

We Who Feel Differently: A Symposium

Introduction by Carlos Motta

The following two short texts were delivered as opening remarks at the two-day symposium, organized by Carlos Motta and Raegan Truax, held at the New Museum, New York City, May 4-5, 2012 (wewhofeeldifferently.info/ephemera.php#Symposium)

Friday May 4, 2012

A few years after I moved to New York to study art I stumbled upon an exhibition that changed my life: "Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz," at the New Museum of Contemporary Art on Broadway. It was at right then, at the New Museum that I picked up a copy of *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz's "memoir of disintegration" and where I started to understand that my personal struggle as a young gay boy growing up in a conservative South American country was part of a larger political struggle. It was right then that I started to connect my personal experience to —as my comrade radical faeries would sing: "The blood of the ancients that runs through my veins." It was also right then that I started to identify my own feeling of urgency regarding the injustice of this system towards queer lives.

In "Postcards from America," Wojnarowicz writes: "But, bottom line, this is my own feeling of urgency and need; bottom line emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication — you can never depend on the mass media to reflect us or our needs or our states of mind; bottom line, with enough gestures we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room." I resist reading Wojnarowicz's words as historical, in fact I want to think that today more than ever, we can't cease to "find our own forms of gesture and communication" to "deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room."

We live in a time of incredible conformity. Where is our collective feeling of queer urgency located today? I believe the pioneers of the sexual liberation movements must be appalled by the conservative turn of queer politics. We've learned to assimilate and to conform to those very things that our predecessors wholeheartedly—and at times violently— fought against: Patriarchy, militarism, the violence of the nuclear family... Today our politics beg for inclusion in those violent institutions uncritically and we largely forget to think of our "difference" precisely as an opportunity to challenge and change this system's profound patterns of homophobic, transphobic, classist and racist discrimination. The conformity is so extreme, that just saying these words would make me for many a "bad gay that doesn't support LGBT rights." And well, my response would be: You're right; I don't support gay rights on those terms. I want to imagine a queer politic of liberation, a queer politic of freedom and emancipatory power, the construction of a just world for queer lives not determined by those enamored with white, middle class, bourgeois power.

The larger "We Who Feel Differently" project attempts to address these questions: The project is an archive and a platform. It archives interviews conducted with LGBTQ activists, academics, artists, and others in Colombia, Norway, South Korea and the United States, as representative stories of the many histories and developments of sexual politics internationally. Although the archive is limited to 50 interviews, I believe it represents the nuanced nature and development of the Movements. The archive is also a platform to hold these kinds of events. The project was conceived as a discursive and physical site of interaction to propose alternative models to the dominant rhetoric of LGBT equality and to form community around these issues.

I am a privileged artist that is able to speak from to the Center. I have been lucky to work in museums and galleries that convene visitors from all paths of life: having the opportunity to address museum visitors, who may have never thought that there is another side to the dominant discourse is a wonderful responsibility, and a responsibility I take very seriously: It is an opportunity to suggest alternatives and change imaginaries.

As Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad, our Keynote speaker today, told me during our interview for the We Who Feel Differently archive: “When you say “excuse me” or “I am so sorry but I am different” is more provoking than saying “I am different,” or “I have something to tell you, I can see something that you cannot see!”

I would like to welcome Esben Esther and our other incredible presenters, and thank them for participating in this project. You are my queer heroes and heroines and I feel honored and humbled by your presence here.

Thank you to the New Museum staff, Travis Chamberlain, Gabriel Einshon, Joshua Edwards, Shannon Bowser, Kelsey Womack, Audrey Hope, Dereck Wright, and Victoria Manning, you’ve made me feel welcome and work so hard!

I would like to specially thank Eungie Joo and Ryan Inouye, New Museum curators for inviting me to develop this ambitious project here, which will take place throughout the summer in the form of this event, an exhibition and a series of Thursday evening events. Eungie thanks for letting me come back to the New Museum so many years later and pay tribute to Wojnarowicz’s legacy.

Finally I would like to thank and present to you the wonderful Raegan Truax, my co-visionary. Her drive and commitment to this project from the start have kept us going!

Thanks and enjoy!

Saturday May 5, 2012

Yesterday we were confronted with the way Institutions control and regulate our bodies: we heard stories of subjection to the gender binary, to medicine and to cultural prejudice. We were told about the insurmountable fear that overcomes society regarding things that exist “in-between,” things that present themselves neither as “either” or “or.” Being in between—or asserting one’s difference for that matter was also presented to us as an opportunity rather than as social condemnation. “Difference” is a way of *being* in the

world, and as such it represents a prospect of individual and collective empowerment, social and political enrichment, and freedom. Freedom implies the sovereignty to govern oneself: Being human is being beyond parameters, being without sex or gender constraints. This is what I would call “feeling differently.” Feeling Differently entails embracing sexual and gender difference politically, beyond the narrow frameworks of identity politics or simplistic narratives of “equality”. Feeling differently to me represents embracing our relation to the commons, forming our communities, developing our potential for collectivity, and working collaboratively to radically change the conditions that oppress us. Feeling differently is then within the framework of this symposium feeling with agency and self-determination.

Yesterday’s presenters demonstrated how liberating and using our voices to articulate our positions is a key step toward decolonizing our bodies, to reconstitute our identifications and to reimagine our desires. From the activist gesture to the artistic expression, from the radical intervention to the subtle reconsideration of the law, the use of our voice, or the breaking of the tyranny or silence surrounding our experience in the world is a way of asserting our presence as citizens of democracy.

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“We Who Feel Differently” is one of a series of art projects where I have directly attempted to question the political construction of the idea of citizenship and of democratic participation. I have intended to critically demonstrate how the telling of

counter narratives, counter-actions and self-determination are in fact sites of democratic exchange. I have also encountered however the impenetrability of the system as it pertains to its ideal social inclusion. Recognizing sexual difference as one of the most terrible fears in contemporary society, it is clear to me that homosexuality and transexuality threaten masculinity and its ruling agency.

As I mentioned during my introduction yesterday:

We live in a time of incredible conformity. Where is our collective feeling of queer urgency located today? I believe the pioneers of the sexual liberation movements must be appalled by the conservative turn of queer politics. We've learned to assimilate and to conform to those very things that our predecessors wholeheartedly—and at times violently— fought against: Patriarchy, militarism, the violence of the nuclear family... Today our politics beg for inclusion in those violent institutions uncritically and we largely forget to think of our "difference" precisely as an opportunity to challenge and change this system's profound patterns of homophobic, transphobic, classist and racist discrimination. I want to imagine a queer politic of liberation, a queer politic of freedom and emancipatory power, the construction of a just world for queer lives not determined by those enamored with white, middle class, bourgeois power.

My position could also be dismissed as “utopic,” but quite honestly I can’t imagine anything less. Being queer to me represents a unique opportunity to defy this system, which has so violently exclude us and to reimagine and construct power as a flexible and open space of interaction and communication.

That is why I have chosen to work from the field of art: Art allows me to my produce “my own forms of gestures and communication.”

I welcome our wonderful speakers today, which will be talking about and around artistic projects and practices of resistance and liberation. Your presence here is humbling, I’ve looked to all of you for inspiration.

Thank you to the New Museum staff, Travis Chamberlain, Gabriel Einshon, Joshua Edwards, Shannon Bowser, Kelsey Womack, Richard Espinoza, Audrey Hope, Dereck Wright, Duncan, and Victoria Manning, you've made me feel welcome and work so hard!

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