



ARTE Y POLITICAS DE IDENTIDAD

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GIAPI 2017

Visualidades,
narrativas migratorias,
transnacionalidad
y género
en el arte contemporáneo

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Gloria Lapeña Gallego

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Departamento de BBAA de UM

Facultad de BBAA de UM

Facultad de Comunicación y Documentación de UM

Responsable principal

Pedro Ortuño Mengual

Responsables de organización

Virginia Villaplana Ruiz

Aurora Alcaide Ramírez

Editores de las actas

Aurora Alcaide Ramírez

Pedro Ortuño Mengual

Virginia Villaplana Ruiz

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Rahmat Itunu Anthonio

Aldara Gallardo Martí

Paula Garces Illescas

Mirian Gómez Moreno

David López Ruiz

Pablo Pastor Vidal

Cristina Pérez Martínez

Nieves Reina Díaz

Carmen Marquez García

Ángel Navarro Mañogil

Belén Vera



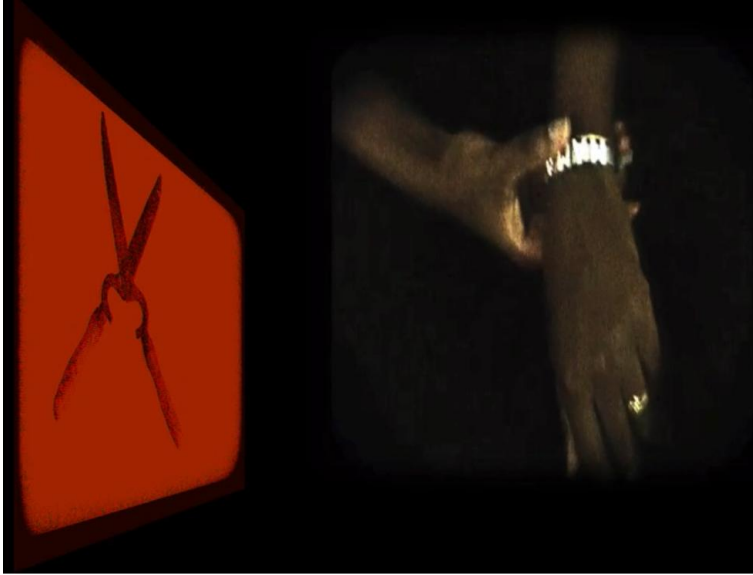
Queer exile, gender invisibility and public art

E. García-Oliveros*

* *PhD Complutense University, Madrid researcher, elgarc14@ucm.es*

ABSTRACT: “Queer exile, gender invisibility and public art” describes, as part of the research project “From feminist upheaval to Public Art: the Far West of opportunities” directed by the author, the public art project “When you give your life for love in Africa” (<http://toxiclesbian.org/amar-en-africa/>) (Toxic Lesbian, 2011-12) (produced in the artist’s residence in El Ranchito, Matadero, Madrid). Women from Sub-Saharan Africa, lesbian or otherwise, including asylum seekers, migrants or European nationals, women who love other women in African countries, where you give your life, face circumcision or rape for love; advocacy organisations working with these groups, on a European or national level; female, queer, feminist and black artists, creative because of their condition, were the stakeholders sought out by Toxic Lesbian to develop this project in a public and process art format between 2011 and 2012 in Madrid (Spain), Paris (France) and (Brussels Belgium). It received support from general human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (Belgium), refugee organisations like Merhaba (Belgium) or CEAR (Spain), and gender-specific organisations such as Women’s Link Worldwide (Spain) or specifically LGBTQ organisations like ILGA World (Belgium), as well as artists like queer photographer Zanele Muholi. The aim of the research project “Queer exile, gender invisibility and public art” is to present the conclusions of the above artistic project as regards its findings on the reasons why queer Africans and, more specifically, woman, emigrate. It will look amongst other things at existing forms of discrimination during the queer diasporas, who left due to their sexual orientation and gender, as well as those subsequently researched from both perspectives within international organisations which are supposed to ensure the enforcement of right to asylum legislation. Similarly, it will cover the creative processes implemented in this respect through public art, with cooperation from partner institutions and members of the population featured in the project overseen by the artist. The research methodology is based on interviews recorded with the various listed participants, privileged witnesses to the events covered by the research, which relate to individuals or the very organisations who decry the kinds of situations the participants are describing. Discussion panels and round tables were also held with various participants, all at the artist’s residence in El Ranchito, Matadero, Madrid. This research material served as the basis for the artistic production which Toxic Lesbian created using live and streamed performances, interactive projections on the façades of public buildings in Madrid and Vj sessions, presentations in various spaces, concerts and the creation of an online community on the issue. This project draws some conclusions regarding the alarming lack of awareness of the extent of persecution based on sexual orientation from a gender perspective, not just in openly homophobic countries but also in European host countries, which prevents the enforcement of right to asylum in the case of queer and female asylum seekers, and a near total rejection of applications from people with this profile.

Keywords: Public Art; Queer Diasporas; Black lesbians; Communitarian Art; Cyberfeminism



When love in Africa costs your life (Toxic Lesbian, 2011)

yg0?list=PL3101C84E0F895F9E),
<https://youtu.be/nwycBwDiByM?list=PL3101C84E0F895F9E>), Anitta, Jeanne and Aline, queer women forcibly exiled due to their sexual orientation from their countries of origin (Senegal, Cameroon and Rwanda) and who sought asylum through the Belgian courts in 2011.

“When love in Africa costs your life” is a public art project which centres on the creative strategies adopted by feminist women artists from the 1970s onwards, in response to an artistic world which was discriminatory towards them or underrepresented them. Suzanne Lacy, an exponent of the movement, would go on in 1995 to edit what ultimately became the reference book for these practices, ‘Mapping the terrain’.

Its content is based mainly on the

life stories of Rachel
<https://youtu.be/VyeQ8GGh>
 Irène, Marianna

The project, which began last year between the cities of Paris and Brussels, started with Toxic Lesbian’s collaboration with civil society organisations upholding the rights of lesbian women across sectors, such as Merhaba and the LGBTQI group Amnesty International Belgium, and subsequently CEAR in Madrid. These agencies warn <https://youtu.be/Bwhq5t4i2QM?list=PL3101C84E0F895F9E>) of the lack of visibility of case studies involving women in the protocols established, in the specific area of study in question, for the submission of asylum applications <https://youtu.be/t21NuXqrmq0?list=PL3101C84E0F895F9E>).

The cross-sector approach, as can be seen in greater detail in “Intersecciones: cuerpos y sexualidades en la encrucijada” edited by Platero (2012), highlights the complexity of identity in view of the various kinds of inequality at play. This approach emerged specifically from the African-American feminist suffrage movements in the United States, which raised awareness of the successive kinds of discrimination suffered by African American women. Angela Davis published “Women, Race and Class” in 1981, which ultimately served as a basis for the development of this essential concept for the rise of feminism in subsequent years.

This cross-sector approach, which would help to measure the level of exclusion suffered as women, but also black women or, in the case of exile, poor and finally queer women, is starkly absent in the stories of Rachel, Irène, Marianna, Anitta, Jeanne and Aline. We can see that the term queer is used in this context to describe the lesbian identity of these women. African LGBTQ activist movements reject the terms gay or lesbian, viewing them as Western and, as such, evoking the connotations of Western culture and identity. Instead they have sought to describe their identities based on their own experiences.

Research interviews and debates in the scope of this project, carried out during the residency of the Toxic Lesbian artist at El Ranchito (Matadero, Madrid, 2011) during the construction and presentation of her work, clearly explain the discriminatory way European organisations

treat cases of dissident sexualities, such as queer identity in people from most African countries. These testimonies illustrate how the criteria used to establish the veracity of asylum applications submitted by seekers are only adapted to cases involving gay men. This has led to judges examining ways of life typically led by men in these countries, with a total lack of awareness of the ways in which lesbian women live their social lives. Until very recently, as substantiated by representatives of Amnesty International or ILGA World, human rights organisations did not specifically establish what shape the persecution of female-spectrum queer identities should take, to the extent that neither were they identified nor were there any sample cases thereof.

Rachel, Irène, Marianna, Anitta, Jeanne and Aline thus at that time saw their cases rejected one by one, on the basis that the applicants were not “genuine lesbians” and that the persecution they had suffered “had not actually taken place” (as attested to by the Amnesty International representative who gave us access to the official files). These decisions were reached following negative responses during asylum tribunals to questions intended to force the applicants to open up and reveal information about how they lived their private lives. The questions focused on their frequenting of gay nightspots, locations associated with activism or assaults in public places (all of which were factors specific to the case of queer identities in African men). The notes explained that the lesbians did not socialize in public places, but rather did so behind closed doors, and that the kinds of persecution against their homosexual identity included the threat of circumcision (as was the case for Marianna, whose own family were to perform this act on her when she revealed her homosexual identity), so-called “therapeutic” rape (a term coined by a part of African society which believes that by raping a woman who claims to be in love with another woman she will become heterosexual once the act has been performed by a chosen man) or even forced marriage. As is often the case on the African continent, “justice” is meted out by relatives or neighbours, and it is they who implement justice in the case of women, whilst for men imprisonment is often passed as punishment, as explained by Amnesty International in its annual reports and in the testimonial provided to us by Eric (<https://youtu.be/IogB25sw3n8?list=PLD575F16F684BA67F>) a gay asylum seeker in Spain.

“When love in Africa costs your life” interviewed South African photographer Zanele Muholi about the systematic violence suffered by visible queer women in African countries, (<https://youtu.be/OHmdPIgO47g?list=PL3101C84E0F895F9E>) specifically in relation to her work ‘Isilumo siyaluma’ where she describes the death of two women close to her killed due to their sexual orientation.

To conclude, the project will carry out online performances, screening sessions on urban façades, concerts and video art as works of art within this research process. All works, as is the case for all of Toxic Lesbian's productions, will be available on social networks such as YouTube or on its website toxiclesbian.org under copyleft licence.

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