

QUEERING QUITO: THE USE OF ART-ACTION TO OPEN SPACE FOR THE
LGBTI COMMUNITY IN ECUADOR

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Genevieve Alix Venable has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics.

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Introduction

“...in the trade of art, where you have to learn to sew your own costumes, to paint your dreams on the fabric scenery and pieces of cardboard, to put on makeup again and again until perfecting each stroke, each shadow; an art that turned me into an activist, by transforming myself through drag, transgressing stereotypes and fighting against norms; ...I tell the story of the reality of my community, a community that has always existed under the shadow of the accusing finger, I do not want to lose the memory of those who have disappeared, in a time when we were criminals for enjoying ourselves, feeling and loving...”

Excerpt from *Kitus Drag Queen* by Daniel Moreno, page 43, author translation

During my studies in Quito, Ecuador in early 2011, I had the privilege of interviewing numerous LGBTI¹ activists and researching five different organizations. I found the organizations through publications listing local organizations and businesses oriented toward the LGBTI community. In my research, I looked at the social climate toward LGBTI issues in Ecuador, the obstacles the groups faced, the structures of the organizations, and each organization’s achievements as well as general achievements for the LGBTI community. The majority of my interviews were conducted in person, but some were completed via email. With each activist, I asked the same set of eight questions (a translation of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A) and then asked other questions from there based on how they answered. The information that I gathered forms the basis for the analysis herein.

Of the organizations I researched, I have here focused on two specific organizations: *Teatro Dionisios* (Dionysus Theater) and *Desbordes de Género* (roughly translated as Overflow of Gender, herein referred to as *Desbordes*). These two organizations pertain to a specific faction of Ecuadorian LGBTI activism—the use of play, performance, and art as protest—a field which has been coined art-action. In the

¹ Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI)

Ecuadorian context, art-action often involves the use of drag and other kinds of performances to expose and challenge social norms, specifically norms of gender and sexuality. *Desbordes* is aimed at the intersection of academia and art-action that illuminates and questions the gender binary, gender roles, and heteronormativity through “interventions” in public settings. The interventions work through blatant and subtle violations of gender norms. *Teatro Dionisios*, in contrast, is a drag theater. Daniel Moreno, the primary drag queen and visionary behind *Teatro Dionisios*, writes plays confronting issues of gender and sexuality through comedy and drama. His works are not overtly political, but affront political issues through the stories he tells. In considering the operations of these two organizations and their cultural context—specifically the dominant machismo² culture—I hope to answer two questions: How are gender and sexuality politicized through art-action and performance within the broader LGBTI movement in Ecuador? What can art-action achieve for LGBTI rights in addressing the dominant culture of machismo that more traditional forms of protest cannot?

LGBTI activism in Latin America has exploded over the past decade and Ecuador has very recently realized substantial political gains in LGBTI rights through the passage of the new constitution in 2008. There is a dearth of research on LGBTI activism in Latin America in general, but especially in Ecuador. The majority of the literature is self-published or comes from the perspectives of activists and academics within the movement itself. In looking at *Desbordes* and *Teatro Dionisios*, I hope to begin to address this lack of scholarship on Latin American LGBTI rights and to nuance the dominant ideas in performance protest theory in the Ecuadorian context.

² For the purposes of my thesis, I define machismo as both the expectations for men to exhibit extreme masculinity and virility without showing emotions and the accompanying expectations that women be docile, weak, and emotional in comparison.

The recent gains for the LGBTI community in terms of legal rights have been large politically and have not been accompanied by the necessary social changes to sustain and give meaning to these gains. The obstacles and challenges presented by the Ecuadorian sociopolitical climate make innovative forms of protest—aimed at changing mindsets and culture—necessary. The art-action contributions of *Desbordes* and *Teatro Dionisios* are, in part, a response to this and are well suited to confront machismo in a way that protest of an exclusively legal orientation is not. Art-action is geared toward the exposure of gender and sexuality and seeks to challenge and reshape not just the institutions that affect them, but the way that they are spoken about and constructed socially. Art-action responds to the need for cultural change by making gender performance—in both the quotidian sense and the theatrical sense—grounds for political contestation.

Performance as Political

Anthropological theories regarding performance are useful in considering art-action, a type of performance, as a political strategy. These theories explain how performance constitutes social norms, how the individual fits into performance, and what happens when performance transgresses social boundaries.

Victor Turner, cultural anthropologist of performance, created the concept of “social drama” which he defines as “an objectively isolable sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type³.” He explains the foundational nature of social drama as:

³ Turner 33

[that] which results precisely from the suspension of normative role-playing, and in its passionate activity abolishes the usual distinction between flow and reflection, since in the social drama it becomes a matter of urgency to become reflexive about the cause and motive of action damaging to the social fabric... The performative genres are, as it were, secreted from the social drama and in turn surround it and feed their performed meanings back into it⁴.

This is the skeleton of art-action and how it operates. Art-action seeks to disrupt the flow of social performance by stepping outside the bounds of norms. The reflection that Turner describes is precisely the reaction that art-action hopes to elicit in order to deconstruct norms that are otherwise performed uncritically.

Social drama has four phases or components. First, there is a public breach in normal social relations, followed shortly thereafter by crisis, which is the liminal phase “when people take sides, or rather, are in the process of being induced, seduced, cajoled, nudged, or threatened to take sides by those who confront one another across the revealed breach as primary antagonists⁵.” Third, some form of remedial action is taken to attempt to resolve the crisis and settle the breach. Victor explains that “This phase is perhaps the most reflexive of the social drama. The community, acting through its representatives, bends, even throws itself back upon itself, to measure what some of its members have done, and how they have conducted themselves with reference to their own standards⁶.” The final phase of social drama is reintegration in which things settle down and new social lines may be drawn, either excluding or reintegrating those who instigated the breach. Victor explains that social drama may not be linear, and remedial action may not always lead to some form of resolution, resulting in a return to the crisis phase. His theory of social drama outline the steps in the process of navigating social norms in a

⁴ *Ibid* 90

⁵ *Ibid* 34

⁶ *Ibid*

society and how that society reacts to breaches in order to bring the violator back into line or to change the norms to accommodate different behavior. For Turner, the process is internal to a given society—he refers to “members” of the society. A foreigner would not necessarily provoke the same sense of breach and would therefore not evoke the same conflict or reflective process. It seems, then, that the ability to negotiate this social drama requires a common cultural background and common social norms for reference i.e. a common cultural citizenship. Turner’s theory of social drama is very much applicable to art-action in the way that it deliberately and knowingly breaches social norms—specifically those regarding gender. It is especially useful in considering those instances when remedial action is unsuccessful and the crisis phase is perpetuated. As will be discussed in later chapters, art-action seeks to re-pattern social norms instead of allowing a re-inscription of the same norms in the face of a breach.

Professor of Performance Studies Richard Schechner’s work complements that of Turner’s in his assessment of how performance affects the performer and the audience. Schechner refers to performers as being simultaneously “not themselves” and “not not themselves⁷.” He shows the way in which dramatic performance is a liminal activity that transcends normal modes of existence. This allows performers to exist outside of themselves and outside of their usual roles in a way that seems to challenge and stretch ideas about an individual’s identity. Furthermore, he explains that not just the performer, but also the audience members, can be changed by performance, be it in a temporary or permanent sense⁸. Actor-activists, in this sense, seek to exploit this aspect of

⁷ Schechner 4

⁸ *Ibid*

performance, to be “not themselves” and “not not themselves,” in order to demonstrate the fluidity of identity.

Schechner focuses, too, on the tools and agency of the performer to control and shape his performance and thereby the effects. “Performance behavior isn’t free and easy. Performance behavior is known and/or practiced behavior—or ‘twice-behaved behavior,’ ‘restored behavior’—either rehearsed, previously known, learned by osmosis since early childhood, revealed during the performance by masters, guides, gurus, or elders, or generated by rules that govern the outcomes, as in improvisatory theater or sports⁹.” This intense preparation allows the performer to make very deliberate decisions about the acting and the framing of his/her character. Schechner talks specifically about the “incomplete or unresolved transformation” as a choice of the actor which he describes in opposition to a more standard attempt to hide the identity of the actor completely behind his/her character¹⁰. This allows the audience to be more aware of the construction of the character and to allow the actor to have a certain amount of self-expression. The performer may also insert his/her own commentary into the performance through these means. Schechner writes, “The distance between the character and the performer allows a commentary to be inserted; for Brecht [playwright and director] this was most often a political commentary, but it could also be—as it is for postmodern dancers and performance artists—an aesthetic or personal commentary¹¹.” Performance, consequently, has the potential to extend beyond the immediate artistic or cultural value to engender a sociopolitical commentary and advocate change. Both Turner and Schechner write about performance as (de)constructive of norms and as positing and

⁹ *Ibid* 118

¹⁰ *Ibid* 10

¹¹ *Ibid* 9

challenging identity simultaneously. The (de)constructive nature of performance makes possible a political application to contest accepted social norms.

Politics of Gender Performance

LGBTI art-action looks specifically to combat the restrictive social norms—specifically those regarding sexuality and gender—as prescribed by machismo which generates homophobia toward those not compliant. For this reason, I look here at Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to enter into how gender is constructed. Butler asserts that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*¹².” Butler’s assessment of gender opens up possibilities for changes to gender if the repetition or the style changes—gender then supersedes biological determinism. This has more than personal/individual stakes insofar as the repetition is determined by social norms. Any sense of the constancy of one’s identity is, in Butler’s theory, somewhat illusory as it is the product of performativity and repetition instead of some constant fact. “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style¹³.” Gender, then, is not something immutable and constant through time, but dependent on the social norms and historical context in which it is performed.

¹² Butler 519

¹³ Butler 520

Butler, however, is cautious not to jump to the conclusion that the performance of gender allows for significant individual agency in this process. She acknowledges the ways in which members from a society are bound to perform gender in certain way or risk punishment. In referring to strategies of gender performance, she explains that “the term ‘strategy’ better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs...as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender *right* are regularly punished¹⁴.”

To do gender *wrong* constitutes a breach in Turner’s concept of social drama, resulting in crisis, which Butler describes as a difficult process that has a tendency to keep people within the bounds of social norms or to at least quickly restore the social norms in the event of a breach. She also explains that the context of gender performativity greatly affects the flexibility and openness of performative options. “[T]heatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions. Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us can compel fear, rage, even violence¹⁵.”

The question of gender subversion and forms of protest against rigid gender roles arises in the context of gender as something requiring constant performance and re-inscription. Butler explains that:

¹⁴ Butler 522, emphasis added

¹⁵ Butler 527

There are social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all. The transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions. Indeed, one runs the risk of addressing the merely indirect, if not epiphenomenal, reflection of those conditions if one remains restricted to a politics of acts¹⁶.

However, art-action runs in contradiction to this—the goal is to change the “hegemonic social conditions” through the sum effects of individual breaches, produced in the interventions and productions of art-activist groups, of social norms. Insofar as gender norms are premised on certain assumptions as biological or social truths about men and women, art-activism seeks to expose these as false and thereby begin to undermine their power. Butler goes on to argue that “Because of this distinction, one can maintain one’s sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that ‘this is only a play’ allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life¹⁷.” However, this leaves room for the ways in which gender-bending performance may not be announced as play. Additionally, the fact that performance may be classified as “play”—a temporary stepping out of ordinary gender roles with the pretext of providing entertainment—does not mean that it is devoid of political importance or the ability to push gender boundaries. Play, as entertainment and diversion, may open the doors to alternative ways of thinking about gender without adopting a didactic tone, thereby having the potential to covertly enter into the political contestation of gender roles.

Playing with Politics

¹⁶ *Ibid* 525

¹⁷ Butler 527

Play and art-action intersect in important ways in that art-action often integrates elements of play into its productions and interventions for amusement's sake and to instill a lighter, less antagonistic atmosphere as it confronts gender norms. Benjamin Shepard, in his book *Queer Political Performance and Protest Play, Pleasure and Social Movement*, frames a theory of play drawing from his experience with LGBTI activism in the United States. He makes the argument that “play”—in the sense of theatrical play, but also encompassing the idea of fun and enjoyment—is an integral aspect of many social movements and protests. In defining his theory of play, he writes that “There is a long history of community organizing models that make use of playful, prefigurative approaches to act out an image of the world in which activists hope to live. Some use creativity to achieve political victory, whereas others involve campaigns that result primarily in community building¹⁸.” An example of this can be found in the drum circles and dancing that often served as a prelude to the Drag March of Pride Weekend in New York¹⁹. They served to build a sense of community and to lighten the mood while also building enthusiasm for the march.

Shepard looks beyond the formal structure of protest to look at the experiences of the activists and the way that playful pride parades and more theatrical protest can blur the line between audience and activist as members of the audience choose to join in the fun²⁰. Play, as something that fosters community through camaraderie and as a means of delivering a political message in a non-threatening way, is a critical component of art-action as an alternative to more divisive forms of demonstration.

¹⁸ Shepard 1

¹⁹ *Ibid* 6

²⁰ Shepard 6

Cultural and Political Stakes: The Ecuadorian Outlook

The previous sections set out the theories to be applied to Ecuadorian art-action. However, in order to place this case study of art-action in context, it is important to lay the basic foundation for the political and social reality for the LGBTI community in Ecuador. There are two purposes for this: one, it establishes what obstacles all LGBTI/queer organizations face and, two, it also helps to set the groundwork for how art-action organizations cope with these obstacles in a different way. All activists face tremendous obstacles in Ecuador—as Elizabeth Vásquez, the Political Coordinator of *Proyecto Transgénero* (Transgender Project), remarked, “Activism is a luxury”²¹ because of economic and time constraints, but LGBTI activism is further complicated as it must face extreme cultural resistance and homophobia. In parts of the country, most specifically the capital Quito, there is some perception that intolerance for the LGBTI community is actually homophobia and ought to be overcome. However, this is met with attempts to mask or justify feelings of hatred toward the LGBTI community. Juan Zabala, one of the activists with *Desbordes*, explained that something he often hears people say about the gay community is, “As long as those fags don’t mess with me, it’s all good, but if they come near me...they’re bitches”²². Comments such as this reflect the tension between a sense of social progress and the dominant machismo impulse to reject the LGBTI community. This kind of attitude is pervasive; Professor Viteri remarked that academia, too, is marked by hypocrisy and homophobia²³.

Some relatively progressive laws have been passed protecting people who identify as LGBTI, but they have not fundamentally changed the reality for LGBTI Ecuadorians.

²¹ Vásquez, Elizabeth and Ana Almeida. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 25 Apr. 2011.

²² Zabala, Juan. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 15 Apr. 2011.

²³ Viteri, María Amelia. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 2 May 2011.

The new constitution of 2008 explicitly extends rights to the LGBTI community in several different places. The most sweeping of these can be found in Title I, Chapter I, Article 11, Section 2 stating that “No one can be discriminated against for reasons of ... gender identity... sexual orientation... nor for whatever other distinction, personal or collective, temporary or permanent, that has the objective or result of undermining or annulling the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of their rights. The law will sanction all forms of discrimination²⁴”. This is accompanied by other provisions that explicitly benefit homosexual couples or the rights of individuals to make decisions about their gender, sex, and sexuality. However, these political achievements are not comprehensive nor have they substantially changed the quality of life of Ecuadorians identifying as LGBTI. This can be seen in various instances of homophobia that continue without legal ramifications. A particularly overt example can be found in Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador and center of business activity, where even today there are signs posted in some shops stating, “No fags.”²⁵ While this acknowledges the politicization of homosexuality, it shows there is very little desire to enforce constitutional provisions protecting the LGBTI community, especially in more conservative pockets of Ecuador. Janina Duque, also an activist of *Desbordes*, expressed her opinion that “even though there have been favorable changes for the LGBTI community in this country on the legal level... bigger transformations are necessary. In practice discrimination continues to be maintained—the exclusion and invisibility. In everyday talk, in conversations, there continue to be derogatory terms related to LGBTI people²⁶.” Political changes have outpaced the

²⁴ Author translation

²⁵ Zabala, Juan. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 15 Apr. 2011.

²⁶ Duque, Janina. E-mail interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 27 Apr. 2011.

dominant culture which continues to demand strict gender role performance and sanctioning any deviation from these roles.

However, to try and frame members of the LGBTI community as entirely of a different culture and mindset—as fundamentally more progressive, tolerant, and open-minded and as somehow separate—fails to acknowledge the influence and pervasiveness of machismo culture. They may be marginalized, but they are not outside of or untouched by the dominant cultural narratives. In many cases, the activists I interviewed spoke of struggles to change the mindsets and behaviors of not just the broader Ecuadorian community, but the very people identifying as LGBTI themselves. Many of the damaging and limiting aspects of broader Ecuadorian culture are repeated and reinforced within the LGBTI community. This is largely indicative of the desire to still comply with the gender binary and with prescriptions of heterosexuality in order to avoid what Butler refers to as the “punitive consequences...[for] those who fail to do their gender *right*.”²⁷ Ricardo Bucaram, a gay activist with *Desbordes*, explained “We try to masculinize ourselves (the gays) or feminize ourselves (the lesbians) and we reinforce the man/women binary²⁸.” While fitting gender and sexuality norms would be impossible for the LGBTI community, there is a sense that minimizing the breach of social norms is important. This can be damaging in terms of envisioning less restrictive gender norms, but it also has had very real implications for violence and abuse within LGBTI couples. Sandra Álvarez Monsalve, the director of the Ecuadorian Organization of Lesbian

²⁷ Butler 522, emphasis added

²⁸ Bucaram, Ricardo. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 13 Apr. 2011.

Women (OEML), remarked that, “There are lesbian couples that reproduce heteronormativity—‘machismo’—in their relationships in the form of violence²⁹.”

The sociopolitical climate produces a tremendous amount of distrust and fear within the LGBTI community and cooperation, if even conceivable, is not often seen as prudent. Daniel Moreno, drag queen from *Teatro Dionisios* explains, “There is not an [LGBTI] community as such. A community exists fragmented by political, economic, and racial interests and that does not allow everyone to unite for one cause. Every group has its own agenda with particular interests, forgetting the human being and their true interests of citizenship with rights and responsibilities³⁰.” The groups that I interviewed were mostly targeted toward one specific subgroup of the LGBTI community, for example OEML is oriented toward the lesbian community and *Proyecto Transgénero* is oriented toward transgenders and transsexuals. Most organizations opted to work in isolation instead of in cooperation with other groups. Many believe that their interests are distinct and are better served working separately.

Beyond fissures between activist organizations, the fragmentation of the LGBTI community does not just occur along lines of sexual orientation. Class has come to be a divisive element and exclusive micro-cultures are being formed by the upper and middle classes that eclipse the possibility for shared goals. Manuel Acosta Martínez, Daniel Moreno’s partner, wrote to me that “[An obstacle for *Teatro Dionisios* is] the great disinterest that the GBLTI community has in culture. Now young and adolescent gays, especially those of the upper-middle class or the upper class, have their elitist space for thinking that art and culture is only Lady Gaga. Their only interest is partying in GBLTI

²⁹ Álvarez Monsalve, Sandra. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 19 Apr. 2011.

³⁰ Moreno, Daniel. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 20 Apr. 2011.

clubs. We continue being a collective with low interest in culture³¹.” The aesthetic interests and sub-cultures of various segments of the LGBTI community diverge along class lines. The vision of art-action as LGBTI activism becomes more complicated in that fomenting appreciation of art and performance in order to gain an audience and community building become necessary objectives alongside challenging gender norms.

Homophobia and the strict gender roles of machismo continue to threaten the LGBTI community externally and internally, even in the face of recent political gains. The community-building and cultural interventions of art-actions are important steps for making the necessary cultural changes to give legal rights real meaning in the lives of the LGBTI community.

Navigating Authenticity and Global Discourses

An additional burden for Ecuador has been engaging in queer and LGBTI discourse on its own terms instead of those already set by the West. As many other countries in Latin America, Ecuador emerged as an active and visible participant in the LGBTI discourse later than many Western nations and as such certain Western ways of thinking and talking about issues were already established and dominant in academia and activism. This continues to present Ecuador with philosophical, linguistic, and cultural obstacles to overcome. The vocabulary and concepts have not always existed in Ecuadorian discourse to engage with Western ideas and theories in a way that seems authentically Ecuadorian to those participating in the discussion.

To some, queerness is equated with foreignness and it seems necessary to import an entire linguistic and philosophical framework to even discuss LGBTI issues. This can

³¹ Acosta Martínez, Manuel. E-mail interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 25 Apr. 2011.

be seen in the direct appropriation of certain terms and concepts. In Ecuador, the most neutral term for a homosexual man is “gay”, which is pronounced as it is in English with a long “a” sound that is distinct from the Spanish vowel “a” as in “ah”. Another example of the clash of Western and Ecuadorian discourses is in the distinction between gender and sex. As late as 1993, the word “gender”—as encompassing Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative and separate from sex—did not have an accurate translation into Spanish. A close cognate, “*género*” carried most strongly the meaning of genre, and carried a weaker secondary meaning of gender, but not as distinguishable from sex, or “*sexo*”.³² However, in my interviews with LGBTI activists which I conducted in 2011, it became clear that “*género*” had since come to appropriate the meaning of performative gender—reflective of social norms—as opposed to biological sex.

These examples show some of the ways that Ecuador has adopted ideas from Western discourse, but they should not be taken to indicate that this process is unproblematic and that there is no resistance or uncertainty about these foreign concepts. Reflecting a long history of struggling against colonialism and attempts to preserve elements of Ecuador’s patrimony, there is a mistrust of the importation of ideas as damaging and looking to eradicate local ideas. Jasbir Puar, queer theorist, explains that, “The constant invocation of ‘the local and the global’ creates a hierarchy that implicitly or explicitly lauds the local as the space of authenticity—the local as democratic, originary, and in the case of queer research, the local as a site of ‘pure’ homosexuality or a site of specific pre-queer identities unavailable elsewhere³³.” This is true of Ecuador as well and there is a sense that foreign concepts do not and perhaps cannot take root and fit

³² Kaminsky 2

³³ Puar 399

naturally within Ecuadorian culture—that they do not and cannot reflect Ecuadorian values. Machismo formulates “pre-queer identities” as those which comply with strict gender performance. While this fails to acknowledge indigenous occurrences of non-compliant gender performance, machismo has a prominent role in rejecting queer discourse entirely as threatening to Ecuadorian authenticity. Returning to Turner’s social drama, the process of negotiating social norms is one that is internal to a given society—those with an understanding of and a personal stake in the norms are those who may take sides on the issue and determine how the norm is resituated or reformed.

Daniel Moreno, speaking of some of the challenges that Ecuador’s LGBTI movement faces, explained that “Globalization obliges us to update ourselves abruptly and does not allow us to calmly analyze our situation as a developing country.”³⁴ Moreno’s observation reflects several key tensions in the navigation of foreign discourses surrounding LGBTI issues. Firstly, there is a lack of contextualized understanding—these discourses do not come from nor do they often integrate voices from the developing world. There is a sense that the global discourse—dominated by First World nations—has moral prescriptions and expectations that developing nations “update” themselves. These prescriptions are perceived as imposed and not expressed in a way that resonates with the Ecuadorian community. Secondly, Moreno points out a sense of urgency indicating that for Ecuador to properly develop, in the Western ideal, these issues had better be resolved quickly in order to remedy the backwardness that the absence of LGBTI rights and protection signals. As stated in the introduction, Ecuador has realized political gains for the LGBTI community without accompanying cultural support or even legal support through the justice system.

³⁴ Moreno, Daniel. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 20 Apr. 2011.

In light of this perilous navigation of what is considered authentically and organically Ecuadorian and what foreign concepts and methods can effectively be imported and appropriated, the use of art-action is all the more significant. *Teatro Dionisios* has been publically recognized as a valuable contributor to the Ecuadorian cultural heritage and has received support from the municipality for its publication. Furthermore, *Desbordes* is affiliated with FLACSO, and while FLACSO is an international graduate institute, the Quito campus is a particular source of pride and a recognized means for Ecuadorian academics to gain an international audience. *Desbordes* and *Teatro Dionisios*, through their local legitimacy, may be able to “Ecuadorize” queer theory and concepts of gender performativity. Daniel, commenting on the general ignorance of constitutional rights and of LGBTI issues in general, explained, “Ecuador is not a country of readers³⁵.” Art-action, then, may also be an effective means of not only authenticating but also disseminating queer theory and criticism of machismo. The end result may be an awareness of and a dialogue about LGBTI issues that is more palatable, more organic, and less forced.

Politics through Art-Action

To have a nuanced understanding of art-action as it exists in Ecuador and given that it rose up in reference to preexisting forms of LGBTI activism, it is important to look at the structures of art-action and some of the other Ecuadorian LGBTI organizations as well. In a similar sense in which feminist movements insist that the personal is political, LGBTI activism in general makes gender and sexuality political issues. Traditional

³⁵ Moreno, Daniel. Personal interview. 20 Apr. 2011.

LGBTI activist organizations³⁶ may include some artistic forms of protest, but only as a small side component of a much larger and more politically-oriented scheme in terms of lobbying and meeting with representatives. They are structured differently than art-action groups and, at least in the short term, have different objectives. *Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad* (the Ecuadorian Foundation for Equality) and the OEML both put substantial resources toward collecting statistics and empirical information about the gay and lesbian communities respectively to support their lobbying efforts. Sandra Álvarez Monsalve, Director of the OEML, served as the feminist and LGBTI consultant at the national assembly for the 2008 constitution³⁷. *Fundación Ecuatoriana Equidad*, in addition to meeting with representatives, also provides basic health care and counseling at their office in Quito³⁸. *Proyecto Transgénero* dedicates a significant amount of its time to what they call “legal patrols” in which activists patrol areas of Quito known for prostitution, looking for transgender sex workers in order to inform them of their legal rights and to help protect them from violence at the hands of clients, random people in the streets, and even the police. These various activities are drawn in sharp contrast with the playful productions and interventions that constitute art-action.

However, in my interviews with the various LGBTI organizations, more traditionally structured or not, all shared a similar vision of overcoming barriers to equality so that the LGBTI community not only has rights on the books, but can exercise and claim these rights in a meaningful way. Furthermore actor-activists from *Teatro*

³⁶ By traditional activist organizations, I mean that they engage in general awareness campaigns with pamphlets, short videos and other publications and that they are generally oriented at realizing political change in terms of gaining and enforcing legal rights. In this sense, the final audience of traditional activism would be politicians and legislators, even if the general populace were solicited to gain momentum.

³⁷ Álvarez Monsalve, Sandra. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 19 Apr. 2011.

³⁸ Soría, Efraín. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 26 Apr. 2011.

Dionisios and *Desbordes* alike believe their organizations to be political, if not exclusively political. The art-action and academic endeavors are not undertaken for only their internal value as artistic expression; they function as a means toward that same vision expressed by other LGBTI organizations. Their work is in exposing how homophobia, the gender binary, and heteronormativity work and how they are socially constructed while simultaneously subverting them.

Art-action, however, is aimed at the broader Ecuadorian population. Its targets are the attitudes and biases that form social systems of oppression fueled by machismo. Omar Encarnación, scholar on Latin American social movements, in discussing the trend of legal rights being achieved without popular support for LGBTI equality, warns of the perilous nature of these gains, “As long as hostility toward homosexuals remains widespread, gay rights will stay vulnerable to a backlash or a reversal, and might even bring about unintended consequences that could harm the very lives these rights are intended to benefit³⁹.” What sets *Teatro Dionisios* and *Desbordes* apart from other LGBTI organizations is that they acknowledge and share Encarnación’s concerns and invest all of their energy in shifting the culture itself and changing the mindsets of the Ecuadorian public instead of lawmakers and law enforcement.

Teatro Dionisios

Teatro Dionisios and *Desbordes*, while both art-action groups, do not operate the same. *Teatro Dionisios* puts on theatrical drag performances in the theater owned and operated by Daniel Moreno and his partner Manuel Acosta Martínez. Oftentimes the plays and performances are written by Moreno, but sometimes they will put on other

³⁹ Encarnación 106

productions or adapt stories to be drag productions. Moreno—who received professional makeup training in Spain—does the campy and elaborate stage makeup characteristic of drag queens. He also performs as his beautiful, glitter-encrusted drag persona, Sarahí. The theatrical performances themselves touch on issues of homosexuality, homophobia and the violence that accompanies it, the performance of gender roles, and other key themes in the discussion of LGBTI issues. The aim of *Teatro Dionisios* is multifold. Politically, they seek to open up space in the broader Ecuadorian community for people identifying as LGBTI. Socially, they aim to help the LGBTI community itself break out of negative cycles of reproducing aspects of heteronormativity and to question the social construction of gender norms. They bear witness, through the themes of the productions, to the struggles within the LGBTI community. Finally, as a theatrical and artistic organization, they seek to enrich the art and performance scene in Quito through drag performance as a publically renowned part of the Ecuadorian patrimony.

Teatro Dionisios is first and foremost about drag theater and the culture surrounding drag performance. When asked about the aims of *Dionisios*, Moreno explained that “[The theater was] created with the objective of fomenting drag culture in the Quito community, demonstrating that transformative art does not only belong to sexual minorities but rather to the Ecuadorian community⁴⁰.” Publically, *Teatro Dionisios* is viewed as an artistic and theatrical space, not necessarily a place for political dialogue about the rights of the LGBTI community. Moreno cites the public acceptance and appreciation of *Teatro Dionisios* as a major achievement, both on a personal level for the theater, but also on a political level in terms of opening space for the LGBTI

⁴⁰ Moreno, Daniel. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 20 Apr. 2011.

community. In 2010, *Teatro Dionisios* published a book entitled *Kitus Drag Queen*⁴¹ that chronicles the theater's twelve-year history, the vision of *Teatro Dionisios*, and some of the major works that have been performed at the theater. Part of the significance of this publication is that the Rescue Fund for Cultural Heritage (FONSAL), a department of the Metropolitan District of Quito, provided the funding for the book, "converting [*Teatro Dionisios*] into an intangible part of the Ecuadorian heritage⁴²." Their publication, then, was made possible through public funding from the city government itself, which would have been inconceivable for a drag theater ten years ago. If they had been structured as an LGBTI activist organization, such public support would still have been unthinkable today. *Teatro Dionisios* was shown to be a valuable contribution to the art and culture of Quito.

However, despite the fact that *Dionisios* is primarily an artistic endeavor, both Moreno and Acosta Martínez expressed clear intentions to challenge assumptions and biases and reshape their community to be more accepting and more educated about LGBTI/gender issues. They envision their work, while theatrical in nature, to have influence that extends beyond the walls of the theater. Acosta Martínez explained, "Dionisios, this house, this space, has become essential concerning the work of overcoming stereotypes, as part of the cultural activity of Quito⁴³." Their audience is not limited to the LGBTI community or LGBTI-accepting circles. In fact, Moreno explained that *Teatro Dionisios* is totally different than other LGBTI groups in Ecuador in this respect. "We teach through art and not only aimed at the LGBTI community but rather at the heterosexual community. That is the base for us to exist in this world. All of us are

⁴¹ See Appendix B for the cover of *Kitus Drag Queen* which features Moreno as his alter-ego, Sarahí.

⁴² Moreno, Daniel. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 20 Apr. 2011.

⁴³ Acosta Martínez, Manuel. E-mail interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 25 Apr. 2011.

born of a father and a mother and we teach respect so that they end up respecting us as well⁴⁴.” Moreno added that patrons regularly include heterosexual families as well.

Drawing on Turner’s thesis of social drama, Moreno’s performance is deconstructive of social norms and re-employs them in a deliberate way involving decisions about the framing, questioning, challenging etc. *Dionisios*, as employing an exaggerated and campy form of performance through drag, engages in social drama such that the fourth and final phase, reintegration, does not neatly reproduce or re-inscribe the same gender norms that it violates. Moreno, as Sarahí, comes on stage in extravagant, luxurious dresses of silk and velvet. She has a loud and flirtatious personality that fills the room as she interacts with the crowd: teasing, prodding, and provoking playfully. The cross-gender performativity—i.e. a man dressed as a woman—is a breaking of norms. The expectations that gender is biologically determined, that it constitutes discrete categories, and that it is immutable are all questioned in this simple act. Furthermore, the notions of aesthetic and what counts as feminine beauty are also thrown into question insofar as Sarahí/Daniel can be a beautiful woman. Drag theater employs Schechner’s concept of the “incomplete or unresolved transformation”; the audience goes in with the expectations that the actors will be men dressed as females—drag queens—or the reverse as women dressed as men, or drag kings. No matter how elaborate the costume or how beautiful the drag queen, there is the understanding that the audience is not fooled into believing that the actor really is a woman. This tension found in the incomplete transformation prolongs the crisis phase of the social drama as the audience sees the way in which Sarahí is a women, Daniel is a man and an actor, and to what extent Daniel and Sarahí are indistinguishable. It provokes certain questions: Is Sarahí

⁴⁴ Moreno, Daniel. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 20 Apr. 2011.

real, a persona of Daniel, or is she just a character? Does Sarahí transcend the stage and the performance? Is Daniel a performance as well? This requires extended negotiation and consideration of the gender norms at hand, disallowing a quick return to gender binary thinking. It is in this respect that Daniel's performance takes on a political nature.

Drag theater is not merely the breaking of gender norms, it also functions on a different level—that of play. The use of camp is a key ingredient in Daniel's performances as Sarahí. It is part of what separates *Teatro Dionisios* from other gender-bending activity and the interventions of *Desbordes*. The drag theater is a ludic place; laughter and enjoyment are welcome and encouraged, even in spite of the serious themes that are broached and the moments of despondency and sadness in the personal narratives of LGBTI struggles. Moreno is an artist and an entertainer as much as he is an actor-activist. Activist and political theorist Benjamin Shepard's theory of "play"—in its many connotations—claims that play has been a historically important form of activism, especially in the development of LGBTI movements. He sees play as having two goals: political victory and/or community building⁴⁵. In the context of *Teatro Dionisios*, there is certainly community-building value in bringing diverse people together to share in an evening of entertainment and art. However, Shepard's second function of play, political victory, is not a central objective of *Teatro Dionisios*. This is, in part, because of the confines presented by the physical space of the theater and also a reaction to the lack of enforcement of LGBTI rights. Moreno and Acosta Martínez do not desire more laws which would be ignored. With the use of play, they instead hope to make broader social changes in their ability to access and manipulate the biases and expectations of a willing

⁴⁵ Shepard 1

audience. The element of play provides the guise of an apolitical evening of entertainment thereby amplifying receptivity.

Finally, the stories in each production itself provoke thought about the reality for LGBTI Ecuadorians. Moreno's productions tell stories of the pain of rejection by family and friends when people come out as LGBTI, the poverty faced by LGBTI Ecuadorians tossed on the streets when they came out, and the violence perpetrated against visibly out members of the LGBTI community. The plays show the very real prospects, historical and present day, for the LGBTI community in a society that castigates them for transgressing gender boundaries. *Teatro Dionisios* attempts to win the audience over in the negotiation of social drama not by presenting rational argumentation, but appealing to their sense of compassion and common identity as Ecuadorians. Through moving retellings of these struggles, the question of a better future hangs over each production and points toward the need for public acceptance and less restrictive gender roles. *Teatro Dionisios* evades the aggressive, didactic presentation of a political agenda associated with traditional activist groups.

Desbordes de Género

Desbordes, in contrast, works at the intersection of academia, art, and protest. Professor María Amelia Viteri, founder of *Desbordes*, explained on behalf of the organization that “[Our objectives are]: to make the classroom horizontal through projects of art-action and ludic gender laboratories; to build bridges between academia and activism at the same time as fomenting audiovisual media as mechanisms for expanding the reach of these discussions around citizenship and...the social-cultural constructions of gender and sexualities; to open the debate and the forum of queer

theory⁴⁶.” This has translated into a wide variety of activities or “interventions” for *Desbordes*. The interventions that are the main public thrust of *Desbordes* consist of events in which the actor-activists act out some form of gender-bending activity in a public space. This means that *Desbordes* generally incorporates drag as a central aspect of their interventions. Presenting the malleability of the body and the performativity of gender is a key strategy for *Desbordes*. Viteri, reflecting on *Desbordes*, writes that “In...[the] framework [of art-action], the body is as much a tool as it is a product...converting itself in meaning and signifier, in object and subject of action⁴⁷.” The body becomes manifest theory, artistic performance, and a political message at once.

The fact that *Desbordes* was born out of academia and that many of the members are in Viteri’s graduate gender courses at the Latin American Social Sciences Institute (FLACSO) is important in the foundation of the organization. Yadira Bedon, one of the activists with *Desbordes*, explained “[*Desbordes*] is different because it was not born of a homosexual movement, but rather from an academic source that becomes a stream of continual deconstruction of norms.” Bedon went on to say that this deconstruction of norms was the sum of “individual initiatives...that have the weight of...theoretical sustenance that allows us to discuss and politicize every action⁴⁸.” In this sense, *Desbordes* is giving life to the abstract theories encountered in the classroom by testing them and applying them in the specific context of the Quito community. At the same time, *Desbordes* can translate and demonstrate theories of gender and sexuality, specifically those about the performativity of gender and subversion of gender norms, for

⁴⁶ Viteri, María Amelia. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 2 May 2011.

⁴⁷ Viteri 4

⁴⁸ Bedon, Yadira. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 26 Apr. 2011.

a public that may not have the same level of education or even access to academic information.

Desbordes also operates in a much more accepting and open capacity. This is reflected not just in the kinds of theories and ideas that the group works with, but also their attitude toward membership in *Desbordes*. LGBTI organizations tend to be very specific in the demographic to which they cater and can be mistrustful of anyone who takes an interest who does not personally pertain to that demographic. A hostile culture, differing objectives, and limited resources often make this exclusivity a sensible decision. *Desbordes*, in contrast, has a policy of accepting everyone regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Juan Zabala identifies as heterosexual and explained that he has felt rejected by other LGBTI activist groups in the past. Zabala remarked, “In *Desbordes* there is a spirit of solidarity⁴⁹.” Janina Duque expressed similar experiences with rejection and appreciated *Desbordes* for its differing stance on this issue⁵⁰. Duque went on to explain, “[*Desbordes*] is distinct precisely for its intent not to pigeonhole itself, of staying open to different perspectives that come from different areas of art and academia⁵¹.” They believe that heterosexual activists bring important experiences and perspectives to *Desbordes* which enrich dialogue and interventions.

The most prominent of *Desbordes* activities has been the production of the documentary, *Cuerpos/Fronteras: La Ruta* (Bodies/Borders: The Journey). The film documents several interventions in which the actor-activists of *Desbordes* dressed in drag and acted out cross-gendered roles in public spaces. The film demonstrates how the bodies of the actor-activists became the canvases for the interventions. Most of the film

⁴⁹ Zabala, Juan. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 15 Apr. 2011.

⁵⁰ Duque, Janina. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 27 Apr. 2011.

⁵¹ *Ibid*

is dedicated to the rehearsal process and the reflections of the actor-activists. A team of drag artists from *Teatro Dionisios* coached the actor-activists and helped with costuming and makeup. The drag costumes and makeup consisted of the traditional man-to-woman or woman-to-man, but there were a couple of instances in which the actor-activists maintained their gender identity, but expressed it in an exaggerated or different way by adopting a persona. For example, one of the women participated in the intervention dressed in a dominatrix-inspired costume, exploring the power dynamics of that archetype. Each of the actor-activists carefully rehearsed their behavior: how they carried themselves, how much space they physically occupied, the tone of their voice, what kind of language they used etc. in order to create their alter-ego. Finally, the members of *Desbordes* were trained in salsa dancing, but were able to choose, regardless of their gender or the gender of their alter-ego, whether they wanted to play the male role or the female role. Salsa traditionally has very strict roles for the man and the woman; the man always leads and makes decisions about the next move whereas the woman must anticipate and follow the directions of her male counterpart. *Desbordes* entered into not only different gender roles physically in terms of their costuming, but also through the inversion and changing of the gender roles of the Latin American tradition of salsa.

The first truly public excursion for *Desbordes*, extending beyond the halls of the FLACSO and *Teatro Dionisios*, were the interventions in traditional salsa clubs. The actor-activists entered as their alter-egos, with the video camera in tow, and proceeded to dance and interact with each other and with the clientele at the clubs. The result was a complex jumble of gender and salsa roles that could not easily be sorted out with a quick glance. There was a range of reactions from obliviousness to the intervention, to

expressions of curiosity and confusion, to looks of disgust. The intervention clearly maps out the phases of social drama. The clientele and the actor-activists, in looking around and reading each other's faces, were engaging in the negotiation process and the sorting of people into "sides"—i.e. against the breach or with the breach. The remedial phase is seen in the reactions themselves. The disapproval etched in the faces of some of the clientele shows how the actor-activists were compared to social norms and found noncompliant through their blatant flouting of gender prescriptions. The ramifications for the actor-activists are not really shown in the film. Are they excluded as outcasts and socially shut out of the community present at the club? Do they receive verbal harassment or even physical violence? My conversations with the actor-activists involved revealed that there were no instances of physical violence or extreme reactions—however verbal harassment and hostility were common and people frequently turned their bodies away as a physical display of rejection. I was left without a clear sense as to which side succeeded in the showdown of sorts following the breach. However, the intervention passed, the actor-activists were left to move on, remove their costumes, and assume their usual identities, whether or not those identities were any more socially acceptable or any less disruptive. They were left to melt back into their communities, but with the option still present of posing another intervention at a later time. Insofar as the actor-activists are not remonstrated to the point where they are unwilling to push gender norms through interventions, in other words, that they do not feel pressured into conforming, the disruptive potential remains. Returning to Butler's theory, gender exists in its constant repetitive performance, and if individuals are willing to endure the consequences and continue to challenge the norms, the myth of gender

identity as a stable binary locus is exposed. The goal is for there to be, at the very least, a lingering aftertaste of the performance acting as an invitation for personal reflection and the hope that some shift, if ever so small, has taken place in how the Ecuadorian public conceives of gender.

In both *Teatro Dionisios* and *Desbordes*, the actor-activists occupy roles outside of those normally assigned to them through dramatic productions in public settings. LGBTI activism politicizes gender and sexuality; art-action makes the performance of gender and the qualities/characteristics assigned to these roles the grounds for political contestation.

Reception and Transformation

To fully flesh out art-action as a strategy, it is important to look at how it operates on the micro level as well, specifically how it address and incorporates the audience and how the actor-activists themselves are affected by their participation.

Audience

Entering into the theater and performance of art-action allows for special consideration of the audience, their receptivity, their expectations, and their role as part of the performance. Traditional protest, in contrast, draws a distinct line between activists and audience, between those making an argument and those who need to be persuaded. One can join the activists, but not without crossing a literal and figurative line and shedding neutrality. This functions as a social drama that is negotiated in a confrontational way, but without the element of art-action to expose the workings of social norms, the negotiation process is rendered less poignant and therefore less

effective. The power of traditional protest is oftentimes in the sheer number of participants as spectacle and not necessarily in the ability to win individual citizens over in terms of personal philosophy on the issues at hand.

Desbordes and *Teatro Dionisios* engage much differently with their audiences. In art-action, the audience is not simply called on as political clout for a more ultimate audience of legislators, law enforcement agents, and the judiciary. They are the immediate and intended audience. Additionally, in the case of drag theater at *Teatro Dionisios*, the audience elects to attend the performance, and in the case of interventions by *Desbordes*, interventions may blur audience and actor-activist through the liminal nature of performance. Benjamin Shepard's book *Queer Political Performance and Protest* demonstrates the value of the liminal nature of the activist-audience distinction with an example from the annual New York Drag March. He writes, "... in 2006 a group of homeless men joined in the dancing to the drums with the gender-bending crowd... Everyone continued to dance as the line between audience and spectator blurred into just the sort of liminal space the evening celebrates⁵²." This blurring of audience and activist allows for the audience to also live out, if only in a limited sense, some of the ideals that are being asserted by the activists—in the case of Ecuadorian drag theater or intervention, to live in a space without rigid gender expectations. Schechner writes "Either permanently as in initiation rites or temporarily as in aesthetic theater and trance dancing, performers—and sometimes spectators too—are changed by the activity of performing⁵³." However, it is inaccurate to encapsulate *Teatro Dionisios* and *Desbordes* as purely aesthetic theater—it is performed with intentions to cross social boundaries

⁵² Shepard 6

⁵³ Schechner 4

with political aim. The audience becomes integrally involved in the social drama because the performance is drawing on the norms and expectations of the audience in order to violate those norms and create a sense of crisis. Additionally, it is difficult to evaluate whether or not spectators may be changed and the permanency of such a change. Insofar as alternatives to social norms are presented that may not have even been conceivable before, a more permanent change in gender norms may be possible.

However, there are certainly limitations to the way that *Teatro Dionisios* and *Desbordes* operate. The receptivity of the audience in a theater—especially as a voluntary audience—may be higher, but it also limits the scope of the performance and its ability to have reaching effects. Juan Zabala, after explaining that the audience of *Teatro Dionisios* and oftentimes *Desbordes* are already LGBTI-tolerant or identify as LGBTI, remarked that, “I like confrontation and there isn’t any when there is a consensus.”⁵⁴ There is the risk that the obvious theatricality of drag theater—namely, that the use of camp—may take the message far beyond anything the audience could conceive of as real or even imaginable. The audience may think of the performances as “just play,” implying that it has no social relevance or political import. There is also the risk that the audience simply will not “get it”—that the message actor-activists seek to bring across may not be effectively communicated. These organizations cannot perfectly predict how their performances will be interpreted and cannot control how their audience will react. Yadira Bedon of *Desbordes* remarked that, “[A obstacle in performance is] that none of us are artists, and the public may expect a perfect theatrical or drag performance without knowing that our [objective] is more the deconstruction of borders

⁵⁴ Zabala, Juan. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 15 Apr 2011.

using materials that alter our perspective of what it is to be woman/man⁵⁵.” Juan Zabala brought up a particular point of confusion, in that “People do not understand queer theory and the philosophy of *Desbordes*. Oftentimes it is confused as a purely transgender movement⁵⁶.” The efficacy of the movement to instigate critical thought about gender and to open up space for the LGBTI community relies largely on what the audience members are thinking as they walk away from the performance.

This should not be taken as a hopeless assessment for the impact these organizations seek to have on their audiences. While audience members may not suddenly embrace a Judith Butler-inspired interpretation of the performativity of gender, their perception of rigid gender categories may begin to blur. Even if they find a way to solidly re-inscribe gender norms following their own personal thought process in the social drama presented to them, they were still forced to go through that consideration. Bedon explained, “[An objective of *Desbordes* is] to take the theoretical concepts from books, essays and research and capture them in palpable realities whose effects/causes are unpredictable because you can only give form to the object you’re looking to project but not to the perception or conversion of the individual⁵⁷.” There is value in the exposure to queer theory—that many Ecuadorians may never have otherwise encountered—and the importance of the internal questioning process that the performances seek to provoke should not be overlooked. A combination of audience self-election and the use of play help to incorporate the audience into the performance and the process of reflection instead of dividing activist and audience. The context of art

⁵⁵Bedon, Yadira. E-mail interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 26 Apr. 2011.

⁵⁶Zabala, Juan. Personal interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 15 Apr. 2011.

⁵⁷Bedon, Yadira. E-mail interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 26 Apr. 2011.

allows for the theories and arguments of art-action to be framed in poignant and personal ways.

Actor-Activist

While the extent of the impact that art-action has had on broader Ecuadorian society is difficult if even possible to measure, each of the actor-activists noted important changes in themselves as a direct result of their activism. This personal transformation was something that each actor-activist unanimously emphasized as a major reason for their continued participation. It seems that the lived experience of art as activism has the potential for personal growth and facilitates a deeper understanding of gender and the performance implied therein.

María Amelia Viteri, as she described the activities of *Desbordes*, emphasized that, “This project is not about experiencing transsexual life and erasing the suffering therein, but rather to explore the borders of our bodies and our perceptions of our gender/sex⁵⁸.” The goal was experiencing and demonstrating the malleability of gender. The importance of the personal lived experience and self-exploration was reflected in the interviews with other *Desbordes* activists. Ricardo Bucaram’s reason for joining *Desbordes* was not initially a political one. When asked why he joined, he stated simply, “To understand myself.” Ricardo has gained confidence in his sexuality and has incorporated small gender-bender activities in his day-to-day life. Coining a term in Spanish, he remarked, “I queered myself.” He went on to explain, “If I don’t have any clean pants, I will go out in a skirt...I give queer to the public by little spoonsful.” He was adamant that these were not really interventions, but evidence of the way that his

⁵⁸ Cuerpos/Fronteras: La Ruta

gender performance and sense of self have shifted as a result of his work with *Desbordes*⁵⁹.

The activists cited fears and inhibitions about digging deeply into their own gender and sexuality and in having experiences beyond their own personal identities. The fear indicates an awareness of the social ramifications when members of a given society fail to perform their gender correctly as outlined in Butler's theory of gender performativity. It also serves to show the extent to which these activists have internalized these messages and fear for the stability of their own identities. To lose one's identity would mean to lose one's stable locus in society. Bedon explained, "A cultural obstacle is that to dare to look at and rethink the binary can result in an emotional instability that many people don't want to risk or don't want to analyze. It is like being without a floor, without knowing where or how you will fall⁶⁰." Bedon explained about her personal experience, "[I] look for my borders in order to move past them, playing with my mind, interpretations of culture, gender, social dynamics, and norms that I have developed that...my subconscious does not dare to deconstruct⁶¹." Duque felt the element of personal discovery was especially important for her as someone who labels herself as heterosexual—someone generally compliant with gender norms. "Personally, some achievements have been to question myself, to question my preconceptions of gender and to make evident the contradiction in my body...It has allowed me to love the supposed 'contradiction' with which I live my sexuality, enjoying it, even though I labeled myself as heterosexual, I believe that I do not fit with any stereotype. I can be very ladylike,

⁵⁹ Bucaram, Ricardo. Personal Interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 13 Apr. 2011

⁶⁰ Bedon, Yadira. E-mail Interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 26 Apr. 2011.

⁶¹ *Ibid*

very macho.⁶² Duque has not only learned a lot about herself, but also felt that she had the opportunity to get inside of the mindset of the machista stereotype through her drag alter-ego. Describing her experience, she wrote:

My character is named David and he is a “machista” man, exaggeratedly machista, and this has allowed me to position myself on the other side... in order to make evident how grotesque it can be and to make it ridiculous. But also it allows me to try to enter into a position of power and of not having limits or pressures. [I am interested in] demonstrating how this “super macho” breaks down and has fears, sensations, and affection that, from the stereotype, he is not permitted to have⁶³.

This does not necessarily mean that Duque empathizes with machista men, but rather that she has come to know the way machismo operates from the inside to better subvert this oppressive culture.

Part of the sense of personal development was envisioned as an investment in Ecuador’s future and a way of broadcasting not just queer theory but queer experiences outward. They felt that traditional political protest and appeals to the legal system had not yet yielded the tolerance and freedom they desired for their community and there was also the sense that engaging in the academic and abstract theories was not sufficient either. The lived experience provided a union of these fields, a holistic experience that left them feeling more enlightened. Zabala expressed that one of the greatest parts of *Desbordes* was that Viteri’s young daughter, Simone, is growing up in this environment and regularly witnesses the activities of *Desbordes*. He feels that it was an important investment in the next generation⁶⁴. For Simone, queer theory and performance are normal. For her, gender had always been represented as something malleable that does not fit with a simple, static binary.

⁶² Duque, Janina. E-mail Interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 27 Apr. 2011.

⁶³ *Ibid*

⁶⁴ Zabala, Juan. Personal Interview. Trans. Genevieve Venable. 15 Apr. 2011.

The most striking transformations take place within the actor-activists themselves. They come to break their own conceptions of their gender identities and exemplify the falseness of the gender binary in the way they live their lives. The activism extends beyond the isolated events and enters the quotidian gender performance of the actor-activists' lives.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I sought to break down specific forms of art-action to understand how they work as simultaneously artistic, academic, and political endeavors. The problem presented by Ecuador's political progressiveness but cultural hesitancy is a difficult one that cannot (and has not) been easily resolved by traditional means of appealing to the government. Art-action has risen up as a fledgling movement within the broader and still very new LGBTI movement. The more lasting effects of these organizations have yet to be seen or measured. Its inclusivity crosses deep divisions that have, in some cases, duplicated efforts and made large scale cooperation and pooling of resources impossible. The queer field is given space for discussion without the threat of cultural imperialism and is ascribed with meaning that resonates with Ecuadorian values through local academia and art. As in the case of *Desbordes's* contributions at FLACSO and *Teatro Dionisios's* designation as a part of Ecuadorian cultural patrimony, art-action can become a source of pride instead of something foreign and offensive to be rejected.

Perhaps more importantly, art-action isolates, exposes, and subverts the social norms associated with the gender binary and heteronormativity. It gets at the heart of machismo culture and the rigid gender prescriptions that accompany it. Gender and

sexuality become ground for political negotiation and analysis. It takes apart gender and challenges it through aesthetic performance, moving from the theoretical to the physical, producing not just cognitive but visceral responses. Homophobia is not a philosophy, but a mindset and a feeling. Art-action aims specifically at the mindsets and biases of individual.

Is art-action is the *deus ex machina* for all gender inequality and homophobia in Ecuador? No, certainly not. There is room for the passage of more specific laws regarding the equality and treatment of the LGBTI community. There is also much that could be done to try to utilize the legal system for enforcing those constitutional rights which do exist. Art-action, however, is an important part of the answer to giving meaning to political rights and helping to guarantee a freer and more equal future for members of the LGBTI community. Rights have little meaning if members of the LGBTI community continue to live in fear and experience emotional and physical violence.

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Appendix A – Translation of Interview Questions

Focus: How do gender/LGBTI groups politicize gender in order to make social and political changes?

Questions:

1. What are the objectives of your organizations? What are your personal objectives?
2. What is the reality like for the LGBTI community now in Ecuador?
3. What is your philosophy and the philosophy of your organization? Is it different from or similar to those of other gender/LGBTI groups?
4. [Question specifically for art-action groups] How do you use machismo and other strict gender structures in your interventions?
5. What are your reaching achievements?
6. How is your organization different that those in the North American and European LGBTI movements?
7. What are the biggest obstacles for your organization?
8. The constitution of 2008 guarantees equality and the rights of the LGBTI community. What is necessary to realize this in everyday life?

Appendix B – Kitus Drag Queen, *Teatro Dionisios*'s book

