis of this investigation. At times during the course, the pressure to create and produce work made me feel like a cog in an industrial production line.

This feeling of discomfort was one of the factors that motivated me to chain myself to the building as part of the installation.

With the help of a friend who had a jewellery workshop we constructed a shackle which would be padlocked to my leg and attached by a thick chain to the wall of the room where the installation would take place.

In this way Geyserbird would be a mix between a captive and a guardian of the Monument, singing the litany of names in Latin as both a witness of their passing and a guardian of their memory.





**Fig. 8.5** *War Memorial*, UPV (2012)

My role as guardian, immobilised inside the memorial, gave me the opportunity to express my relationship to the Academy, and the sense of oppression I often felt while studying there, in a manner consistent with my practice. Being chained to the wall with my movement limited to a one metre radius made me feel the burden of responsibility in a physical way and realise that discipline is also an important part of artistic practice. Artists like Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano<sup>264</sup> have been performance pioneers in the area of life-as-work of art that was, in part, an inspiration for this piece.

On the day of the installation, I set up the room so that the video was projected in a small format on the wall in the main part of the room. The elegiac soundtrack of cello music filled the room at all times, creating a sombre atmosphere emphasised by the semi darkness of the room since the only light came from the image on the screen and a narrow spotlight which pointed to an upright cello case. The black colour of the case with its red velvet lining insinuated the appearance of a coffin and its organic form looked like the shell of an insect.

Inside the case there were several insects “embalmed” in resin and beneath it I placed the Vanitas box containing insect bodies, ivy and a miniature coffin. Vanitas paintings, apart from including some of the few representations of insects in the history of western art, carry a moral message about the vanity of human life and the misplaced importance we give to transitory things.

A trail of vintage natural history magazines announcing “a world of marvels” led from there to the curtain behind which I was concealed.

<sup>264</sup> For example their collaboration: *Art / Life: One Year Performance 1983-1984 (Rope Piece)* in which they were linked to one another with a 2.4m rope for the duration of a year.



When people approached my darkened cell, I would switch on a light which illuminated the alcove and then I would begin to sing the Latin names of the extinct insects accompanied by the cello music coming from the video. As a further testimony I scribbled the names in charcoal on the walls of my cell, wiping them out immediately as they had been wiped off the face of the Earth.

The duration of the piece was only three hours, but being chained to the wall and unable to move freely during the installation, gave me time to reflect on my role as a self proclaimed shaman or witch. Normally these characters would have gone out into the woods or to the mountains to seek spiritual guidance but I had chosen this dark space to seek mine.

With the monotonous and eerie music of the cello looping for hours in that darkness I had time to reflect on the dead I was bearing witness to and realise that death and decomposition are an important part of the cycle of life.

To maintain the intensity of the performance and focus on the sense of loss at no point during the installation did I engage with the audience or the outside space, focusing instead on the music and mourning. I used my intuition and the sixth sense of a predator to detect the presence of people near me and switch the light on. I felt like the guardian of the monument, a witness of what happened to the victims. The uncomfortable postures I had to adopt to protect the feather headdress, together with its weight made me realise the discipline required of the showgirls who wore these costumes. My back ached and I understood the difficulty involved in their work, where they always had to wear a smile no matter how tired or in pain they were.

### **War Memorial II: The Keening**

In 2014 I returned to the theme of immobilisation as part of an architectural installation, in a work produced in collaboration with the female Belgian Shibari artist Zaima.

Shibari is the ancient Japanese technique of rope tying, originally used by samurai to immobilise and suspend their prisoners in mid air. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it began to be used as an erotic game in the context of a sadomasochistic relationship where the submissive partner was tied up by a dominant master or mistress.

Shibari artists experiment with different knots and types of suspension to create different aesthetic effects but the majority of these artists are men and it is usually women who are suspended, in other words the stereotypical gender roles in society where women are submissive to men are recreated. I wanted to subvert these roles and be tied and suspended by Zaima who was carrying out a Shibari residency in the sex shop and art space 69 in Valencia.

Sex shops are often seedy places where sex is sold as a commodity, similar in some ways to the public toilets used as meeting places for sex between men, but 69 was an interesting combination of business and culture which I felt made it a highly significant space to carry out this War Memorial installation as part of a pre-planned concert with Gran Tour.

Over a period of two weeks, Zaima and I experimented with different positions of suspension in 69 which was fully equipped with proper suspension hooks and ropes. Since all my weight would be concentrated on the points of suspension, my body needed to be trained to assimilate the pain involved.

Normally when people are suspended as part of the Shibari practice, they enter an altered, introspective state of consciousness whereas I was interested in using the experience to project pain outwards, in the form of the keening. Therefore, it was important that I would be able to sing whilst in mid air as part of the installation and this was quite an ambitious challenge.

The complicated Shibari suspensions, which are often used for aesthetic effect, do not normally allow the body to draw the breath it requires in order to sing. Through the process of experimentation we discovered that the most practical solution was a horizontal suspension with my body perpendicular to the floor, as this allowed my weight to be concentrated on my shoulders and legs, leaving my torso and lungs free. These practise sessions helped me build up the confidence and stamina required to stay in the suspended position for longer.

Although the focal point of the action was the keening, carried out in suspension, in this installation the public were to be present for the whole process, including my immobilisation, the suspension itself and the untying procedure. The rope tying procedure was a lengthy process and music would be crucial in building the atmosphere, giving me the opportunity to explain the history and significance of keening in a poetic form. Therefore I began improvising with the musicians Kapi Martinez and Sara Galán to structure the cello and piano accompaniment to the text. Once suspended I would sing the litany which had already been arranged as part of the song cycle **Histeria Natural** “**SuitE**”.

As the text developed in these improvisations, it also became about the transgressive act of keening as a male “and they say why are you keening, boy?and the fear of being buried alive: a fear I likened to being trapped inside a body “like a corpse inside a tomb”. The suggestion of being trapped inside a body that has been mistaken for dead was a way of expressing how I imagined a transexual person might feel living inside a body that does not correspond to their own self image.



**Fig. 8.6** *War Memorial* Concert performance, Espacio 69 (2014)

“It is these victims - animals and cultures which have been obliterated - that we are going to commemorate in this act... and apart from them there are other victims who do not belong to any tribe or race but who didn't fit into what society wanted at that particular moment- the witches, the homosexuals...and of course these memorials are built depending on where the victims come from and their importance because sometimes they are “collateral damage” and of course those victims don't count... usually they are not white, not rich often they are not men- what a surprise! And what is my role in this memorial? I am its guardian. Our architect, Zaima who is constructing this memorial has come from Belgium where many are buried in the fields of battle of two world wars.”<sup>265</sup>

In the end the concert performance proved quite powerful but left us feeling we needed to explore the potential of the action further and document it on video without the pressure and limitations of having to perform for the public. Zaima was due to come back to Valencia a month later so we arranged to carry out another session in 69 so that the action could be filmed simultaneously from multiple angles using several cameras.

I considered performing alone with Zaima with a pre-recorded instrumental version of the music so that the focus would be on the act of Shibari and the suspended body, but decided against it because the energy of the live musical improvisation would have been lost.

Furthermore since keening was normally a form of emotional release for the community, it made more sense to do it in the company of others, with the complicity of the musicians accompanying the action with their instruments and their presence.

In the month leading up to the shoot, I continued improvising with the musicians in Gran Tour to re-structure the music for the suspension section. As Toni Martí had recently joined the group on bass guitar we incorporated the instrument which helped create a driving rhythmic base where the tension, built up in the hiatus of my body being tied up and immobilised found its release in a howling chorus.

We replaced the musically monotonous and funereal roll-call of names with a wild and uncontrollable screaming based on the onomatopoeic sound of the words: howling, keening, aullando (howling in Spanish). This change transformed the action, making it much more powerful and cathartic and allowed me to express more freely the pain and anguish of loss.

The video action took place in 69 on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2015. We'd previously prepared the space clearing the shop stock and furniture and covering the immovable fixtures with black material so that no other elements would detract from the keening performance.

In the keening tradition the family stand round the coffin with the lead keening woman at the head of the body and others around the sides and at the feet. This creates a feeling of solidarity for the mourners with a close communication between all of the people involved in the keening ritual.

In order to recreate that atmosphere and allow us to communicate with each other through eye contact during the performance we set the instruments up in a semi circle centred on the suspension hook which hung from the ceiling in the centre of the room.

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<sup>265</sup> All texts, Graham Bell Tornado, from War Memorial II, Espacio 69, Valencia 5/12/2014. An edited video of the performance can be seen online at: <https://vimeo.com/123654328>



The photographer Alejandro Sánchez positioned lights and cameras round the space to create a dramatic atmosphere and film all the members of the group and the Shibari action.

To add to the feeling of complicity between us, Zaima created a Shibari rope structure for each of the musicians which would not impede their movement whilst the hair and make up artist Carola Castañon prepared us all before filming so that we shared a pallid and dramatic appearance on screen. Everyone was dressed in black as we would have been at a funeral. I wore a black veil and dress.

When everything was ready the filming began. Zaima and I moved slowly forwards to take our positions under the suspension hook. I then took off my veil and lowered my dress, so that I was naked apart from a flesh tone girdle. At this point Zaima took up the ropes and the musicians began to play, building up the atmosphere while she tied my hands and legs together, slowly constructing a structure of rope around my body. Meanwhile I declaimed:

“Keening- why am I keening?...  
why am I keening?  
Keening is a kind of lament, an expression of passion- for the dead,  
for the recently departed,  
for the ones who have gone,  
Keening- why am I keening? AH- AH -AH...

The practise of keening was banned in my country by the church and the women who practised it were called banshees, banshees, banshee!, banshee!..  
And it was said that they had been possessed, possessed by the devil, by the devil!..  
My sister the banshee...  
AH, AH, I´m a banshee, a banshee...  
I want to join the keening women and weep o´er graves beside the shore  
this world so rotten can surely twist and turn no more..  
I want to join the keening women and hurl laments so sharp through the air  
they slice through this corruption and those black birds can sing once more”<sup>266</sup>

When all was prepared, Zaima signalled the musicians to stop playing, then knocked me gently off balance to make me fall sideways as she took my weight up with the ropes, pulling my legs and lower torso into the horizontal suspension position.

The silence continued broken only by the sound of the ropes and our breath as Zaima secured the ropes firmly to create the structure which connected me to the point of suspension. I now formed part of the architecture of the War Memorial, the human element at the centre of a structure which encompassed the ceiling, walls and floor of the room and all it contained.

Her final action, before she retired to the back of the room, was to nudge me gently so that I began to spin slowly round and round. At this point the musicians began to play the rhythmic keening dirge while I began howling and screaming like a banshee, as I spun round and round.

We had previously decided this moment would last a carefully measured extension of time since the intensity I wanted to express could best be held over a short period before it became repetitive and risked lapsing into parody.

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266 Final section from the song *Keening*.



**Fig. 8.7 *The Keening* (2015)**

The music and singing stopped in unison and in the silence that followed came one of the most intimate moments of the Shibari experience: the delicate equilibrium of the touchdown.

During suspension the body loses its sense of balance, so it is normal to experience difficulty to remain upright in the moments after it is lowered to the ground and the ropes which held it up are untied. In those brief moments when my feet made contact with the floor and my body resumed its normal upright posture, the special intimacy that had built up between me and Zaima reached its climax and thanks to the careful attention that she showed me I did not collapse.

In fact although my body was aching and covered by rope burns I felt exhilarated and full of adrenaline.

We were all very moved and emotional and decided to repeat the action once more after a short break.



**Fig. 8.6 *The Keening* (2015)**

In the second suspension, I felt more confident to express my anguish in a more physical way, twisting and contorting my body which led me to spin faster and faster. As a result the keening was highly charged and came to a dramatic halt, my exhausted body hanging limply as if it had already joined the dead in another world.

### *War Memorial III: Memory P(a)lace*<sup>267</sup>

The third part of the War Memorial project was one of the most ambitious of the cycle. It took place in the Botanic Gardens of Valencia as part of the arts festival Incubarte and was a collaboration with performance and shibari artist Eva Pez and filmmaker Jesus Peralta.

Situating the botanics piece in the context of an arts festival was a deliberate strategy which also allowed me to liaise with the biologists and gave me greater access to the space. I decided to carry out another durational installation-with-presence using the technique of Shibari to attach my body to one of the trees in the garden. This formed part of a symbolic architectural structure which included the plants and trees in the garden along with the remains of several commemorative rituals.

The choice of site was of great significance for me since the first War Memorial had been planned to take place in the Natural History Museum which overlooked the back of the garden and was connected to it via a specially constructed system of tubes which allowed bees from the museum to gather pollen from the flowers in the garden. Furthermore the gardens were a natural oasis of peace I often visited to escape the hustle and bustle of the city.

In a way, the artificially created landscapes of the garden, designed to mimic the natural habitats of the plants transported there from their countries of origin, were the first hyper-realities, as described by Umberto Eco: improved versions of reality, well kept and pristine environments, perfectly suited for an exercise in queer ecology since they are neither natural or unnatural spaces.

For the performance<sup>268</sup>, I selected an idyllic spot where a water feature had been constructed which simulated a running stream and fed a pool surrounded by high reeds. I had always gravitated towards this beautiful area, dedicated to native Valencian plants, since the bushes and flowers growing amongst the trees created a wild atmosphere unlike any other area in the gardens.

A tall bald cypress (*Taxodium Distichum*, country of origin: North America) was growing beside the pool and seemed the perfect tree for the immobilisation. The central location of this area was important in the configuration of the installation. I visited the spot several times with the Valencian performance artist Eva Pez, who had studied Shibari and would tie me to the tree.

As in the other installations I felt that by attaching myself to a fixed element within the gardens I was attaching myself to the whole garden, its structure and its history. Originally the first “sample gardens” were cultivated in Renaissance Italy and conceived as complements for use in the study and practise of medicine.

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<sup>267</sup> The parenthesis allude to a play on words between palace (phonetic pron: pa-lis) and place (pleys). The title is thus pronounced pa-leys which creates an exaggeratedly long sound and a corresponding confusion between the two words.

<sup>268</sup> Video of the performance: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ye-HKDATmE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ye-HKDATmE) - Accessed:3/6/18



The garden in Valencia was opened in 1567 in the gardens of the Archbishop of Jolla, although it was transported to its current location in the centre of the city in 1804. The relocation took place over a two year period and the famous botanist Antonio José Cavanilles took an active part in its establishment at the new site. During the reign of Carlos III in the 18th Century a radical change took place in the field of botany as a result of the various exploratory expeditions in unknown lands, leading to the discovery of many new species and an increase in interest in the developing fields of the natural sciences and agriculture.

Around this time the concept of the botanic garden changed and they began to be seen as spaces where all sorts of plants, not only those with medicinal properties, could be cultivated and studied. Botanic gardens became memorials to the thirst for knowledge, to catalogue specimens, discover new species, collect seeds and cuttings and reproduce them. With the passing of time and the growth of the city, these gardens now represent a natural space for city residents to relax and enjoy an exotic idyll.

The Botanic Garden of Valencia is quite extensive (4 hectares) and I decided to construct the installation so that it would encompass as much as possible of the whole area. The garden is divided into different zones based on the geographical origin of the plants, which prompted me to design an installation based on the 4 cardinal points: north, south, east and west.

I chose four areas to represent each direction, assigning a continent to each one. A fifth continent – North America- would be invisible and exist only through its evocation as the Underworld, beneath the site where I was confined.

This would represent the invisible and insidious nature of neo-colonialism.

As a matter of fact many of the plants in the garden were specimens collected on expeditions which often preceded the colonisation of countries overseas, making the garden a living testament to the European colonialist project.

In the week leading up to the performance I visited the garden every day, to soak up the atmosphere, getting to know the people who worked there, studying the history of the site and collecting materials. I wanted to base the installation on organic material retrieved from the gardens and other elements I found onsite. Each decision had to be negotiated with the head gardener and the conservationist to make sure the installation would not cause any damage to the plants.

For example, I had wanted to place one of the circles in a seemingly empty patch in front of the huge banana plants, but it turned out to be under special protection because it contained the bulbs of a plant which could not be disturbed so I had to find another site on the path nearby.

This site was one of the most significant in the gardens, the huge leaves of the banana tree conjuring up images of Tarzan in the jungle. This setting was the perfect backdrop to carry out a queer subversion of the stereotypical Hollywood fetishisations of latinos and black people.

Just as Jack Smith had played with the exotic as an “anti normative option”<sup>269</sup> resisting historical determinism, visiting the animals in Cologne zoo dressed in ostrich feathers (a performance documented in the magazine *Avalanche* as **Fear of Shark Museum** (1974), Geyserbird would insert a transgender presence in this overdetermined landscape.

<sup>269</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999)

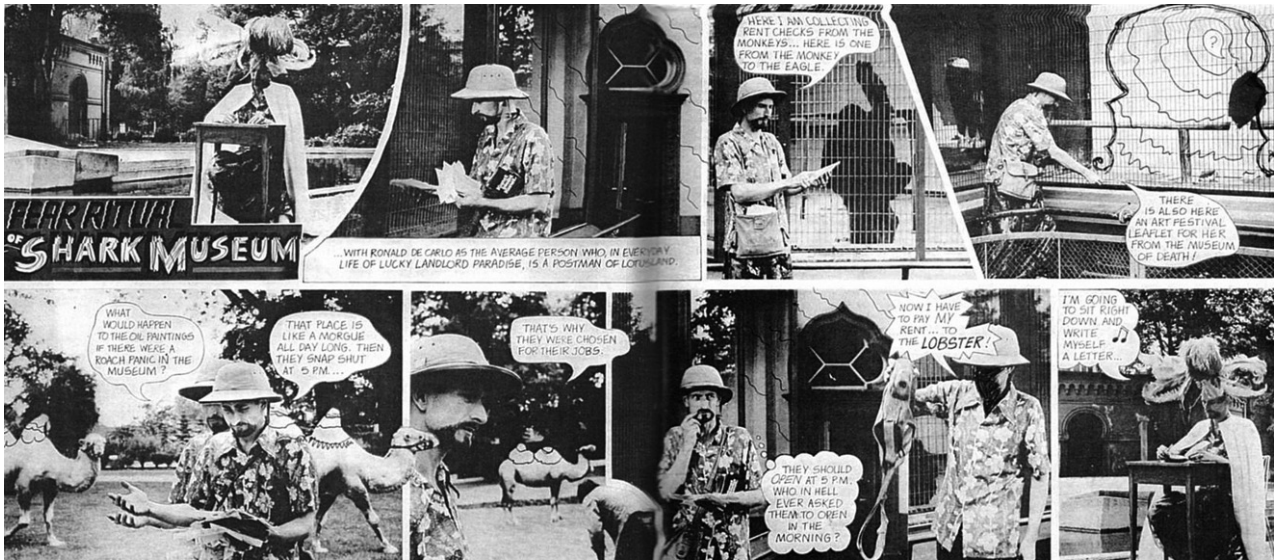


Fig. 8.6 Jack Smith, *Fear Ritual of Shark Museum* (1974)

The main criterion which had been used in selecting the areas where the circles were positioned was aesthetic, as I wanted to inspire visitors to the installation with the beauty of the gardens and had chosen the areas which were most emblematic of the rich variety of plant-life contained within its walls. However it had also been important to select areas so that the circular motif I use to represent the natural cycles of life and death could be replicated in the ritual. As I would be turning to face all four corners of the Earth during the incantation it was important that these circles were positioned in the directions I would face.

I wanted to introduce the minimum amount of elements from outside of the space apart from my own body in order to give prominence to the extravagance of the vegetable forms. Since the performance took place in June, many of the plants and trees were blossoming and shedding their flowers, depending on the stage of their cycle. I began to search and pinpoint different areas where this was happening to make sure I would have fresh material to collect.

In the last mornings preceding the installation, when some of the paths were covered in carpets of colour I began to gather the flowers one by one in order to store them safely before they were swept up by the zealous gardening staff or became trampled and dried in the heat of the day. Some of the flowers were quite small and scattered over a large area but the repetitive action involved in collecting them by hand was a pleasure in the open air environment where they lay.

Originally my idea had been to be attached or suspended from a tree and blend totally with it, as an organic growth. I discarded this idea early on as I began to question the motivations behind the suspension process and realised that the element of creating a spectacle, a suspended body was not as interesting as melding into the space represented by the tree in its habitat. The focus of the work was my voluntary submission as the guardian or keeper of the memorial.

The ropes and knots used in Shibari have a highly aesthetic component and it was important that this did not overwhelm the body since they were being used as a means of immobilisation and nothing more. Furthermore there were conservation issues and the fact that one of the organisers commented upon the fact that: “last year we had a performer who had a sheet of glass and was moving around within it, which was quite worrying as he could have damaged himself, the audience or the plants”

made it clear to me that it would be better to seek alternative ways of immobilising myself. In fact when Eva and I began to try out different possibilities, we decided it would be better to attach my body to a rope tied round the tree trunk, giving me freedom of movement within a limited radius.

As I realised how difficult it would be to create the piece without occupying more of the physical space in the gardens I decided to amplify Eva's role in the piece suggesting she guide the visitors through the gardens leading them towards the site where I would previously have been restrained.

She was enthusiastic and this solved one of the major problems I had identified in recent works- the reliance on the text. Geyserbird was a new kind of alter ego for me, one which I felt needed to move beyond the rational and with the opportunity to work with Eva I felt I could dedicate myself to exploring more deeply this aspect of the shamanic personality.

Her guided tour would also incorporate another aspect I felt was important in the context, the experience of walking, as a means of crossing from one space to another, and also as a kind of transformational experience for the audience.

On one of these visits Eva pointed out that the prickly pear cactus was in fruit. The flesh of this fruit was similar in colour to blood and so I decided to gather it for use as part of the performance, carefully extracting the pith from the spiny fruit. The fleshy texture of the fruit summoned up images of blood soaked entrails and I decided to use this gory image for the publicity of the event. In close up it was hard to distinguish what the texture was but its obviously organic origins suggested mashed up body parts and a violent end.

It was important to be on site each day to take advantage of the continuous maintenance work being carried out in the garden - for a period of two days before the performance two of the large cactus plants (*Euphorbia Coerulescens*, country of origin: South Africa) were being pruned and their huge thorny branches being piled up before being taken away for composting. After talking to the gardeners who lent me their tools I chopped some of the cuttings to a more manageable size and carefully transported them to a nearby site for use in the installation.

As a didactic space run by the University of Valencia, the identification of species is of special importance and the maps, information boards and metal plaques used to identify the plants and trees form a highly characteristic part of the landscape.

I decided to use the identification stakes as commemorative plaques and requested 20 of them for use as part of the installation. Each plaque was labelled with the latin name of an extinct species alongside an image of the animal whenever available. I researched and found representative species from each continent in each of the four major taxonomic groups- mammal, bird, amphibian and reptile. Their latin names formed the litany I chanted for the duration of the installation.

These names and their continent of origin were recorded in a specially prepared cloth bound book whose cover was embossed with a golden compass point. I had chosen this special book from the stocks of my collection of old educational books which I use to create the **Recyclopedia**<sup>270</sup>.

In this case I had gutted most of the pages from the *Tierras y Pueblos I: Iberia y Iberoamérica*<sup>271</sup> volume of the *Enciclopedia Juvenil* (Young Person's Encyclopedia) retitling it **Memory P(a)lace**.

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<sup>270</sup> *The Recyclopedia* is a project which involves recycling old encyclopedias and educational books. I alter these books with a variety of techniques, drawing, paper engineering, calligraphy, replacing an historical discourse with an hysterical one.

<sup>271</sup> Translation: Countries and People I: Iberia and Ibero-America Young Person's Encyclopedia.





Fig. 8.10 *Memory P(a)lace* - Animal plaques & map (2015)

I prepared it with the names and geographical origins of the extinct species. It would be my guide during the installation ritual and serve as a prayer book on the day of the performance.

The creation of this installation was itself a ritual process, each of the elements involved had a symbolic meaning. I wanted the public to witness the ceremonial construction of the installation as well as my constriction within it as its guardian during which my movement would be restricted for hours.

Therefore I decided to do the installation ritual the day before the public performance and document it on video so that the footage would become part of the final installation through its projection on a loop in a room at the entrance to the garden. The day before the *Memory P(a)lace* performance, I carried out the ritual installation of the gardens, dressed as Geyserbird, with the help of Anna Maria Staiano and the video artists Jesus Peralta and Serena Rinaudo.

After I had changed into my ceremonial dress with its protective amulets and put my make-up on, we began the ritual on the path by a pair of huge banana trees where the first of the circles was to be created.

I first sang the mantra of the names of extinct species from the continent I was designating then crouched down to turn round with my arm outstretched tracing the circumference of a circle with flour which I allowed to trickle through my fingers as I moved. In this case I used flour instead of salt to form the protective commemoration sites because salt would have altered the pH of the soil.

Once the circle was complete I filled it with the flowers of the lacebark tree (*Brachychiton Discolor*; country of origin: Australia) creating a pink carpet of colour.

Then I wiped one of the huge fleshy leaves of the nearby banana tree over my arms and body, to suffuse it with my essence, before placing it in the centre of the circle. Smearing some of the juice I had extracted from the prickly pears on my arms I began to drive the commemorative stakes with the names and images of extinct species from the continent of Oceania into the ground around and within the circle.



Fig. 8.11 *Memory P(a)lace - The Circles* (2015)

Once finished I ran off through the trees, frolicking in the afternoon sunlight. It was incredibly liberating to occupy every corner of the garden, since normally visitor access is limited to the series of paths which run between the plants and trees. Instead I followed a randomly chosen route zig zag route from one area to another sometimes following the paths round and round, sometimes in the middle of the garden itself. I was suffusing the space with my transgender being, a fleeting spirit occupying spaces which were normally free of human presence except when the gardeners were at work there.

Throughout this journey I carried the *Memory P(a)lace* volume like a talisman, presenting the open pages of the book to all the corners of the garden as if collecting the essence of the spaces within its binding. The knowledge once gathered in its pages had been subverted through techniques of collage which mixed its few remaining pages together to disrupt the stories of colonialism it had once told.

In this way I weaved my way towards the upper part of the gardens where the next circle was to be created in the middle of the cactus garden. As a child I had been fascinated by cacti and had a small collection of tiny stunted specimens which struggled to grow in the cold Scottish climate, so this was one of my favourite sites in the garden, where huge cactus trees would produce their strange flowers. I positioned the spiny cactus cuttings round the area where I was going to make the circle to provide it with a further protective barrier. In amongst those spiny plants I sprinkled the flour filling the circle with the orange flowers of the Palo Rosa tree (*Tijuana Tipu*, country of origin: Argentina/ Bolivia).

Afterwards I smeared the cactus juice over my face and torso, bathing myself in it. Finally I planted the taxonomic plaques designating the circle as the continent of Asia. In this area of wide open space I became more aware of my own physical presence since the gardens were open to the public and there were a few people around.

I entered into a more serious mood using the prayer book as a prop to express my feelings in movements that were more controlled. In this way I processed towards the herb garden, a space not intended for use in the installation but which I wanted to register as part of the monument in some way.

This is the only fenced off area in the garden which along with the paving stones creates an atmosphere reflecting the original purpose of the botanical “specimen garden” as a practical complement to medical studies in the days when pharmaceutical remedies were made up using these natural compounds. In the centre of this space there is a well which provided a perfect platform for Geyserbird to climb onto and sing before galivanting off to the next space chosen to form part of the *Memory P(a)lace*: the rockery.



By the weeping willow at the edge of the pond I prepared the circle scattering the white flowers of the *Yucca Rostrata* (country of origin: Mexico). I dug the plaques into the gravel designating the space as Europe and poured the last of the cactus juice over myself and dripped some blood red drops onto the white flowers. The solemn mood created by the last mantra continued as I smeared the juice over my arms and legs using slow movements.

The ritual was reaching its end and I wanted to draw every last second out of it. For one last time that day I sang almost in a whisper “Monumento, Memory P(a)lace”. After a silence which seemed to last forever I came back to my surroundings and yelled in exhilaration “Geyserbird!”

I felt a strange power. I had suffused almost the entire garden with a transgender presence just like the ones driven underground or killed by the European colonisers in their righteous indignation at the thought of homosexual aberrations. The two spirit shaman had returned, if only for an afternoon to walk the landscapes of the world. On my way back to the entrance I was walking on air, savouring every moment. The late evening sunlight suffused the garden in a beautiful glow. It felt like this was my domain.

The video footage of this action was edited overnight in collaboration with Jesús Peralta for projection in a specially adapted room in the entrance to the gardens. Visitors could thus begin their visit to the memorial installation watching its preparation.

On the morning of the performance I arrived when the gardens opened to put the final touches to the installation and prepare the final circle.

Firstly, I dressed in my ceremonial Geyserbird dress, tail feathers and high heels. I put on my insect necklace and the imitation amethyst diadem then applied the commemorative make-up with green and orange eye shadow and a white eyeliner pencil. The incongruousness nature of wearing heels in such circumstances, like the exaggerated make up I wore are part of my strategy to represent a different kind of femininity in the broad light of day, since male crossdressers and drag queens usually come out at night. Wearing heels in such uneven ground made it more difficult to move and I might have stumbled more often were it not for my experience in heels and in mountaineering, but I prefer the artificial postures the body assumes in heels to those it takes barefoot.

Then I positioned the stakes for the fifth hidden continent along the paths which led to the pond and an empty silver and tortoiseshell picture frame was placed in a small grove beside them. It was positioned to frame a still life composition of exuberant growth and in the centre of this overgrown corner I scattered the left over petals from the other circles on a large stone.

The disposition of these elements alluded to the Vanitas paintings with the baroque frame itself representing the vanity of the western idea of culture as that which supersedes nature.

I then prepared the final circle placing the commemorative stakes around the pond, in front of the tree I would be tied to. A path of stepping stones led across the pond to the island where I would be immobilised. I stood on one of the stones which formed the natural platform I would perform on, and span slowly round dripping the flour from my outstretched hand to create the final circle. I placed the commemorative prayer book and the ceremonial glass full of the juice and pith of the prickly pear cactus fruit at the base of the cypress tree from where I would carry out the commemoration ritual.



During the course of the ritual I followed a cyclic pattern, directing myself and chanting to the four cardinal points, each of which represented a continent before crouching down to chant to the hidden fifth continent. Each of these songs, dedicated to the memory of extinct species from one continent had a special flavour inspired in part by my mental image of that continent's culture and in part by the resonance of the names. I played with the rhythm of their syllables incorporating them into my movements, dancing in time. Over the length of the day they also came to reflect different moods, some more humorous, some more serious as I ranged up and down the scale exploring the masculine bass sounds and effeminate higher pitches of my voice, sometimes whispering, sometimes screaming.

I began the keening cycle chanting the names of extinct species from the first continent, Oceania, as I faced South in the direction of the corresponding circle. I then turned 90 degrees to face the East and the continent of Asia chanting the names from that continent, repeating this action to the North (Europe) and West (Africa) till I had returned to my original position when I crouched to sing the names of the extinct species in the continent marked out round the pond, the underworld of the Americas.

Between each of the continent songs I repeated several times the monotone mantra I had created for the installation "Monica, Samia Yusuf Omar". "Monica" was the name of a boat with over 1000 "illegal" immigrants aboard which ran into trouble while trying to reach Italy. This incident caused Italy to declare a state of emergency when it happened in 2002.

Although there were no reported casualties it seemed symbolic of the desperate situations which drive many to their deaths. I felt it was time I extended the keening litany to make reference to the human victims of global politics since images of refugees being rescued and bodies washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean were in the news every day and in 2015 the number of immigrants travelling to Europe passed the million mark. Those who die in the journey are generally reported only as statistics and the difficulty of putting a name to the dead is exacerbated by the fact that many of those who illegally cross the Mediterranean burn their documentation in a final ritual before they leave for Europe to avoid deportation.

As a symbol of their fate I chose the name of Samia Yusuf Omar, a Somalian athlete who had drowned in 2012 whilst attempting to reach Europe. Her name became part of the mantra I recited throughout the commemorative ritual.

This mantra and the repeated title of the piece "Monumento- Memory Pal(a)ce were sung in a similar manner throughout all of the ten cycles of the day almost without exception. Whilst I explored the possibilities of the words and tested the limits of my voice on the commemorative continental extinction songs these were a constant reminder of the gravity of the events I was commemorating.

"This is one of four sacred spaces I have constructed in this botanic garden to commemorate the victims in this war: animals, indigenous people whose land is being robbed, those who have to migrate because of poverty and drought, the queers who also migrate and all those others... lost!"

After the first cycle had finished I began on the second during which I slowly stripped off my ceremonial robes in preparation to undertake my role as guardian of the memorial. First I took off the amulets and charms I was wearing, tying them to the tree and bushes around me. These brightly coloured adornments contrasted strongly with the vegetation adding a kitsch aesthetic to my transgender memorial space. Then I stripped off the tail feathers, placing them beside my little grove and finally I took off my ceremonial dress hanging it from the tree.

Now I was ready to be tied up, wearing only a pair of high heeled shoes and a skin-tone girdle. Eva arrived while I was carrying out the third cycle. After waiting respectfully until she could find a moment to intervene she stepped over onto my little island, picked up a rope and began to tie it around my torso, constructing a Shibari corset. She attached two ropes securely round the thick trunk of the cypress and then firmly tied them on to the corset. I was now within the structure of the Memory P(a)lace. She had finished just as I had reached the end of the third cycle.

My guardianship of the memorial had begun. Strangely it seemed like a release to be tied to the tree and I let myself fall forwards knowing its strong trunk would keep me from losing my balance. I stretched out with my hands testing to see how far I could go, standing on the tips of my high heeled shoes.



**Fig. 8.12 *Memory P(a)lace* - Eva Pez ties up Geyserbird (2015)**

I began the fourth cycle, tied up, singing and accompanying the more rhythmic names clacking my heels and snapping my fingers to generate a percussive accompaniment. Chanting “Monica Samia Yusuf Omar” I dipped my fingers in the juice of the prickly pear and smeared it over my face and body.

“Hay un continente sumergido aqui debajo que pierde el control que piensa que tiene el control<sup>272</sup>, that loses control that thinks it has control, losing it. Losing it... America this one’s for you”

Then I burst into a punky chorus of names screaming in wild abandon until I finished: “Monica Samia Yusuf Omar - Don’t mess with me!”

This spontaneous outburst reflected how protective I had become towards the species I was invoking.

<sup>272</sup> Translation: There is a continent submerged here below, that is losing control, that thinks it is in control...



This freedom of expression created an experimental soundscape with my voice changing over the duration of the piece, at some points blending with the ambient sounds of the gardens (bird song, frogs croaking) and the city beyond (sirens in the distance), and at others taking a more active role as protagonist.

This freedom came in part from the greater possibilities the installation in the gardens had offered to configure various spaces which in their totality formed the Memorial. There were places for silent contemplation which I had prepared to commemorate the dead, such as the circles filled with flowers with their identification stakes that were like tombstones, where the public could reflect upon the deaths in an introspective way.

However the circle I inhabited as the guardian, was designed as a place to celebrate life as well as remember death, where I felt free to express a fuller range of emotions. The explosive anger of punk reflected my awareness that the forces which are causing the deaths I was commemorating must be challenged, that my mourning would not let go of the natural world I loved and “in defiance of bourgeois (and capitalist) imperatives to forget, move on, transfer attention to a new relationship / commodity”<sup>273</sup>

This was one of the major distinctions between Memory P(a)lace and the other War Memorials in which the expression of the voice had been less free, in the first War Memorial, the monotone of a litany expressing sorrow, and in the second The Keening, the uncontrolled howling of anguish mixed with anger.

The spot I had chosen by the pool, was difficult to access which made it feel like a sanctuary, a reclusive space where I could feel protected and concentrate on my task. A network of narrow paths led around the area so I could be seen from a distance across the water which meant I appeared fully immersed in the environment. My voice carried quite a distance in the stillness of the gardens and attracted lots of people curious to find the source of the sound.

Since it was a sunny Saturday there were many visitors, not all of whom were aware of the festival and of the performance taking place.

Because of the high reeds and vegetation people would not be able to see me until they were quite close. Even then they would only get a partial view so they had to circle the area to find different vantage points if they were interested in seeing more. This meant they had to implicate themselves in what was going on.

While I was carrying out the commemoration, I was completely concentrated on my role which meant that although I felt as if I had a heightened awareness of my surroundings: the bird song, the light in the trees, etc.. I was in many ways oblivious to the public.

This was of great importance, as I did not want any exchange to distract me from my role. The only time this barrier was broken was when, occasionally I heard some awkward laughter, or when a protective wife ushered her husband away with the comment “*Vamos por allá* (Let’s go that way!).” This woman’s reaction was quite natural and honest.

My response was to incorporate her comment into the cycle so I parroted her words “*Vamos por allá*” as part of the strophe I was singing.

Obviously my strange transgender presence could not be to everyone’s liking, but I thought it important that I register my awareness.

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273 Ibid: Sandilands (2010) p.354



I was an outrageous sight and my presence might have been an intrusion, for those who were only there to visit the gardens, but this, I believe is the role of the performance artist to make uncomfortable truths evident, and not only in safe spaces, where an audience expects to be challenged.

Most people seemed fascinated if sometimes a little unsure of what they were seeing and stopped and stared silently with strange quizzical expressions on their face. I imagine that the sight of a semi-naked Geyserbird covered in blood-like cactus juice and make-up might have given them quite a shock! Indeed when I reviewed the footage afterwards it was interesting to discover the range of reactions from amongst the public, some stayed for a long time watching, some just seemed to want a quick snapshot with the freak, some walked quickly by averting their gaze.

Since I would be confined in the same area for the most of the duration of the installation we had decided that apart from carrying out the Shibari Eva should act as a guide to the memorial taking groups round the gardens to visit the circles and explain their significance. She was dressed in a white lab coat and presented herself to the public as a botanical student studying in the gardens. As the female representative of reason she explained the concepts behind the installation as well as the history and work carried out in the gardens.



**Fig. 8.13 *Memory P(a)lace* (1) Guided Tour (2)Chanting (2015)**

Eva's last tour ended by the pond where I was carrying out the final song cycle. Once I had finished, she untied me and I dressed in my ceremonial robes to accompany her and the group towards the cactus circle.

En route she stripped off her white lab coat and we joined hands to chant the mantra as we approached the cactus circle taking our positions within it.

I then sang the names of the extinct species commemorated there and we chanted one final round of the mantra as we anointed each other with the cactus juice.

Holding hands, we sang, the rational and the irrational, female and male, science and magic, united once more.

In hindsight, it was quite a different experience to be a guardian in such an idyllic site: the solemn guardian of the first War Memorial was, for the most part, gone and instead what had emerged was the trickster, an anarchic presence who could switch from solemnity to parody in milliseconds.



If performance is often, as Marvin Carlson suggests, a display of technique, I gave myself free rein to shine in this performance.

When discussing the origins of performance in the theatre, cabaret, circus and other fields Carlson distinguishes between the more traditional function of theatre, the communication of a story and the “performant function...which seeks to please or amaze an audience by a display”<sup>274</sup> and it was on the basis of this display that the interaction with the public took place.

An important factor in this freedom to experiment and push the limits of my voice and my body was the fact that I did not have to worry about making sense, the language I was using was gestural, suggestive, onomatopoetic, but any meaning conveyed (some of the Latin names were at least in part understandable) was of much less importance than their expression.



**Fig. 8.14 *Memory P(a)lace* - Ritual closing (2015)**

<sup>274</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, (Routledge. London, 1996) p.82



# CHAPTER IX

## (E)FEMME(RAL) SITES OF RESISTANCE

- *The P.I.N.Q. Park Project* (2013-)

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds”<sup>275</sup>

In 2013 my investigations in Natural Hysteria took a new direction. The powerful metaphor, suggested by Leopold in 1949, of the world as an organism which can be damaged like a person, predated Lovelock’s theories of Gaia by decades and influenced me towards imagining landscapes affected by environmental degradation as open wounds in the tissue of the planet.

As part of La Erreria (House of Bent), I organised a series of events round the concepts of queer ecology and ecotransfeminism in Valencia titled **Open Wounds**<sup>276</sup> which culminated in the first **-Post Industrial Natural Queer- P.I.N.Q.**<sup>277</sup> **Park Opening Ceremony**. I felt it was time to develop the concept of witnessing (paying homage to those who have been slaughtered in the war being waged against nature) from an ephemeral performative act into the realm of the physical by dedicating a series of spaces for remembrance and creating a network of **P.I.N.Q. Parks**.

In this way, after the opening ceremonies had taken place, these sites would become anti-monuments to those who have died in the war against nature. But these parks would be different from the parks or reserves set up by a heteronormative society intent on controlling sexuality and nature, in conserving a status quo and which seeks a pristine and static nature.

Nature is in constant flux and although the processes of succession through which one type of vegetation replaces another may be so slow, that to us humans they are imperceptible, nature is never static.

“Instead of static forests and static lakes and static prairies, Warming and Cowles recognized that these features of the physical world were in flux.

As Cowles wrote in his introduction, “Ecology, therefore, is a study in dynamics.”

Queer ecology, then, is the study of dynamics across all phenomena, all behavior, all possibility. It is the relation between past, present, and future.”<sup>278</sup>

Nature conservation has often been related to a politics whereby local peoples have been displaced to ‘clear the land’ for hunting, fishing or even ‘green’ holiday pursuits. Indeed the first national parks in the United States were spaces where middle class and rich white men could escape the feminising influence of the rapidly growing cities and assert their masculinity. To create these fantasies of an unspoiled nature it was necessary to move the Native Americans, who lived there, into reservations.

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<sup>275</sup> Aldo Leopold, quoted in Sandilands (2010) p.331

<sup>276</sup> <http://houseofbent.blogspot.com.es/2013/12/blog-post.html>

<sup>277</sup> Pronounced “pink” in English, in reference to the pink triangle homosexuals were labelled with by the Nazis (and the pink pound based on the higher disposable income of some gay men which has opened up new markets and fomented an alternative economy)

<sup>278</sup> Alex Johnson, *How to Queer Ecology: One Goose at a Time* (Orion, March/April 2011)



In 1887 Native Americans owned 56 million hectares of land whereas by 1934 that figure had been reduced to 19 million<sup>279</sup>.

In the same period the first National Park, Yellowstone was established (1872) and the National Park Service began operating in 1915.

The imposition of a western view of conservation on indigenous people (whose cosmologies generally show a deep reverence for nature) continues today as recent exposes show how the Baka people have been tortured and their homes razed to the ground by eco guards supported by conservation group WWF to stop poaching in their reserves in Cameroon.<sup>280</sup>

The designation of certain areas of special ecological importance as conservation areas is highly laudable but should be accompanied by policies which protect nature in its entirety.

The video essay **Forest Law** (2014), by Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, documents the historic legal case brought by the Sarayuku people against the Ecuadorian government which planned to allow mining operations to take place in their territory. They won their case by arguing that nature has rights and should be protected.

In her essay on **Modern Nature: the Journals of Derek Jarman** (1991) a book which describes the gay film director's garden near Dungeness nuclear power station, Catriona Mortimer Sandilands reflects upon how Jarman's vision of this barren landscape was particularly queer.

The journal documents the slow deterioration of Jarman's body as it succumbs to the effects of the AIDS virus, and his garden was a metaphor of this process: the plants commemorate his friends, lovers and experiences.

She contrasts this melancholy nature, documented warts and all, with the concept of nature as pure and unspoiled, sold as a destination for green tourism which is exploited by the forces of capital to divert attention from the continued degradation of our environment being carried out by corporations and governments worldwide in the name of progress and development.



**Fig. 9.1 Derek Jarman's garden at Dungeness**

<sup>279</sup> Source: <https://urbanland.uli.org/development-business/native-american-tribes-and-economic-development> - Accessed 6/2/18

<sup>280</sup> The investigation carried out by human rights group Survival is reported here: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/03/wwf-accused-of-facilitating-human-rights-abuses-of-tribal-people-in-cameroon> - Accessed 5/2/18

But what about the landscapes which have been altered through the processes of industrialisation? As production moves increasingly outwards to the global periphery where production costs are lower and environmental controls less strict, the factories and warehouses that once formed part of our landscape have been abandoned, left to crumble.

These ruins are testimonies to the scars of our industrial past and are slowly disappearing as nature reclaims them. In our society's nostalgia for the past, they are sometimes restored and form part of the heritage industry which designates certain buildings as industrial or cultural heritage, certain areas as national parks and others as World Heritage sites.

“Heritage discourse provides a significant challenge to both the queering of space and the ecological defence of ‘wild urban nature’ through its ideological emphasis on the reordering and surveillance of space in the service of a heteronormative reading of public culture.”<sup>281</sup>

I decided to carry out an ironic critique of this “heritage” culture and create a network of protected ruins: the Post Industrial Natural Queer Parks.

“An ironic ecology...rather than dominating or venerating nature, would...value and proliferate “impure” and vernacular mixings of nature and culture, new shared meanings and practices, new ways of dwelling with non-humans...Its defining legacy would be neither the nuclear power station, nor the nature reserve but a living, evolving plurality of shared forms of life.”<sup>282</sup>

In a satirical vein, artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan highlighted “the heteronormativity of dominant ecological and national narratives”<sup>283</sup> in their performance **The Lesbian National Parks and Services** (1997). In a humorous way, they challenged the dominant view of nature as heterosexual and parodied the image of the macho white heterosexual park ranger. Posing as park rangers they invited the public to seek out lesbian plant and animal species in the park, in this way pointing out the historical invisibility of women and lesbian in these natural spaces.

The appropriation of semi-wild urban spaces has a long tradition in the history of sexual dissidence. “The first queer uses of space in the modern era involved dark alleyways, leafy parks, and hidden or abandoned buildings which were appropriated by homosexuals and men seeking sexual relations with other men.”<sup>284</sup> Historically, cruising grounds were often amongst the few spaces where men could indulge in this activity and they were perhaps the most democratic of spaces for same-sex relations since access to them was not limited by age, race or financial status.

The struggle for control over public space is exemplified by the history of Russell Square, a famous cruising ground in central London. In 1998 the local council, with the excuse of cleaning up the park, cut down shrubs to stop cruising activities which instead became more visible. This led to complaints from neighbours and police harassment to the cruisers.

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281 Matthew Gandy, *Queer ecology: nature, sexuality, and heterotopic alliances*, (Environment and Planning D: Society and Space vol 30,2012) <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1068/d10511> p.4. - Accessed 6/2/18

282 Bronislaw Szerszynski, *The Post Ecologist Condition: Irony as symptom and cure* in (Environmental Politics 16.2, April, 2007) p.351

283 Jennifer MacLatchy, *Lesbian Rangers on a Queer Frontier* (Canadian Literature Vol 224, 2015) p.156 <http://canlit.ca/article/lesbian-rangers-on-a-queer-frontier/> - Accessed 6/2/18

284 Jesús Martínez Oliva, *Queer uses and appropriations of Space: from cruising zones to gay districts* in *The Gendered City: Urban space and Gender Construction* (Universidad de Castilla la Mancha 2004) p.112

As a response, the queer activist group **OutRage!** lobbied for an area of the park to be designated as a gay sex zone of toleration.

“Entrance to the area would be marked with a warning sign. A similar system has worked well in the main parks in Copenhagen and Amsterdam for many years.”<sup>285</sup>

Their proposal was strongly opposed by the local community who felt the cruising activities may corrupt children and it was turned down by the authorities.

“If local people don’t like gay sex in Russell Square, they should stay away...what are these heterosexual whingers doing wandering around Russell Square at 2 a.m.? They should be at home looking after their children”<sup>286</sup>

The Russell Square proposal opened up a heated debate in national TV and press over the use of public space. Is public space equally available to all? Will heteronormative prerogatives such as protection of minors dictate the use of public space? Can it cater to the specific needs of different communities at the same time? How is it possible to reach a peaceful coexistence? Could the access be negotiated and regulated for example delimitating particular areas and specific times for certain activities such as cruising? Should it be self-regulated or government run?

In Amsterdam, the local authorities have regulated cruising in the Oeverlanden Park, within a clearly marked zone indicated by signs as a “Cruising Area” that can be used day and night and represents the largest such space in the city.

However in most cities, surveillance and control are more important than sexual freedom and in order to deter cruising in city parks, brighter lighting is installed and undergrowth removed.

These changes decrease the biodiversity of parks since the removal of shrubs limits sites where birds and small mammals can breed, whilst the brighter lighting confuses night-flying insects and bats. “Cruisers and ecologists have a shared interest in ‘unruly spaces’ since the loss of ‘wild urban nature’ reduces opportunities for public sex in nature and the enjoyment or study of nature itself”<sup>287</sup>

There have been various artistic projects based on cruising grounds in a wide variety of different media. As a response to the cleaning up of a cruising area in Copenhagen, the Danish artist Lasse Lau carried out the action **Secret Bush Planting #1** (2005), which involved the illegal planting of a shrub commonly known as “heartbeat” in the Ørstedsparken, after which seeds were offered to the public so they could carry out such actions themselves.

“This action is a poetic gesture with its own inner logic (exemplified by the name of the bush) about the hope of greater understanding and tolerance. At the same time, the work is action-oriented and politically oppositional.”<sup>288</sup>

The artist also carried out an installation in the park filling an old World War II bunker with foliage. **Park - privacy could only be had in public** (2001) could only be visited after dark and the only illumination came from a disco ball creating a hybrid space with elements of dark rooms, cruising areas and discos, three spaces which are peculiarly queer.

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285 John Beeson, *Zone of Toleration for Gay Sex in Russell Square?* - <http://outrage.org.uk/1998/08/zone-of-toleration-for-gay-sex-in-russell-square/> - Accessed 6/2/18

286 Ibid.

287 Matthew Gandy, *Queer ecology: nature, sexuality, and heterotopic alliances* (Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, vol 30, 2012) <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1068/d10511p.14>. - Accessed 6/2/18

288 Mathias Kryger Hansen, *Botaniske Overgreb*, <http://trikster.net/2/kryger/2.html> - my translation. - Accessed 12/2/18



In 2011, Ørstedsparken, was also the chosen spot for an anonymous action where official looking signs using the Council of Copenhagen’s logo, were put up around the park, advising cruisers that sexual activity was allowed as long as it was done quietly and any semen was removed from benches.<sup>289</sup>



Fig. 9.2 Cruising signs (1) (2)Amsterdam (3) Copenhagen

Tom Burr’s **Central Park Series** (1992) is based on an area of Central Park called the Ramble in New York, which is used for cruising.

The installation includes a miniature model of the area and photocopies of information leaflets about the Park published by the authorities. The latter focus on the ornithological interest of the area, which attracts many birdwatchers who share the space with the cruisers. As Burr comments: “The two groups coexist in a dynamic exchange of looks and glances at each other, at one another, and at the birds”<sup>290</sup>



Fig. 9.3 Tom Burr, *A Ramble in Central Park* (1992)

289 <https://ekstrabladet.dk/nyheder/samfund/article4104234.ece> - Accessed 17/2/18

290 Tom Burr, *Just Outside the Museum*. (Kunst + Museum Journal, Vol. 4 #6, 1993)

I have often found myself caught in a similar confusion of gazes using my binoculars in the natural reserve of the Albufera since the nudist zone used for cruising lies opposite the area of the bird reserve. The birds do not recognise the line that separates these areas.

In 2008, Pepe Miralles (who gave the workshop on cruising as part of Ecogender Days in the Polytechnical University of Valencia) carried out an intervention **El poder de las palabras (2)** (The Power of Words) in a local cruising ground which would have been a perfect site for a P.I.N.Q. Park, the abandoned Plexi factory on the Pinedo beach near Valencia. In the photographic documentation we see the wall which separates the factory from the dunes that surround it with the stencilled graffiti which reads “Use a Condom for a better life”.

It forms part of his **Geografías del Morbo** (Geographies of Desire) project in which he has mapped cruising zones in the region and in which he discusses the use gay men make of rural, peripheral and urban spaces for cruising. “If public space has been and continues to be heterosexual in all its expressions, dimensions and dispositives, our gay subculture has had to homosexualise enclaves stolen from this heteronormativity, transforming them into our own temporary territories, into spaces of dissidence used and perceived only by initiates.”<sup>291</sup>

Of course the practice of cruising is a reflection of the history of the gendered distribution of space, which confined women to the domestic space whilst “the proprietorial position of men in public space allows them to appropriate it for casual purposes.”<sup>292</sup>

The focus on quick anonymous sex is often used as a release by men who are in the closet and would not see their sexuality as political. On the other hand the use of these same cruising grounds by women and transgender people is a politically charged act.

Perhaps one of the earliest public actions to claim the right of women to cruise was organised in 1992 by **LABIA (Lesbians Answer Back in Anger)**, the lesbian branch of **OutRage!** They publicised a women-on-woman cruising night in Hampstead Heath in London in the gay press. However the event ended up attracting more journalists than women.

This lack of response could be due to many factors such as the heightened danger of rape or attack in an open sex space. “Sasha Albert (2011) and Denise Bullock (2004) have conducted studies on public sex between women, finding from interviews that women do engage in practices such as cruising, though in important ways this is distinctive from gay men’s practices.”<sup>293</sup>

An early Spanish example of a lesbian appropriation of public space is documented in Carmela García’s **Video no. 1** from her series **Chicas, deseos y ficción** (Girls, desire and fiction, 1998) where a group of women exchange glances and follow each other through the twisting paths of the Retiro park in Madrid in a filmic representation of cruising.

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291 Pepe Miralles, *Geografías del Morbo*, <http://geografiasdelmorbo.com/materiales-de-uso/> - Accessed 12 /2/18

292 William James, *The Gendered City: Urban space and Gender Construction* (Universidad de Castilla la Mancha 2004) p.93

293 David Bell, *Representations of Public Sex in Crime, Media, and Popular Culture* (Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology, 2017) p.5



With **Praxis # 4\_Tigre&Robot** (Tiger&Robot, 2010) Esperanza Montero documents women having sex with other women in the Pinedo cruising area. “We also vindicate the invisible sexuality of lesbians (as always primarily discriminated for being women) by visibilising it as much as possible: we also desire, experience, enjoy, want (and know how to) fuck”<sup>294</sup>



**Fig. 9.4** Esperanza Montero, *Tigre & Robot* (2010)

Furthermore, the masks worn by the women in the photographs -one of a tiger and one of a robot- represent an ecotransfeminist deconstruction of the nature/culture binomial which assigns women to the space of nature because of their capacity to produce life, whilst men are supposed to belong to the superior sphere of culture since they can produce technology and thus dominate women and nature.

But all humans are a mixture of nature and culture and as La Boucherie, one of the participants in the action pointed out: “I do not believe that there is a battle between culture and nature, I believe that there would be more balance, if it were not that the economic gains generated by technology causes other agents to cheat and intervene in our subjectivity from the moment we are born in an attempt to beat the instinct out of us and design us to become 100% productive like robots”<sup>295</sup>

In another example, **Pansexual Public Porn: AKA The Adventures of Hans and Del** (1997) the intersex photographer and film maker Del LaGrace Volcano and transgender artist Hans Schierl, document their sexual experiences with men in cruising grounds in the UK. Their intention was to “draw new territories that open the possibilities for those of us who can not or do not want to be reduced to the binary model (the standard: one or the other) and create spaces in which difference is developed, respected, loved”<sup>296</sup>

Historically, cruising grounds have been really important spaces of queer freedom but “Today, cruising is a commodified, competitive and highly ritualistic business. Gaydar culture institutionalises erotic interplay, turning adventure and wonder into a sexual McDonald’s.”<sup>297</sup>

<sup>294</sup> Esperanza Montero, *Cuerpos Lesbianos en (la) Red* (TFM, UPV, 2010) p.128

<sup>295</sup> Ibid

<sup>296</sup> Del LaGrace Volcano quoted in Giulia Perli, *coños urbanos: la deserción del deseo y las calles sexuales* (TFM, UPV, 2011) p.121

<sup>297</sup> Stephen Maddison, *Cruising in style* (Guardian newspaper, 2006)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jul/31/gayrights.lifeandhealth> - Accessed 19/2/18



We live in a culture of hedonistic nihilism which encourages us to have unlimited sex, take another pill, go out on a bender, numb ourselves to what is going on around us because the reality is too hard to deal with.

“... capitalism naturalises its own diseased control of our lives by tolerating our perversions as long as they remain functions of commodified exchange which make our subjectivities functions of consumption.”<sup>298</sup>

Should we propose alternatives to this kind of sexual consumerism where other humans are just products and there is no care or love involved in the relationship? If we use each other for sex, if we are just bodies, then why not use up and destroy other life forms and the planet?

### **The P.I.N.Q. Park Project**

**The Post Industrial Natural Queer Park Project** is rooted in a decidedly queer use of space- it is expansive and goes beyond categorisation. The Parks are imagined as commemorative spaces but can also be used for bird and butterfly watching, sexual activity or simple “vernacular delight”<sup>299</sup> in the contemplation of nature. The juxtaposing of the terms “natural” and “queer”, which are generally seen as opposites, is a vindication of the philosophy of queer ecology.

The parks are based in abandoned lots, warehouses and factories, spaces which are testimonies to the processes of globalisation whereby production has moved to countries that offer an unprotected labour force.

These spaces display the wreckage of our industrial past, a past that is slowly being erased by the processes of re-colonization by nature.

They remind us that whatever damage we do to the environment, however many toxins we let loose in the atmosphere, although the human race may disappear from the face of the Earth along with millions of other species, it is more than likely that some simple celled life forms will survive and evolution will continue to generate new life from the fall out.

The P.I.N.Q. Park network of nature reserves has been set up to draw attention to the fissures in the logic of capitalist monoculture and its neo-colonial project, and to protect sexual, biological and cultural diversity.

These post industrial spaces are designated as ‘safe’ for the species that live there (both local and immigrant), for women and LGTBQI people.

They harbour species of plants, insects, birds, etc which are examples of unruly nature, adapted to survival in somewhat toxic conditions.

The resilience of the plants which colonise and grow in these ruins shows the vanity of mans claim to dominate and control nature. These spaces represent the failure of the modern project and its attempts to eradicate the primitive, the irrational, the queer.

Described by the architectural philosopher Ignasi de Solà-Morales as *terrain vague*, these abandoned areas, obsolete and unproductive spaces and buildings, often undefined and without specific limits, represent a form of absence in the contemporary metropolis.

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298 Stephen Maddison, *Small Towns, Boys and Ivory Towers: A Naked Academic*, p.18  
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.599.5681&rep=rep1&type=pdf> -  
Accessed 19/2/18

299 Ibid Tandy p.4

Solà-Morales insists on the value of their state of ruin and lack of productivity, and anticipating our appropriation discusses how for artists and dissenters they have value because they “seem like the last uncontaminated bastions for the exercise of the freedom of the individual or of small groups.”<sup>300</sup>

The ownership of *terrain vague* is often unclear and although it survives on the edge of other already developed areas, its value lies in its potential for development so it is usually fenced in and has limited access. By trespassing and occupying these sites temporarily, they become public once more for the duration of the ceremonies.



Fig. 9.5 Prototype space for a P.I.N.Q. Park (2013)

The claiming of them as queer parks carries out a symbolic occupation of private property which reflects the real occupation carried out by anarchist groups all over Spain, which has given rise to an alternative cultural scene based on squatted CSOAs (Anarchist Occupied Social Centres) where I have performed frequently over the years. These spaces are generally very open to queers and have created a network for a strong transfeminist and queer punk scene. In 2005 the international queer festival **Queeruption** took place in a recently squatted space in Barcelona and in 2011, in Madrid, the collective **Rebellion Consciente** was founded who produce and distribute the *Anarqu queer* fanzine and other relevant texts whilst here in Valencia the hugely successful **Kafeta Kabaré**, which ran monthly between 2004 and 2005 in the CSOA Pepika La Pilona, whilst not strictly speaking queer was very queer friendly. These are only some examples. Obviously no space can be guaranteed free of sexist or homophobic behaviour as one of the most active members of the scene Diana Pornoterrorista points out: “I’m tired of hearing stories of sexist violence in libertarian spaces”<sup>301</sup>

The P.I.N.Q. Park project is an exercise in claiming authority for those who historically have none. It requisitions land from within the territory of the nation-state constructing a “queer nation” made up of islands of resistance as “a means of visibilizing and critically addressing the fiction of the nation state and its violent demands to own identity.”<sup>302</sup>

300 I.Sola Morales, *Presente y futuros. La arquitectura en las ciudades*, Barcelona, 1996 p.23 - my translation.

301 Diana Pornoterrorista, *Vomitorium*, 2017 p.30 - my translation.

302 Miguel A. López, *Toxic Exorcismos: Sergio Zevallos in the Grupo Chaclacayo*, in *A Wandering Body, Sergio Zevallos in the Grupo Chaclacayo (1982-1994) Catalogue* (MULA, Lima, 2014) p.23

These terrains are mapped creating a queer geography, but unlike official parks where time appears to be frozen, these sites are left to their fate, existing in a state of flux, reflecting a queer fluidity, by mutating and changing their shape and use continuously over time.

Land use is of course, constantly changing, and the demand for living spaces in and around cities is high. In my explorations of these wastelands, seeking the pockets of wildlife that survive in the peripheral zones of the city, I frequently come up against the harsh reality of other's lives, discovering makeshift shelters or other signs that show these are not empty spaces. These places are inhabited, they are the areas where the poorest of the city live and go about their business: scrap merchants who scan the streets taking the rubbish they have collected to recycle and sell, vendors who sell their goods on a blanket in the street. My interests enter in conflict with theirs and reveal my privilege constantly. Even in the centre of the city this can occur.

Each action in the project is different from the rest and is a response to many factors, including the physical and sociopolitical context of the space, the entities that collaborate, the resources available and the constant need to redefine and expand its reach. For example in the once heavily industrialised city of Bilbao, instead of dedicating a small parcel of land as a park, the whole area of Zorrotzaurre, once a thriving centre of the iron industry of the Basque region but now a semi wasteland of abandoned warehouses and currently in a slow process of gentrification, was dedicated in a ceremony where water from the Nervión river was transported to the building site where a canal is being excavated in order to transform the area into an island which the city planners hope will be a mini Manhattan.

A few P.I.N.Q. events have incorporated participatory street parades, with music and chants. Parades or *pasacalles* are part of the popular culture in Valencia, many take place during the *Fallas* celebrations and have a standard bearer who carries a banner with the groups insignia on it. There are also many processions when religious images are carried through the streets.

In an interesting analysis of street theatre and parades, Bim Sherman discusses how in both religious processions and secular parades the idea is “to take out to the ordinary people that which is usually hidden away inside and shown only to an elite.”<sup>303</sup>

This could be seen as a metaphor for “coming out”: the process whereby one reveals one's sexual identity. Sherman also describes parades as a “display of community”<sup>304</sup> and indeed one of the largest contemporary parades worldwide is Pride, where the (mostly) gay and lesbian community celebrate their identity.

In recent years Pride has been heavily criticised by queer and transgender activists since its original purpose as a political demonstration has been diluted by commercial interests which have turned the event into a hedonistic display of stereotypical gay images. Indeed as a reaction the concept of Gay Shame has been used by various groups and collectives to target the commercialisation of the gay scene.

In 1996 the queer arts organisation Duckie who organise weekly live art events in London began hosting Gay Shame “the annual festival of homosexual misery”<sup>305</sup> and in 1998 a group of activists in Brooklyn began to organise Gay Shame, an event which became annual in San Francisco the year after and has hosted a series of street

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303 Bim Sherman, *Street Theatre and Other Outdoor Performance* (Routledge, London, 1992) p.154

304 Ibid

305 <http://www.duckie.co.uk/events/gay-shame>



actions including the Gay Shame awards which “sought to expose both the lie of a homogeneous gay/queer “community” and the ways in which the myth of community is used as a screen behind which gay people with power oppress others and get away with it.”<sup>306</sup>

The P.I.N.Q. Park parade (which was first celebrated in the Velluters ceremony on 24/10/15) , where the public become part of the parade rather than watching it go by, taking an active part in a “coming out” process, which is an ironic commentary on the objective of most traditional parades which “are used as a display of power as well as to advertise an ideology.”<sup>307</sup>

In order to give the parade a more official and local flavour, I customised one of the standard Falla poles by adding a toy giraffe to the traditional Valencian insignia of a bat and prepared a special banner with the words “P.I.N.Q. PARC” emblazoned on a red velvet background to hang from it.

Traditionally in the parades each group is accompanied by a brass band. I decided to recreate the musical atmosphere of this popular tradition by handing out percussive instruments to the participants and encouraging them to make noise with them during the parade. Furthermore to create a special atmosphere of camaraderie between all the participants I made up a call and response slogan which incorporated a simple rhythmic accompaniment that we chanted as we walked along. Chanting slogans, more common in a political demonstration than in a parade, is a way of involving everyone present in the action, and generated a positive energy which helped break down barriers between the participants.



Fig. 9.6 (1) P.I.N.Q. Park Velluters (2015) (2) A les Balconades (2017)

Another exercise which proved popular was based on a Falla tradition where, on an order from the band leader the music stops and after a count of three, everyone crouches down, lower and lower, until they are practically sitting on the ground. At this point, on a final signal, everybody jumps up together and the music starts once more.

I customised this action by inviting everyone to crouch down as we chanted the initials of the acronym, before jumping up to the tune of “Pink Park”. This action usually gets an incredible reaction from the participants, some of whom gesticulate wildly as they jump, screaming “P.I.N.Q. Park!”

Perhaps the reason this action is so popular with the local public is because they are aware of its subversive subtext. Until very recently there was a very popular Fallas song which encouraged homophobic sentiments, through a chorus which stated: “Maricón, el que no bote...” (If you don’t jump, you’re a poof.)

306 Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *That’s Revolting: Queer Strategies for resisting assimilation* (Soft Skull Press, Berkley, 2004) p.272

307 Ibid

As people search for meaning in a modern world, where many traditions that helped define a community have been lost, it is perhaps natural to turn to the past to generate that sense of belonging. But this must be done from a critical perspective to ensure that sexist, racist or homophobic attitudes are not reproduced.

To reclaim a queer public space with this action, chanting the PINQ Park slogan in the middle of the street felt like a powerful statement of intent. In these moments the energy between the group has created what Hakim Bey described as a “temporary autonomous zone” where State control over our lives is suspended and we can experience the possibility of freedom.

“If History IS “Time,” as it claims to be, then the uprising is a moment that springs up and out of Time, violates the “law” of History.”<sup>308</sup>

The theories of Bey have influenced artists and activists to create these momentary uprisings. One of the most well known are the events carried out by the group Reclaim the Streets whose protests invite the public to rebel against the tyranny of the car and occupy public space in celebration.

The P.I.N.Q. parade was also a way of taking over the street, interrupting the flow of traffic and asserting the rights of people over cars.

We repeated this experience on another occasion, this time in the more urban environment of the Russafa neighbourhood as part of the **A Les Balconades 2017** festival which united artists with local political and activist groups, using installations on balconies to make political statements. We collaborated with CSOA L’Horta in the design of a P.I.N.Q banner based on a collage of photographs of their allotments, the P.I.N.Q logo and the graffiti sign.



Fig. 9.7 P.I.N.Q. Park Banner

The P.I.N.Q. Park project is an exercise in what I would term flaming ostentation: a decidedly queer form of subversion where the institutions that determine value are parodied with a DIY trash aesthetic.

The project has extended to cover half of the Spanish territory by piggy backing on invitations to arts events around the country. It is based on the subversion of an act which normally takes place to mark the opening of a site of some importance: a shopping mall, museum, etc..., an act which generally supports the values of the dominant society. In this case an abandoned and overgrown *terrain vague*, generally in a run down or out of the way area, is opened by a transgender freak.

<sup>308</sup> Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Autonomea, 1985) p.79



Often the only element which adds a touch of pomp to the ceremony is the piece of material -sometimes red velvet, sometimes shiny pink lycra- which covers the plaque and which, once unveiled, instead of the metal, marble or noble material upon which the name of the site is inscribed, reveals a cardboard-backed black and white photocopy.

The opening speech reflects the serious intention behind the act, and my attitude is important to make sure the event has the gravity it requires. My accent, and perhaps the heavy irony expected of the British helps in creating a solemn atmosphere for at least part of the ceremony.

Since the impact of the project's existence relies on its presence in the digital realm, the production and design of graphic material is an essential element. Therefore, I have designed various logos, signs, badges, maps and symbols as well as publishing a collaged history of the project<sup>309</sup> which form part of the archive of the project together with the audio-visual documentation of the performances.

It is common practice for political artists and activists to use the tactic of the fake to make a bigger impact. Thus La Erreria has employed corporate branding strategies to create the impression that the P.I.N.Q. Park project is run by a trans-national organisation with legal authorization to re-designate the use of the spaces and guarantee their protection, whereas that protection is purely symbolic. Indeed, one of our first designs was Queenpeace, a customised queer version of the Greenpeace logo.

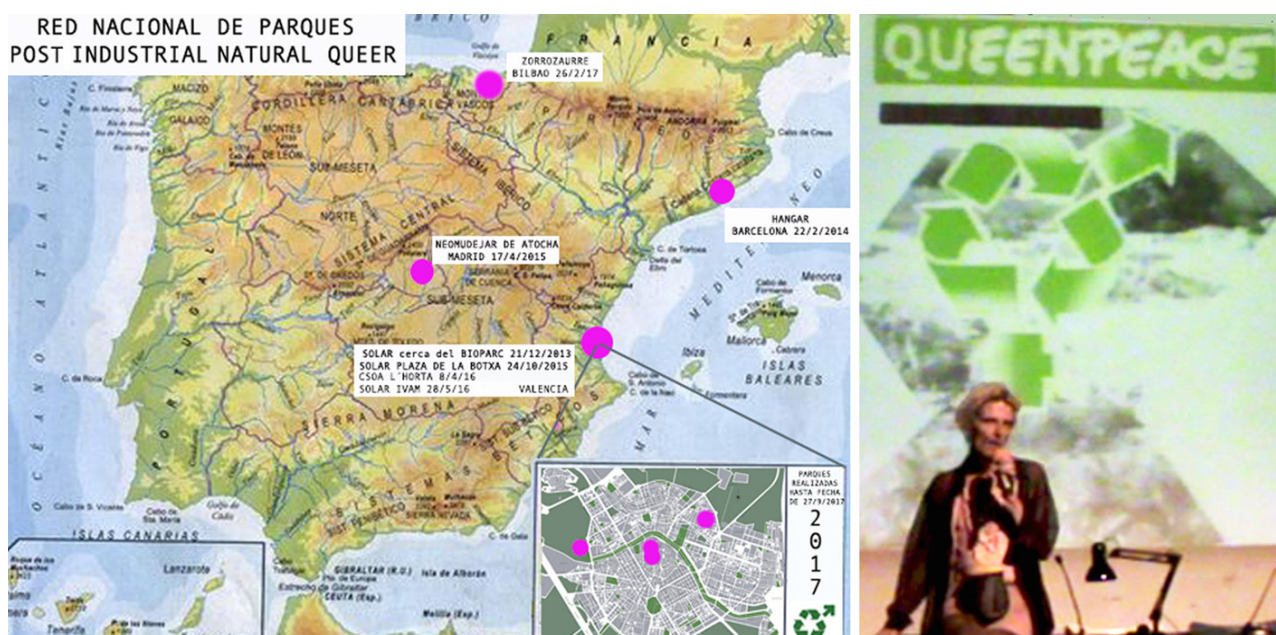


Fig. 9.6 (1) Map of the P.I.N.Q. Park Network (2) Queenpeace logo (2014)

The P.I.N.Q. Park sign itself, is based on a photograph of the derelict lot of the first park combined with the “recycle your gender” logo created for the Ecogender project. This plaque was designed to appear like an official sign by incorporating the law number 42/2007 on Biodiversity and Natural Heritage which regulates the protection of natural parks in Spain,<sup>310</sup> although, through the insertion of the word “queer”, the protection of the area is extended to include biodiversity of a sexual nature.

309 In the catalogue for *Unfix Festival Performance & Ecology*, ed. Cristina Garriga, (My Bookcase, Glasgow, 2015)

310 The European Union established the Red Natura 2000 network to protect biodiversity in the Eurozone and stop the loss of species and habitats. In Spain it is regulated by law number 42/2007.



In the following I will discuss in depth a selection of the **P.I.N.Q. Park** actions carried out so far which included:

P.I.N.Q. Park Campanar (Valencia, 21/12/13)

P.I.N.Q. Park Poble Nou (Barcelona, 22/2/14) in collaboration with Davis Museum

P.I.N.Q. Park Atocha (La Neomudejar, Madrid, 17/5/15)

P.I.N.Q. Parc Velluters (Valencia, 24-25/10/15) as part of the Intramurs Festival

P.I.N.Q. Park HQ (CSOA L'Horta, Valencia, 8/4/16) as part of the AnArco Exhibition

I Conferencia Transnacional P.I.N.Q. (IVAM, Valencia, 28/5/16)

P.I.N.Q. Park Zorrotzaurre (Bilbao, 26/2/17) as part of the Zinegoak Film Festival

Pasacalle (r)Evolucionario (Valencia, 26/5/17) as part of A Les Balconades Festival

- **P.I.N.Q. Park Campanar** (Valencia, 21/12/13)

The first Post Industrial Natural Queer Park was created on the winter solstice of 2013 (exactly a year after the How to Heal ritual outside the Valencian Bank) in one of the last undeveloped pieces of land in the Valencian suburb of Campanar. On one side of the lot, a landscaped park had been built with luxury skyscrapers beside it, and on the other, the Bioparc, new home to the animals from the zoo where Geysersbirds journey began.

We had publicised the opening on the Erreria's social networks and once a group of people had assembled I began the ceremony by attaching this cardboard sign, (which became the official PINQ Park plaque, used in all other ceremonies) to the fencing which separated the lot from the street.

Reproduced on paper and cardboard the sign's ephemerality mirrored the processes of change happening in the park itself, as the rubble slowly disappeared under the foliage of shrubs and other plants.

“Welcome to the opening ceremony of this post industrial natural queer park. It is, I believe, the first of its kind - but not before time. We want to claim this territory for all those who have been disinherited from their lands, queers because they don't fit in at home, women because they're meant to stay indoors, tribes-people in order that big companies can steal their land, and animals because there's just not enough space for them anymore. We think all of us need a space to call our own and after a long journey we decided that this was the kind of space that best reflected our situation. It shows the wounds wreaked upon it by industrial society- who knows what was here before but it is just waiting to be redeveloped and no doubt in a few years will be the site of the latest luxury development of local construction company Valencia Paraiso. But today we will plant the seeds that lay our claim”<sup>311</sup>

In ancient Egypt when a new building was constructed offerings of food would be placed in the corner stones of its foundations so I had baked bread in the shape of the queer park symbol and placed it on an altar I had constructed from objects found in the lot: a piece of sponge from a mattress covered in leaves, snails and rubbish; a half decayed woolly lined jacket. Detritus from our consumer culture slowly being decomposed by the forces of nature.

I climbed up the largest pile of rubble in my heels to address the group:

“I'd like us all to feel a part of this new land, so the first thing we will do as part of this opening ceremony is explore our new land, singly and in silence taking time to check out its decaying clothes, its rotting shoelaces, its leaves, its insects, its birds.

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311 All quotations in this section are from my speech at the opening ceremony.

And seek out something which represents our journey to this point. Once you have found something bring it back with you to this our altar. Then we'll begin the ceremony”

Once alone I began mixing flour and water together on the tarmac, the sticky dough clinging to my fingers as I mixed it all together. When it had reached the right consistency I rolled it out with a rolling pin and laid it beneath the altar. At this point I put on my ceremonial tail-feathers and waited for the last of the group to return.

Once ready I began:

“Please line up before me, forming an orderly queue to present our offerings on the altar. The queue represents the wait we have all done – in night-club queues, only to be rejected for not having the right look, in unemployment queues, in the queue for acceptance into heterosexual society... well that was never going to happen! So please respect the order.

When each member of the tribe steps up to me for a quick preparatory hair grooming I would like us to announce them as follows, singing together: “somos, we are, som .” At which point each member of the community will have the opportunity to claim this land for themselves -and their tribe- if they have one, by announcing their name to the group.

Then once they have been groomed they will be ready to place their offering on the altar. Often on these occasions a founding brick is laid with a commemorative plaque and I have prepared this dough so we can all leave our imprint on it to be buried here today.”

One by one the people approached and placed their offerings on the altar: a pair of shoes, a palm leaf, a shaving brush, a slab of concrete, were amongst the objects they had found. When everyone had done this and marked the dough with their fingerprint or some other print, I sprinkled amaranto seeds on the altar to symbolise: “the renegade forces of nature...that resist the control of the Company... Now let us all join together and scream!!!”

Finally I invited the participants to take their offerings and bury them in one of the piles of rubble that were scattered all around us:“This act will form the foundations of this new society of justice, respect and freedom for all, no matter what colour, race, gender or species...”



**Fig. 9.6 P.I.N.Q. Park Ceremony, Campanar (2013)**

Meanwhile I sealed the amaranto frosted dough, placing it on the spongy mattress at the base of the altar then, after everyone had removed their offerings and gone off to bury them in the nearby piles, I buried the altar beneath the rubble, piling stone after stone on top of it. Apart from the cardboard plaque on the fencing, no sign would remain of our presence in the space.

- **P.I.N.Q. Park Poble Nou** (Barcelona, 22/2/14)

The second P.I.N.Q. Park (Barcelona) was opened during the *Muestra Marrana* post porn film festival where my film **In the Field** was being premiered. As part of the presentation I discussed the P.I.N.Q. project in front of a projection of the Queenpeace logo.

The opening took place in a disused lot near the art space Hangar on 22nd February 2014. This was the only private ceremony of the project since it was conceptualised as a film made in collaboration with the **Davis Museum**<sup>312</sup> for exhibition there. The narrative structure of the film included Geyserbird arriving at the site and carrying out the ceremony.



Fig. 9.10 *P.I.N.Q. Park* Remains (1) Ashes (2) Plaque (2014)

The action centred around the burning of a copy of the Spanish law protecting biodiversity and the ashes were donated to the Davis Museum and exhibited alongside the edited documentation of the action.

The collection of the museum includes work by Yoko Ono, Francesc Torres and many more and is a form of *anti*-museum inspired by the artist Marcel Broodthaers who in 1968 “opened his museum to the public, presenting himself as director. This action, grotesque and comic, was the inception of a new construct for the institution of the “museum.” In this new paradigm, the artist no longer worked or was defined as a producer, but rather as an administrator, occupying the site of control and determination.”<sup>313</sup>

The P.I.N.Q. Park project claims a “site of control” within a virtual queer geography and it is similar to Davis Museum in that it relies on a conceptual framework and a virtual presence for its existence.

312 [www.davismuseum.com](http://www.davismuseum.com) Video link: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3WgNqIyQao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3WgNqIyQao) - Accessed 3/6/18

313 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900 modernism, anti modernism, postmodernism* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2004) p.552



- **P.I.N.Q. Parc Velluters** (Valencia, 24-25/10/15)

The fourth P.I.N.Q. Park was opened as part of the Intramurs arts festival which takes place in the historic central area of Valencia. I selected a heavily symbolic site for the park: an empty lot in the *barrio chino* (traditionally the red light district of the city) near my flat. This lot belongs to the town council and I was part of a neighbourhood group who were negotiating to have it converted into urban allotments. It seemed a perfect spot for a special P.I.N.Q. Park.

However in the space of time between arranging the event with the festival and the carrying out of the opening ceremony, a homeless person had set up a makeshift shelter there. With everything already planned for the event it was difficult to find another location at the last minute and somehow this occupation of the space seemed a fitting use of the park. When working in public space it is important to be open to adapting actions in reaction to changing conditions.

Therefore, out of respect for the privacy of the new resident, I decided to minimise any disturbance by limiting access to the lot and I left a note by the shelter advising the person living there of when the event would take place so they could choose whether to be present or not.

Instead of focusing the event on the lot itself, and since the project already involved occupying public space and generating a temporarily autonomous queer zone, it seemed a logical development to take the celebration out of the physical space being appropriated and into the neighbouring streets. Therefore I decided to invite participants to take part in a *pasacalle* (parade) to celebrate the opening. This change of plans turned out to cause an interesting evolution in the ceremonies as the parade added a festive and popular element to the event.

After the parade, the opening ceremony and unveiling of the plaque took place, followed by a final act where participants planted seeds on a specially prepared patch of soil in the lot. In a further use of graphic intervention in the interests of the project and its dissemination both within the digital realm and in this case in the fabric of the city itself, we invited a graffiti artist to come along and tag the space in Velluters writing P.I.N.Q. Park with pink and green spray paint on the wall.

As pointed out by Miralles in relation to his **El Poder de las Palabras (2)** intervention, graffiti is by its very nature ephemeral and within the year another artist had obliterated all traces of the sign.



Fig. 9.11 (1) P.I.N.Q. Graffiti (2) Planting seeds (2015)

After the success of this first parade I decided to repeat the experiment taking advantage of the infrastructure and street decorations in place for the festival and quickly announced another parade the day after.

Despite the short notice, a group of around 20 people turned up to the meeting in the Plaza de la Virgen from where processed along Calle Caballeros the main street through the Carmen which had been decorated with black banners with communist and anarchist slogans by the activist group **Democracia**.



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Fig. 9.12 (1) Levante newspaper (2) P.I.N.Q. Parade (2015)

The festival organisers helped control traffic as we made our way along the busy street, chanting that we wanted a P.I.N.Q. Park and making noise along the way. It was a way to draw attention to the project and a photograph and information about the parade was used in a feature on the festival in the local paper *El Levante*.

- **P.I.N.Q. Park H.Q.** (CSOA L'Horta, Valencia, 8/4/16)

CSOA L'Horta, is an anarchist social centre and allotment located in a previously abandoned lot on the outskirts of Valencia. The land had once been destined for urban expansion but as a result of the crisis this never took place and a group of local residents and anarchists squatted the site and divided it into allotments, using the original farm-house as a social centre which runs regular activities. This intentionally reclaimed space which is open to all, regardless of gender, sexuality or colour, seemed the perfect place for the headquarters of the PINQ Parks. The farmyard atmosphere of the cottage where all year round activities take place in and outside was a perfect contrast to the pristine, gleaming headquarters of banks and international organisations the project was satirising.

I discussed the proposal with the assembly who take all decisions on the events which happen in the centre and they agreed to become involved with the project.



The dedication of the farmhouse took place as part of the activities organised as part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Anarchist Book fair of Valencia by the group **AnArco** of which I was a member. AnArco was the name of a recently formed collective of artists and activists who were organising this exhibition as a response to the recent *Arte y propaganda libertaria* exhibition organised in Madrid by amongst others, the Democracia collective.

The idea was to explore what form and potential for changing society, a contemporary libertarian art might have. The name Anarco had occurred to me as a satire on Arco, the biggest contemporary art fair in Spain which had recently taken place. The group met regularly in the months leading up to the exhibition and designed logos, publicity and organised the events and exhibition which counted with the participation of over 50 artists from all over Spain and took place in four social centres in the city.<sup>314</sup>

My contribution consisted in the performance and an installation which included the documentation of the P.I.N.Q. Park project. The creation of this archive involved mapping the sites of the parks on a map of Spain with a pink circle beside information about the place and date of opening. The archive included a brief description of each ceremony and photographs of the sites at different times and in their current state. These information sheets were displayed alongside a specially prepared folder constructed within the cover of an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century geographical atlas, which had been altered with maps and recycled pink papers found near the social centre. This dossier carried the flaming ostentation of the project into the field of archiving, in anticipation of the projects entrance into the institution which took place shortly afterwards.



Fig. 9.13 P.I.N.Q. Park Ceremony, CSOA L'Horta

As part of the opening night events of the exhibition I carried out a ceremony which began with a short dance lesson based on a traditional Scottish country dance.

Traditionally the dancers form two lines facing each other with the men on one side and the women on the other. However I encouraged people to choose on which side they wanted to go and how they wanted to define themselves.

The dancers were invited to mingle and greet each other as they swung round. It was quite a wild and chaotic experience and a fantastic way for people from the social centre, transfeminists and queer activists and invited artists to break the ice.

It was springtime, and this was the first time the ceremony had taken place in a space where plants had been encouraged to grow. I wanted people to experience this natural exuberance so I led them through the allotments which were in full bloom, stopping at each corner to bless their growth.

Finally, I unveiled a plaque assigning the farmhouse as the official headquarters of the P.I.N.Q. Parks.

314 More information on the exhibition: <https://anarcoartllibertari.org/exposicion/>



- **I Conferencia Transnacional P.I.N.Q.** (IVAM, Valencia, 28/5/16)

The project reached a climax with this presentation in one of the most significant art institutions in Valencia, the Institute of Modern Art. We were invited to open a P.I.N.Q. Park in the abandoned lot behind the museum as part of the project *El museo modos de uso* (The museum modes of use). The only access to the space was protected by a barred and padlocked gate on a street at the back of the museum. This was a heavily contested site, since the council had requisitioned the land after knocking down an old apartment block which had been squatted, and given it to the museum.

The previous administration had decided the area would become a sculpture park but with the change in local government there had been a change in the museum administration.

Spain is a country where these things often go hand in hand, a strange marriage of culture and politics which beggars the question as to how free art institutions are from the meddling of politicians these days. The plan had been modified and only part of the lot was to be used as the sculpture park leaving a small area which would eventually become a public park. Whilst this development might take years, we were invited to open a P.I.N.Q. Park in that sector of the lot. Since with this action we would be entering the terrain of the institution we decided to organise a short conference before the ceremony which was to be followed by a parade leading round the neighbourhood into the vacant lot where the ceremony itself would take place.

In keeping with the satirical nature of the project we titled the event **I Conferencia Transnacional P.I.N.Q.** (First Transnational P.I.N.Q. Conference) playing on the double meaning of trans meaning cross border or trans (sexual or gender) and inserting a space in the word conference which implied that the event might be a confidence trick. “The invention of false facts in order to create real events is a method which highlights and criticizes the mechanisms that determine the hegemonic production of mediatic and political images of reality.”<sup>315</sup>

A flaming ostentation, which satirised the forms of an international conference, was used throughout all aspects of the event. Mimicking the standard presentation style, where speakers are presented in terms of their role within an institution, Anna Maria and I had name cards indicating that she was the project’s director and I was the spokesperson. To give a corporate image, we dressed in business suits and both of us wore lipstick and heels.

Anna Maria welcomed the delegates in the downstairs entrance to the IVAM lab and gave them a badge with a specially designed corporate logo which was reproduced 3 metres high onscreen in the upstairs conference room. This image formed part of the presentation video which accompanied the opening act of the conference and included subtitles in Spanish since I gave the opening presentation in English, international language of business. This was preceded by a presentation in Valencian of my text, the language which had become the lingua franca in public presentations since the left wing government took power, carried out by the representative of the museum Maria Angeles Enguix.

“Welcome to the first Transnational Post Industrial Natural Queer Park Conference. We began this project in 2013 and it is really exciting to be presenting it here in the newly opened IVAM Lab four years later. We’ll begin with a brief history of the project, then we’ll have a few minutes for questions from the delegates. Then we’ll be going outside for our team building exercise: the P.I.N.Q. Park Procession, leading us to the site where the opening ceremony of this 5<sup>th</sup> P.I.N.Q. park will take place.

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315 Luther Blisset and Sonja Brünzels, *Manual de la Guerrilla de la comunicación* (Virus Editorial, 2000) p.63

These sites have been carefully selected to spread our P.I.N.Q. philosophy and in the months to come we hope to celebrate opening ceremonies in Brazil, Honduras and China. But today we are here at the Valencian Modern Art Institute to inaugurate the latest addition to the P.I.N.Q. Parks Spanish Network.”



Fig. 9.14 *P.I.N.Q. Park Conference, IVAM*

After the video I climbed onto the wooden table and sang the following P.I.N.Q. Theme song, to the techno pop backing of The Retromodernistes, a musical collaboration with producer Juli Mekanika:

“It’s a space, lost its use in time  
as we farm out, our dirty business  
the wound it leaves behind needs no regeneration,  
weeds reclaim the territory from toxic manipulation.  
Parque Post Industrial – it’s natural, it’s queer!  
Parque Post Industrial – it’s now it’s here!  
It may be an eye sore, but we don’t give a damn,  
it’s the Parque Post Industrial IVAM!”

For the team building part of the conference, percussion instruments were handed out to the delegates and we processed out of the museum, along the esplanade and through the streets of the neighbourhood, carrying the P.I.N.Q. Banner, chanting the P.I.N.Q. Park slogan and carrying out the Falla jump previously rehearsed in the Velluters parade.

There was a storm approaching as we arrived at the lot which was heavily overgrown with tall grass swaying in the wind, creating a very surreal atmosphere. Amongst the vegetation, we had placed a plinth borrowed from the museum supporting the torso of a male mannequin, in reference to the history of art contained within the walls of the adjacent museum.

This statuesque form was hidden from view under a skein of pink taffeta which was actually a ball gown. Pink bunting decorated the nearby trees framing the specially prepared P.I.N.Q. Park sign, a collage of images, including the painted facade of the squat which had been there previously, alongside images from other P.I.N.Q. Parks and the law on biodiversity.

I led the people to the farthest corner of the lot which had been prepared earlier for the ceremony and changed from my business suit into my ceremonial Geyserbird dress.





**Fig. 9.15 P.I.N.Q. Park Conference (1) Parade (2) Ceremony, IVAM**

Then we carried out the four screams of the How to Heal ritual and I dedicated the space reading a translation of my text into Valencian: “Within these protective walls we feel at last as if our P.I.N.Q. theory has found some kind of political and cultural homeland.

So we have decided not only to designate this space as a P.I.N.Q. Park but also as the Carmen’s P.I.N.Q. Headquarters. We think all of us need a territory we can call our own. And these once industrial spaces, which have now become abandoned, reflect how the neoliberal economy which judges us as useless, is decaying and will ultimately become erased by the forces of nature.

With the unveiling of this statue I now declare this space as a P.I.N.Q. Park.”

I unveiled the statue, and holding the dress we began the celebration, opening some bottles of champagne and toasting the P.I.N.Q. Park in pink glasses.

The kitsch aesthetic was enhanced by the presence of performer Mad Vicious wearing a beehive wig and red negligee.





Fig. 9.16 *P.I.N.Q. Park Conference, IVAM (top) Ceremony, (btm) Burying the Archive (2016)*

The conference ended with the burial of a hand bound volume of the P.I.N.Q. Park archive in a patch of ground in the empty lot.

This semi clandestine “no-donation” to the museum was, in part, carried out as a reaction to the 2013 exhibition *Identidad femenina en la colección del IVAM* (Feminine Identity in the IVAM collection) organised by the previous administration, in which the majority of the works were shown with information labels which stated “donated by the artist”.

Artists donate work so they can claim to belong to the collection of a museum and in the hope that their work will be shown in exhibitions there. Before a museum accepts a donation normally a selection committee will decide whether or not the museum wants the donation. By making public that a work has been donated the museum a distance is placed between that work and others in the collection which have been selected for inclusion.

While it can be argued that this is a legitimate practice, in the context of an exhibition of women’s art, which is presumably meant to support women artists, it only served to show that if women no longer needed “to be naked to get into the (Met) museum”, as stated by the **Guerrilla Girls** in their 1989 billboard, it was only because IVAM had given them the opportunity to give their work away.

By burying my work in ground once occupied illegally by squatters, I carried out a symbolic occupation of the museum’s collection with a work that would slowly deteriorate as the organic nature of the materials used in the archive -cardboard and paper- succumbed to the processes of decay.

# CHAPTER X

## THE CAMERA IS MY WITNESS: JOURNEYS OF PERSONAL HYSTERIA

- *Natural Photography* (2016-)
- *The Journey* (2015)
- *Qui Si Sana* (2016)
- *Bowie Ritual* (2016)
- *Snake bite Cleansing ritual* (2016)
- *In the Ruins: Anthropological Studies of Geyserbird* (2016)
- *New Wave Ritual* (2016)
- *Scottish Hysterics and the Keening Women* (2017)

This chapter compiles a series of personal healing rituals and actions which represent an exercise in introspection and self-discovery.

It includes work which relates to journeying and documents family trips and artistic residencies in Scotland and Italy. I film these actions with the camera to record private moments that have special meaning for me and cannot be repeated.

I have always had a close relationship with the camera, using video to document my performances and re-presenting the footage in other live performances or in edited video form. But in public performances it is the audience to whom I direct myself, whereas in these works the camera was the only witness to actions which were carried out specifically for it. They often took place in significant but remote or out of the way places where it would be very difficult for me to return.

In the How to Heal and the P.I.N.Q. Park cycles, I concentrated on finding formats which would allow other people to participate which required the focus to be on making them aware of what they were getting involved with and explaining the motivation behind the action. In order to do this I had developed a rhetorical style, crafting speeches and a fixed structure for the public to follow.

Carrying out the personal rituals was a return to the self, an attempt to find my own voice again and to escape from a style that was no longer sustainable for me. I wanted to abandon the rhetorical style of the preacher or the politician telling people how to live and start to look at my own life.

These private practices represent a big change from the participatory cycles because, without the pressure of having to perform for an audience, I have much more freedom to improvise. I can experiment and explore the different possibilities of each space, react to the moment and the circumstances, express my inner feelings and vulnerability.

I generally use some previously prepared elements which hold special significance for me, but often in these works I did not have a precise structure worked out.

As these actions took place outdoors in the countryside, they allowed me to escape the control involved in works which rely on audio-visual material and technical cues.



These personal actions took place in the context of a return to origins over the three year period of this investigation when I reconnected with the landscapes of my childhood in Scotland, and visited my partner's family and sites associated with the Grand Tour in Italy.

The Grand Tour began in the seventeenth century and was the origin of modern tourism. It was the journey made by young English aristocrats to continental Europe during which they were supposed to finish off their education in a gap year where they learnt about ethics and diplomacy and had the opportunity to see the great artworks of the time before returning home to take up their roles as leaders of society. This phenomenon provided a conceptual framework for my long term musical collaboration *Grand Tour*. Over the years since the project began I had taken advantage of holidays in cities or places which might have formed part of the Grand Tour to film on location improvisations where I personified the aristocratic traveller/tour guide. Some of these videos had been edited for use as video projections in the groups concerts and have grown to form an archive for a work in progress based on the project. This musical version of the Grand Tour was a mixture of cabaret and opera, a multi media experience in which video, performance and song were integral parts of this exploration.

And between 2006 and 2013 it was variously staged in concert form, as live art or as musical theatre. In the theatrical presentations of my contemporary version I addressed myself to the modern aristocrats who hold the reins of power -businessmen and politicians – and the songs covered a wide range of subjects related to my ecotransfeminist philosophy, expressed with passion, irony, sadness or pathos, depending on the subject matter of the song. The opportunities which arose to film in important locations which had formed part of the Grand Tour through my journeys to Italy during my doctoral investigation created some interesting experiments since the effete and highly theatrical aristocratic character I had created for the project resurfaced in the context of a series of actions in southern Italy more related to my recent alter ego Geyserbird. The confluence of these highly contrasting alter egos reflects how performance art is “a grammar to articulate the possible dissolution of sensible boundaries between art and life.”<sup>316</sup>

This made me increasingly aware that the thin line dividing my art from my life was being rubbed out and that, in reality, since I began performing, my life not only informs, but is informed by the work.

Whilst working on the *How to Heal* cycle, I had begun to realize that in order to heal the world, I had to heal myself first. This led me to carry out a series of private and intimate healing rituals, some of which are documented below.

My social conditioning as a male was the major source of this inner conflict. I had been taught to be independent, self reliant, and to compete in order to get what I wanted, and despite my efforts, my conditioning had not been as easy to shirk off as I had assumed. I thought I had rejected normative rules, by living a life on the periphery, a bohemian artist, living on the minimum but instead I had constructed other boundaries around myself which were tearing me to pieces.

In my euphoric devouring of radical texts I had allowed myself to become intolerant, and judgemental of others. This is I believe the cause of the multiple schisms within the left. It sometimes seems as if we are in a competition to be the most radical, the least “polluted” by capitalism. But although we can accept our privileges only the very brave can give them all up.

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<sup>316</sup> Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: an oral history of performance art* (Palgrave, London, 2015) p.1



I became aware of the irony of presenting myself as a shaman travesti who carries out healing rituals and decided to change my focus, since the most radical healing to be carried out was not in the abstract sense of a world paradigm, but lay in the realm of my own personal experience.

In order to do this it was time to carry out a self analysis, to question my motivations. Why had I felt the need to present myself as a shaman travesti? In the context of the work as it was developing, it had seemed natural to claim this role but did I have the right to claim this title? Or was I carrying out a form of cultural neo-colonialism, becoming guilty of the very nihilistic western malaise I set out to criticise?

Instinctively I felt this was not the case, I felt a connection to those traditions where transgender people had a spiritual role in the community whereas in my Celtic tradition there seemed to be no role for gender dissidents and I had been an outcast from an early age, lacking in positive references.

For years our stories have been silenced by LGTB-phobic societies or distorted by sensationalistic media. I believe that an effective way to combat this discrimination is by generating our own histories and telling our own autobiographical stories. The following fragments are part of my journal.

### *Natural Photography*

Insects and especially beetles are a constant in my work, in performances such as War Memorial and the How to Heal... rituals as well as in graphic work, video and photography.

The **Natural Photography** series is an ongoing project which began in 2016 as a spontaneous expression of my interest and appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of beetles, their sheen, their morphology, and my desire to document them.

I had never felt drawn to nature photography as a medium of expression since it seemed a little too bucolic for my taste, until I realised I could juxtapose it with artifice and create queer images. I was interested in the interaction between multicoloured beetles and my body, I had experimented with letting them crawl over my body in the film **In the Field** (2013).



**Fig. 10.1** *Natural Photography*

It was only when I realised the similarity between their exoskeletons and my painted finger-nails that I decided to carry out a series of photographs of portraits of my nails with iridescent beetles and other brightly-coloured insects.

I had been painting my nails for years and saw them as a constantly evolving canvas since I rarely remove the varnish, instead painting over the older layer when I have a performance.

I generally use different colours to add contrast and the paint is constantly being chipped off by the ravages of time. The composition is thus, a result of a series of factors such as the growth of my nails, the different layers and colours of paint applied and the way in which it has eroded.

The brilliance of nail varnish somehow seems similar to the sheen and the translucence of the beetles and there seemed to be a chemical logic to this combination since keratin is present in both finger-nails and insect exoskeletons. The photographs are a challenge to produce since they capture a precious and fleeting moment of interaction before the insects crawl quickly away from the nail.

### *The Journey*<sup>317</sup>

In summer 2015 as part of my investigation I travelled to Glasgow for a three month residency at the **Unfix Festival of Performance and Ecology**.

**The Journey** is a living art piece which developed as a personal response to the invitation of another festival -the **Environmental Arts Festival (EAFS)**- to carry out work related to the concepts of “journeys, migrations, secular pilgrimage and transformation.”

I decided to expand upon their suggestion that visitors to the festival consider the way they got there to be a part of the experience taking into account not only the physical act of travelling to the festival itself but also the context in which the journey took place.

This was my first extended stay in Scotland since I left there in 1999. My visits had become less and less frequent in the years since my parents died and thanks to the generous freedom Paul Michael Hendry, director of the Unfix festival, gave me, I had the opportunity to travel around the country, spending time with my family and reconnecting with the wild and rugged landscapes of my youth.

I had responded to an open call out for the Unfix festival and applied for a grant to work there documenting the performances and workshops “UNFIX conceives individual human lives as a microcosm of the whole, and puts it to you: climate change and ecological transformation are happening inside your body, RIGHT NOW...rather than restricting itself to ‘environmental art’, UNFIX chooses a broad definition of the term including ecologies of: Imagination and Culture (the ideas, myths, dreams and archetypes we live by), Politics & Economics, Environment, Soul & Mental Health: the individual & collective psyche and questions of balance, physical maintenance and happiness; ecologies of emotion and the forces of love, conflict, anger, shame.”<sup>318</sup>

Working in the festival I had the opportunity to discover the work of many artists working on topics of interest for my investigation. Over two days of intense programming there were many special moments. F.K. Alexander’s visceral performance **A/VOID** highlighted our society’s frenzied reliance on fossil fuels.

317 Video of *The Journey*: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsvKbheu-ak](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsvKbheu-ak)

318 [www.unfixfestival.com/about.html](http://www.unfixfestival.com/about.html) - Accessed 30/12/16

The dark atmosphere evoked by live industrial music was heightened by the use of dramatic lighting which illustrated the tireless movements of the artist as she pushed a long line of coal from one end of the theatre to another.

In the site specific outdoor workshop **Necropolitic**, Penny Chivas and Paul Michael Henry took us on a tour of the beautiful hill which is home to Glasgow's Victorian cemetery, where we carried out exercises in butoh and explored nature amongst the gravestones. Alastair McIntosh eco-activist, writer and director for many years of the Centre of Human Ecology (CHE) at the University of Edinburgh, gave a powerful and moving dramatised lecture **Awakening an Ecology of the Imagination**. He grew up on the remote hebridean island of Lewis and mixed the traditional hell and fire-water style of the protestant ministers there with an invocation of the Celtic goddess Brigid in a performance which included, performance, video and butoh dancing.



Fig. 10.2 UNFIX (1) Alastair McIntosh & Paul M. Hendry (2) Ken Mai (2015)

On my first day back in Scotland I had happened to walk into a local library where a book sale was going on and discovered his book **Soil and Soul** which I read non stop in my first few days in the city. The book describes his creative way of doing activism and tells his part in the historic purchase of the island of Eigg by its inhabitants in 1997. Like most of the land in the Highlands of Scotland, this island belonged to an absentee landowner who only used the island for vacations and to hunt. McIntosh demonstrates how the centuries long mismanagement of the Scottish Highlands by generations of absentee landowners is similar to the way in which corporations manage land in other parts of the world which they have acquired through processes of land grabbing thus evicting the local inhabitants from their territories. I had always wanted to visit this strange and remote island since I'd passed by it on a ferry years before and his book inspired me to travel there later in the summer.

But before I made it there I met up with my brother and his two young sons to spend some time together with them travelling around the northern highlands on a camping trip. The landscape of this area, one of the least populated in Europe is the result of a conflictive history. Perhaps the earliest examples of the now common practise of land grabbing by multinationals were the Highland Clearances, carried out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by absentee landowners who were tempted by the economic rewards the successful introduction of sheep farming in the North of England had led to. Their disdainful attitude towards the local highlanders who "Contented with the poorest and most simple fare and, like all mountaineers, accustomed to a roaming, unfettered life ...deemed no new comfort worth the possessing which was to be acquired at the price of industry"<sup>319</sup> meant they had no qualms about brutally expelling them from their homes, forcing them to move to smaller parcels of land on the coast or emigrate.

<sup>319</sup> James Loch, 1820, quoted in John Prebble, *The Highland Clearances* (Secker and Warburg, 1963) p.56



Accompanying them on their holiday made me aware how little people in Scotland question the freedom they enjoy when they drive their car long distances from sight to sight across the country. We travelled all over the north, visiting some of the many incredible beaches scattered all around the coast, and I scouted sites for a possible keening tour of the north since I had long wanted to revive the practice in its original setting. Somehow I had always imagined the keening taking place by the sea (perhaps because so many fishermen used to die in accidents in the treacherous North Sea) and wherever we went I would explore any churchyard near the shore, documenting the spaces and the gravestones, the only form of religious art which survives in the majority of Presbyterian churches.

There were many special moments in that wild and underpopulated countryside, including the discovery in the recently opened visitor centre at Knockan Crag that Scotland had originally formed part of the land mass of North America- imagine the difference in our history if those geological movements hadn't brought the land closer to Europe! On the isle of Skye we joined the tourist trail and at the aptly named Fairy Pools I had a moment of epiphany watching a group of young men stripped to the waist, poised on a rock over the churning waters of the river, in a modern image of Thomas Eakins famous homoerotic painting **The Swimming Hole** (1884).

It was made even more dramatic by the steely grey sky which threatened rain at any moment. From there we travelled to a little known remote beach my brother had discovered where the sand was black and peacocks strutted around on the nearby estate. But after days spent listening to the selection of music of my nephews in the car, and the complaints of the younger one when we stopped to go for a walk (to be fair I was much the same at his age) I was glad when they dropped me off in an eco camp site on the southernmost tip of the isle of Skye from where I could get a ferry to connect with the boat to Eigg.

The island is now a model of how a community can manage its own reserves as it produces all its own electricity using renewable and local energy sources. The independence that the local population has gained has fostered a peculiar culture which has adapted to the times and is a mixture of the traditional and the hyper-modern. Despite having a population of 89 the island has three small museums which are unstaffed and function on a basis of trust as does the exchange site for clothes and used objects. There are regular artists residencies and a lively music scene.

I spent three days alone on the island, camping, trekking and exploring its coastline, hills and culture. Hamish Fulton has been creating work since 1967 based around the practice of walking. His minimalist works evoke the experience of landscape and reflect his respect for nature since he leaves no traces and does not collect material for the artworks he creates based on these journeys. Works such as **The Pilgrim's Way** (1971) juxtapose an image with detailed text about the walk the photo was taken on. More recently he has used the format of the guided tour or walk where the audience participate in the work. Although he is not a performer his work shares a similar philosophy to many performance artists: "I rejected form, scale and texture in favour of ways of living."<sup>320</sup>

In this intense period of almost total silence apart from a few exchanges with locals and visitors to the island, I walked all over the hilly island, crossing it from north to south, east to west several times, exploring its landscape and discovering a history which seemed to be steeped in feminine mythology.

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320 Hamish Fulton, (Frieze 108 (2007) <https://frieze.com/article/life-film-hamish-fulton> - Accessed 25/2/18

High on a mountain plain I followed a trail of dead and dying butterflies, en route to the Loch of the Big Women which according to legend had a Crannog island in the middle and causeway which was only crossable by the Giant Women who lived on the island and could skip from stone to stone.

Early one morning I followed a path along the woods on the east coast to a ruined church where there was a stone sculpture many believe to be a *Sheela Na-Gig* in a niche in the north facing wall of the old church. These ancient images of a woman exposing her vulva are found all over Europe and have been variously interpreted as signs which help fertility or ward off evil, but the open display of female sexuality is taken by many feminists to be a representation of a Celtic goddess.

They have inspired artists such as Monica Sjoo and Nancy Spero who has used the image on several occasions including in her **Sheela (na-gig) at Home**, installation (1996) where she juxtaposed repetitive images of the Sheela with various items of women's underwear hung on a clothesline.

It was strange to find this image set inside the architecture of the church so as an offering I placed a selection of wild flowers (which included buttercups, daisies, a white-spray and a small violet petal) inside the plexi-glass window that protects the image from the rain. Because the island is so exposed to the winds of the Atlantic the weather is highly changeable. In one day I experienced heavy hail, rain, winds and incredible spells of sunshine. These changing meteorological conditions on an island where there is little in the way of shelter, made me realise how fragile existence is, and plan my movements across the terrain being attentive to changes in wind speed and cloud cover which warned of impending rain.

In one such squall I stopped for coffee at Eigg Yurts, a lone house where guests could stay in a yurt. The owners were flamenco fans and I whiled the time away until the sun came out again discussing Paco de Lucia and Al di Meola. In another shower I took shelter in a barn, unwittingly evicting a family of swallows, and gazed out in awe at the towering crags that surrounded me.

The dramatic landscapes inspired me to carry out a video action based on the practice of keening in a hidden waterfall carved out of the rocks by the Singing Sands beach on the west coast of the island. I clambered semi naked up the stream into this cave and sheltered in a recess from the freezing water to sing in the tumult of water which pounded past me before running through the curtain of water to emerge through a hole in the rock. Shivering I put on the Geyserbird ceremonial dress and continued the keening until I could stand the cold no more.

The secret chamber behind the water seemed like the kind of place that could once have served as a hiding place for the Young Pretender and hero of the highlands Bonnie Prince Charlie who had led a revolt against the English in 1745 and when defeated gone into hiding while the English army combed the highlands for him before he famously made his escape disguised as a woman sailing to Skye and safety. My awareness of this connection to a transvestite history where the crossing of the water led to freedom although the temperature of the water had made it feel like a baptism of fire, inspired my transformation into Geyserbird in the shadow of the cliffs.

The experiences I had in the brief time I spent on the island were highly significant. I had read about the hardships endured by the pioneering naturalist Fraser Darling who had spent years on these islands studying wildlife but it was necessary for me to have a direct and visceral contact with my own body to realise how isolated we have become from our environment and how fragile life is.

From Eigg I travelled south to Galloway to finish off the summer at *EAFS OffGrid: Adventures and Journeys*. One of the main themes of this highly innovative festival was journeying and the organisers had encouraged visitors to travel to the remote rural location in the most environmentally friendly way possible. This invitation was a way of encouraging the audience to see the trip to the festival (whose motto was self-management, generosity and sharing experiences) as part of the experience and thus to participate actively with the ecological and creative principles of the festival.

A friend lent me a bicycle and I cycled the 80 kilometres from her house to the festival site in the company of her daughter, the young artist Rosie Malachi. We set off through driving rain along the Auchencairn coast but as we turned inland and towards the uplands of Galloway the weather changed and we ate our first meal on the road in sunshine watching dragonflies and birds at the waterside of Lochfoot.

We recorded images of our trip through the landscapes that have inspired so many artists to live and work there. Despite the hilly landscape causing a strain on my out of shape calf muscles, we reached our destination that night at a friend's beautiful farm homestead in GlenMidge.



Fig. 10.3 *The Journey* (2015)

The next day I got up early to explore this magical territory which is home to so many artists- the famous eco artist Andy Goldsworthy's workshop is nearby and land artist Charles Jencks also lives in the area- but decided not to go too far as I knew there was a tough day's cycling ahead. When discussing the art of Andy Goldsworthy, whose piece **Arch** documented the journey he made along the old drover routes travelled by shepherds taking their sheep to market, Donna Haraway comments: "His art is relentlessly tuned to specific human inhabitations of the land, but it is neither humanist nor naturalist art. It is the art of naturecultures"<sup>321</sup>

In fact the landscape was much hillier than the day before and we made frequent stops along the way, including an unexpected visit to the beautiful old kirkyard of Kiermillhill. Hidden along a wood-side track outside the village there is an old churchyard where the body of Kirkpatrick Macmillan lies, the inventor of the rear wheel propelled bicycle. A little further on we stopped by an old stone bridge over a raging torrent of waterfalls and exploring the rocky bank of the river found a plaque to someone who had died there. I sang a short tribute before we mounted our bikes again for the final leg of our journey.

<sup>321</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm, Chicago, 2003) p.24



The three day event counted with over 1000 visitors and took place in the incredible landscape around the ruined Morton Castle. It was probably unique in being the only summer festival to be completely off grid, using solar power and campfires to promote night-time discussions.

Local and international artists took part with site specific temporary installations which required stamina to visit as most of them were sited in remote locations. This made the journey and the contemplation of the landscape part of the experience. Walking in such remote spaces encouraged a deep connection with oneself and with the environment.

I only saw a few of the installations but was incredibly moved by **Songlines Through the Land** by the Cairn Chorus a roughly 11 km walk which situated Scottish, Irish and even Hawaiian traditional songs alongside modern folk and gospel music sung at strategic points along the route, including a stop at the sound installation **Lessons Learned in the Konigsforst** by Dr Chris Dooks, sited in an eerily and recently abandoned cottage, roofless but still semi furnished.

**Urchin** by Crafted Space, consisted of a hand crafted floating vessel for 2 which immersed its neoprene clad passengers in the waters of the lochan below Morton Castle for a meditative experience in company. The changed perceptions brought about by floating slowly about inside its organic structure caused an incredible feeling of tranquillity and togetherness with my fellow passenger and artist Jenny Hall who swam out with us, towing us away from the shore before leaving us alone within the landscape.



Fig. 10.4 E.A.F.S. (1) The Cairn Chorus (2) Crafted Space (2015)

On the last night of the festival I carried out an unplanned performance by the ruins of the castle in collaboration with the Finnish artist Uula Jero. After a short introduction I sang **Extinct or Alive?** with musical backing powered by the hand-cranked sound system Uula had created.

Although my journey began in a highly unsustainable manner, with an international flight, its 3 month duration included the quality time spent with my family, a highly productive pilgrimage of self discovery on Eigg, and the intense period of work carried out on the Unfix festival, the artistic collaborations I took part in and the incredible insights the festival gave me into artists working in my field.

The whole experience was a way to reconnect with the landscapes which had inspired my love of nature, and confirmed my philosophy that artistic interventions in the countryside should be transient and respectful.

To feel the wind and the rain in my home country had connected me to a time gone by when survival for many was a constant struggle against the elements.

Perhaps that struggle is one of the reasons which caused our society to develop in the way it did, and to create the industrial revolution that instead of liberating has enslaved us. My return to my home country had reminded me of the differences between Mediterranean and Scottish culture. In the modern Scotland which once provided soldiers and engineers to the British Empire, individuality, self reliance and independence are highly esteemed. In the rite of passage which is becoming adult these qualities are encouraged unlike Spain where the family is still the centre of social interaction.

In Scotland it is the State which is expected to provide for the needs of the citizens, a State whose economy was dependent on its Empire. This fierce independence and idea of the Self as whole, as if we somehow exist outside of society creates alienation. In returning to Scotland I wanted to discover an older tradition, which had briefly existed in the period of the Scottish enlightenment, the idea of the “common wealth”, the group as source of well-being and strength - self in society.

In Unfix a community of (mainly) young artists had created a festival with no official funding as had the organisers of EAFS, a group of people who have successfully created community outside of the city. Both experiences provided vital pointers on how art and creativity can help to negotiate two different modern realities, urban and rural.

### **Qui Si Sana**

This performance was the result of a series of coincidences which led me to reformulate the divisions which had entered my work in recent years in response to my education and investigations into the world of public art.

With my entry in the academy in 2012 I had to quickly assimilate various currents in contemporary art and through my speciality, public art, I developed a series of performances in the public domain which had led to the birth of the new alter ego Geyserbird. For a time this character existed alongside another alter ego, which I had been performing as for many years, the aristocratic Grand Tour Guide, Graham Bell Tornado. The aristocratic guide was an expression of one side of my personality which connected to my ironic camp history whilst the transgender shaman Geyserbird reflected another, more sincere, introspective and spiritual side of my character.

In the winter of 2015 I travelled with Anna Maria to pass Christmas with her family in Castellamare di Stabia where I discovered a way to bring these characters together in the **Qui Si Sana** action.

Castellamare a large and chaotic city in the province of Naples had been a popular spa town in the Roman period until, like many towns in the area, it was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 72AD. Now a thriving mini metropolis her family history reflected tensions which were a result of the peculiar geography of the town. Most of the town was spread along the coast where her mother had grown up in a bourgeois family, but there was also a more rural area of the town -Quisisana- situated on the hillside above the main town, where her father had been born into a more modest family of peasant farmers.

This area had been a healing place since the thirteenth century when it was named Quisisana (literal translation: this place heals) by Charles I d'Anjou. The villa which stood there was refurbished as the Reggia (royal palace) in the 18th Century and became the summer seat of the king who moved there to take the medicinal waters and retire from the heat of the city of Naples.

Thus the town became temporary capital of the kingdom of the two Sicilies and home to many foreign embassies including those of Russia, Britain and Spain. Furthermore, the area became a major destination for writers, artists and aristocrats on the Grand Tour as a result of the recent discovery of the ruins of Pompei and the eruptive state of Mount Vesuvius.

The contemporary reality of the Naples region has changed dramatically since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has been marked by the rise of organised crime. “For many years businesses in the prosperous north of the country paid organised crime to dispose of toxic waste illegally rather than pay far higher rates to have it dealt with safely. So the Camorra Mafia contaminated great chunks of its own backyard, littering the landscape with heavy metals, solvents and chlorinated compounds. The story of this illegal waste disposal stains Italy. It reveals the dark side of capitalism, with allegations of state complicity, cover-ups by police, politicians and prosecutors.”<sup>322</sup>

This contamination is profoundly affecting the region putting at risk the health of both its inhabitants and the wider ecosystem. In September 2004 the cardiologist Alfredo Mazza published a report which showed evidence of links between environmental degradation and rising incidence of tumours in Campania. “Life expectancy in Campania is two years lower than in the rest of Italy, with 2,000 excess deaths estimated over a 15-year period.”<sup>323</sup>

As the Italian feminist group ideadestroyingmuros point out “the complex web of state, private industry and organised mafia interests which exploit the south of Italy as a marginalised site which can therefore be used as an illegal dumping ground for household and toxic waste produced not only by the north of Italy but more importantly by the symbolic north of white, capitalist, heteronormative, rich societies.”<sup>324</sup>

For the last 13 years I have been doing my own version of the Grand Tour, filming and documenting my journeys as part of the project **Gran Tour** which started in the winter of 2005 when I undertook a long awaited journey to Eastern Europe: Slovakia, Austria and Hungary. On New Years day just as we were crossing the Hungarian border my sister rang to tell me my mother had passed away. So it seemed appropriate on the tenth anniversary of her death to carry out a ritual seeking peace with my mother since I had experienced very mixed feelings over her decision to hide her mortal illness from me and the rest of my family.

The ritual took place in two different locations and started in a cobbled square by the stone fountain of Santa Anna where I carried out a cleansing ritual with the spring water from the nearby mountain.

I chose this fountain because it lies midway between the house of Anna Maria’s parents and her grand-mother’s farm in Quisisana and I passed through it frequently on my early morning walks to the woods.

Many of the embassies and palazzos used to be in this area which has now become one of the poorest and most dangerous areas in the town.

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322 Ian Birrell “Mafia, toxic waste and a deadly cover up in an Italian paradise: ‘They’ve poisoned our land and stolen our children’” The Telegraph (newspaper 24/6/16).<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/mafia-toxic-waste-and-a-deadly-cover-up-in-an-italian-paradise-t/> - Accessed 29/5/18

323 Ibid

324 ideadestroyingmuros, <http://ideadestroyingmuros.blogspot.com/2012/01/ecodrag.html> My translation. - Accessed 29/5/18



On the morning of the action I got dressed in velvet trousers, a red cravat and the silk grand tourist waistcoat used in concerts, making myself up and painting the half moustache/ half lip line design characteristic of the character.

There were a few people hanging about as I approached the fountain and we began filming: “We’re at the fountain of Santa Anna here in Castellamare on the final stop of the Grand Tour.”



**Fig. 10.5 *Qui Si Sana* Ritual- The Fountain (2016)**

Then I slowly began washing the make-up off of my mouth with the spring water from the fountain. When I had finished I stripped off my waistcoat and shirt, drank some water and put on the ceremonial Geyserbird dress. This black dress had sequined shoulders and had belonged to Anna Maria’s mother. We had customised it by sewing pigeon feathers down the front which I had collected from around the shrine to the Madonna on the pavement opposite the house where Anna Maria had lived as a child. This gave the feathers a special significance as they were found amongst the plastic flowers offered to the virgin. A grey fake fur stole completed the outfit.

At this point I wore the dress as a top over my trousers as I didn’t see the point of taking any unnecessary risks during the final walk up the hill to the farm. Half way up the hill I found the ripped and scattered remains of a calendar with picturesque scenes of local landscapes and selected a couple of images which seemed symbolic for use in the second part of the action: one represented a wood with tall trees, and the other a mountainous landscape with a castle which looked like the nearby castle of Quisisana.

For the second part of the ritual I had chosen an overgrown spot in the garden of Anna Maria’s grandmother’s farm at the bottom of a stone staircase. Underneath the stair I had discovered a small niche hidden by the lush greenery that had practically overrun the ruined buildings nearby.

I knew my mother would have loved the spot and decided it was the perfect space to construct an altar.

In preparation for the ritual I wandered round the garden collecting material. In one area there were citrus fruit trees and beneath them there were lots of unpicked lemons and oranges on the ground. Some of the oranges had obviously been there for a long time as they had been hollowed out by birds or animals.

I collected a mixture of different types and carried them back arranging the whole ones in a pile at the back of the niche and the hollowed out ones at the front in a circle round the small fire I built with twigs. On a wooden plank I had found nearby I placed the painted reproductions on each side of the citrus fruit as if to frame it like an altarpiece.

I then wandered round the garden picking a selection of differently coloured wild flowers that were in bloom.

The mechanical action of searching out and collecting material was a way of gathering force from the tranquillity of the overgrown garden for the emotional ordeal ahead. A spray of purple flowers made a beautiful backdrop on top of the oranges and I prepared the other flowers breaking their stems so they would fit in the hollow oranges.

Once everything was more or less in place I sat down to write a letter to my mother. According to the psycho-magical philosophy of Alejandro Jodorowsky, the act of writing a letter to someone who is dead is a way of expressing feelings which were left unsaid and can help to overcome regrets or conflicting emotions.

I had seen my mother one month before she died, after an alarming call from my sister, who had suspected she was ill and had called advising me that a visit home might be a good idea. Even on that last occasion she had hidden her illness and I had felt embarrassed to bring up the subject since in our family, as in so many Scottish families, we never talked about our emotions or pried into each other's affairs. Somehow it's as if it was improper to express emotions...

My mother actually managed to convince me that my sister was overreacting so when I received the call a month later to say she had died I was completely shocked. Since my last visit home had been the previous year if my sister had not called me I doubt whether I would have seen my mother in her final days.

This was difficult to assimilate since I would never know if she would have called me home for that one last Christmas together. She did not want pity or to be a nuisance, a typical reaction in a culture where the normal way to deal with old age and infirmity is to shuttle our old folks off to residential homes when they are no longer capable of looking after themselves. This is symptomatic of a culture where old age is seen as something taboo, to be kept apart, as if older people are diseased.

The contrast with the Mediterranean culture where the family usually takes care of older relatives until the last possible minute is extreme, and although it is generally the female relatives who end up sacrificing their lives and caring for elderly relatives since of course their time is less valuable in a patriarchal society, somehow the Mediterranean system seems much more humane.

I had just finished writing when Anna Maria arrived from the house. She filmed me folding the letter up and placing it in an envelope before taking off my shoes and trousers in preparation for the ritual. As a final touch of feral glamour, Anna Maria placed the stole on my head tying it so it framed my face like a furry tiara. Once ready, I processed slowly down the stairs, carrying the letter in my hands with a gravity the situation demanded.

Then I sat down on the ground by the niche, took the letter from the envelope and read: "Mummy. I'm writing to thank you for bearing me, for caring for me, feeding, baking, loving me.

I'm writing because I love you and because I feel you were taken from me too soon. I never had the chance to tell you how much I loved and admired you, how it was you who encouraged my wayward theatrical ways and you who never judged me.

And I'm writing because despite all of this I feel as if I need forgiveness, forgiveness for the way you left this world and I need your help this one last time."

And here my emotions began to overcome me as I read "because you wanted to protect me from your illness but I wanted to share your pain, I wanted to spend your last days with you, and you denied me that - I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I love you now and always, your wayward son Graham"

Folding the letter back up, I began to arrange the flowers, carefully breaking their stems to length and separating the flowers from the leaves so they would fit in the hollow orange skins, “dandelion and buttercups from our land -Scotland- mix with these more exotic plants that come from here Quisisana.”

I had been a keen flower arranger as a boy, even winning a prize for an arrangement at the town fair one year and my mother had always encouraged me -in fact I only stopped doing it when I realised that boys weren't supposed to play with flowers and buckled under to peer pressure.

“These are the nine cups that represent my love for you and the days we spent with dried flowers and live flowers playing together when I was a boy. I think you knew I was not an ordinary boy.”

Picking up the ripped images I continued, dedicating the beautiful landscapes:

“So similar these mountains to the ones we climbed, and these trees to the ones I climbed and behind the sea” I motioned to the pile of fruit “you loved so much... I'm saying goodbye mother. I wish you'd stayed longer with me.” With these words I set the letter I had written on fire and placed it amongst the twigs I had gathered. Finally I gathered the ashes together and wiped them across my eyes, and chest... Picking up two of the orange flower cups I stood up to take my leave saying- “my mother is in the Earth” before climbing back up the stairs towards the house.



Fig. 10.6 *Qui Si Sana Ritual- The Garden (2016)*

### **Bowie Ritual**

On the 10th of January 2016 David Bowie died. Thus began a month of personal mourning in the Erreria since both Anna Maria and I were heavily influenced by his music and life. We watched Bowie documentaries daily and listened to a constant soundtrack of his music including his final musical testimony, the album **Blackstar** which had been recorded in the knowledge that he was suffering from terminal cancer.

In this period I became obsessed with the epic ten minute song Blackstar and its video directed by Johan Renck. Blackstar had made a huge impact on me, the song, its lyrics and video seemed to confirm my ideas that a pagan earth based spirituality was necessary to counteract the consumer nightmare we seem unable to wake up from. At the end of his life Bowie seems to recognise his own importance within our culture and be predicting the rise, not of another rock star a la Ziggy, but the charismatic spiritual leader of a cult.



Bowie admitted his alter egos were often based on messianic figures<sup>325</sup> and the **Blackstar** song suggested that at the end of his life he was passing on this role. This romantic vision of the artist as the creator of a universe is in sharp contrast to the contemporary view of the artist as an agent of social transformation. Nevertheless the charismatic character of Bowie was of great importance in catalysing a change in the British society of the 1970's when he shocked the nation by declaring himself to be gay in 1972.

The song and its video seemed to capture the spirit of the zeitgeist- the women in the video carry out a ritual where they enter a trance like state worshipping the jewel encrusted skull of a dead astronaut in a clear reference to Major Tom the character who appeared already as an alienated space traveller in Bowies first hit song **Space Oddity** in 1969, then reappeared in 1980 as a junkie in the song **Ashes to Ashes**. The message in the video seems to signal the end of the era of the patriarch as their ritual calls up a formless creature who seems about to tear apart the three men hung up as scarecrows in the middle of a corn field. The fully grown corn bobbing in the breeze is a symbol of the fertility of the earth and the sacrifice about to take place and references cult horror movies **The Children of the Corn** (director: Fritz Kiersch,1984) and **The Wickerman** (director: Robin Hardy,1973), where agriculturally based communities make human sacrifices to ensure the fertility of the harvest.

On my return to Scotland in the summer I was thrilled to receive the special tribute issue of the Guardian newspaper from a close friend and fellow Bowie fan. I resisted the temptation to read the story and 8 page supplement deciding to wait till meeting up with Anna Maria so we could read it together.

Then one morning, when I was camping with my family in the Grampian hills I woke up early and was looking for something to read when I opened the paper and saw the iconic image of Bowie as Aladdin Sane full size on the front cover of the supplement. and before realising what I was doing found myself drawn in to the report. Instead of devouring the tribute, I closed the paper and decided that I would take it with me into the woods and carry out a ritual to the artist's memory.

Humming the words of the song I gathered together my Geyserbird outfit and accessories and took the path that led from the campsite to an old pine wood nearby. In a marshy area en route I stopped and picked some pink marsh flowers threading them into a floral crown like we used to do with daisies as children.

The sun was rising at the edge of the wood by the tree where I decided to carry out the ritual using my video camera as part of the process. I changed into my Geyserbird outfit, placing some lichen in the jewel box by the base of the tree and the floral crown on my head. I filmed myself as I circled the tree singing a short improvisation based on a section of the song **Blackstar**. As I was finishing I spotted a black slug in the grass and gently picked it up placing it on my nipple. As a child I'd heard stories about witches being turned into slugs, indeed my mother was supposed to have transformed an evil witch near our house into one.

I carefully positioned two images of Bowie from the newspaper article at the base of the tree, one, a recent photograph, the other the iconic Aladdin Sane image, upon which I placed the jewel box with lichen and my make up, before filming the next

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<sup>325</sup> Bowie on his stage characters "They're all messiah figures" quoted in *David Bowie Is* (V & A Publishing, London, 2013) p.312

sequence which began with the slug on my nipple before panning down my body along the grass to the makeshift shrine with the make up which I then applied before panning over the Bowie images and up the tree trunk to the sky.

Then, bowing my head, I took the floral crown off and placed it on the image of Bowie as Aladdin Sane. A close up showed the pink flowers on his head in deep contrast to his green eyes, then I panned across to my face and intoned: “*Como sanarme a mi y al Banco Mundial*”. Then I repeated the text in song in its English version “How to heal the World Bank and me”.

I ended the sequence laying down beside the images of Bowie singing “How to heal the World Bank and us” and placed the image of Aladdin Sane on my face.



**Fig. 10.7 *Bowie Ritual* (2016)**

The final sequence was a pan over the Geyserbird dress laid out at the base of the tree, the floral crown, now hanging from a crevice in the gnarled bark of the tree trunk and up through the branches to the sky above.

The sky, which Christians associate with God and a heaven where they will escape the confines of the Earth they so disdain, represented some kind of home for Bowie as well, although for quite different reasons since, for many years, he had been obsessed with the idea that he was an alien, alone in a world of humans.

This feeling is shared by many trans people and sexual dissidents since we also find it hard to fit in to our highly heteronormative societies.

### ***Snake bite Cleansing Ritual***

The discovery of the meaning of Quisisana and its history led me to become fascinated with the area, and on returning there in the summer of 2016 I woke up early in the mornings and climbed the steep cobbled streets that led from the town centre towards the wooded hill, with its palace and medieval castle.

One day I took water and fruit with me, prepared to delve even further into the woods that must once have formed part of the palace grounds, now abandoned and slowly disappearing as nature reclaims its territory. I passed above the crumbling fountain (now dry), stopped to add an offering at a family shrine constructed within and around a huge tree stump and further on found a rarely travelled path, so narrow and overgrown I might have got lost if not for the red and white ticker tape and markings that signalled the way.

The heat was rising as I approached the top of the hill and it was getting late so I decided it was time to heading home and turned back. Ten minutes down the track (with various stopovers to take photos of the stunning scenery when it came into view through the trees) I felt a sharp, intense jab in my foot and realised I had been bitten, though I saw no sign of the culprit. My toe was bloody but on squeezing it to try and get rid of the poison I saw no other liquid emerge. I knew I was in trouble. The road was at least twenty minutes away and nobody would find me if I didn't make it there. Anna Maria's house was another half an hour away but even if I reached the house it was possible there would be no one in as they had gone to the hospital to visit a member of the family.

I had to act fast. I sped up my pace, determined not to panic and increase the speed of my blood carrying the poison round my body. Within ten minutes I was getting closer to the beginning of the path but a pain in my groin told me that the poison was creeping slowly up through my body.

Just in case I thought, just in case I don't make it I decided I would record these moments and started to rap...

“Is this poison? oh my god this feeling, blood... sweat... the lizards scurrying... can feel my death approaching, is this- is this-, the culling? oh my foot, the poison, rises the poison, rises, in my head the pounding, in my head the pounding, in my head... the pounding the pounding ... in my head the poison, the poison, the pounding, the poison, the pounding, the poison, the poisoning, poison, pounding...”

The heat was becoming unbearable. When I finally made it out of the woods I headed towards a spring I had passed on the way up. There were people picnicking nearby and a group of men were drinking from what turned out to be, not a spring or a fountain but a tap, running into a plastic barrel. The men were filling up water carriers, so I waited for a few minutes before diving in to pour water over myself and greedily guzzle more, as a family of bourgeois Italians, whose child was thirsty, disapprovingly eyed the motley scene and told the child to move on.

Thinking I might still make it back I decided to continue downwards towards home. The pain had reached my stomach now but I thought until it reaches my head there is time. Down and down I went, past the local bar, crossing the main road into the old barrio of Quisisana and as I barrelled down through its cobbled streets the splitting headache hit me.

A huge beetle flew up from the mossy stones of an ancient buttress-wall, high into the air its rose, its glimmering turquoise forewings sparkling in the sunlight. It was the first time I'd seen one in Italy and as I watched it rise high above me I realised it was a sign. Here I must stop.

Rounding the corner I made for a clean, safe space to sit off the road. As soon as my body touched the floor I took my sock and sandal off as I knew it would be important to point out that I had been bitten. Then my strength deserted me and I collapsed to the ground. A car stopped and, without getting out, the driver asked if I was ok. “*No. Aiuto!*” (No, Help!) were the only words I could manage. Within minutes a passing doctor took control of the situation and soon after an ambulance arrived. My journey through hell had just begun. A blow by blow account of the vomiting, shitting and drama that followed is not, I believe strictly necessary, the ordeal neared its end when I produced a thick yellow liquid, gathered up by one of the nurses who held the paper to my mouth as I spewed it forth, what I can only assume was the poison.





**Fig. 10.8 The Snake Bite Accident (2016)**

According to many traditions the shaman must undertake these kind of vision-quests as part of their training, in some cases intentionally seeking out the poisonous bite of a snake or spider in order to have a near death experience from which if they return they will receive messages from the spirit world, messages which will help them identify their spirit guides. It seemed I had discovered mine in the shape of a turquoise beetle, indigenous to the mediterranean region.

A few days later, with my foot still swollen I decided to make my first outing, hobbling through the cobbled streets of the town to it's recently reopened spa.



**Fig. 10.9 Cleansing Ritual (2016)**

Originally built in 1836 I thought its curative waters, which include sulphurous sodium chloride - isotonic, hypotonic or hypertonic - ferruginous-carbon dioxide and bicarbonate and calcium, might help to reduce the swelling on my foot and speed up the healing process.

It was busy when we arrived as at the end of the day the spa opened free to the public. Most of the huge complex was closed apart from the gardens and the fountain of mineral waters, round which all the people were gathered, jostling to gather water from the row of 9 metal taps which flowed into a trough below. Each tap was labelled with the composition of the water it contained.

After exploring the gardens I returned with a special cup in hand, queueing to drink from each of the taps (there was no queue for the pungent sulphurous waters) and bathe my foot in the water. Whether it was the minerals or the cooling effect of the water itself I felt better on the walk home.

### ***In the Ruins: Anthropological Studies of Geyserbird***

La Reggia de Caserta, a magnificent baroque palace inspired by Versailles, is situated forty kilometres inland from Naples and was built between 1752 and 1847 to accommodate the court of the newly formed Kingdom of Naples and Sicily ruled by the Bourbon King Charles VII.

The large area known as the English Garden, constructed in the romantic style and carefully planted to appear unkempt and wild was designed by the botanist John Graefer.

We had visited this area many years before and I had decided it would be the perfect place to take a series of portraits of Geyserbird. The combination of nature and classical ruins was a perfect setting to construct an alternative transgender hysteria for the shaman.

We spent the early part of the day filming in the outrageously ostentatious palace. I posed in the rooms, as if I owned the place, dressed in high female drag with a gold lame top, lipstick and blusher in between continuous waves of other tourists who must have been more than a little surprised when confronted by such a strange transgender presence. It was late in the day by the time we reached the gates of the English garden and the sun was already beginning its slow descent.

Various architectural follies had been built in this area evoking ancient civilisations including the classical period of the Roman empire, in fashion at the time the garden had been constructed as a result of the recently discovered ruins of the nearby Pompeii where excavations had begun in 1748.

The princess Maria Carolina who took an active interest in the garden while it was being built was a member of the Neapolitan freemasonry and wanted the garden to be “a sort of initiatic journey made up of a series of stops, marked by clearly symbolic works, including a pyramid, a neo-Gothic cemetery, and a small ‘tholos’ temple in the middle of a maze. At the end, providing a kind of purifying catharsis, there was the enchanted space of the lake dedicated to Venus.”<sup>326</sup>

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326 Translated from M. Fagiolo, *Architettura e massoneria: l'esoterismo della costruzione* (Gangemi, Rome 1988) /[www.italianways.com/venus-and-the-mysterious-gardens-of-the-palace-of-caserta/](http://www.italianways.com/venus-and-the-mysterious-gardens-of-the-palace-of-caserta/) - Accessed 24/2/18



The garden was a powerful site for Geyserbird to visit, representing as it does the battle between the forces of culture and its civilisations with the forces of nature and its cyclical rhythms of reclamation. The special atmosphere of the place began to affect me as soon as we arrived so I decided to change into costume immediately and made my way to the first of the follies- an overgrown temple facade fronted by thick columns. We filmed Geyserbird clambering over the ruins and posing on a plinth in the midst of a surreal tangle of huge cacti and ivy that resembled some kind of Post Classical Natural Queer park. Further on we discovered a highly Rosicrucian pyramid whose entrance was perfect for the shaman to emerge from. As the light began to change we then focused on finding the ruins we had come for and quickly realised that this was to be no easy task.

Signs in Italian warned us to Keep off the Grass as apparently the centuries old trees in the park were in danger of falling apart- presumably a branch had fallen off and hit a tourist so health and safety had decided to declare the whole wide parkland off limits. Geyserbird was undeterred and ran out into the field returning to the path just before two young men appeared in the distance. A moment of strange epiphany passed as we stopped them to ask for directions, one of them was the most perfect examples of southern Italian manhood I had ever seen and if he hadn't seemed so unassuming might just have stepped out of an advert for cologne. In my Geyserbird ceremonial dress I must have looked like an extra in a drag version of one of Fellini's more surreal movies but both young men seemed completely unphased by my appearance and responded without a flinch to our request for directions. Several other tourists we met on our way to the well hidden construction reacted similarly. There is a certain element of denial in this reaction to the irruption of the highly theatrical in everyday life.

Our final destination was a hyperreal construction which is a cryptoporticus, a semi-subterranean gallery whose vaulting supports portico structures above ground and which is lit from openings at the tops of its arches and has statues found in the ruins of Pompeii in niches at either end.

The term hyperreality was coined by Umberto Eco to describe a life size reproduction of the Last Supper scene he encountered in 1960's California but this construction preceded it by over 150 years.



**Fig. 10.10** *In the Ruins: Anthropological Remains of Geyserbird* (2016)



The meticulous attention to details in these reproductions is a condition of hyperreality “where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falseness is enjoyed in a situation of ‘fullness’, of horror vacui.”<sup>327</sup>

It is built beside the lake where the statue of Venus lies, and access to the site is through a rocky outcrop. The peculiarity of this construction is that it is actually underground- the high “ceiling” has two large holes in it through which the sky can be seen. There is one at either end of the corridor and they are framed by plants growing around them and in one a thread of ivy hangs down and almost touches the ground below.

This curious mix of architecture and horticulture although said to have been based on the nearby Pompeii excavations, for me more clearly evokes the historic moment in 1480 when a young Roman shepherd fell through a cleft in the rocks in the Oppio hillside near Rome and discovered the Domus Aureus, Nero’s long forgotten palace.

Now a relic of a long gone age itself, the irruption of the ivy falling from the ceiling inspired the improvised movements of Geyserbird. I imagined the mixed feelings of a “primitive” being who had fallen into this archaeological site. On one hand the fear of being trapped underground in a hostile environment, on the other the fascination with the discovery. In some of the photographs (which were taken by Anna Maria) I am striving towards the light, as if praying to some unknown spirit to raise me up out of the pit I have fallen into, in others I am railing against the forces that have trapped me there in the form of the huge classical statues that line the corridor.

### *New Wave Ritual*

In September 2016 I received an invitation to participate in Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle’s **Wet Dreams Water Ritual**, as part of 34 Exercises of Freedom a programme of events taking place in Athens as part of **The Parliament of Bodies de-localised** edition of the arts biennial **Documenta 14**. The chance to collaborate again with them was exciting and I got in touch to say that although I couldn’t travel to Greece for the event I would love to take part and suggested that I would carry out a watery ritual on El Saler beach while they were celebrating the ritual in Athens. They liked the idea and agreed to include me in the programme for the event.

At the time I was at the Erreria in Xàtiva and decided that I would do a try out for my intervention in the freshwater spring at Bellus. As part of the preparation for the ritual the one and a half hour journey on foot was important giving me time to reconnect to my body, the non urban context and to sensitive myself to the sights, sounds and smells of the countryside.

In these small personal rituals these journeys situate me in the cycles of nature since the weather, temperature and season affects the outcome and elements available for the ritual. The fig trees were in fruit so I picked and ate some on the walk to the canyon, and decided to keep 2 to decorate an altar for the ritual, one for Beth and one for Annie. For me, these fruit, which I had only ever seen in dried form in my childhood represent an exotic Mediterranean bounty connecting them to the classical mythologies of Greece and Rome.

Additionally the word for fig in Valencian (figa) has a sexual connotation because it also means pussy, making them perfect for an ecosexual ritual.

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<sup>327</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (Harcourt, 1986) p.6

On the path leading in to the spring I saw the same pink flowers I had gathered in the first ritual as a kitsch offering to the water. This time I picked only two to mirror the figs and when I arrived at the spring I placed them together with the fruit on the flat stone by the waters edge.

This block of hard marble-like stone was a recent addition and had been carved with the name of the spring in valencian: Font del Conill (Rabbit's Spring) in a style which resembled handwriting. A beautiful locally made altar for the ritual and possible result of the changing use of the spot which had happened in the last few years.

I had first discovered the spring when a friend had taken me there along a narrow semi hidden path which led off the main walkers track. Through the high bamboo he led me to the unspoilt shady spring telling me to be careful to make sure no-one saw me if I returned on the approach so as to keep its whereabouts secret.

So I always checked to see if anyone was around before going there and for the first few years it seemed the spring was still relatively unknown.

On my visits I'd only ever met some older men bathing.

They had probably been responsible for cutting back the bamboo which every year threatened to block out the light from the water and which would have eventually choked and dried up the pool if not kept under control. I had often spent time in spring breaking down the huge stems and carrying them away from the waterside so as to help maintain the spring and keep the water oxygenated.

In recent years the spot seemed to have become more popular and I'd sometimes met younger people there. On more than one occasion I had collected rubbish left behind by these (or other) newcomers.

I stripped off and waded into the cool water. Taking one of the figs I bit into its soft flesh and rubbed it on my nipples, staining them with the pale juice of the fruit. It had been a long and tiring journey and I couldn't resist biting into the other, leaving its flesh exposed before the camera which was filming the ritual.

Kneeling in the water I began to sing: "Its coming- the new wave<sup>328</sup> is coming, que viene...la nueva ola."

Slowly I began slapping my palms against the water, experimenting with the rhythm and sound made by different movements, circling my arms spraying it around me as I sang. I left the spring feeling elated, basking in the sun and enjoying the beautiful landscape on the other side of the river.



**Fig. 10.11 *New Wave Ritual*, Alboy (2016)**

<sup>328</sup> This phrase also refers to the new wave musical movement which happened after punk, a period of experimentation which produced many different musical styles.

As I was exploring the wooded riverside I heard the sound of bells jangling and looking round for their source saw a horse and cart being led by an old man up the track. I associate the sound of these bells with herds of goats met on the hills of Spain over the years and they never cease to entrance me conjuring up a seemingly long lost tradition of shepherds living with the animals they tend. This semi nomadic lifestyle still exists in some areas.

Over the years I had filmed various actions in these dramatic surroundings, where over the millennia the Albaida River had carved dramatic shapes in the rocks of the canyon and where remains had been discovered of Neanderthal man in the nearby Cueva Negra. The landscape reminds me of the paintings of the romantic painter John Martin (1789-1854), a contemporary of JK Turner whose apocalyptic biblical scenes were hugely popular and portray humans dwarfed by the landscapes that seem to be engulfing them. At a period in Britain's history when industry had transformed the landscape, when workers were exploited in factories and where child labour was common, Martin's work portrayed the sublimely destructive power and beauty of nature, in contrast to many of his contemporaries whose vision was more pastoral and associated destruction with the hell-fires of industry. After that magical morning I was even more convinced that this canyon was an energy centre. In other years I had watched a continuous flow of passerines flying high overhead following the line of the river on their annual migration to Africa.

A few days later the ritual was scheduled to take place on the evening of September 23rd, a day celebrated internationally since 1999 by bisexual activists as bi visibility day.

Rain had been forecast for the previous days and a friend had warned me that the gota fria was due to begin that evening. The "wet drip" is how Valencians refer to this meteorological phenomenon which is like a shortened rainy season in tropical climates and often happens in autumn when the vapour given off by the hot water of Mediterranean meets a cold weather front. This can lead to heavy rainfall and often disastrous storm flooding.

It seemed ironic that this weather was on its way just in time for the ecosex ritual to honour the water. I had once been caught up in a mini tornado caused by such weather conditions something which worried me much more than the rain. Nevertheless I had made a commitment to carry out the ritual and as the day progressed and the weather still hadn't broken I prepared to head off to the remote beach at El Saler where I had carried out my first watery ecosex experiments in the past.

Annie and Beth were scheduled to carry out their ritual from 20.30 - 21pm but I planned to arrive on the beach a little earlier to take advantage of the last daylight since the sunset that day would occur at 19:57pm. I had not showered that day deliberately despite the fact I knew my body smelled of sweat, because I wanted to wash it in the sea.

Furthermore I knew that in Siberia the shamen were often described as being quite rank and smelly. I relished the fact that my mixed body smells would pervade the atmosphere of the bus en route to the beach. In areas of the world like Valencia where water is scarce it seems ridiculous to shower every day. I believe the modern obsession with personal hygiene is often based on a fear of the smell of our own bodies. In the past however, a lack of hygiene was often equated by those in power as denoting a primitive lifestyle lacking in morals and certainly the Soviet authorities who described Siberian shamen may not have been unbiased in that respect.



Darkness was fast approaching when I got off the bus so I hurried through the wooded dunes to the beach recording my impressions as I went: “I wanted to come to this place to celebrate this special water ritual... I wanted to make it a little early to this beautiful place so it can be seen so I’m going to run now to see if I can make it to the beach on time”

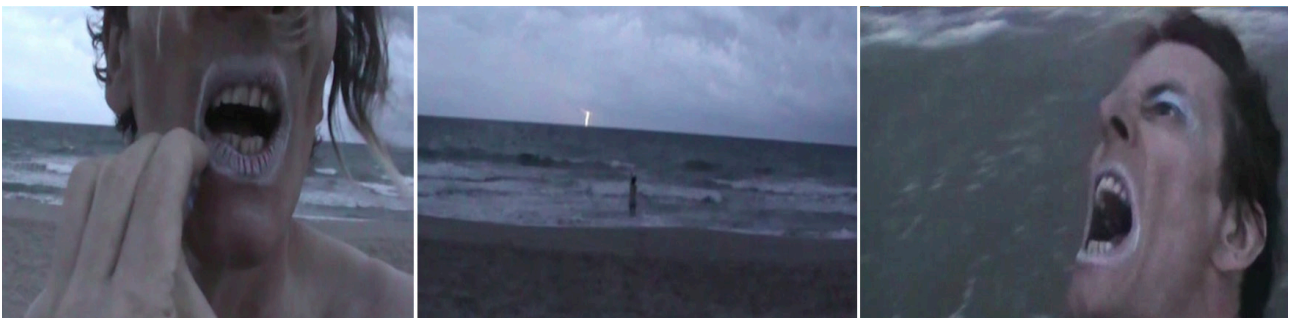
As I broke free of the tree lined road to take the path that led across the dunes I could see dark clouds hanging over the sea.

“Just saw the first flash of lightning so it’s going to be a bumpy ride” climbing the last dune the panorama which met my eye was quite dramatic, the storm was brewing and in the distance lightning broke over the sea. As I’d feared it was already quite windy so I struggled to put the camera tripod up, lodging it deep into the sand so it wouldn’t blow over while I prepared myself.

I had brought make-up in blue and white, the watery colours Beth and Annie had requested for the ritual and a blue choker made by Anna Maria as an adornment. I ran into the water and attempted to create rhythms, clapping my palms against the surface of the water as I’d done at the spring.

It was difficult in the waters of the choppy sea, but I beat a rhythm in accompaniment to the song (and balanced the camera tripod with one hand since I dare not trust it to the wind or waves) adding vocal inflexions to generate a more effective beat. I hoped that the primal power of my flamenco-punk song howled into the winds would cross the waves to Greece.

“It’s coming, the new wave is coming, viene, la nueva ola, chacha cha chacha cha la nueva ola. It’s coming a change is coming, at last the new wave at last the new wave-its coming the new wave is coming. It’s co-o-o-oo-ming, the new wave, vie-e-e-nee la nueva o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ola”



**Fig. 10.12** *New Wave Ritual* (2016)

Later on the beach as the lightning crashed in the distance I began to prepare for the journey back worried that torrential rain could fall at any minute. A few spots fell:

“And now we have the rain, all that’s missing is this...” I pissed - a watery tribute to the storm. “It’s as close as we can make it to eight thirty...have a great ritual!”

Quickly I gathered my belongings and headed back to the road, stopping only to film in the woods where the cicadas were chirping in the trees. The lightning seemed to be all around me, over the city, to the north, out to sea and now over the lagoon in the distance:“and as the ritual continues, the elements conspire.”

Twenty minutes later I was on a bus back to Valencia where a heavy rain had fallen. The storm continued well into the night.

## *Scottish Hysterics and the Keening Women*

Working in the realm of the symbolic, I believe it is important to be sensitive to signs which offer us clues as to which path to take. In the summer of 2017, I received an invitation to join friends on a camping and driving tour of Scotland and, taking advantage of an urgent family obligation and my Erasmus residency in London with Cuntemporary Arts Feminism Queer, I proposed that we visit a series of places to which I have a special connection. Thus the **Scottish Hysterics and the Keening Women** tour I had foreseen two years ago began. The tour would be a mixture of joyous and mournful remembrance for people and things gone past.

In preparation I packed the dress I had worn as a *Plañidera Cultural* many years before and designed a keening necklace with Anna Maria. It was important to me that she was present on the tour although she could not come on it. She made the necklace using black lace and threading red tubing around it to represent blood. She then sewed a small bag which was tied to the necklace with the tubing and contained some of the rare cowrie shells that my mother had collected over the years from beaches all around Scotland.

Finally, although I was unsure what form the keening ceremonies would take I felt the need to have some element which would give some kind of structure to the performance and help me to contain my emotions.

I decided this rational desire could best be represented by a book. Therefore I selected a Catholic prayer book bound in black leather with an embossed image of the Madonna and child on its cover, and gutted its contents so that only the blank front and end pieces were left. Within its covers I constructed a pocket which would be able to contain any texts I wanted to prepare. In the end I never used it for this purpose but the pocket was handy for holding the feathers I used in the ceremonies.



**Fig. 10.13 Elements for the Keening Rituals (2017)**

As the places we would be visiting were relatively remote I decided it was important to use social media as a way of bearing witness to the tour and thus began a series of publications. The first of these was the original artwork I had “commissioned” from my then 15 year old nephew Findlay on our camping trip to Skye a few years before when the idea of doing a Keening tour of remote beaches had come to me.

The next was published on my first day back in Scotland - a grainy black and white photo taken by a friend of me in my Keening dress.

The comment I added alongside the photo "It's an old family tradition" was an ironic reference to my use of female apparel.

The evening before my friend's arrival in Scotland was spent battling with an old slide projector at my sister's house.

We've become so used to instant accessibility of images it was quite a challenge to work the projector, focusing each image manually and loading the slides individually into the cartridge which frequently stalled as we flicked through them. I was interested to find photographs of myself as a child since I had no memory of ever having seen any. Images of family pets (our menagerie included cats, rabbits, goats and horses at one time or another) mixed with beaches and dramatic mountain landscapes, but perhaps the most dramatic discovery were a series of portraits of my sister and me on the front porch of our house in a variety of fancy dress costumes in which my sister stood in the sun while I remained hidden in the shadows.

Was this a result of my parents lack of skill at photography or evidence of my shy nature?

On an early morning cycle along the canal the next day I recorded a short message on my mobile phone which I would later play at the unofficial presentation of the tour at Greyfriars Kirkyard in Edinburgh. The graveyard had become famous for the story of Greyfriars Bobby, a dog who reputedly stayed by his master's grave day and night for 14 years.

It was a blazing hot day so it was quite busy when we reached the cemetery, which is full of the most incredible 18th century graves. I placed the mobile on one of the more ornate memorials and covering it with the keening necklace I would wear on the tour pressed play. It began with a Keening choral before a short speech:

"Welcome to the Scottish Hysterics and the Keening Women tour of Scotland. We begin here in Greyfriars cemetery by one of the most baroque memorials in the whole of this nation. This presentation is also an invitation to all those women and female identified males who wish to join and keen with us on this tour. Gentlemen will be permitted, for documentation purposes, access to the sites, but must apply for a photographers permit before doing so."

Outside the cemetery gates a crowd was gathered round the memorial to Greyfriars Bobby, whose nose had been polished off to reveal the metal beneath by the hordes who believed that by rubbing the dog's nose they would have good luck.

It reminded me of similar scenes in Spain when images of saints are brought out for processions and the crowds of devout believers pass their children forward to touch them and receive a blessing from the saint.

A few days later we were on the road and stopped over in Perth where we ate raspberries gathered on an island in the middle of the river Tay which divides the town. I explored the town cemetery also known as Greyfriars cemetery, by a strange coincidence.

My interest in Scottish graveyards is not purely the result of a morbid obsession with death but a recognition of the fact that when images were removed from churches in Scotland as a result of the protestant reformation, a respect for the dead and the memorials which marked their graves meant that the only examples of religious art which survive (outside the great Gothic cathedrals) are the stones which survive in these kirkyards (church-yard).



Furthermore in Perth my interest in the kirkyard was further motivated by a large sign at the entrance which declared it was being managed as a “biodiversity bank” in which wild flowers, butterflies and insects were encouraged to flourish. The long grass growing over the graves added to the romantic atmosphere of the place. I found the body of a crow in the grass and broke one of its wings off to use on the tour. In the original Keening song I had composed year before I evoked the spirits of the keening women with the desire that: “those black birds shall sing once more”

A few days later I washed the wing in the sea, and carefully separated the feathers to dry in the early morning sun at the nature reserve in Newburgh where I had spent many hours watching birds as a young ornithologist.



**Fig. 10.14 Preparations for the Keening Rituals (2017)**

The next day we reached the first of the Keening sites, Aquhorthies stone circle by my home town of Inverurie. These megalithic monuments exact purpose remains unknown although it seems highly likely they were used for ritual celebrations since many are aligned with the stars providing a calendar of the changing seasons useful to the agricultural peoples who constructed them. They flourished in the neolithic and early bronze age periods (between 3300 and 900 BC) all over Britain and elsewhere but the highest concentration of circles was in the North East of Scotland where I grew up.

They had always fascinated me and formed an important part of my personal history, since their mysterious nature and the fact that they were often to be found in the wildest places appealed to my romantic spirit.

It had been many years since I'd been back and the road which I'd cycled so many times from my parent's house uphill to the circle was virtually unrecognisable, housing estates and retail units having replaced the fields. We parked the car at the end of the road and I headed up towards the circle. Although people were out walking, when I reached the circle it was deserted so I passed through the gate and information panel to view the stones alone.

After taking in the beauty of the stones and the view across the fields to the hill of Bennachie, I began to prepare for the ritual. It was strange to carry out a queer occupation of this space I had visited so many times in the past and as I carried out the preparations I was aware of the pagan significance of the site and how heritage culture has often prohibited the use of these spaces by modern pagans.

Perhaps this need to occupy the space in a contemporary pagan way had led me to bring the incongruous plastic vinyl I had prepared for the night at the Poetry Club years before, the black lines of the World Bank logo interrupted by insects contrasting with the white background.

The wind threatened to blow it away as I rolled it out over the grass so I weighed it down with stones I'd collected en route, then laid a tartan mini skirt which represented my transgression of gender and tradition over one of its edges. Finally I placed the Keening songbook on top and left it there to change on the banking outside the circle. By this time my friends had arrived so we discussed the action which would take place and decided where they should position themselves to film and take pictures.

Once dressed I entered the circle chanting as I processed round it touching each of the stones as I passed. I began with the mantra I'd used in **Memory P(a)lace** to commemorate the deaths of those who had died in the Mediterranean on the final leg of their journey to Europe from Africa: "Monica Samia Yousuf Omar."

Once I had finished the circle I moved towards the centre and placed an agate ring on my finger, a reminder of the rocks that lie beneath the ground in Scotland. Picking up the Keening songbook I began to circle the logo and chanting the names of extinct species, took my position at the centre of the circle. Facing the recumbent stone I lay down and placed my head on the ground.

It was time for this cycle to begin "Joan, Joan Isobel Bell, Isabella bell" my mothers name became part of the chant. Playing with the strange coincidence that had caused her middle name to mirror her surname I savoured the rhythms this produced as I approached the stone, kneeling down on the stone which some claim may cover what could have been a burial chamber beneath these huge rocks. The sensation of the hard rock against my skin, caused a change in rhythm and I slowed to feel myself a part of the circle, knowing in some way my strange homage was a part of the stone's heritage. The creak of the gate opening brought me back to reality - I thought I heard a voice say "Don't look at it" and raising my head a few moments later saw three women sitting on the embankment that surrounded the circle with their backs towards me looking out across the hillside to the fields beyond. To finalise the ritual I opened the songbook at my feet and intoned "Scottish Hysterics and the Keening Women Part One" before leaving the circle.

As I collected my things those words "Don't look at it" rankled in my head. Was "it" the action taking place or did it refer to me? The Keening tour was by its very nature "open to the public" and although I had been unsure how the public would react to my unsolicited presence, the very intimacy of this small circle invited dialogue. "Do you mind if I have my picture taken with you?" I asked, and sat down beside them. They were curiously coordinated in differently coloured tops. Thus began a short but pleasant conversation during which I explained my personal connection to the circle and the area. "Its a great place to come and think" one of them concluded.

As part of the tour we returned to the house I grew up in. This white harled bungalow was in the grounds of the Hatchery where my dad worked and outside working hours we children had full run of the gardens and land within its confines. Once the house had been on the edge of town but since the discovery of oil the town had grown up around us. Nevertheless the large space had provided home to a menagerie of animals including rabbits, cats, goats and eventually a horse which lived in a field we fenced in, on the land which lay between the hatchery buildings and the golf course.





**Fig. 10.15 (Top) East Aquhorthies Stone Circle (Bottom) Hatchery House (2017)**

Pulling in to the road we found parking immediately in the vacant lot which it took a while to realise had once been our neighbours house. Walking up the drive we were greeted by a surreal spectacle. The house was still intact but behind it, where the hatchery had been it looked like a bomb had struck. Rocks and rubble were piled high and as we approached an oystercatcher flew off. In the middle of the space where the hatchery had been rose a huge pile of rubble round which a flock of seagulls cawed noisily.

We skirted the rocks and house- a car was parked outside but there was no sign of life- as I tried to reconcile what I was seeing with my memories of the space- where once there had been allotments behind the building, trees obscured the view, and the trees which lined the now asphalted muddy path which had led to my primary school also blocked out all light, so tall they had grown.

Many of these trees had been planted by me and my father. One stood slightly apart from the rest and sent a thrill through my veins. It was a rowan- a tree believed to have magical properties and often planted near the doorway of houses in Scotland to ward off evil spirits- and at the age of 5 my father had made each of us children plant one. I remember marvelling at the difference in growth between the trees as my brother's, who was seven years my elder, was wide and tall when mine was still little more than a sapling.

Everything had changed so much I was unsure who had planted this magnificent specimen (in the end I believe it must have been my sister) which seemed made for climbing. The spell it cast, the wheeling gulls which provided a shrieking soundtrack to our visit made me realise I had to mark this special occasion in some way. The building where once chickens had been hatched in industrial incubators and shipped off to battery farms (the hens) or thrown into black plastic bin bags and gassed (the cocks) had been colonised by the gulls. We had arrived in the brief period before the rubble was cleared and the property developers began building on this prime piece of real estate.

I changed into the Keening dress and succumbed to my natural instinct – to climb the rowan tree. In its branches I moved singing “I want to join the keening women and weep o’er graves beside the shore this world so rotten to the core can surely twist and turn no more...” and before intoning the chorus I grabbed tightly onto two branches and let me body fall... suspended inches above the ground I continued “Keening, keening” then dropped into the thick grass below.



Rising, I knew I must scale the mountain of rubble and picked my way through the rocks barefoot to its summit to continue the song amidst the screeching of the gulls who wheeled around me. It was just as I had suspected- they had nested there and a couple of now empty nests lay there. One lay near the edge towards which I had gravitated, overlooking hatchery house.

Crouching before it, I touched the densely packed structure and wailed, in remembrance of all the death this site had seen. I picked a bone from inside the nest, placed a feather which blew away and a phrase I had been thinking over came to mind: "This once was my domain."

I made my way slowly back down the hill and sat beside the worn tree to digest what had happened. Red rowan berries were ripe on the tree. I picked some and ran in circles round the grassy lawn throwing the berries into the air-

"Scatter... and grow!" Finally I collected 5 berries for the memorial bag around my neck, one for each member of my family.

The next stop planned on the tour involved a sharp change in register. In the 1970's the first female newsreader on our local tv station had recorded an album as the "Torry Quine" (translation the girl from Torry). The record included a song which due to its subject matter and the fact it was practically the only song to mention my home town in its lyrics had become a bit of an anthem for me: "The Quine that did the Strip at Inverurie". I had performed different versions of the song in a wide variety of contexts including a baronial mansion and various cabarets and lounge bars in London but never in my home town. I had decided to perform the song as a homage to a recently deceased acquaintance, the transgender performer Diane Torr.

The perfect picture postcard image of my town is the Victorian town hall which would have been a great place for the Strip but since I usually accompanied the song with a strip tease and wanted to avoid any problems in a town I had fled as a teenager after years of homophobic abuse I had decided to do the performance at a quiet spot on the banks of the river Ury with the town hall in the distance.

Unfortunately when we arrived at the road end near the path to the river we discovered that it was completely overgrown with nettles and had to change our plans. I decided to follow a path down the river from the graveyard on the other side of town to its intersection with the bigger river Don. This was in fact the "inver" Ury which gave the town its name since in Gaelic "inver" means the confluence of waters. In this out of the way spot I changed in the fishing hut as an angler in waders cast in the river opposite. He was gone by the time I was ready and introduced the song amongst the reeds with a reference to my own angling history...

"I've had some good poaching on these rivers, the river Ury and the river Don and this is where they meet in Inver Ury. Now ah met a very interesting woman a couple years ago called Diane Torr. She was a Torry quine just like me an it turned out she'd gone to New York and started up a drag king workshop "man for a day" she called it - women dressing up as men I said listen Diane ye're never gonna make money at that - why don't ye come back to Inverurie cos I've got a rare job here that pays loads o'money..."

I then began to sing the song, taking off a piece of clothing after each verse until I was down to my flesh tone girdle.

"and this is the Inver ury... I had to leave my home town many years ago to make a living but I'm back and this is what I do now, I don't make very much at it but ah fair have a lot of fun, thanks to my friends... and all you lovely people watching in youtube-land as well, I'm so proud to be "The Quine that did the strip at Inverurie -NO- the Queen that did the strip at Inverurie"

As the sun began its slow descent (the light never quite disappeared from the sky during our time in the north) we arrived at Loanhead of Daviot stone circle and in lengthening shadows I prepared the final ritual of the day. The original circle has had another circle of stones placed within in at a later date, probably for burial purposes. At the centre of this circle the gravel made a perfect base for my World Bank logo. Processing once more from outside the circle to this centre I intoned the litany clambering over the rocks towards the recumbent. Climbing on top of it I discovered that it was actually formed by two similarly sized rocks with a narrow chamber in the middle. This formed a perfect echo chamber for the Keening. In this intimate space I continued my litany and experimented with the strange acoustic reverberation against the rock, echoing the click of the photo camera with the click of my fingers and a series of hand claps.



**Fig. 10.16 Loanhead Stone Circle (2017)**

Although the spot was deserted I was aware that the town had crept up towards it and that beyond the trees and the protective fence there were houses. I wondered what the residents would make of my wailing but remain firmly convinced that my use of the stones was in keeping with their original purpose.

That night we camped by the shore at the river Ythan estuary outside the town of Newburgh, in a nature reserve where I had spent many hours birdwatching in my youth. I fell asleep to the sound of birds and when I opened my tent flap the next morning was barely a few metres from a group of lapwings on the shore.

The next stop on our Keening tour was the remote beach of Sunnyside where, according to my mother's wishes, we had scattered her ashes. We had camped overnight along the road from the site where my parents had the trailer where they spent many of their final holidays together and arrived early at the farm which lay at the road end. It was a mile long walk to the beach and on the way we passed a strange whitewashed conical building which towered above the wheat in the fields around it. I circled the building and discovered an old wooden door at the back. Pushing it open I discovered a small entrance space before an iron gate which barred entry to the building. The fluttering of wings told me it has inhabited. Indeed it was a sixteenth century dovecot and apparently housed 700 nest boxes in its interior. The doocots (as they were known locally) provided fertilizers in the shape of the bird's droppings and food as the young birds were cooked in stews and soups.

Lack of sleep and other problems had created a tension between the three of us which had to be dispelled before we reached the beach. I felt a strong desire to process along the cliffs towards the bay and thus decided to change into my Keening attire in the bushes on the clifftop despite being unaware of the distance involved. Somehow I felt this would allow the three of us to forget the problems of travelling together, sharing difficult living conditions (at nights we would search for a place to camp, but it was cold and sometimes difficult to sleep in the tent) so that by the time we arrived at the beach we would feel bonded once again.

I began chanting a full litany: “Monica Samoa Yousuf Omar Joan Isobel Bell oh woe is me ah-ah-ah, Ron nor nor nor Ron Ron oh. Oh oh oh” I incorporated handclaps and span round before breaking into a run having arranged to meet my friends on the beach below for the Keening ceremony. When I reached the beach it seemed I was alone, and I ran to the waves.

I had decided to show the preparation required to keen by shaving in the sea. I always carry out performances clean shaven and often when I prepare I cut myself. On this occasion I hoped my blood would flow as a result of this feral act though on this day I managed a close shave without too much damage.

I then began to keen, spinning in the sand till I fell, and began to mark out the circle and logo of the World Bank tracing the lines in the sand with a stick. Collecting my songbook from the rocks I returned to the circle singing “I want to join... they slice through this corruption”

The binding of the book held the collection of black feathers I had gathered in the graveyard, and I accompanied these words by stabbing one of the feathers into the sand on the perimeter of the circle. “Woe is our lot” I continued as I marked out the final intersections with the last few feathers. Rising, I clasped the bag of cowries in my hands then raised the songbook to cover my eyes, signalling the end of the ritual.



**Fig. 10.17 Sunnyside Beach (2017)**

Afterwards I strolled along the beach carrying out the old family tradition that had brought my mother here- beach combing. The cowries in my remembrance bag were from her collection of the tiny unusual shells gathered from many beaches all over Scotland but many of them would have come from this her favourite beach. I wanted to find a cowrie shell there, and finally after a while searching, I came upon one amongst the sand and other shells.

From the North-East of Scotland where I grew up, to the North West Highlands where our family spent most of its holidays was quite a journey, and still is despite road improvements.

On the way north we took a short detour off the main road to Fort George, a military garrison which had been constructed in the 18th century after the Second Jacobean rebellion, to make sure that no such uprising took place again.



The clan system which had supported the rebellion was destroyed in the years following that armies massacre at Culloden in 1746 but the garrison at Fort George was called out in the following century to enforce the clearance of townships across the highlands to make way for the large sheep farming industry which still dominates in that region. From a society in which small crofting communities scraped a living from the earth the highlands became managed for the growing trade in wool which was a more cost effective use of the terrain.

The ramparts at Fort George are a silent testimony to the violence which shaped the landscape of the highlands, still one of the least populated areas in Europe. It is one of the most imposing military forts in mainland Britain with a complex design of deep ditches and boundary walls surrounding it which stretch over a mile in circumference.

When we arrived the visitor centre was closed but I discovered a long set of steps which led down into one of the big ditches which lay between the walls of the fort. The grass was long and gulls seemed to be nesting there. With the royal coat of arms above the fort's entrance behind me, we filmed a short speech in which I talked about this past. When I turned to look behind me I noticed the British flag was no longer flying on the pole behind me and reviewing the video footage we realised we had captured the moment when it was lowered at the end of the day.

That night we camped by a river on the wild road which leads over the hills to Bonar Bridge. In the morning the rain and thick clouds of midges which swarmed around us made packing the car a fraught and difficult task. My fiends were covered in bites and had hardly slept because of strong allergic reaction to the bites.

We drove in an awkward silence, almost without stopping the final 70 miles which separated us from the north coast and Durness. The showers continued so we sheltered for a while in Cocoa Mountain, the cafe famous for its chocolate, in the craft village of Balnakeil, This was possibly the farthest north western settlement on mainland Britain and was built as a military station during the Cold War. It was never used and instead the army rented the huts to artists who created a thriving craft community I used to visit with my family in the 1970's.

Beyond the community lay the long sandy beach of Balnakeil and the old churchyard where the next Keening ritual took place.

I prepared myself in the busy car park, this time I had decided for the first time in the tour to wear make-up since I would begin the ritual in an alcove in the ruined church. In this way I wanted to emphasise the role of the keening women in accompanying the body of the deceased in procession to the site of burial.

In this case the procession would pass through the graveyard and end on the beach which, for me represented the wilderness, an area between land and sea where ownership is unclear.

I remembered the alcove from my previous visit- legend had it that the mass murderer Duncan McMurdo was buried there in a grave which was positioned "half in and half out" of the church since the clergy didn't want to bury him in hallowed ground but his employer had paid a handsome sum so this compromise had been reached.

Whatever the truth, the alcove with its skull carved in the stone was the perfect spot to begin the keening. A blackened piece of wood had been left there which served me as a symbol of the missing body on the wake I was to accompany.

I carried out a full lament as I made my way out of the ruined church and through the gravestones, adding “And this is my lot, and this is our lot.. the keening women- this is our lot ! To keene for the lost, to keene for the extinct, to keene for the gone, to keene by the sea that washes...but can it wash us clean?”

Leaving the churchyard I crossed the short distance that separated it from the beach and passed through the wooden gate onto the grassland. “I who join the keening women, weep o’er graves beside the sea, weep for those gone, not forgotten, weep for those who will not return, weep for those who will not return”

And as I continued the lament I began spreading the charcoal from the blackened wood over my face and body, before stepping onto the beach and digging the wood into the sand to provide the centre for the circular World Bank symbol I then traced out.

Gathering the feathers I circled round its perimeter singing “Woe is me, woe are we, woe are we” marking each phrase with a stabbing motion as I jabbed the feathers into the circle’s edge.

Once they had all been positioned I untied the memento mori bag from my keening necklace and emptied its contents in my palm.

Round and round I ran, marking an outer circle with my feet until I fell...and placed the shells and berries on the songbook.

With the rhythmic chant of “Monica Samia Yousof Omar Joan Isobel Bell Ron Ron a Bell, Monica Samia Yousof Omar” I accompanied the final series of cycles, ending them bent over before the circle. As I straightened up I realised I had been constructing a shrine of sorts.

In silence I took off my necklace, and carefully placed the shells and berries back in the bag, tying it closed.

Next I removed the two feathered charms which formed part of Geyserbird’s ceremonial dress and placed them in the shrine, then the third enamelled pussy brooch which I stuck into the wood, now an effigy at its centre. Finally, standing up, I sang once more the single word “Keening” and let my dress fall to the ground. I placed it in the circle with the other elements and ran the 50 yards or so to the sea. It cold waters shocked me and I splashed through them till I was knee deep.



Fig. 10.18 Balnakeil (2017)

The chill sent a thrill through my body, I began laughing, splashing through the waters up and down the beach I ran, ending my giddy run in the arms of my friend, outstretched, holding the tartan blanket she had bought in a charity shop in my home town to combat the cold nights in the tent from Jeannie a friend of my mothers.

After I had warmed up and changed we went for a long walk across the beach out to the cliffs beyond. On the way back I got separated from my friends and after a fruitless search for her, returned to the beach in time to see two young women practising some kind of perfectly choreographed exercise routine together. It seemed as if their “dance” was some kind of response to my ritual. I walked quietly by them making sure my arrival on the now- deserted beach did not disturb them.

That night we drove to the remote hamlet of Oldshoremore, the place my parents had returned to faithfully year after year, camping in a site near a beautiful beach with a headland covered in the alpine flowers my mother would spend hours identifying.

The campsite had closed down a few years ago when the owner retired so I camped overlooking the beach, in the lee of the cemetery walls. It began to rain as I set up the tent but fortunately it stopped raining in the middle of the night as my flimsy charity shop tent had already let in water the night before. Once we had dried everything in the early morning sunshine we set off for the final Keening site: Handa, an island only accessible via boat.

“Up until the mid 19th Century, Handa supported a relatively large population for its size - in the census of 1841, 63 people lived there. Traditionally, the oldest widow was given the title “Queen of Handa”. The potato famine of 1848 led to the migration of the islanders to Canada and it has since then been uninhabited. Handa rises over 400ft above sea level and measures about a mile by a mile and a half.”<sup>329</sup>

The island was now a nature reserve managed by the Scottish Wildfowl Trust who ran boats from the mainland carrying birdwatchers and holidaymakers. A guide met us after we had landed in the bothy which served as an information centre and explained what we would see and the rules we must follow during our visit since as a breeding site for skuas and other seabirds access was strictly controlled and off path hiking forbidden.

It would be complicated to carry out the ritual with a certain degree of privacy, respecting these limitations but I was determined to keen there since as a society which had been, at least in part supportive of women, it seemed the perfect place to end the tour. After rejecting a few sites as possibilities for the ritual, we settled beside some pools of water on a high grassy plain overlooking the sea and the hills of the mainland. I prepared myself by a rock which provided at least some shelter from the omnipresent wind.

Once dressed I began, dedicating my lament to the bird which had once lived on the island but had become extinct in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: “I Keen for the Great Auk.”

The wind was high as I keened, turning round on myself to face all angles, stabbing the 5 feathers that represented the members of my family in a circular perimeter around me. Once I had completed the circle, I stripped myself of my amulets and jewellery to construct a small shrine in the grass, this time including a piece of tartan I had brought with me from Spain.

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329 Source: <https://www.scourie.co.uk/history> - Accessed 27/7/17



Finally I washed my face in the waters of the pool beside me and raised the blackened wood effigy to cover my face. For now, the Keening was over. A large black beetle wandered by.



**Fig. 10.19 Handa Island (2017)**

On this tour I feel somehow like I've gone somewhere I've never gone before, never really wanted to go.... It's like I was laying bare the processes of creation, something which had been fashionable for years.

When I had lived in Scotland I had found it difficult to find funding in the 90s because the arts council only seemed to fund work-in-progress, and as I was more interested in the interaction with the audience and preferred to present finished work, it was extremely difficult to produce work. The situation had been little better in London where the Live Art Development agency carried out a similar policy. This was something I discussed candidly with a complete stranger on the southbound bus. I'd decided to write down some of my impressions of the trip when her book fell on my lap, jolting her awake. She had grown up in the Yemen watching women keening as they accompanied bodies from the washing place beneath her house to the site of the funeral, and had moved to Scotland from London over 20 years ago to help run a contemporary dance company in Dundee of all places. Our conversation helped me clarify something...

There is no rehearsal for life, I don't represent, I just do. This is what's important. Maybe it is scary to plunge into something that way, but its the only way that seems honest to me. Throughout the whole experience something important had been resolved.

I realised that truly this IS my lot, as a transgender person. I, who have felt the pain of rejection by society, must bear witness, must shed real tears for what is about to be lost. If not I, then who?

But in the same way that the women who keened for the dead in the small communities of North West Scotland had done, or indeed as any of the women who carry out this important social function around the world, I must recognise that it is a function, a calling or a vocation- yes, but what must remain clear is that it is never, never, never, a sentence, because it is a choice we make, not an imposition.

I am not ashamed, but I hope my acts will shame others.

**PART THREE**

**HYSTERICAL PROCESSES**

# CHAPTER XI

## RADICAL PEDAGOGY

- *Workshop Presentations* (2016-)
- *Video-Essays Dramatised Lectures* (2008-)
- *Music Albums* (2013-2015)
- *Publications* (2012-)

“Current ecological movements certainly have merit, but in truth I think that the overall ecosophical question is too important to be left to some of its usual archaisers and folklorists, who sometimes deliberately refuse any large-scale political involvement. Ecology... questions the whole of subjectivity and capitalistic power formations, whose sweeping progress cannot be guaranteed to continue as it has for the past decade.”<sup>330</sup>

The works in *Natural Hysteria* can be seen as a response to the call made by Guattari in relation to the “deterioration of human relations to the socius, the psyche and ‘nature’”<sup>331</sup> and I agree that the message is far too important to be left in the hands of specialists or to be limited to specialist forums where everyone is in agreement. Since my work is transversal and touches not only on environmental issues but also on feminist and queer issues, when it is presented in any one of these contexts it introduces additional concepts which are not normally considered or discussed. Thus whilst carrying out a cross-pollinisation between these forms of activism I hope it can generate a complicity between different sectors of society.

In my performances I construct a discourse, mixing social critique with entertainment, which I have called **Antitainment**, a form of live art which crystallised over the years.

It was influenced by an attention to the audience which developed in the early years of my practice when performing in raves and pubs where the respectful silence afforded performance artists working in gallery spaces was not an option. In these more informal spaces it was essential to connect with the audience otherwise they were free to ignore the work and continue dancing, drinking or talking. Therefore I developed a fast paced style informed by counter-cultural movements like punk and drag which are very direct in their communication with the public, and aim to provoke a reaction or involve the audience in the performance.

The idea of provocation was of course a part of artistic movements such as Dada, Situationism and Fluxus, but combining them with drag adds an element of humour which gives me the opportunity to introduce more serious issues without falling into the trap of agit prop performance where often the medium is sacrificed to the message.

Avoiding the seduction of the society of the spectacle which conceives culture as an opiate for the masses Debord conceived his cinema as a form of anti cinema in order to provoke the audience.

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<sup>330</sup> Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (The Athlone Press, London 2000) p.52

<sup>331</sup> Ibid p.41



**Antitainment**, also attempts to provoke a reaction, to awaken the social conscience of the public but represents a queer seduction that subverts the nature of the spectacle itself. It invites interaction from a public no longer seen as passive observers but implicated in the work. In this respect it is closer to cabaret than the Avantgarde.

This practice is similar to Jack Smith's who: "believed art should be entertaining but also didactic. At the same time he believed it should question the status quo."<sup>332</sup>

Since my work contains a strong didactic element, I decided that it was important to explore discursive formats such as performance lectures, conferences and workshops. Furthermore in order to disseminate this discourse to a wider audience I also create and exhibit video-essays, music albums and publications.

"Pedagogically, and ideologically the performative becomes an act of doing, a dialogical way of being in the world, a way of grounding performances in the concrete situations of the present. The performative becomes a way of interrogating how "objects, discourses, and practices construct possibilities for and constraints on citizenship". This stance connects the biographical and the personal to the pedagogical and the performative. It casts the cultural critic in the identity of a critical citizen, a person who collaborates with others in participatory action projects that enact militant democratic visions of public life, community, and moral responsibility."<sup>333</sup>

I was interested in the concept of performance pedagogy exemplified in the philosophy of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra: "I thought: if I could only turn the classroom or workshop-studio into a performance and rehearsal space, reconcile my theory and praxis, and utilize my performance techniques to teach, I may be able to find a temporary utopian space within an educational context. I saw the potential of the classroom and workshop space. It could become an extension of both the performance space and the social world, a kind... of demilitarized zone and nerve centre for progressive thought and action... If performance is a form of radical democracy then performance artists must learn to hear others and teach others to hear"<sup>334</sup>

The change in register to which Gómez-Peña refers is quite difficult to achieve as it can be hard to maintain the level of intensity of a performance in a workshop or lecture. A good teacher engages with a class but the communication skills required to generate complicity with students is something which is either natural or requires practice and learning to achieve.

I believe it is easier for me to keep the attention of the audience by switching to a performative register which adds charisma to the presentations. Thus I can use the communication skills learnt carrying out participatory actions in the academic context by viewing the classroom as a theatre.

Changing the tone of my voice, the clothes and make-up I wear, allows me to enter a performative space.

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332 Uzi Parnes, *Jack Smith: Legendary filmmaker, Theatrical genius, and exotic art consultant in the European Media Art festival catalogue* (Innsbruck, 1994)

333 Norman K Denzin *Performing (Auto)Ethnography Politically* (The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 25, Taylor and Francis, 2003) p.273

334 Guillermo Gómez Peña, *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2005) p.96

Humour and playfulness are crucial in encouraging an atmosphere of exchange and creativity so whenever possible, I subvert the normal academic presentation style by introducing performative elements or turning the presentation into a performance by appearing as an alter ego. “the work of Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Davis, Marga Gomez, and many other queer performers of color who... participate in the genre of comedy and satire, these performances do not lose sight of the fact that humor is a valuable pedagogical and political project.”<sup>335</sup>

For many years I have relied on the construction of performance alter egos to speak in public because they give me the confidence to say and do things I would not normally do, but they may create a distance between me and the public. However participatory our actions may be, or intimate our connection with the public, there are still firm boundaries between the public and the performance artist.

With **Information action** (1972) Joseph Beuys invited a museum public to take part in an experiment of what he described as social sculpture. In this durational piece, which many have seen as a precursor of the performance lecture format, Beuys discussed politics with the public for 8 hours (the full working day of the museum) using a series of blackboards to express his ideas but also to create the atmosphere of a classroom in the gallery.

This piece was criticised by members of the audience who questioned the use of a microphone in the action, since they claimed it gave Beuys a privileged position at the centre of the action the whole time: “To what extent Beuys’s forms of teaching were in practice actually able to achieve audience participation in an open forum... or whether he just gathered an audience around himself, is something that has to be critically appraised”<sup>336</sup>

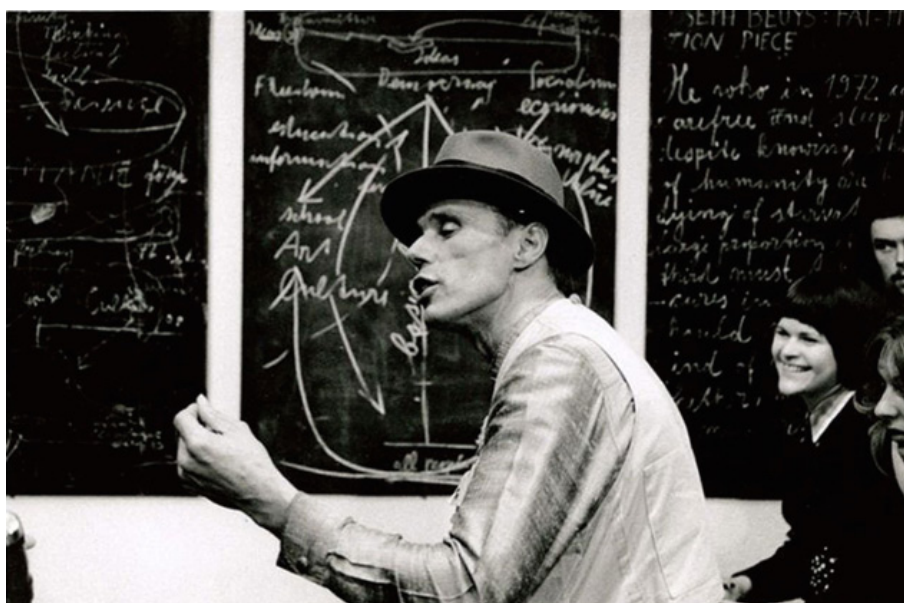


Fig. 11.1 Joseph Beuys, *Information Action* (1972)

Beuys’ desire, to carry out a radical form of democracy through his performances might have been frustrated by his highly unusual and individualistic personality but whether the experiment worked or not, is less important than the questions it raised about democracy and the role of the artist in society.

335 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p.xi

336 Marianne Wagner, *Doing Lectures: Performative Lectures as a Framework for Artistic Action*, in Kathrin Jentjens et al., *Lecture Performance*, (Revolver, Berlin 2009) p.21

“This public intellectual practices critical performance pedagogy. As a concerned citizen, working with others, he or she takes positions on the critical issues of the day, understanding that there can be no genuine democracy without genuine opposition and criticism”<sup>337</sup>

In an interesting evolution, the kind of collaborative processes that Beuys was experimenting with, are now very popular with museums. Workshops and educational programmes encourage the public to see the institution as a space where they can go to play, learn, or interact.

The spectacle has invaded the museum and their reinvention as sites of production is in line with capitalist values. A fine balancing act is being carried out since the museums want to be seen as encouraging art practices which engage with the audience, but these practices must not threaten to overthrow the role of the institution as a site of cultural production within a system based on surplus value.

The economy of art relies on institutional support making it difficult for artists to refuse to work within this system unless they have another source of income, therefore as Gómez-Peña points out a lot of his work is done outside the institution and is never mentioned in art reviews.

Sometimes it is only through experimentation that we can learn our strengths and limitations, even though, this means that sometimes we must accept an experiment’s failure. In our goal oriented society where we must be seen to succeed and be productive at all costs, failure can be a powerful form of queer resistance.

Capitalism requires that there are winners and losers and as Judith Halberstam points out rejecting the rules is a subversive act of: “art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable the unlikely and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art and for being.”<sup>338</sup>

### **Workshop Presentations**

Workshop presentations are interesting because they give an opportunity to expand upon the ideas behind the performances before carrying out the practical part of the session. The performative aspects mix with the theoretical basis of the action, so the participants are aware of the background and implications of the action.

One of the main differences between a performance and a workshop is the focus. Whilst carrying out a performance I am presenting work and although I may react to interventions from participants, I generally have a clear idea of what I am going to do, whereas in a workshop the focus is the exchange between me and the public. Therefore, the process of listening to and interacting with the public may significantly alter the outcome.

This personal interaction requires a different set of skills to those used in performance. Whereas a powerful live presence can work in the context of a performance, it can generate a distance in a workshop which may alienate the public.

<sup>337</sup> Norman K Denzin *Performing (Auto)Ethnography Politically* (The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, Vol 25, Routledge London 2003) p.273

<sup>338</sup> J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011) p.88



In these situations workshop leaders generally use a more informal tone to create a relaxed atmosphere. Humour can be useful in generating this atmosphere and when I have invited the public to collaborate with me in a cabaret context, it has generally been a success whilst it can be more difficult to recreate this atmosphere in an academic or institutional context.

I approach the preparation of a workshop in the same way I would a performance, adapting it to the context and the event. Therefore in a workshop given at the Arts faculty I gave a talk based on an alternative hysteria of art and the practical part of the workshop was based on musical experimentation, whereas in the more political context of the AnArco presentation I focused on strategies of activism in the arts and encouraged participants to create a manifesto.

When carrying out the ritual in public space, the restrictions of the context make it very difficult to experiment, but when given the opportunity of a workshop in a controlled environment there are more possibilities to incorporate different techniques and practices, and to experiment with corporal expression, musical instruments and singing.

Indeed my participatory rituals function as a kind of workshop in performance with lessons in free expression using different vocal and corporal techniques, music and dance. Participants are encouraged to express their emotions directly and explore the theatrical side of their nature.

Here is a list of the workshop presentations:

**Transgender Rituals and Myths: An hysterical critique of the education system**  
Day of Multidisciplinary Education for Gender Equality, Valencia University  
(25/4/16)

**Cabaritual: music and ritual in performance**  
Arts Faculty UPV (11-12/5/16)

**Towards Ecotransfeminism: how to queer the ecology movement and vice-versa**  
Octubre Contemporary Culture Centre, Valencia (17/12/16)

**How to Heal...**  
Festival For Equality, Valencia University (30/3/17)

**Eco BDSM Presentation**  
XVII Anarchist Book Fair, CSOA L'Horta, Valencia (6/4/17)

In the following I will discuss more in depth a selection of them.

- **Cabaritual: music and ritual in performance**

This two day workshop took place in the white cube exhibition space of the UPV as part of the activities organised in conjunction with my performance at **The Ritual Box II** exhibition.

I was interested in expanding the ritual format to create a looser structure, and encourage a more collaborative process which would implicate the participants in the construction of the ritual itself.

On the first day I talked about the philosophy which informs my work and traced an alternative queer and feminist genealogy of performance. I felt it was important to present another interpretation of the canon because, in the Faculty of Arts at the University, it often seems as if performance is taught as an expression of a neutral subjectivity, one in which race, sexuality and gender have no bearing.

Therefore I decided to do the presentation in drag, and introduce an alternative genealogy of female and transgender performers.

I wanted to challenge stereotypical views of cross-dressers, presenting myself as an expert in art history. My highly subjective overview, which was in line with my appearance, was also a subtle critique of the way in which bodies which do not raise questions about gender are seen to present an objective view of art history, when in fact every historian has their own biased view.

I began the lecture by talking about the often overlooked contribution of Emmy Hennings to the success of the Cabaret Voltaire, home of the dada group in Zurich. This short lived cabaret which opened its doors in 1916 is generally held to be the place where performance was born.

However, despite the greater fame achieved by Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara, according to contemporary newspaper reports, it was Hemmings who was actually the star of the cabaret. She had worked in a travelling theatre company and was an accomplished poet and singer who had spent time in prison in 1914 for forging passports to help pacifists escape from the war.

At the first of these dada events she read one of her anti war and prison poems and, according to Richard Huelsenbeck, sang “with an anger we had to give her credit for although we scarcely thought her capable of it”<sup>339</sup>

The condescending tone of this comment reflects a general tendency to view women as muses or peripheral in art movements. Furthermore, many of the supposedly rebellious artists of the time did not accept on moral grounds the fact that Emmy occasionally worked as a prostitute to support her family. These attitudes are probably the reason why her role in the cabaret has been so underestimated in art history.

Another female performer who is often overlooked is Penny Arcade who explores the terrain between theatre, cabaret and performance. Her show **Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!** (1990-95) was a sex positive critique of the censorship going on in the USA at the time where various artists had funding withdrawn because their work was considered offensive.

The show mixed improvisation, pole dancing, monologue and audience participation and was also a criticism of the politically correct movement “that had been rising in the Gay world since the mid seventies. B!D!F!W! was the queer, feminist, erotic dancer backlash and united thousands of people in 30 cities around the world, hiring strippers and performers in every city we played in and proved undeniably in the face of that JUDGEMENTAL PC world that one could be a FEMINIST and a stripper, a FEMINIST and a Prostitute, a Feminist and ANYTHING you wanted to be or were including a MAN”<sup>340</sup>

When female artists are not excluded from official histories they often appear in the role of femme fatales or as wives or lovers and not for their own artistic achievements.

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339 Penelope Rosemont, *Women of dada and their times*, (Against the Current Vol 181, Detroit March 2016) Online at: <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4589> - Accessed 26/2/18

340 Penny Arcade, *When Closeted People Censor*. Online at <http://pennyarcade.tv/when-closeted-people-censor/#.Wp0tnYJG2FA> - Accessed 5/3/18



Fig. 11.2 Penny Arcade, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!*

Indeed the Spanish version of Wikipedia still implies Yoko Ono's main achievement to be "John Lennon's second wife" despite her importance in the Fluxus movement and the fact she had already carried out such influential performances as **Cut Piece** (1964) and **Bag Piece** (1965) years before she met him. These early works were ignored until 1989 when the Whitney Museum had a retrospective of her work **Yoko Ono: objects, films**, which allowed her work to be re-evaluated.

On the second day, I used the opportunity to experiment and try out a series of new participatory practices with a large group of enthusiastic young students, many of whom had never studied or taken part in a performance before.

I began with the choral piece to overthrow patriarchy for which I had prepared a score sheet. I then invited the group to divide into the three sections which form a trans chorus -*bajas*, *sopranas* and *alternores*.<sup>341</sup> In this trans choir practice, based on a subversive use of the gendered structure of the Spanish language, the different voices are each assigned a vowel which, when combined with the others, creates a cyclical musical structure. The masculine vowel sound o blends into the feminine vowel sound a, the neutral i and then back again.

It was interesting to note that at this point a lot of the male students left, perhaps, this was because they were embarrassed to sing in public.

When I taught each group their part in the piece sometimes I got confused going between the different voices and had to improvise to create a harmonious result which gave the experience quite an experimental feel. Although I personally don't mind if the combination is not harmonious, if the people in the group are not accustomed to discordancy, this can cause them discomfort.

But the process of moving from discordance to harmony seemed to generate a positive energy in the group which the incredible acoustic reverb of the space multiplied.

<sup>341</sup> These distinctions are described more fully in Chapter 7.





Fig. 11.3 Cabaritual Workshop presentation, UPV (2016)

Interestingly, these moments of doubt and adjustment create experimental sound pieces which are much more powerfully queer than they would be if everyone sang in perfect harmony.

The experience of singing in a choir can be quite moving, especially for those who are not accustomed to the experience. The harmonies -and discordancies- which are created between the different notes that each section of the choir sings, is something that can not be experienced outside of the choir. Hearing one's voice blending with others gives a sense of belonging to a group which become united through the practice although it may differ in many ways on any other level.

For the second part of the workshop I wanted to work outside the sterile atmosphere of the room so, together with a smaller group, we went out into a disused area near the main building. There we continued in a looser format improvising with the voice, percussion instruments and the body to generate sound.

The intimacy of the smaller group made it easier to create new musical bases and the group had such good communication that we ended up carrying out a series of interesting sound experiments which included a ten minute improvisation where the melodic intervention of a Spanish guitar, inspired a vocal based on the chorus "Punk's against the system".

- **Towards Ecotransfeminism: how to queer the ecology movement and vice-versa**<sup>342</sup>

This talk and workshop formed part of the *AnArco* cycle of presentations *Ètiques i Estètiques llibertàries* (Libertarian Ethics and Aesthetics).

<sup>342</sup> Originally titled: Cap a l'ecotransfeminisme: com fer queer el moviment ecologista i viceversa. A sound archive of the talk (in Spanish) is available online at: <https://anarcoartllibertari.org/cap-a-leco-transfeminisme-com-fer-queer-el-moviment-ecologista-i-viceversa-taller-debat/>

Through the invitation to take part in the *AnArco* exhibition: **Art Llibertari vs Art Liberal** (8-17/4/2016, several spaces, Valencia) I had met regularly with locally based artists and activists.

Over a four month period we debated the concepts of community feminism, postcolonialism and anarchism, organizing the exhibition and other events that were part of the project. Since all decisions had to be made by consensus, this long and sometimes frustrating process was a lesson in patience and listening. After the exhibition, together with a small group of activists we decided to continue programming events and began holding monthly talks with artist and activist.

The group meetings were an excellent opportunity to debate ideas about art and activism with people from a different background (apart from a Greek comrade I was the only non Spanish member of this group) and together we produced a varied programme of events which were documented on the groups website and publicised through the site of the Octubre Cultural Centre which hosted the events. The programming included talks by: Amaia Orozco and representatives of **Vicoval** an activist group which defends the rights of people with functional diversity to lead an independent life; Marina Pastor on borders and the Nation State; and the **Tenderete** collective who coordinated a debate about the role of graphic art in social movements.

In this context I was invited to give a talk on my philosophy and decided to combine the talk with an experimental workshop.

To contextualise the importance of environmental issues I opened the discussion with the results of two studies: one carried out by **The Hills Group**, an association of engineers whose studies show that the cost of extracting petrol will outweigh the returns by 2022; and the other showing the current state of danger of extinction of different groups of animals.

Using examples from my artistic references I discussed the different strategies these artists use to challenge the system. The first example was of a radical defiance based on the total condemnation of a corrupt system using extreme imagery to make the abuse of power evident.

The example of this strategy was the **Grupo Chaclacayo** (previously discussed in chapter III) who were working at the height of the most violent period in Peru's recent history when the government and extreme left wing group Shining Path were battling for power. In the context of institutionalised violence there was no room for dialogue and the very survival of the group depended on carrying out their radical practices on the margins of society.

In societies where the relations of power are more diffuse other strategies can emerge and in the case of **EZLN (Ensemble Zoologique de Libération de la Nature)** direct action is used to denounce corporations and anti-democratic treaties of free exchange (TTIP, CETA, etc...).

The group are based in Belgium and have been active since 2015, when they zapped a Volkswagen factory to denounce the fake emissions devices installed in the company's cars.

The **EZLN** carry out their semi illegal actions disguised as animals and vegetables and use this highly theatrical form of presentation to create videos which go viral through their use of social media bringing to the world their message: "We are nature, defending itself!"



**Fig. 11.4 EZLN, Action against Bayer (2015)**

Artists whose work is political, often use different strategies, occasionally working with institutions and occasionally outside of them in collaboration with activist groups. As an example of these strategies I showed the **Love Art Labs** work, and Anohni who uses the powerful marketing tools of the music business to publicise her ideas.

For the practical part of the workshop I decided to carry out an experiment in collective writing inviting participants to generate a poetic text with antecedents in both artists and activists movements: the manifesto. Instead of showing any of the well known surrealist, dada or futurist manifestos, I showed examples of two political manifestos, one *Contra totes les contaminacions* (Against all contamination) released by the **Antinuclear Committee of Catalunya** in 1979 and one released by the the **F.A.I.** (Iberian Anarchist Federation) against child soldiers and militaristic toys.

### **Video-Essays and Dramatised Lectures**

My relationship with the video camera is very important as I both document my performances in this medium and make short films and video-art. My practice is based on the maximum use of the resources available to me, taking advantage of any opportunities to perform and film in strange, unusual and/or interesting places and contexts and sometimes I perform solely for the camera to generate material for my multimedia performances.

In this way I have built up a large archive of material and in 2007 I began to recycle this footage in the production of a “Greatest Hits” DVD to present my work to Spanish audiences. This is how I developed the experimental format of the video-essay which I have used since then to express my political and artistic ideas.



The sequences of the narrator in these videos were filmed in spaces which related to the material under discussion: for example I used a paper theatre to discuss theatre and cabaret work in *Antitainment*, or the projection room of the Sala Parpalló exhibition space to discuss the media.

These videos have been shown at festivals, in exhibitions and in certain cases are available online, making my work available to audiences at LGTB and post porn festivals, and students of queer performance.

Indeed when I was unable to attend the **II International Congress on Research in the Visual Arts** (at the UPV, Valencia 9/7/15) whose theme was **Virtual/Real** I prepared my presentation by filming a performative version of the speech then editing it with footage of the artists under discussion in a video-essay **Transgender Operations: drag, performance and representation in the on-screen age**.

I have also used these video-essays as the basis of both live performances and dramatised lectures where I replace the narrator in the films with my on stage presence and insert the prepared video footage within my narrative.

Documentation of earlier performances is selected and organised into themes which are then mixed with material recorded specifically for the lecture constructing a discourse through a review of my work using the technique of video collage.

“In the *lecture performance* half-knowledge, invention and fiction in the treatment of truth play a fundamental role”<sup>343</sup>

I believe this mixed media format exemplifies the transdisciplinary nature of my approach and is a very effective way to present the various facets of my work in a live context. “The simultaneous presentation of images, iconography, objects and actions from seemingly separate worlds (i.e. shared collective experience back to back with personal experience) creates a performatic middle ground, evocative of the “betwixt and between”; the liminal state of consciousness explored by anthropologist Victor Turner. It is believed that liminal space provides a place for genuine energy exchange, meditation and personal transformation”<sup>344</sup>

I have been experimenting using video-essays in live presentations since 2008, in a wide variety of styles and contexts.

For example: in the *Valetudo* performance festival I discussed the concept of **Antitrenimiento** (Antitainment) and sang my critical version of a popular catalan rumba; then in the **Ritual and Death** performance in rural Scotland, the video was projected onto a standing stone after which I carried out a keening ritual; and in the Mr Pink art gallery I presented **Antitrenimiento II**, ending with a projection of the Palestinian flag while a choral backing accompanied me singing along to a psalm.

In **Identidad** (Identity), the first performance lecture carried out in an academic context, the **Heretical Sexualities and Bodies in Artistic Practises** conference in Altea, I used the video to give myself freedom to improvise.

Whilst my onscreen persona talked, I lay onstage watching the screen, mimicking my onscreen actions and running around the lecture hall. I finished the lecture by carrying out a strip tease to reveal the word Bisexual written on my back, in a critique of biphobic attitudes amongst certain “queer” academics, activists and performers.

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343 Marianne Wagner, *Doing Lectures: Performative Lectures as a Framework for Artistic Action*, in *Lecture Performance*, ed. by Kathrin Jentjens et al., (Revolver, Berlin, 2009) p.21

344 Victoria Singh, *Ritual in Contemporary Performance: a Document of the Contemporary Ritual Series*. Western Front Performance Art, 2005 p.7. See also: <http://sharonalward.com/public/pdf/Ritual-Article-Liminal-Acts.pdf>

My action suggested that my bisexual and unruly body in its wild abandon might be the most heretical at the conference.



Fig. 11.5 *Identidad* (2009)

In the recent lecture *Antitainment* (Queen Mary University, London, 2017) a strange feedback loop occurred when my live presentation was edited together with the original audiovisual material by the organisers who then uploaded it onto their youtube channel.



Fig. 11.6 *Antitainment*, Performance Lecture (2017)

The *Antitainment* concept was also used for the *Antitrenimiento 70* show at IVAM (Valencia), a cabaret style revue devised for the **Resistance from the Queer South** conference<sup>345</sup>. In this cross cultural homage to drag forebears and the women who inspired them, I focused on Spanish artists such as “El Titi” (who was openly gay and sang the song **Liberate** which became an anthem for sexual liberation in the late 1970’s), and the flamenco singers Antoñita Peñuela and Dolores Vargas (known as

345 The conference was part of the activities of the Collaborative Research Project CRUSEV - Cruising the 1970s: Unearthing Pre-HIV / AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures, funded by the Research and Innovation Program Horizon 2020.

“La Terremoto”- the Earthquake for her wild dance style which mixed traditional and modern elements).

I also invited local transfeminist performer Rampova (imprisoned under the Franco regime in the 1970’s for being gay) to perform as part of the revue which was a vindication of camp, femininity, and socially conscious entertainment.

Here is a list of dramatised lectures using video-essays:

### **Antitrenimiento**

Festival Valetudo, Greenspace, Valencia (16/2/08)

### **Ritual and Death**

Cairnholy, Scotland (28/3/08)

### **Identidad**

Heretical Sexualities and Bodies in Artistic Practises conference, Palau de Altea (5/11/09)

Muestra Marrana: Hangar, Barcelona (15/7/11)

### **Mi Histeria Sexual**

Film Festival Zinegoak, Bilborock, Bilbao (7/2/13)

Festival of Conceptual Strip-tease, Ca Revolta, Valencia (25/1/13)

### **Antitrenimiento II**

Mister Pink Gallery, Valencia (25/7/14)

### **Transgender Operations: drag, performance and representation in the on-screen age**

II International Congress on Research in the Visual Arts, UPV, Valencia (9/7/15)

### **Antitainment**<sup>346</sup>

Conference: Power, Subcultures & Queer Stages, Queen Mary University, London (27/4/17)

### **Antitrenimiento 70**

Conference: Resistance from the Queer South: Uses of the Past, Peripheries, and the Spaces of Sexual Liberation, IVAM, Valencia (28/4/18)

### **Music Albums**<sup>347</sup>

“Music is one of the forms of thought. In a present time full of zombie-categories that live and die in the moment, it is good to resort to other ways to try and understand the world. Popular songs, in addition to providing pleasure and connection, have the power to give us back the, always contradictory, world view of the disinherited. Despite the design of the market, in many of them there still lingers some hint of cultural conspiracy. In the same way, in contrast to a globalizing “history”, they bring us back the memory of peoples, territories, experiences and struggles already forgotten...”<sup>348</sup>

346 Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLqdh5o2Ptg> (additional editing by Lauren Angelkov Cummings)

347 All the songs of Gran Tour can be heard on line at: <https://grantour.bandcamp.com/>

348 Cecilia Flaschland, *Música y territorio ¿todo lo solido se desvanece en el aire?* (Archipiélago



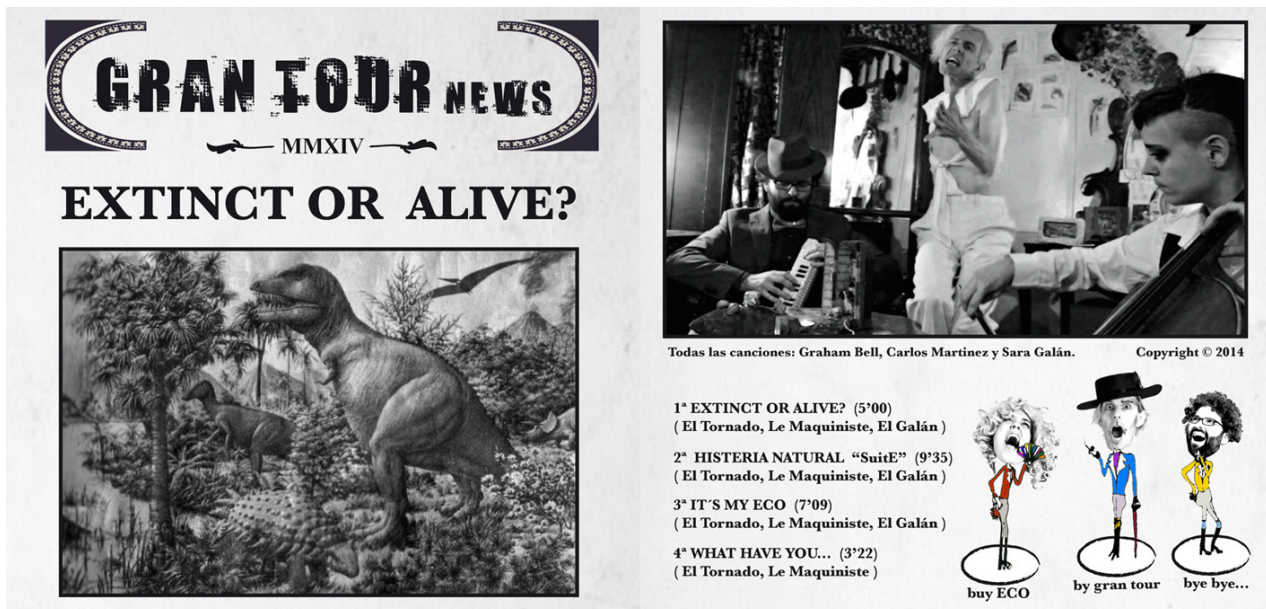


Fig. 11.7 *Extinct or Alive?* (2014)

Over the years I continuously use the lyrical form to express my ideas and the concept of Gran Tour was based on the idea of travelling as a form of education with the emphasis in the songs being to promote respect for the environment and denounce abusive environmental practices.

The classical and jazz influences in the music create a deceptively harmonious soundtrack to the bitterly ironic lyrics. The process of creation and recording of the songs was long and complicated. Most musicians enjoy the process of song writing where the structure of the song evolves through improvisations where the lyrics and music are adapted to fit.

This is also pleasurable for me as a vocalist since it as a challenge to adjust the lyrics to a rhythmic structure, and often new ideas emerge in the process.

Playing live is a way to polish the music and is also pleasurable since the feedback from the audience creates a special energy and my experience as a performer makes it easy for me to communicate with them. However when it comes to recording music, discipline is required to get good results and musicians often lack the patience to persevere and do this well.

The message of **Gran Tour** was of great importance to me and I was determined that the songs would be recorded because I felt this was a much more effective way to reach a wider audience.

Recording on a low budget is complicated, since in a DIY home studio environment, each instrument has to be recorded separately to avoid the microphone picking up sound from other instruments.

The musicians record one by one and the song structure is built up from the musical base with the vocals being recorded at the end.

Musicians who are used to playing live, often feel the energy of the song can get lost at this point, since the chemistry created in a live situation has to be sacrificed to the limitations of the set up. Of course in a professional studio each musician is in a sound booth and can hear the other musicians through headphones so the possibilities of conserving that energy are greater.

With Gran Tour we experimented with many different recording techniques in an attempt to keep that live energy, setting up microphones for each musician in different rooms in the house, or borrowing equipment from friends for a day of intense recording on a four track where each instrument can be plugged in, so that filtration of sound from one track to the other does not occur.

Over a three year period we produced these recordings in sessions carried out in different locations, with additional vocals on the last CD **Coca Oh-là-là** recorded in the sound studio of the department of sculpture at the UPV.

I produced the graphics and artwork used for our webspace and on the covers of the CDs which were sold at the band's concerts.

The recordings were also uploaded to the online web distribution network Bandcamp and can be listened to, or downloaded from our space on the site, carrying the ecotransfeminist message to the four corners of the globe.

“Coca oh-là-là, c'est un peux, c'est un peux risqué, it's a little, it's a little bit risky es un poco, es un poco arriesgado, but we're prepared to take that risk... We can build a dam in Boulder Valley, tell the locals we'll give them the jobs. Doesn't matter that it's a lie 'cause the whole government's in on the rob... ay si-si como me encanta el sabor de la sangre humana embotellada”<sup>349</sup>

Here is a list of the Gran Tour music albums:

**La Tierra de O/A** (2013)

**Extinct or Alive?** (2014)

**Coca Oh-là-là** (2015)

## **Publications**

As discussed previously, my performance practice is often based on the texts I write and their subsequent development through improvisation in a live situation. Therefore over the years I have written in a wide variety of styles and formats: songs, scripts, short stories, autobiography, auto-fiction, articles and reviews.

Since I began writing in the 1980s the market has changed but at the time it was almost impossible for queer writing to get published and furthermore as a political act many queer writers, myself included, wanted to publish our work without censorship and began to produce our own queerzines.

With the coming of the digital revolution I have made full use of the technology to publish in blogs, websites and social media but have also continued to publish short print runs of books and magazines to disseminate my work and that of others. Indeed this investigation is a development of the **Eco-Género = Eco-Gender** exhibition catalogue published in 2012 by La Erreria (House of Bent) which also contained texts by William James and Verónica Perales.

In 2017 we prepared an extended and updated version of this book, titled **Ecogender X**, which includes work carried out in this investigation. An extract, **Eco-BDSM and Extreme Practices with Nature** was released in pamphlet form and presented at the Valencian Anarchist Book Fair in 2017.

<sup>349</sup> Lyrics of *Coca oh-là-là* available online at: <https://grantour.bandcamp.com/album/coca-oh-l-l> (Translation: The taste of bottled human blood makes such a great aperitif)

After completing the Master in Artistic Production and publishing the results as **Natural Hysteria: Performance, Ritual and Queer Ecology** (2012) I began work on an, as yet unpublished, autobiographical work based on the experiences and performances carried out over the last few years: **Ecogender: my trans (r) evolutionary odyssey**.

Transgender or transexual people are their own creation and since society rejects us, we write and elaborate our own stories. There is an extensive bibliography in this format which ranges from the sensationalistic bestseller of the “first transexual in America” Christine Jorgensen (**Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography**, 1967) to the intimate confessions of godmother of punk Jayne County (**Man enough to be a Woman**, 1995), Warhol Superstar Holly Woodlawn (**A Low Life in High Heels**, 1992) and the mix of memoir and commentary of Diane Torr organiser of the first drag king workshops (**Sex, Drag and Male Roles: investigating gender as performance**, 2010).

The publication **The Catalogue: A Living Artist’s Book** documented the eponymous exhibition which together with the publication was a process of inscription of my performances and other work within a semi official history of art.

I invited artists, art-critics and writers to produce texts for the catalogue (including Juan Vicente Aliaga, Eva Caro, Rafael Tormo i Cuenca, Toni Davidson, William James, Rampova Kabaret, Amparo Latorre Romero and Rosa Sanchis Caudet) which were published alongside images of the exhibition. The central installation consisted in a series of collages in which photographs of my performances were inserted in the pages of an Encyclopedia, as if they were part of the content of the book.

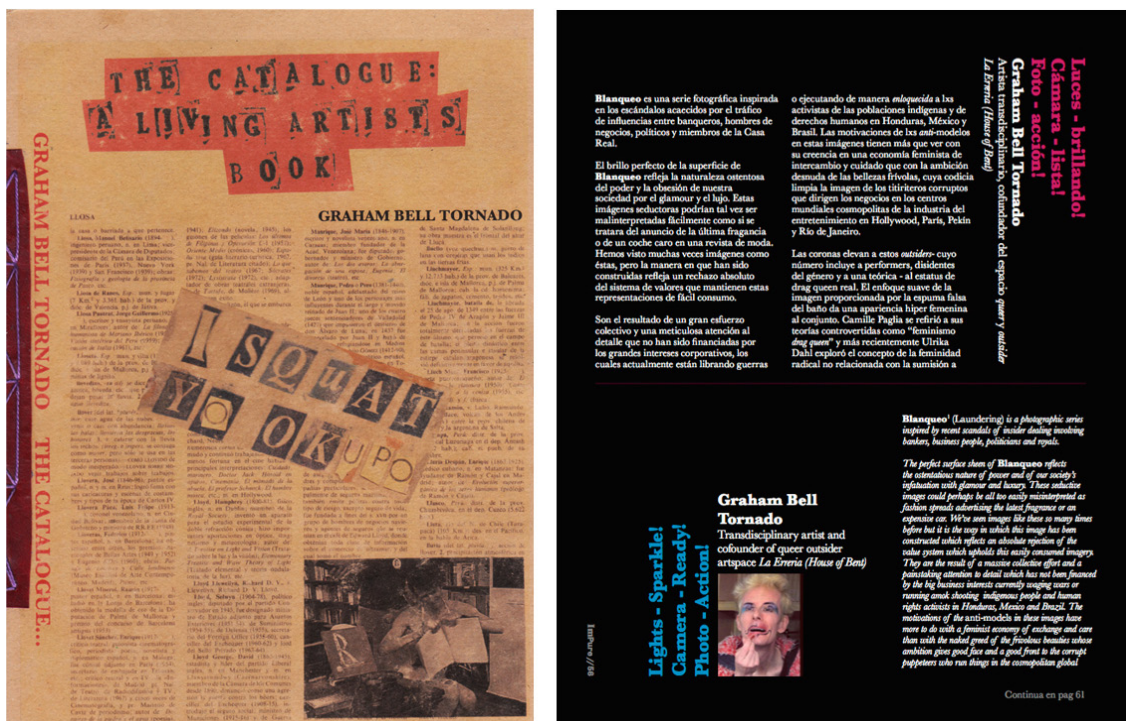


Fig. 11.8 (1) *The Catalogue...book cover* (2014) (2) *Impure* article (2016)

I have also published two essays on the transfeminist art practice of my partner Anna Maria Staiano in **Impure**, a La Erreria (House of Bent) book which was produced in collaboration with a host of feminist/queer/trans photographers, writers, performers, artists, curators and activists.



This publication has been presented at various festivals and events in London, Bilbao, Barcelona and Valencia accompanied by a series of performances and fashion shows.

Our following project was **Transexpace** which has taken the shape of a photo-novella, a short-film and various performances presenting a universe populated by Amazonian warriors, androgynous consuls and gender dissidents.

This expansive project carried out a queer appropriation of space by occupying symbolic architectures of power, such as the City of Arts and Sciences multi million project by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. As well as participating in the performances I directed the live-staging at IVAM using the particularities of the main staircase as a backdrop, and collaborated on various texts related to the project.

The catalogue for **A les Balconades**, a project which united activist groups and social movements with artists, included two of my interventions (one in collaboration with La Erreria) documented with photographs and the texts I wrote about them.

This is a list of the various publications:

**As a publisher with La Erreria (House of Bent):**

- The World of Rampova Cabaret (2009)
- Eco-Género = Eco-Gender (2012)
- The Catalogue: A Living Artist's Book (2014)
- Impure (2016)
- Eco-BDSM and Extreme Practices with Nature - Author: Diana J. Torres (2017)
- Transexpace (2018)

**Recent Articles:**

- Transgender Operations: drag, performance and representation in the on-screen age (ANIAV Conference, UPV, 2015)
- Bejewelled Voluptuaries (Impure, 2016)
- Lights – Sparkle! Camera – Ready! Photo – Action! (Impure, 2016)
- The Revolution will not be homo-genised (Gehitu vol 96, 2016)
- Entrevista a Graham Bell Tornado: Arte, Queer y Política (Canibaal, 2017, [www.canibaal.es](http://www.canibaal.es))

**Recent Exhibition Catalogues:**

- Lost in Transition \_a performance poem by Cabello/Carceller (IVAM, Valencia, 2017)
- A les Balconades (Jarit Associació Civil, 2017)

# Conclusions

I approached the conclusions of this investigation with reluctance. It's difficult to sum up a practice based on blurring the line between art and life as if it were already over. Also I remember experiments carried out when I began my university career as a first year Microbiology student where somehow we never managed to reproduce the "correct" result. We would repeat the experiment over and over, but somehow our petri dishes were always "contaminated".

Since then I have been wary of those who present clear cut experimental results and agree with Jack Halberstam, who points out that: "some cultural studies proponents have argued that social science methods of collecting, collating, and presenting sexual data through surveys and other methods of social research tend to rediscover the sexual systems they already know, rather than finding out about those they do not"<sup>350</sup> Furthermore the objectives in an investigation based on an ongoing practice ought to be fluid since artistic practices are a continuous process of trial and error. Asking the right questions is more important than knowing the solutions.

The main achievement of this investigation lies in the development of a series of actions which link queer theory with ecological awareness, bringing together interests related to politics and entertainment, anti-capitalist criticism, postcolonial theories, feminism and performance.

As part of the investigation I undertook a review of my work in order to trace an evolution of underlying themes and to see how my practice has changed over the 30 years since I began doing performance.

When I began making work the sociopolitical climate was very different to how it is now. There was very little LGBTQI visibility in the arts and in society in general, and the political gains of the 1960s were under threat from right wing governments who blamed gays for the spread of the AIDS virus. To be an out and proud transgender performer was an activist act per se.

My early performances and street actions focused on that visibility and on claiming a space both within the art world and beyond. My gender dissidence has always aligned me more clearly with performance in the expanded field of live art and popular formats such as cabarets, drag shows and musical entertainments. I may take a critical stance on the media and popular culture but I believe these are important elements of contemporary culture and that it is highly important to engage with our context and make work that can connect with all sectors of society. Perhaps this compromises my political intentions but I am not a purist, and never was. I am queer.

The seeds of this project began during my residency in the Orchardon arts community (Scotland) in the late 90's and my growing concerns about the ecological crisis was first publicly reflected in works produced there. Since then I have developed a personal symbology through actions, rituals, workshops and conferences which bring together the fields of ecology and gender studies since, as Greta Gaard says: "queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized and naturalized in a culture that disparages women, animals, nature and sexuality."<sup>351</sup>

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350 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998) p.12

351 Greta Gaard, *Towards a Queer Ecofeminism*, (Hypatia-A Journal Of Feminist Philosophy Vol. 12, No. 1, 1997) p.11

I believe that it is time the LGBTQI community and the wider society realize that all bodies are organic and we are all animals sharing a unique ecosystem. It is important for us queers to join the ecological and anti-capitalist struggle if we are to save the planet from the ravages of the free market.

At the same time, it is necessary to be aware of the difficulties involved because there is a dominant sector of the community which has embraced consumerism as a way of life. If our acceptance by society is based on our existence as a sector of exemplary consumers, perhaps its time to question whether we want to be included in that society or fight for a new, more egalitarian one: "capitalism works because it is always manipulating our desires, we believe it is important to reclaim these desires, so our work includes pleasure, play and adventure" to "give people a sense of collective creativity."<sup>352</sup>

### *Natural Hysteria*

I believe that with **Natural Hysteria** I have created temporary spaces where enjoyment and creativity go hand in hand with a social commitment, creating performances and rituals which reflect our contemporary reality. These collective experiences which fuse humour, passion and commitment create a symbolic imaginary for social and personal transformation.

Guattari's concept of the three ecologies -social, psychological and environmental- has provided a basis for this wayward and undisciplined investigation. The **How to Heal...** rituals correspond to the social aspect, whereas the **P.I.N.Q. Parks** focus on environmental aspects and the **War Memorial** installations in conjunction with the **personal rituals** explore the psychological effects of loss.

For the project I have enunciated an alternative to the official history: a hysteria that is the feminist version, the version of indigenous peoples, of animals in danger of extinction, the queer version. At the base of this project is an attempt to decolonize knowledge from its western rationalist roots.

At the beginning of the investigation I extended my work into an area that was more political and began to consider how I might blend my personality into group actions. But over the period of the investigation I realised that my personality is a product of a highly individualistic society and my role models -drag queens, outsider artists, renegade philosophers- fascinate me precisely because they do not fit in and form part of a collective mass.

I came to realise that irony, humour and sarcasm are an important part of my being and perhaps the best way for me to carry out a critique of the injustices in society is to use my voice and allow it to be expressed in its natural tone.

In the process of creating the different actions I have gone in depth into the creation of a versatile alter ego, Geyserbird, which has allowed me to agglutinate the different concepts (nature, endangered species, sexuality, entertainment), contexts (stage, cabaret, public space, conferences) and formats (music, performance, installation) in order to develop a critically positioned and committed artistic practice based on the relationship between ecology and queer theory.

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<sup>352</sup> John Jordan, *The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination: Art, Activism and Permaculture-an interview with Isa Fremeaux and John Jordan*, in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation* (2011) p.302



## *Geyserbird: the Shaman Travesti*

One of the main achievements of this investigation has been the creation of an alter ego which is flexible enough to allow me to express a wide variety of different registers from political rhetoric to poetic interludes.

Over the years I have created a series of alter egos each of which have their own style, wardrobe and character which expresses my current concerns. With Geyserbird I incorporated elements that defined a character which responds to a need to find a balance between modernity and tradition, one of the most important challenges posed by decolonial thought.

Initially I worked directly improvising with the body, exploring forms of bird movement, especially those related to courtship behaviour in the actions developed for the cabaret show *Cabaré Clandestino Corrosivo Charivari* and for the **Extinct or Alive?** video recording.

I quickly became aware of the possibilities of the character and began to develop the alter ego further incorporating elements of costume such as the ceremonial dress, high heeled shoes and amulets.

At the same time I began to explore another side of the character, that of shaman/witch, based on my studies of the traditions of transgender shamans in various cultures worldwide including the *chukchee* in Siberia, the *feminielli* in Naples, the *hijra* in India and the two spirits in various tribes of North America. I feel there is a proximity between my gender dissident art practice and other techniques of the body discredited by colonial reason such as shamanism and santeria.

In this process I was more interested in conceptualizing and investigating shamanism and witchcraft than learning the techniques of these practices, therefore I officiate ceremonies without training, using traditional codes in a personal way to create situations which have a very untraditional content.

This relates to the influence of queer theory in my practice and the idea of the performativity of gender which gives me the freedom to transgress binary roles (animal / human, male / female) and allows me to play with irony, ambiguity and humour. My interpretation of the concept of performativity gives me the freedom to shift roles and, through communicating this with others, I hope to show that we all have this potential within.

The deliberate contrast between the lack of technique and the seriousness and passion with which I perform an action may sometimes give rise to humour, a key element of my proposals which usually occurs as a result of the creation of chaotic situations where calm is maintained or an action is carried out in unconventional attire (for example: officiating a ceremony, holding complex rituals, singing in a liturgical or flamenco style) but with gravitas and the seriousness of a “professional”.

Thus I presented Geyserbird as a transgender shaman in the **Shamanic Hairdressing** ritual and continued to work in this way with the **Natural Hysteria** cycle. In all the actions proposed, the technique was less important than the discourse, which is ultimately what defines my work. I try to execute the action in the most rigorous way possible, without a previous technical training, because I am interested in the visceral and improvisational texture this gives to the action.

## *The How to Heal Cycle*

As part of the process of this investigation, I configured the performance structure of the **How to Heal...** ritual, which has proved to be of great use in the development of my work. This formula has given me the opportunity to follow a line of investigation into the adaptability of the same action for the very different contexts in which I present work: public spaces, theatrical spaces, rural and urban environments.

In the process I have learned that the challenges of adapting the work for different contexts is equally rewarding as developing new work, as it is a constant learning curve where the balance between the discursive and the playful elements in the work is constantly changing, and where I have to be sensitive to the needs and realities of a wide range of audiences with highly different profiles.

This has led me to reach a greater understanding of the power of performance to communicate and connect with the public in a very direct way, and to develop a more inclusive participatory practice. I have learnt how to motivate the public to join in by first appealing to their sense of reason, then to their emotions.

In this process, the concept of the ritual, an action which is performed repeatedly but can be slightly different each time, was highly useful as this fusion between the avant garde and tradition acted as a counter balance to my baroque tendencies to create complex work. Often as artists we have a romantic idea of art as something which must always be highly original, but art is a social practice and perhaps this direct approach is a more effective way to bring about a transformation in society.

The game of exchange that forms the basis of the **How to Heal...** ritual involves imagining that there may be a helpless insect within the heart of the most ruthless capitalist. This exchange of roles is also proposed to the spectator-participants, who are given an active role within the ritual.

The concept behind **How to Heal the World Bank** is important because it might have been more coherent with my principles to simply perform an exorcism or attempt to destroy an institution which keeps whole countries in debt in the name of development. But in an era where environmental changes are occurring at a global scale, some kind of international regulatory body -perhaps more like a gene or a blood bank than a financial one, where vital resources are stored in case of emergency- is more than ever necessary in order to enforce justice on those who infringe the rights of the planet and of those who cannot defend themselves.

I do not believe that the ritual will solve the world crisis but through collective experience, humour and participation it fosters encounters where people become aware of the need to respond to the exploitation of nature and human beings and creates a symbolic imaginary for social and personal transformation.

## *War Memorial*

My new alter ego was also useful in developing and exploring a personal commemoration of loss in the **War Memorial** installations-with-presence. This was a way to turn the ancient tradition of keening, a highly personal mourning practice, into a public expression which functioned as a form of political activism, denouncing and drawing attention to the irrevocable loss of cultural and biological diversity.

“The age of the Anthropocene is an age of grief, put simply. Not showing, sharing or indeed feeling that grief will make it all the more unbearable. But a collective keening may be key to moving forward and creating a new society that fully respects and cherishes the millions of life forms that call this planet home.”<sup>353</sup>

This practice was deconstructed in several of the **War Memorial** installations where the elements of music, video and performance were delocalised in the space so that each one was autonomous and could be experienced intimately. In this project I experimented with techniques of Shibari in order to be immobilised, leaving myself vulnerable and reflecting the inertia of our contemporary reality which has turned us into “the audience of the apocalypse”<sup>354</sup>.

### **P.I.N.Q. Park Project**

Many of the conclusions of this investigation are contained in the changing processes and work carried out during the investigation, for example, when I wanted to explore the possibilities of going beyond performance to create something less ephemeral, I began working on the **P.I.N.Q. Park**, a cycle of works in which the emphasis was on the spaces and the creation of the network, but which nevertheless included a performative aspect in the form of celebratory opening ceremonies and participative parades.

The parks are symbolic of global conflicts over conservation, the use of space and who owns or has the right to use it. In this sense it connects to the work carried out by the artistic collective World of Matter who: “By exploring the political, social and economic dimensions of land use around the globe with specific attention to the Global South, ( ) a central limitation of other environmentally concerned artistic research that tends to focus on the developed North...( ) areas of concern align with postcolonial critiques of the ecology of affluence, which focuses on environmental commitments in developed nations, such as conservationism, organic products and recycling, rather than on social justice, alleviating poverty and combating corporate ecocide in the non-West”<sup>355</sup>

This has led to a fruitful investigation into the use of these terrains *vagues* and the possibility for further investigation and work which might connect queer and ecological perspectives on space and how, and by whom, it is controlled. In fact, during the process of investigation I realised that the **P.I.N.Q Parks** could be inscribed within a particularly queer history of the appropriation of space in relation to the practice of cruising.

### **Personal Hysteria**

As pointed out in Chapter X, a turning point of this investigation came when working on the **How to Heal Cycle**, I realised that if I wanted to heal the world, I had to heal myself first, beginning with my unresolved grief over the death of my parents years before.

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353 Jeremy Hance, *Why don't we grieve for extinct species?* (The Guardian newspaper, Manchester, 19/11/16) available online at [www.lostspeciesday.org/?p=483](http://www.lostspeciesday.org/?p=483) Accessed 20/1/18

354 Isa Fremeaux, *The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination: Art, Activism and Permaculture-an interview with Isa Fremeaux and John Jordan* in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation* (Nai publishers, Rotterdam, 2011) p.303

355 T.J.Demos, *Decolonising Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Sternberg Press, New York, 2016) p213



Their sudden and unexpected deaths had made me aware of the fragility and vulnerability of life and I now realised that this awareness and grief were intimate, unconscious motivations which had led me to begin the cycle.

This discovery brought about a change in my practice to include a series of self-healing rituals, without public, based on overcoming this grief and accepting the cycle of life and death.

I have always believed that art is a form of therapy for its practitioners, but over the course of the investigation I have learnt to use the transformative power of art to deal with my own personal loss and thus managed to transform my grief into a positive force. As Schechner points out “from an operational perspective, art and neurosis are closely linked because both behaviours are generated by a porous and shifting boundary between the unconscious and the conscious. And what art manipulates on an individual basis, ritual does collectively.”<sup>356</sup>

After years of internal turmoil, associated with the guilt of the emigrant who has left home and the hard years when visits to home were only for hospital visits and funerals, these rituals have helped reconcile me to my role as a border crosser. I will continue to raise awkward questions through my work on both sides of the invisible frontier that separates these two cultures which represent my own personal North/South divide.

### **Radical Pedagogy**

Apart from my performance work, I have been invited to participate with activist groups and in social outreach projects and have organised and taken part in conferences, talks and workshops in order to promote and discuss theories related to queer ecology, ecosexuality and ecotransfeminism through an analysis of their historical, philosophical and artistic backgrounds.

This began with the special events which accompanied the **Eco\_Gender** exhibition in 2010 and continued with the **Ecogender** conferences organised in Valencia University and the UPV in 2012. Since then I have continued to present the concepts in talks both within the academic context and in activist circles (European Bisexual Conference, CSOAL'Horta, Anarco).

I have also had the opportunity to take part and analyse a wide range of different artistic practices through my residencies with the **Unfix Festival of Performance and Ecology** (Glasgow, 2015/16) and the queer feminist arts organisation **Cuntemporary Arts** (London, 2017).

Furthermore I developed the formats of video-essay and dramatised lectures to adapt my performance practice to a digital age where our lives are increasingly mediated by screens and where often reality merges with fiction.

The presentations and organization of conferences and workshops has expanded my personal methodology within the context of the academy and art world and given me the opportunity to develop my connections with writers, activists and artists working in similar fields to strengthen the work carried out over the course of my investigation. It also represents another form of political activism that goes hand in hand with my performance practice. For me they are two sides of the same coin.

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356 R. Schechner, *The Future of Ritual* (Routledge, 1993) p.238

I hope this investigation may serve as a useful reference for researchers and practitioners interested in the emerging field of queer ecology and the application of ecotransfeminist theories in the arts.

Knowledge transfer is very important therefore amongst future plans I will publish my findings in a bilingual edition and organise an exhibition showing the videos and other documentation of the cycle.

I will also edit the **Natural Hysteria** video essay for presentation in a wide variety of contexts including academic conferences and arts events and festivals.

The material generated throughout this investigation will provide raw footage which I will use to disseminate my philosophy through these live-presentations or by using streaming or video reproduction technologies allowing my work to be presented internationally in an ecologically sustainable way whilst avoiding one of the problems of a performance based practice- the necessity for the presence of the body!

New technologies afford us the possibility to create and disseminate our ideas without taking a long distance flight to the next biennial.

The "art world" does not exist outside of its social context, indeed artist themselves form a community and have the power to opt out of the capitalist marketplace or remain within it. Indeed some artists and curators are questioning the carbon footprint<sup>357</sup> of the art world itself: "It suits the status quo that the radical thinkers and makers don't have a territory, belong to nowhere and float in an abstract vapid world where no solution is graspable, where radical thinking has no anchor in action"<sup>358</sup>.

If the work of other artists like The Love Art Laboratory, El Museo Travesti de Perú and Alistair Macintosh have changed my way of seeing the world and helped me realise that my opinions, and way of doing things are important I would like to believe that my work can do the same for others.

I want to empower my audience to believe that they can create rituals, because I believe everyone has the capacity to imagine other realities and to be creative. As Beuys famously stated as part of his philosophy of social sculpture: "This is why we believe that a well-ordered idea of ecology and professionalism can stem only from art – art in the sense of the sole, revolutionary force, capable of transforming the earth, humanity, the social order etc. Art is, then, a genuinely human medium for revolutionary change in the sense of completing the transformation from a sick world to a healthy one. In my opinion only art is capable of doing it."<sup>359</sup>

Sometimes we forget that performance, like any other social art practice, constructs alternative realities, particularly when carried on outside of the usual circuits. Actions in streets and even on secluded beaches are witnessed and affect those who witness them.

In times such as ours, where a change of system is urgently required, we often set ourselves goals which are too high, but there is also importance in small acts, such as when a teenager dons a wig for the first time and questions how sexuality is constructed, or when gays or lesbians living in isolated rural communities see someone who has the courage to stand up and express themselves in public.

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357 <http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/67560/the-carbon-footprint-of-the-artworld/> - Accessed 6/6/18

358 Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, quoted in T.J.Demos (ibid) p 268

359 Joseph Beuys, *Times Thermic Machine*, 1982

These small acts of micro-politics are one of the strengths of performance art, since the connections made in those moments are becoming less and less common in a world which is increasingly mediated through technology, which distances us from one another and from our environment, encouraging us to believe that massive ecological destruction is inevitable.

It is against this pessimism, and the corporate interests who foment this apathy that the art of performance must stand as a temporary space of freedom where we still have the power to say no, to challenge and to create alternatives.



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Fig 11.6 Antitainment lecture, London (2017), Video still: Cuntemporary Arts

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Fig 11.8 Publications (1) The Catalogue...; (2) Impure: La Erreria (House of Bent)

# Appendix

## Natural Hysteria Video Documentation

Videos compilations of the different cycles I produced as part of the investigation process:

***How to Heal the World Bank*** (2018, 10 mins)

<https://vimeo.com/274817764>

***War Memorial Trilogy*** (2018, 9 mins)

<https://vimeo.com/274820549>

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Videos of specific actions, performances and conferences which are available online:

### Ecosexuality

• ***Blue Wedding to the Sea*** (2009) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDV1XJ8ZE8c>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKpEVVtEtsc>

• ***Silver Wedding to the Rocks*** (2011) Video streamed by minipimer.tv

<http://laquimerarosa.blogspot.com.es/2011/07/> (Our performance starts at 28 min.)

• ***Black Wedding to the Coal*** (2011) Filmed by Alejandro de Antonio & edited by

Pedro Soler.- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giP-kA3ia68>

### The Ecogender Project

• ***The Eco\_Gender Exhibition*** (2010) Video by Televisión MK (subtitled by La Erreria) - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUwkpBTPX-I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUwkpBTPX-I)

• ***The Natural Hysteria Theme Park*** (2010) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD25bj9gWAE>

### Geyserbird: the Shaman Travesti

• ***Extinct or Alive?*** (2012) Video edited by Graham Bell

<https://vimeo.com/115116211>

• ***Shamanic Hairdressing*** (2012) Video filmed & edited by Manu Marpel

<https://vimeo.com/43105460>



## **Participatory Rituals: How to Heal...**

- • *How to Heal the World Bank* - La Nau (2018) Video edited by Trans Making Academy - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbKbheu-ak>
- *Cabaritual* - Kessler Battaglia Gallery (2014) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent) <https://vimeo.com/115606592>
- *Cabaritual* - The Poetry Club (2015) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent) <https://vimeo.com/148277475>

## **Queer Remembrance: War Memorial**

- *War Memorial (Monumento a lxs Caídxs)* (2012) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent) - <https://vimeo.com/120143877>
- *War Memorial II: The Keening* (2014) Video edited by Jesus Peralta <https://vimeo.com/123654328>
- *War Memorial III: Memory P(a)lace* (2015) Video edited by Incubarte <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ye-HKDATmE>

## **(E)femme(ral) Sites of Resistance**

- *P.I.N.Q. Park Poble Nou* - Barcelona (2014) Video filmed and edited by Davis Museum - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3WgNqIyQao>

## **The Camera is my Witness: Journeys of Personal Hysteria**

- *The Journey* (2015) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsbKbheu-ak>
- *New Wave Rituals* (2016) Video by La Erreria (House of Bent) <https://vimeo.com/184070249>

## **Radical Pedagogy**

- *Antitainment* Conference (2017) Video filmed and edited by Cuntemporary Arts <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLqdh5o2Ptg>

