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Introduction to the Symposium *Gender Talents: A Special Address* at TATE Modern's THE TANKS
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Gender Talents: A Special Address

“There is no oxygen in the air
Men and women have lost their hair...
When tomorrow becomes yesterday
And tomorrow becomes eternity...
And there is no one and there is everyone...

Tomorrow will be the 22nd century...

1972 was right all the way...
Right wing left wing middle of the road...
Liberation of women liberation of men
Everybody carrying a heavy load

Tomorrow will be the 22nd century...

Liberation of animals...
Revolution of music poetry love and life
Sex change change change
Man is woman woman is man...

I first heard the song “Tomorrow will be the 22nd century...” performed by Mx Justin Vivian Bond, a fierce performer and advocate for gender self-determination, rights and justice. The song, written by Euxuma and also masterfully covered in 1972 by Nina Simone is a beautiful, nihilist and apocalyptic tune where the future of the world is terrifyingly real yet confident, uncompromising. Bond like Nina Simone before V made the convergence between rage, ideals for a good life and political commitment evident and urgent: a refusal to, despite the discouraging state of things, conform to the forces of oppression.

We live in a time of pervasive conformity and of strategic pragmatism, where begging for inclusion in discriminatory legislative, social, religious and cultural systems has become the political aim of mainstream Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex movements, instead of challenging, resisting and producing the transformation of those very structures that have neglected and denied our (deviant) identities and (feared) bodies historically. The idea of ‘equality’ has been appropriated by homonormative career-bureaucrats whose vision of the world adapts, tactically, to systemic norms—crippling the hope of a truly mutable sexual and gender revolution.

Ideas of radical change tend to be considered naïve, idealistic and outdated within this increasingly normalized neo-liberal climate, where progress equals assimilation and where individual and community rights are largely designed and available to social and economically privileged sexual minorities that can

afford to access them or have the resources to be visible. The mainstream LGBTI movements' approach, where identity recognition and cultural tolerance are the foundation of the battle for legal rights has proven inefficient to confront issues of poverty, criminalization, discrimination, disability, etc., issues that greatly affect queer people's lives. This scenario of political inequality and cultural complacency must compel us to insist that social issues *are* queer issues and that social injustice *is* queer injustice.

Queer folks around the world resist the seductive appeal of the pillar battles of LGBTI movements fronted by marriage equality. Marriage is a project of privatization of social safety nets, and as such it destabilizes the welfare state, creating a culture of self-reliance that inevitably also reproduces economic inequality. Stirring, mobilizing and organizing in multiple directions to build a horizon of possibilities that moves past marriage rights is an imperative task: a task that demands us to fight beyond the reductive identity-based approach that sees 'tolerance' and 'inclusion' as its primary aims.

As an artist I am interested in the history of social movements, in the re-writing of historical narratives and in the educational potential of social situations mediated by art. I am interested in documenting counter cultural projects and in facilitating platforms that can enable critical conversations around issues of social justice. Today's events are born from this interest and were conceived as part of *Gender Talents*, a long-term project-in-progress I am working on that engages discourses and movements for gender self-determination within trans, intersex and gender queer communities in various countries, from traditional Joggapa groups in India, to sex workers in Colombia, to gender progressive activists in the United States. The project documents the development and ongoing work of activist movements, the formation of a critical discourse and the implementation of intersectional political strategies for social change.

Gender Talents: A Special Address, this symposium, is convened to focus on the politics of gender and sets out to question and challenge the gender binary, a minimizing and repressive logic of classification that undermines difference and reinforces what Gayle Rubin called the 'sex-gender system', where the masculine is privileged in every sense. This symposium was convened to reflect on society's anxiety regarding the transgression of gender norms, which deems inverting expectations of gender expression to be a legal 'impossibility' and 'moral' failure and that result in unpunished physical and psychological acts of violence every day, everywhere around the world, most of which go unpunished.

The holistic recognition of gender identities in legal and medical terms, gender registration, social harassment, discrimination and stigma, accessing employment, work and healthcare, imprisonment and access to gender segregated public spaces are some of the social issues and political battles that trans and gender non-conforming communities face. While the gender binary logic does not only affect these communities, some folks whose personal and collective expressions of gender are made impossible by

conventional binary gender classifications and are restricted and policed by rigid institutions are building critical trans politics and movements. This symposium brings together key activists, thinkers, and artists that have shaped and largely influenced those movements. They were invited to deliver short manifestos about practical ways to destabilize, collapse or abandon the gender binary both in the present and when thinking around the future.

Considering the unprecedented visibility that some specific gay and lesbian issues have gained in mainstream society in the last fifteen years, how can political strategy be 'queered'? Who is being represented and by whom? Who is excluded in the name of LGBT equality and how? What are the practical political goals toward a politic of true sexual and gender liberation?

The form of the manifesto, referred to here in the second part of the symposium's title as 'A Special Address' was operatively chosen to convey a sense of urgency and to encourage a speech act of performance. As such, the proceeding manifestos may seek to mobilize a queer politic that balances between political subjectivity and political strategy, between emancipation and ideology. I am interested in the ways that discourse as a form of mobilization can rupture the idea of linear progress and put forward a series of counter projects and counter narratives that may propose a different order where sexual and gender difference present opportunities to reclaim queer bodies and affects unapologetically.

The first part of the symposium's title, *Gender Talents*, is borrowed from the work of sexologist, professor and trans activist, Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad, and refers to a semantic inversion, where negative classificatory terms used to diagnose and identify gender difference such as 'syndrome' and 'disorder' are turned to alternative categories and associations such as a 'talent'. My reading of Esben Esther's proposition is that this inversion functions as a form of self-empowerment: Hir sees this change of terminology as an opportunity to reject social condemnation. This positive inversion doesn't imply a lack of engagement with the violence of classification and exclusion: it is a resource.

You've been convened here not to promote a false sense of optimism, but to sketch a world of '(im)practical (im)possibilities,' a meeting between realities we desire and need and the ones in which we live, because there will not be path to gender and sexual liberation without reconfiguring existing norms and institutions. You've been convened here to communicate transformative political dreams and radical expressions of sexuality and gender, to consider the recurrent violence and phobia that have made us a 'community' and to suggest potential paths to social justice. We are also here to challenge the bio-cultural 'foundations' of society and to question gender norms in order to counteract neoliberal models of identity institutionalization, privatization and normalization.

What is the difference between speaking amongst us on the street, a club or a community center and speaking here at Tate Modern? Will the institution amplify our message or coopt it? What do we gain or lose by entering the international market of ideas sanctioned by a large-scale institution such as this one? Recognizing this publicly funded museum's outreach and influence I am aware of how important it is to *use it* operatively. It is not a coincidence that we have gathered here today to speak about transforming institutions, to speak to the 'margins' from the 'center', and to bring explicit queer progressive content into debate. Tate Modern has hosted significant programs that have addressed related issues, so hopefully the movement of queer ideas and bodies inside these walls will let our views of a generous world reach the mind of Tate's audience and its many visitors to encourage further debates and thoughts about sexuality and gender well beyond this Tank.

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