

**Embodying Enlivenment:
Becoming Sex-Ecologies at the Xplore Berlin 2016 Symposium and Festival**
Sacha Kagan

In the summer of 2016, I curated a symposium entitled “EMBODYING ENLIVENMENT – Queer, SM and Eco-Sexual Perspectives” at the “Xplore” Festival in Berlin – probably one of the most original and deeply inter- and transdisciplinary festivals I ever encountered...

“Xplore – The Festival on the Art of Lust”, held every year in Berlin (Germany) since 2004 and in the meanwhile also in other cities around the world (Barcelona, Paris, Roma, Sydney, Vienna), is a three-day event on creative sexuality, BDSM, body work, dance, performance and ritual. BDSM stands for: Bondage, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. It is an umbrella term for an ensemble of diverse embodied practices between consenting adults that include sexual practices and also go beyond them, developing a complex and highly reflexive corporeal individual and social practice that explicitly addresses difficult questions such as the flows of power in human relationships and the (re)discovery of sensations beyond conventional binaries such as pain vs. pleasure.

With the Xplore Symposium, held in parallel to and as an integral part of the Xplore Festival, I was searching for ways in which different embodied and sexual practices may relate to an ecological way of thinking and way of life, as part of my ongoing exploration of the cultural dimension of sustainability. Together with the symposium’s seven speakers, the festival’s workshops organizers and many participants, we engaged into a journey of discovery, which weaved together exceptionally well the theoretical threads (mostly at the symposium) and experiential-practical threads (mostly at the workshops and performances): We ventured into original ways of thinking and experiencing ourselves as hybrid becomings: becoming queerer and other, becoming animals, becoming plants, becoming meta-beings (meta-humans, meta-animals) and overall approaching a richer and deeper experience of becoming ecologies.

Xplore and Felix Ruckert

Xplore is the child of Felix Ruckert, a German choreographer who at some point in the course of his successful career as contemporary dance choreographer, also created, managed and permanently resided in an interdisciplinary creative space in Berlin, named Schwelle7: Schwelle7 was a performance space in Berlin-Wedding, between 2007 and 2016, where very diverse forms of embodied practice and research could meet and enrich each other. The space soon acquired international renown and attracted international experimenters who were not satisfied with the existing boundaries around specific fields such as contemporary dance, yoga, body-mind spiritual practices, philosophic and artistic approaches to embodiment, Tantra, BDSM communities, queer, and other sexual and otherwise embodied approaches and communities. Ruckert writes on his website: “At schwelle7 I juxtaposed my private life and my artistic practices, fusing them into a choreography that lasted nine years. I consider schwelle7 a masterpiece and my ultimate participatory performance.”¹

1 <http://felixruckert.de/2016/10/04/schwelle7/>

Ruckert had already, in the preceding decades, explored issues of sexuality and sadomasochism in his choreographies such as e.g. “Secret Service” (2002). My first encounter with Ruckert’s work had been that piece when performed at the dance festival of La Ferme du Buisson near Paris in 2005. “Secret Service” is a piece where the visitor is blindfolded and has a choice to make between 2 options of an embodied experience:

- a ‘soft’ version where the dancers work with the visitor’s bodily movement (it felt to me like experiencing a form of ‘contact improvisation’ choreography, no longer with my spectator-eyes but through my own body);
- and a harder version, also including elements of BDSM (which I did not experience back then as I ran out of time and courage).

As stated on Ruckert’s website, in Secret Service “the visitor’s body becomes the center of activity. It is unconditionally handed over to the performers. The only choice is to continue or to stop. Focusing on the senses, the process radically alters the notion of time and space, leading to the very source of creativity, the intelligence of the body.”²

I re-discovered Ruckert’s work, both at Schwelle⁷ and at Xplore a decade later, around 2014, and by 2015 I was joining in as a presenter at Xplore. For the 2016 edition of Xplore, Ruckert invited me to curate the first edition of an “Xplore Symposium”, happening in parallel to the festival on the same premises, to strengthen a theoretical dimension of the explorations at the festival, and to further develop its reflexive dimension.

Xplore constitutes a fascinating context for reflecting on embodiment, with and also beyond art, as it already exemplifies a playful fusion of art, body practices and sexuality that joyfully moves beyond deeply seated conventions such as traditional couple-based sexual and sentimental relationships, fragmentation between hetero, gay, lesbian and trans+queer communities (at Xplore all genders and sexual orientations feel welcome and the diversity is extraordinary), and narrow-minded opposition between a certain kind of feminism and sexpositive practices & BDSM.

In its 2016 edition, concretely, the Xplore festival offered a number of workshops around shiatsu, several approaches to breathing (including a workshop where participants became one collective “breathing slime”), mind and body awakening, self-defense, acupuncture, sexual transgressions, whipping in BDSM as a form of musical production, a workshop introducing (heterosexual) men to ‘passive’ anal pleasure, genital reiki, animalization, rope-play in networked “cocoon”, and various other sexual, spiritual and BDSM practices. One of the symposium speakers, Jaime del Val, also contributed a workshop and a performance/metaformance, which I will discuss again further down. Xplore 2016 also offered an ongoing participatory performance, the “Guru Supermarket”, which, with over 20 participating “gurus”, humorously thematized “manipulation and abuse of power within the framework of ideologies and belief systems.” These gurus, the festival program promised, “will found ashrams, institutions and sweatshops. They will preach and seduce, gather and educate students, enlighten disciples with secret teachings, offer services – and of course, demand tribute in return! There will be no shortage of initiation rites and blessings, indoctrination and enlightenment, mindfuck and assault...maybe even doubt and rebellion?”

Embodying Enlivenment

With this symposium, I was aiming to bring together thinkers, both practitioners and scholars, who would bring original insights contributing to a shared reflection on how we can learn about living well, both personally and together, through non-conventional embodied practices.³ I was especially interested in how, in an age still marked by the modern myths of Mastery and Control (for example in the main bulk of science, policy and management discourses about sustainable development), but

² <http://felixruckert.de/2002/01/30/secret-service-2002/>

³ See also the Xplore Symposium website at <http://www.2016.xplore-berlin.de/index.php/en/symposium-en-16>

where these myths have started to crumble down (especially with the acknowledgement of life's qualitative complexity), the rediscovery of the body, of one & many ecology/ecologies, and of intelligence beyond the narrowly rational intellectual realm, is opening up new perspectives for transformation of individuals and society.

Corporeal practices allow us to learn through embodiment, whether they are sexual, gender-related and/or otherwise exploring new territories of self and others. But how do these practices relate to existing social order? How far do they maintain the status quo, titillate social change, or even maybe foster deeper social transformation?

The symposium was an occasion to explore some alternative cultures in their relations to mainstream cultures. It investigated both individual practices and temporary communities. The guest speakers introduced different approaches and perspectives related to Queer (and post-queer) Theories, BDSM, Phenomenological Animism, Queer Ecologies, Eco-Sexuality, Metahumanism, and the philosophy of Enlivenment. Through the guest speakers' interventions and in a plenary panel debate, we exchanged and explored together how knowing and making worlds with the body, rather than 'against' the body, relates to philosophical, political and civilizational questions about the kind of society we want to become.

German philosopher, biologist and journalist Andreas Weber opened the symposium with an inspiring talk (entitled "Poetics of the Flesh: Sense and Existence Beyond Body and Culture. Towards a Nondualistic Eros"), spoken in a beautifully written and spoken German language, introducing his philosophy of life as a continuous creative process of desire, by all the living and towards all life. Critical both of body-mind dualism and of "body-transcendence [and] the primacy of culture", Weber proposes a biosemiotic worldview, one of "Enlivenment" where every living body, starting with the smallest bacterial organism, "exists within a sphere of meaning, a poetic space of relating and meaningful identity-generation". The room was packed and the audience highly energized by Weber's poetic language and performance as much as by the evocative depth of his insights.

The symposium was also strongly oriented to a queer-ecological discourse, with two inspiring speakers from Canada: queer environmental humanities scholar Catriona Sandilands from York University, and the artist and sex educator Caffyn Jesse from Salt Spring Island.

Sandilands shared some insights from her newest research on queer ways of thinking, being and eroticizing with plants. Entitled "Queering Communities: Becoming (With) Plants", her speech evoked the ambivalences of our relations to plants as sensual and sensate beings, in everyday life and in modern culture (including cinema and the arts). She also invited us to do a sensory exercise with plants she had gathered on the roadside on her way to the festival. Critical of anthropocentric and zoocentric thinking, her attention to our deep enmeshment in the plant-life that dominates the surface of the earth, found many echoes in the audience, as well as later in our panel debate and in some of the workshops.

Caffyn Jesse shared a passionate and colorful plea for sex-ecological practice as individuals and communities, entitled "Queer Embodiment: Shapeshifting, Pleasure and Wildness". She evoked a queer emancipatory magic, and shared an embodied-utopian vision "grounded in empowered boundary awareness" and "co-creat[ing] possibilities for shapeshifting and wildness" that moved the audience. Critical of conservative political tendencies within the LGBT movement, and quoting Michel Foucault ("sex is not a fatality; it is a possibility for creative life"), she advocated for queer practice as "radical disharmony with various sites of oppression: gender, morality, the patriarchal nuclear family, the prevailing culture of nature, and white racial supremacy".

Jaime Del Val, a philosopher, artist and activist based in Madrid, shared in his lecture some of the insights from the "Metabody" European research project he is coordinating. Denouncing how Big Data rules through quantified bodies, Del Val develops a critical analysis of the power of media and technology ("where bodies are increasingly reduced to complex data and behaviour patterns of

prediction, in a process disguised behind rhetorics of technoliberation”) coupled to a performative practice “working not inside representation but undoing its perceptual framework and mobilising an unquantifiable body”. In his workshop “MICROSEXES - Alien Couplings”, all participants concretely practiced micro-movements together, “experiencing how the body loses its form, anatomy and identity and becomes an emergent landscape of infinite indefinite sexes”. It was for me a challenging corporeal practice, seeking the most alien own movements possible, breaking patterns as soon as I recognized them and aiming for an amorphous (“de-territorialized”) movement – a strenuous yet fascinating experience, and a utopian (sorry, *metatopian!*) experiment.

I also invited two German social scientists to present their research on BDSM communities: Elisabeth Wagner, sociologist and practitioner of sadomasochism, analyzes “strategies for (self)normalization in sadomasochism as a potential critique of gender norms”, articulating how BDSM-practitioners relate to a social order simultaneously tolerating and marginalizing BDSM, how they restrict themselves through “self-normalization” while aiming for acceptance, and how far/how subtly (or not) they reflect on gender identity and power-norms through BDSM practice. Robin Bauer, a queer and transgender scholar and activist, in his lecture “transgression, transformation, exuberant possibilities?” shared his empirical research results on les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices. Focusing on BDSM-play with gender and age especially by trans and queer people, he outlined how such play holds a “potential to experiment with and invent new forms of existence and bodies that are not restricted by ‘biology’ [but] reinvented in BDSM interactions [potentially moving] beyond restrictive either/or thinking and giv[ing] us an idea of the exuberance of life”.

The symposium was closed with a final talk by Thomas Burø, a Danish philosopher and punk rock musician with a research interest in masculinity studies. His lecture entitled “Our Sad Contempt for Powerlessness: or, on masculinity and cultures of sustainability” examined how cultural clichés of masculinity (“competence, virility, potency, virtuosity, leadership”, etc.) are linked to a conception of power and of the subordination of all others. Burø advocated a practical reform of masculinities, asking “how they can move from subordinating female bodies, animals, plants and other others to connecting with them in a compassionate, intimate and respectful manner”. Workshops-leaders in the audience felt a direct relevance of Burø’s message to their work.

I also moderated a plenary panel where the speakers started a rich exchange with each other as well as with the audience that included Felix Ruckert, several workshop leaders and key members of Schwelle 7. The common ground between the approaches at the symposium was allowed to emerge, which I’d summarize with the expression: “becoming ecologies”.

Becoming ecologies

What, for me, came across both the symposium and festival, as the emerging ‘red thread’, was a reflexive experience of hybrid becomings. It was present in all the speeches and I also felt its presence in several of the workshops. For example at the animalization workshop (by Senzo M and Annie Fol) we attempted to become animals or rather “pets” as they are symbolized and experienced by humans in mainstream western culture. Elsewhere we attempted becoming (with) plants, becoming slimes (in Maranta Rubiera’s workshop), etc. Or maybe even, as I felt ambiguously during the animalization workshop (where I could not identify so well with role-playing one specific species), we were starting to experience ourselves as what Jaime Del Val calls meta-humans – or meta-animals, and even further thanks to Cate Sandilands’ inspiration: Acquiring an artistically experimentalist experience of becoming ecologies – not merely as an arcane intellectual experience within an environmental humanities conference or a reading of queer theory,

but as a joyfully estranging, deeply embodied corporeal exploration of sex-ecologies within oneself and with others.

In July 2017, the second edition of the Xplore Symposium experimented with a modified format, again with guest-speakers but integrated within a festival play-space.

The focus was placed on the productive ambivalences and ambiguities at the "Shifting Backstages and Frontlines of Embodiment"⁴. Online and in print, further outputs from the two first Xplore Symposiums are expected, and a documentary film about the Xplore Berlin festival is in preparation.

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4 See the Xplore Symposium 2017 website at <http://www.2017.xplore-berlin.de/index.php/en/program-en/symposium-en-17>