

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

I think there are societal benefits to embracing gender diversity and giving people more ways to express themselves. When you give people the ability to be themselves in more than two defined categories you open up ways for people to live, which sparks diversity. Diversity sparks creativity and I think it is important to look at what we contribute to society in terms of our views and our experiences. This contribution that we make to society is something we need to stress and convey to other people.

An Interview with Justus Eisfeld

January 24, 2011

Justus Eisfeld's Apartment in New York City

Justus Eisfeld: My name is Justus Eisfeld. I am a trans activist. I am originally German and I came to New York after eleven years in Amsterdam. I have been working for *Global Action for Trans Equality* (GATE) as co-director together with Mauro Cabral. This organization is an idea we developed two years ago and received funding for a year ago. I have been involved in trans activism since I started to transition myself in 2002. I volunteered with the *Dutch Transgender Film Festival* and initiated the *Dutch Transgender Network*. I was also the first co-chair of *Transgender Europe*. I am a political scientist and gender studies major by trade and I live here in New York for love. I moved here to be with my boyfriend and we have a little dog, Gemma, who is here to give her approval to everything I say.

Carlos Motta: What is GATE exactly?

JE: GATE is an international transgender human rights organization with three key aims: To support trans movements worldwide, to make critical knowledge and resources available to trans activists, and to work for trans rights internationally.

One of the most visible things we accomplished in the last year included a Pre-conference called, "Trans Action as Trans Rights," for the first *International Congress on Gender Rights and Human Identity*, which was attended by one hundred trans activists from all over the world. We have also conducted field research in different parts of the world in order to identify leaders within international trans movements and we have done a lot of background work to make international structures, such as NGOs, more aware of trans rights.

CM: When working internationally, do you establish connections with local trans organizations and work together with them?

JE: Yes, the trans movement is at a very early stage of organizing. We are pretty much where the gay and lesbian movement was in the early 1980s in most major cities and richer countries. In these places, support groups are mostly run at a zero dollar budget. People meet at somebody's home to talk about their feelings. In very few places you see more political activism, most notably in Latin America, North America and Europe, though there are a lot of things

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happening in Asia and there are things happening in parts of Africa. It is very quickly developing as a movement, which is right now at a grassroots level.

There are few countries where you can identify truly national structures; primarily local support groups also take on national functions. A lot of our work is with grassroots organizations, which is both fun and difficult because most of them have slightly different goals than an international network needs to have. When you work at the national, regional, or international level you have to work on a lobbying level, you have to be able to talk to politicians. People at the grassroots level are usually more concerned with actions, with being visible and influencing their own living surroundings, which is important and necessary, but it is different. Sometimes this is an issue and sometimes it is a source of inspiration.

CM: When you speak of a movement that is starting to be formed internationally, what are the foundations of this movement? What do you understand as a trans person and what needs does an organized trans movement address?

JE: Let me start with the definition first: I don't think anybody can define a trans person in a clearly defined setting. We prefer to work on gender identity issues and gender identity rights that are broadly rooted in critical gender studies and feminism. We consider these foundations from perspectives of people who transgress gender norms because we have found that perpetrators of violence, for example, don't really care how people self identify but rather attack anybody who they perceive as transgressing gender norms. This can be a person who is visibly transgendered or androgynous, but it can also be a person who crosses gender boundaries in other ways, for example, gay men with a sway in their hips, lesbian women who look a little too butch, heterosexual women in a powerful position, and so on. While these are all transgressions of gender norms, many of these people would never self-identify as trans and we would never claim for them to be trans. While we are deeply rooted within the trans movement we also feel we need to take multiple needs into account when pressing for trans rights in order to frame our struggle in a broader spectrum addressing the transgression of gender norms as well as looking critically at gender norms in general.

As for the needs of trans people, these are similar in most parts of the world. There are always issues around holistic recognition of our gender identities, both in legal terms but also in medical terms. There are always issues around violence, discrimination, harassment, and accessing employment, work and healthcare. However, the severity of these issues varies greatly from country to country and from culture to culture. In some places access to healthcare is more important and in other places direct violence by strangers or by family members is a more direct need so the emphasis is different in different parts of the world.

CM: Are the issues the same in what is called the "developing world" as opposed to the "developed world," or is there a difference in terms of how gender is normalized and perceived in developing nations?

JE: I think most cultures have different ways of perceiving gender. For example, if we compare the Netherlands and the United States, when I was still presenting and identifying as a butch lesbian, people in the Netherlands read me as a butch lesbian. When I travelled to the United States, people read me much more often as a man. In the Netherlands I would be called "Sir" maybe once or twice a year. In the United States, I was being called "Sir" on a weekly basis.

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I don't think one can really distinguish between global regions such as the global north, global south or eastern and western hemispheres because how gender identity is being read and placed within culture differs from country to country.

The economic intersections are limited. For example, in some Pacific Islands, societies have developed where people who transgress gender norms are raised as part of society, whereas in other wealthier parts of the world the exact opposite occurs. However, when you look at the overall issues trans people are faced with, economic factors are always aggravating. If, for example, access to employment is an issue, in places where unemployment is very high and where people struggle with obtaining jobs to begin with, it is always trans people who are in the last group of people who get employed. In places where education is not available for everybody in the country, trans people are always part of the group with least access to education. Economic factors have a huge impact on trans people even when they are not inherently part of discrimination of trans people.

CM: In some of the interviews I held with trans people in Colombia, the issue of class was raised very strongly because of the fact that Colombia is such a class divided society. Diana Navarro mentioned how lower class trans women often see prostitution as their only option for work whereas upper class trans Colombians find ways to leave Colombia to transition elsewhere or find places that are more welcoming simply because of their economic privilege.

JE: Class is a huge issue also in countries like the United States where there are enormous class differences, especially in a city like New York, and also in Europe where class is not so much defined by wealth within native societies, but by who is legal and who is undocumented in the country. In Europe, trans sex workers are usually people who are living in Europe undocumented, many are from Latin America and Asia. Here in the United States the trans women working as sex workers tend to be Black, Latina, and very low income white people, so it is also heavily influenced by class and by race.

CM: Can you speak specifically about New York City in terms of trans issues? I know for example the *Sylvia Rivera Law Project* (SRLP) is a really strong organization advocating for trans rights. What is your involvement with organizations in New York City at a local level?

JE: I am relatively uninvolved at the local level partly because I moved here two years ago and partly because trans rights activism is my daily work so whenever my workday is over I need some time off. That being said, I am involved in some organizations including the *Callen-Lorde Community Health Center*, which is the largest healthcare facility, in the world I think, for trans, lesbian, gay, bi, and HIV positive people. Callen-Lorde provides access to medical facilities to people who don't have healthcare insurance. I also admire the work of the *Sylvia Rivera Law Project*, the *Audre Lorde Project*, and *Queers for Economic Justice*. These are all organizations working specifically with marginalized LGBT people.

CM: What are positive ways of thinking through the challenges that the trans community faces, say at the level of grassroots activism or even at the level of lobbying and political advocacy?

JE: I think the best examples of grassroots trans activism come from trans people deciding to get together, even if it is just to watch *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, or another feel good movie. When trans people get together, we start to organize ourselves and

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become aware of political issues and become knowledgeable about what is right and wrong relative to what is happening in our lives. That is when action starts, that is when people start to move their asses and get active and start to, figuratively or literally, go out into the streets and claim their rights. That is the best action that I can imagine.

CM: From the work I have been doing in the different countries, I have also heard from the people that I interviewed that often trans communities are split between people that are more interested in assuming categorical gender norms, such as a full transition from male to female or the other way around, versus other people that do not feel the need to do that, hence organizations have formed that have strict views on who can receive treatment and so on. Can you comment on this?

JE: First I would like to place this in a larger frame of the impact of experiencing discrimination. Being part of a marginalized community, people have the strong need to identify with somebody and get together with people they feel are just like them, and that is the positive side. On the negative side, I think the stress of being part of a marginalized minority, stress that is often not dealt with, makes people tend to feel the need not to be on the lowest ladder in society. That is a really tough place to be so many people find somebody to look down on. Often that somebody is or should be an ally because these are the people in your direct reach. You see this in a lot of marginalized communities, in ethnic minorities, in racial minorities, and in gender minorities. People who are at the lowest ladder find somebody to look down on and that is where the split comes, with people getting outraged at people who are similar but not exactly the same, people who are potential friends and allies, but who get rejected because they are the easiest to reject. I think that is a large factor of why movements split. Gay people can be extremely racist and people from racial minorities can be extremely homophobic. The need to look down on somebody else is really a strong issue and this is what is happening in the trans community as well. One of the excuses for making that split is to deconstruct or conform to gender norms.

CM: How do you address these splits as an international trans advocacy organization, when it comes to lobbying for example?

JE: We are taking an approach that we have taken in the Netherlands, which is to say that first, all the different parts of the movement, the different groups and organizations exist for a reason; otherwise they wouldn't be there. We need to acknowledge their work and ensure that they can exist in the future. Secondly, this isn't about convincing you that you are the same as me when you are not. Working on the political level means you form coalitions to work together with other people on issues that concern both parties. Once you have built that trust and can work on some issues together, you don't have to work on everything together. Access to healthcare is an issue for many groups, mainly because everybody wants to have a primary healthcare facility that respects their gender identity. That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone agrees on hormone treatment, but we can still work on getting access to healthcare together.

CM: With the issue of healthcare for example, the *Harry Benjamin Resource Center* in Norway (which works in close collaboration with the *Gender Clinic*, the place that diagnoses and approves whether a person is allowed to transition or not) is a firm believer in the gender binary. People who do not want to conform to this gender binary cannot have treatment. How do you address the needs of these communities when the political work is perhaps focused on conforming to gender norms that are so defined?

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JE: I think one issue we need to address within the trans community is how to do political work without harming other people that should be allies. If one organization prefers to organize around gender binaries and work with the *Harry Benjamin Resource Center*, that is fine, but they should not limit the access of other people to receive the healthcare they may want.

The situation in Norway is very peculiar because you have a Gender Clinic with a monopoly working exclusively with one group of transsexuals that believe they are either male or female. It is unusual that a well-funded trans organization would completely go along with a specific definition of trans. In Norway, there are some political gender issues that come into play such as the fact that patients have a right to a second opinion, except for trans patients who do not have this right because the Gender Clinic has the monopoly on the matter. This is where the work of the other trans groups needs to focus.

CM: Can you think of examples in different countries where the situation is more integrated and the outcome of organizing around access to treatment and healthcare positively impacts a wider range of the population?

JE: I wish I could give you an example of a country where everything is perfect, but I can't. There are different issues in different places. In the United States, doctors are often very progressive and eager and willing to work with trans people on the patient's terms. At the *Callen-Lorde Community Health Center*, which started as an initiative from the LGBT community, the assumption is that trans people are perfectly normal and should be treated as such. This means that when a trans person is seeking hormone treatment they are not automatically sent to a psychiatrist or psychologist. Their doctors make sure patients know what they are getting into and are able to make a choice based on informed consent, which is the standard for medicine in most places of the world. On the downside, access to treatment in the United States is limited by money and insurance and by where one lives in relation to those progressive doctors who treat trans people respectfully.

In some countries in Latin America the situation is starting to change for the better. In Brazil for example, the government just included trans specific healthcare in the national healthcare plan. But from what I understand, the medical professionals still need training on how to actually be effective providers for trans people. In some countries in Europe, trans specific healthcare is also part of national healthcare plans, or private health insurance, but again, there is often a problem with healthcare providers who are overly restrictive, so even though something might be covered by insurance it doesn't mean people actually do get the treatment they want or need. However these attitudes are changing rapidly all over the world.

CM: In regard to the idea of "informed consent," I would like to understand the relationship between the medical decision to allow a person to undergo treatment and the possibility to doubt the patient is ready to transition. What is the relation between these medical decisions and the impulse to uphold gender norms? Consider, for example, somebody who wants to keep male genitals but grow breasts.

JE: I don't think one can speak of one medical establishment because there are all kinds of doctors with varying ideas and many doctors very strictly uphold gender norms and re-enforce binary gender norms of what is male and what is female. On the other hand there are also doctors who do not believe there are only two genders and ground this belief in their medical

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knowledge of larger varieties of hormonal makeup, genetic makeup, genital makeup, of identities and possibly in terms of brain makeup.

There is research saying that male and female brains are different in some respects. Between those two extremes, there is also a variety of brains that look more like a female brain, more like a male brain, or look a little different all together. That is what I mean with brain makeup and there are many factors that define gender. Doctors initially seem to embrace the variety in genders first and then come to the conclusion that people have different needs in terms of expressing their gender and the kind of medical treatment they need to be at ease with their body in the societies that they live in.

CM: Thinking about countries that have nationally sponsored health care in contrast to those where health care is privatized, on what political levels is your organization advocating for medical treatment?

JE: We see healthcare is always under pressure in all parts of the world. There are expanding healthcare costs everywhere and politicians correspondingly make cuts to lessen those costs. Trans specific healthcare is always a contested field no matter which country or how wealthy the country is. Politicians are always ready to make cuts to trans healthcare first because they perceive trans people as being too weak to speak up against it and they rely on sentiments within society that trans people's healthcare needs are a luxury, that trans people are weird people who should not have healthcare to begin with. We always work in an environment of having to defend our healthcare needs even in countries where our healthcare needs have been met for some period of time, when the next budget cut comes around we have to be there advocating for ourselves again. A gain we had five years ago doesn't mean it will stay there forever so it is a perpetual process of ensuring we have our continually have our healthcare needs met.

CM: The accessibility and opportunity for medical resources and treatments are contingent on the different political inclinations of governments in place at the time?

JE: Yes, though I wouldn't say there is any consistent left, right paradigm on this issue, as any party wanting to score popular votes has been known to attack trans people's healthcare needs. You can't simply put it into a political spectrum; it's more an issue of knowledge, respect and knowledge, and then more knowledge.

CM: Is *GATE* involved with advocating for the rights of intersex people?

JE: Not directly. We feel that intersex people's rights are distinctly different from trans people's rights in a lot of ways.

CM: Can you expand on that please?

JE: One thing that is very different is that for many intersex people, bodily variety and not gender identity is really the issue. Many intersex people can be happy with the gender they were raised and are happy to conform to those gender norms. That isn't true for all intersex people of course, and that is where the overlap is, but a lot of the issues center around genital bodily variety and respect for the rights of children to have an intact body, whatever that may

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mean. These are all issues that are not very central to trans people. That being said, we have worked to support intersex activists in their work and to connect with intersex activists. We will continue this work because we do feel we have duty to support the build-up of an intersex movement just as we have a duty to support a trans movement and we will support the intersex movement as they build their own structures in any way with that we can.

CM: Regarding this overlap you mentioned this brings us back to this idea of gender bending or blurring the norms. I understand that Australia recently came up with a gender-neutral law?

JE: There was one court case in Australia of one person, which was later overturned, but it is still in the court so it is not completely over yet. Speaking as a trans activist, there are many varieties between male and female. I personally believe we should question why states and governments register gender in the first place. Any registration of any characteristic is always used to make distinctions between people and I believe governments should not make distinctions between men and women.

The registration of gender is very closely linked to the military. The first national registration of citizens was done by Napoleon in France because he wanted to know who the boys were so he could draft them for his wars. Registration of men and women by governments has always been very closely linked to being able to draft one half of society to be part of the military.

CM: To be precise, what do you mean by registration?

JE: There are different forms of registers such as tax registers, military registers, birth registers, and anything the government uses to know who their citizens are.

Any gender registration has always been started with the purpose of identifying men to draft them for the military. Over the course of time it became a free floating thing of its own, especially in countries with no military draft. Registering men and women can be useful in terms of monitoring discrimination, knowing how many men and how many women are in specific places in society, but I firmly believe this can be done with statistical methods as well, without coming down to the individual person.

Similar to monitoring race, a lot of countries do not register race for very valid reasons; still, governments have been able to trace the kind of discrimination that racial minorities have faced in that country purely by statistical methods. I really don't believe that governments need to register men and women. Strangely enough since the 9/11 attacks we have seen more registration of men and women. In Europe, many countries' passports did not register male or female pre-anti terrorist measurements. Now with new passports suddenly there is a field for "M" or "F" that was not there before and is now causing trouble for trans people. Gender registration causes a lot of problems and I believe it is really unnecessary.

CM: It seems very difficult and possibly unrealistic to change things like gender registration, which has become so engrained, not only at an official level but also in the way that bathrooms are separated and things like that. What solutions do your organization propose?

JE: I don't think all sex segregation is necessarily evil. I come from a lesbian separatist background and I do have to say that I cherish women only spaces for the energy they have. I

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believe many women feel more comfortable in certain spaces when only women are around; the same goes for men actually. There are men only spaces that, may not get labeled that way, but they are being propagated, I mean who hasn't heard of the *Man Cave* on American TV?

Separate spaces should be available where it makes sense and where people feel comfortable having them, but they should also be accessible for trans people, but I don't think governments have a task in that. On a practical level it will take a long time before we get anywhere on these matters because people feel that gender is such an essential thing they aren't ready to let go of. So getting rid of gender definitions is a tough sell and I think it is going to take decades before we come to a place where gender is no longer registered on passports or birth certificates.

CM: Is that an aim of the trans movement?

JE: I wouldn't call it an aim of the trans movement right now. I think right now it is more wishful thinking than a concrete aim. For now, the aim is to make it as easy as possible for trans people to have a passport that reflects their gender identity and to get people and society to understand that violence against trans people, withholding jobs from trans people, kicking trans people out of school, and denying trans people healthcare and housing is not okay.

I think we should get rid of unnecessary gender registration. I don't think we should get rid of gender definitions at all, a lot of people are very comfortable with the way their gender is defined and I don't think we need to take that away from people. I don't think this is about taking anything away from anybody, I think what we are talking about is expanding current possibilities.

CM: What impact might expanding our current possibilities for gender have on language?

JE: Languages will have to evolve and in a sense it is our task as a movement to talk about the way language addresses us, the way we are talked about in different kinds of languages, and to develop our own language of talking about our identities and our feelings. On the other hand I don't think it is something that we as a movement can force, it is something that has to develop over time. I believe artists, linguists and other creative people should, with our movement, develop new ideas for talking about gender identities, and try things out and see what sticks.

CM: It seems like there are more pressing social issues at the moment in terms of having practical access to a good life.

JE: See the luxury for an activist in the trans movement: Such an abundance of things to work on! It is really about choosing whatever feels most pressing for you. For myself, I find that the four issues that I mentioned earlier: access to a holistic gender recognition, access to healthcare, access to employment and school, and access to being able to live a life without violence, are most pressing. Other people may have other priorities and that is what they should work on. We have a huge amount of things we can potentially be working on so it is really whatever rocks your boat.

CM: Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

JE: I would like to stress again how important it is to consider what society and people can gain from more variety and expressions of gender. I think there are societal benefits to embracing

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gender diversity and giving people more ways to express themselves. When you give people the ability to be themselves in more than two defined categories you open up ways for people to live, which sparks diversity. Diversity sparks creativity and I think it is important to look at what we contribute to society in terms of our views and our experiences. This contribution that we make to society is something we need to stress and convey to other people. I believe in positive examples.