

9. Aktivismien teorit, työkalut ja tulevaisuudet / Theories, Tools and Futures of Activisms

Re-thinking queer and feminist activism in time of anti-LGBT mobilization

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In the past couple of years in Europe there has been an increasing mobilisation directed towards diverting, forestalling, and openly opposing movement towards greater gender, sexual, and trans* equality, operating on both national and trans-European levels (Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Anti-LGBT initiatives have been rather successful in mobilising hundreds of thousands of people in and through public activities such as protests, national referendums, and civil petitions, and have largely relied on the discursive strategy that combined the naturalising and essentialising discourses of gender, sex, and sexuality with the discourses of nationalism and Christianity. As some scholars have suggested, such rhetorical strategy successfully tapped into the larger social and economic crisis brought by the neo-liberal order, and have managed to reach out to people disempowered by the crisis through “common sense” claims and emotionally charged statements about the things that are familiar, relatable, and empowering, such as family, nation, and the notion of tradition (Grzebalska 2016; Kováts, 2017; Petö, 2015).

In this paper, I would like to reflect on the challenges that these ongoing anti-LGBT mobilisation poses for queer and feminist activism. I will do so by exploring and assessing the current responses to the anti-LGBT activism coming from the actors that promote gender and sexual inclusiveness. My analysis will be informed by the triangular notion of progressive practice based on inclusiveness, reflectivity, and prefiguration as proposed by Eschle and Maiguashca (2014). At the same time, by drawing on Laclau’s and Mouffe’s call for the utilisation of populism in progressive politics, in my analysis I will also tackle the question of necessity and possibility of feminist populism.

Art, culture and queer activism: Case studies on conflicts with activism and visual culture

Marianne Niemelä

In my paper I would like to present my work and experiences on working, on the one hand, as a researcher on queer theory, as well as my experiences as a queer activist mainly in the cultural field, on the other. For my Aalto University master’s thesis *Queering the gallery: in search of counter-normative curatorial strategies* (2015), I considered exhibition making as a form of queer activism and what art events could learn from queer events. I have, before and after my research, been both taking part as well as organised queer events myself. Interesting was how and why my attitude towards research shifted noticeably depending if I was the researcher or the organiser in the event. What I considered the central problem between research on queer topics and queer activism was that too often researchers considered that their research was in itself activism or had too high hopes on that it would instigate activism as such. Whereas more often or not, it was the other way around. That is, researchers taking credit of the work done by activists. However, what I think underlines this, as well as the wider conflict between queer theory and practice, is that queer is constantly in the risk of being appropriated into the mainstream without its message and concerns coming along with it. So the wider question to me is that how to we at the same time bring forth this non-normative criticism of society, but so that we do not dilute the message or allow it to be commercialised.

Creative Strategies of Action in Contemporary Russian Feminism

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The contemporary feminist community in Russia has been formed in the 2010s in a situation, in which political opportunities are shrinking and the terrain of action has significantly been transformed with new restrictions that for example limit the possibilities to organize street demonstrations. This paper zooms into the strategies of action (Swidler 1986) of Russian feminist activists and the resources that allow contemporary strategies to be taken into use in the transforming field of activism. Since the feminists have very few economic resources at their disposal, they succeed when inventively making use of other resources such as creativity and media know-how.

This paper illuminates how contemporary feminists draw increasingly from artistic strategies of action such as visual art, performance art and theater. In addition, digital media plays a pivotal role enabling feminist activism in contemporary Russia, connecting activists not only to each other but also to the transnational feminist community. The main claim in this paper is that in the limited political opportunity structure and strongly mediated reality, feminist activism in fact becomes all about creating appearances. For example, staging demonstrations serves as an illuminating example of creating appearances, revealing how real and digital in fact often become blended in the context of Russian feminist activism, making digital life at times more real than the reality outside of it, like Gapova (2015, 30) has suggested having happened already in the context of Pussy Riot and its infamous Punk Prayer.

The paper is based on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2015-2016 in St. Petersburg and Moscow during 3.5 months and consists of 42 interviews with Russian feminist activists.