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The relationship between art and sexuality in Latin America has been a relationship that has been constructed through silence regarding that sexuality; it is not a question of demanding that people should speak about it but of showing other ways in which silence operates, which does not necessarily imply vindicating silence as a strategy of self-representation and cultural fight. Silence functions as a strategy of the historical artistic discourse but also as a strategy of resistance, and such is the case of the gay couple that purchases the painting because it allows them to hang the image of the naked man in their sitting-room while at the same time they can keep the secret of their sexuality, since what they have is a work of art, and they can thus avoid the violence of homophobia.

An Interview with Víctor Manuel Rodríguez

March 20, 2010

Víctor Manuel Rodríguez's house in Bogotá, Colombia

Víctor Manuel Rodríguez: My name is Víctor Manuel Rodríguez. My connection with the subject of sexuality comprises two components: one is an academic and investigative component, for I pursued studies and obtained my Ph.D. at Rochester University in New York and one of the central subjects in my academic training was *queer* studies. I began to develop a series of papers and research work revolving around the relationship between a *queer* perspective and a perspective of the artistic and social movements in Latin America. On the other hand, I am involved in a sort of activism within the local artistic milieu. I have not only written about artists who have worked, or who work on these subjects, but I have also organized and curated exhibitions that attempt to link cultural and visual studies with artistic practices, making the works hold a dialogue in wider contexts and associating them to political struggles, ways of inhabiting the city, ways of constructing the public space, etc.

Perhaps there is a third component of my work. I served as Deputy Director for the Promotion of Art and Cultural Expressions at the District Institute of Culture and Tourism, and as Director of Art, Culture and Patrimony at the District Secretariat for Culture, Recreation and Sports, both these bodies attached to Bogotá's District Administration. During Lucho Garzón's term of office, I had the chance to join in his government project for the inclusion of communities marginalized on grounds of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Our work was aimed at formulating a public policy that would lead the Government to recognize, reestablish and guarantee the cultural rights of these groups. We identified organizations working for cultural changes; we promoted the visibilization and implementation of their cultural practices, and we laid the foundations for the State to fulfill its obligation to guarantee the right of these communities to diverse ways of living, to non-official modes of inhabiting the city, of occupying the space, of constructing the territory.

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Carlos Motta: Let us begin by the theoretical ambit. Can you tell me what the theoretical field prior to the arrival of the *queer* theory in Latin America, and in Colombia in particular, is?

VMR: In the 1990s there appeared in Latin America an emerging academic movement that echoed the “Gay and Lesbian Studies”. Based on that perspective, sexual identities were vindicated in a somehow essentialist way, in an attempt to incorporate them in the great multiethnic and pluricultural narrative of the notion of multicultural nation or city of the time. In Colombia there were some shy attempts on the part of the academy to begin to address these issues; and by shy I do not refer to the efforts made by the academicians but to the fact that university institutions still questioned the relevance and the seriousness of the studies devoted to those issues. Many of us were linked to the academy and to processes of social and political activism.

The progressive insertion of issues related to sexuality and to social and cultural studies in the academy and among activists began at a later stage, in the framework of the debate confronting the “gay and lesbian studies” and the *queer* theory. Academicians and theoreticians considered that these were not academic or theoretical options, but rather political ones. The inception of the *Ciclo de Cine Rosa* in 2000 widened the range of questions on the subject and generated a permanent forum for the discussion not only of issues related to culture and sexuality but also of those associated to human rights and hate crimes, among others. Although the cycle was promoted by the Pensar Institute of the *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana*, we continued to work in the margins of the academy. The central question addressed by this debate was aimed at shedding light on the politics of academic work, on its connection with social and cultural movements, and on the pertinence of these currents in our social and political context.

One of the most important moments of this debate was the one marked by the initiative to promote the approval of the law on “gay” couples by the Congress of the Republic. To “liven up” the debate, some right-wing congressmen closely linked to the defense of the monogamous and heterosexual family distributed among the members of Congress some videos that illustrated the sexual practices of “fags”. The video had been produced in the United States and it contained detailed descriptions of “fist fucking”, among other practices. This posed an interesting discussion on issues of representation and on strategies of cultural activism, regarding what mechanisms or practices of political activism should be devised to counteract a representation that constructs those communities as sick and perverse groups.

CM: Does this discussion take place in the academic ambit?

VMR: No. At the time when this video began to circulate, a group of activists and academicians, myself among them, gathered together to discuss initiatives and lines of action. Two tendencies arose. One of them demanded a response to this video that would demonstrate that we are not sick and perverted people. The other proposed to explore counter-representation strategies not based on an essential “gay” strategy, which would be badly represented, but repeating and deconstructing the mechanisms that characterize representation. The former sought to assimilate couples into a normality criterion, while the latter sought to vindicate the right to be abnormal. A strategy of cultural activism –which was never implemented – was proposed; it consisted in taking the gay bars in Bogotá and replicating the medicalization implicit in the congressmen’s attack by considering the bars itinerary as a great hospital. For

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example, the bars for teenage socialization would be represented by the neonatology ward, the bars for elderly adults would be the geriatric ward, and the Congress premises would be the “vaccination clinic” where people were vaccinated against homophobia. It goes without saying that proposing the Congress to be a vaccination clinic had a strong ironic content, since the “injections” required syringes of considerable dimensions.

CM: The concern has arisen in different contexts regarding the fact that the *queer* theory has been left aside by the social movements in a strategic way in order to implement a policy that replicates the norm and acquire an equality of rights without inquiring further into what a diverging or more plural sexuality might be. What is this issue like in Colombia?

VMR: I think that the local community has been tactical and strategic at the same time. From a tactic perspective, the fight for the guarantee of rights has shown a marked tendency towards normalization. But this is inevitable; the fundamental rights of communities with diverse sexualities in Colombia are permanently infringed: the fundamental right to life, for instance. However, this position has facilitated more strategic medium and long-term processes. This tactical and at the same time strategic outlook has conciliated the claims of the movements that demand normality and of those that seek divergence, resorting to the discourses and legal frameworks they have at hand. In an atmosphere of reciprocal solidarity, efforts have been made in order that this recognition does not prevent the development of diverging ways of being, and of experiencing sexuality.

CM: Some of the people who have been linked to the changes in the legislation say that the majority of the members of the community want to live in a normative way; however, the trans communities, or intersex persons who are considered identity categories not necessarily binary remain in a limbo. I wonder if in Colombia there has been a history of artistic expressions addressing that subject and creating a sphere of thought production through the aesthetic or the discursive.

VMR: I think that the resistance of these movements and these social groups to normality has also led them to resist that their forms of representation be included within artistic perspectives or cultural movements. What has been achieved is recognition of the divergent without demanding that these communities self-represent themselves through those languages and those institutional frameworks.

But going back to the subject of theoretical debates, *queer* studies, Post-structuralism, Post-modernism, etc., are often accused of having been produced elsewhere. In the presence of that objection, I propose that in globalization and, as a matter of fact, after World War II, “elsewhere” is no longer here or there. I find a strong relationship between the ways of living sexually and thinking the politics on sexuality both here and there, because there is no longer a here and a there. What must be specified, however, is that what is important about the *queer* theory is not its place of origin but the way in which we can use it in the framework of local conflicts and struggles in a context of colonial conditions.

Latin American professors working in the United States and in Latin America have posited the Modernity-Coloniality Project which takes a distance from subordinate and post-colonial studies, although it compiles and reads them, because it considers that the societies of Latin America and the Andean Region have different historical and

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colonial legacies. One might say that they are colonial societies, but not all colonial contexts are the same. Coloniality is read from an ethnic point of view. What Aníbal Quijano – one of the most important referents – maintains, is that the whole of Latin America's colonial structure is mounted upon the problem of ethnicity, and this has implied that the most important developments of the Modernity-Coloniality Project revolve around ethnicity. I find this reading disturbing because it also excludes other social movements and cultural and artistic processes which do not revolve around ethnicity, but which are also generating forms of social affiliation linked to sexuality, for instance, and which are moving the politics of those countries in a way that is neither foundational nor utopian.

The whole of *Colombia Diversa's* exercise –turning the Political Constitution around and placing it at the service of the sexual minorities – is an exercise that I would term *queer* because it has sneaked in through the interstices of the Constitution itself; it is “queering” the Political Constitution. It has acted in such a way that it has made the guarantee of the community's rights possible without getting into utopian discussions regarding the transformation of the State; they have done so through the interstices and, in a way, pushing the constitutional principles to the limit.

In Colombia there is a difficulty or an advantage: these studies have not had the possibility to become incorporated into academic spaces associated to universities. They seem to be linked, rather, to the political and cultural management of the social movements. They move within political activism; people do things, and they theorize about those things, and to theorize they make use of whatever theory they have at hand.

CM: I would like you to refer to the development of artistic practices that handle this subject, not necessarily from a particularly aesthetic perspective, but from the perspective of activism and the relationship between these practices.

VMR: The artistic and cultural subject is very interesting, because it begins with a movement of young artists who start to think about that topic and to explore, from the perspective of artistic practice, the cultural constructions of sexuality. My revision is aimed at questioning the way in which the art institution itself has been addressing issues of diverging sexualities. Thus I perceive a double record in the development of these artistic works: on the one hand, there is the subject of the cultural construction of sexuality, and on the other, how these works hold a critical dialogue with respect to the art institution. Alongside the theme of sexuality, which appears in the work of artists such as José Alejandro Restrepo, who did something on transgender from a non-transgender place, there are other works which denote an interest in showing, in generating a dialogue, in generating reflection, and some very interesting curatorial exercises appear.

In 2003 I curated the exhibition “Un caballero no se sienta así” (“A gentleman does not sit like that”), which sought to understand the non-artistic relationships that marginal sexual groups establish with art and how the sense of art is somehow transformed to become incorporated in the political and cultural agenda of social movements. It is a non-artistic appropriation of artistic icons for the benefit of the community, to insert it in their political agendas. This causes me great concern as a curator, as a researcher and as an academician, because I feel it is an exercise in treason against the art institution and against its modernist and developmental idea about all of us having to appropriate the works from an aesthetic and formal point of view.

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The classic case is that of Luis Caballero, that was the subject of this exhibition. His work circulates in the LGBT milieus as an icon or identification emblem. However, nobody has a work by Luis Caballero for the reasons that art critics used to describe Luis Caballero as a great artist, which he undoubtedly was. The communities utilize the artistic discourse as an excuse to hang the picture of a naked man in the dining-room or the sitting-room and say they are exhibiting art. I have been developing brief works, essays and exhibitions that revolve around this critical relationship between artworks and the way in which the different movements appropriate them.

The relationship between art and sexuality in Latin America has been a relationship that has been constructed through silence regarding that sexuality; it is not a question of demanding that people should speak about it but of showing other ways in which silence operates, which does not necessarily imply vindicating silence as a strategy of self-representation and cultural fight. Silence functions as a strategy of the historical artistic discourse but also as a strategy of resistance, and such is the case of the gay couple that purchases the painting because it allows them to hang the image of the naked man in their sitting-room while at the same time they can keep the secret of their sexuality, since what they have is a work of art, and they can thus avoid the violence of homophobia. The title of the exhibition is derived from this. The guy buys the Luis Caballero; he hangs it in the dining-room, his mother comes along and asks him: What is that? And he answers, in historical artistic terms: It's a Caballero¹. But she replies from a non-historical artistic point of view: a "caballero" (a gentleman) does not sit like that.

After that exhibition, we gradually created an informal collective of artists, curators, and people engaged in cultural studies with the intention of addressing the relationship between cultural and artistic processes, and sexuality. We presented the exhibition "Yo no soy esa", ("I am not that woman"), which inquired into the different forms of resistance of the queer Bogotá of the 1980s. It attempted to establish a connection between artworks and non-official sexual practices within a framework of resistance both to the normalization of queer lives during that period and to the art institution. Such is the case of Miguel Ángel Rojas. In the 1970s and 1980s, he produced a series of photographs showing the spaces for gay encounters in theaters, public bathrooms and parks. The first time he was asked to exhibit in a gallery, he showed these photographs in a 0.5 millimeters in diameter format. Nobody sees anything, and I wonder: What is this work resisting? What it is resisting is, precisely, that this queer world be transformed into art and strengthen the art institution. It seems to say: this world is not for you. This world is not at the service of artistic *voyeurism*, so to speak. The work always resists being seen, being understood, and there is a scenario that renders translation impossible. One sees this photograph, and if one does not form part of the universe of this subculture, one can hardly realize that one is in the restroom of the Faenza Theater, looking at someone who is returning the gaze.

We have established a dialogue between these classic works of Colombian art and people who are carrying out more contemporary research. In a parallel way, there have been other exhibitions in which an attempt is made to refer to the issue, and that is healthy. In "Yo no soy esa", the rendering was not artistic, and that generated some difficulties for its reading on the part of the art world. We showed the way in which the works of art articulated with broader cultural universes and how those cultural

¹ T.N: A play with words. "Caballero" is the Spanish word for "gentleman"

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universes had constructed a *queer, underground* city, profoundly rich in forms of resistance, but which was not artistic.

CM: Do you have any experience in the utilization of artistic strategies within cultural ambits in minority communities, whether they be gay meeting points or places for prostitution, for example?

VMR: As a result of all the work with cultural organizations during the Garzón term of office, we identified organizations that had incorporated the cultural issue in their agendas, not only from the point of view of the change in homophobic representations, but also from the point of view of their representation as a group. We might mention at least 35 organizations in Bogotá that have incorporated that topic as fundamental. Part of the exhibition we are organizing at present is aimed at exploring those organizations and the way in which they represent themselves through all those mechanisms, starting with their names: there is an organization called *Madonna and her divas*; another one is called *Women on the Verge*, which are appropriations of icons of popular culture. What is interesting is the way in which these organizations are generating dialogues with the artists who work on those issues. *Madonna and her divas* holds a dialogue with works by young artists in some aspects; it also develops appropriations from popular culture for artistic and non-artistic purposes. This generates a very interesting space for research of the intercrossing between the artistic and the non-artistic, between what occurs not in the artistic or the non-artistic space, but in both places. There is a permanent struggle to remake and resignify what is understood as artistic in each of those spaces.

I believe in considering the territories of curatorship territories of cultural and political activism and not an artistic or academic exercise making it possible to construct a space for reflection on art, culture and sexuality

CM: A recent face of the global activism of social movements has been the utilization of strategies of *performance* and *queering*. Activists from Northern Europe face the police in Heidelberg dressed as women or exhibiting their transgender breasts and creating some very strong images against a sort of very hegemonic heterosexual power in relation to the *queer* practice, as if this represented the alternative, the idealistic, the utopian, the opposition. I wonder if this kind of practice occurs in Colombia, that is, if there is a way to express opposition from that perspective.

VMR: The space for public demonstration has always been centralized in the LGBT march. The character of “march” is vindicated because it is a citizen’s march. Here you find these forms of representation. When the issue of couples did not prosper in Congress for the second time, there was a movement in front of Bolívar square, although without an idea of self-representation in the terms you indicate. We are carrying out research on the concept of public demonstration in a wider sense than that of a march that takes place on 28 June. I find the opposition to power from that perspective very interesting, not necessarily to promote or advocate a cause associated to issues of sexual orientation or gender identity, but related to power. It would seem that power is always this masculine, heterosexual, normative figure hallmarked within a police or a military uniform.

CM: What are we like? Not in terms of what your lesbian friend pretended, bringing the psychologist to tell us that we are normal, but in terms of the sub-cultural practices of

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the LGBT community, practices like the ones that could be seen in the pub *Las calles de San Francisco*, of live sex with animals, among others.

VMR: I feel that the city has also been the subject of normalization practices, and that at present the proliferation of those things that we might term counter-cultural is somehow normalized. Things happen, but mostly in spaces that have become normalized, that is, the normalization of gay life forces us to explore other spaces. These counter-cultural sexual expressions have somehow become relegated to a space in which one must pay to see.

CM: I think it is very interesting to know whether the progressive processes of legislation, the cultural changes derived from the politization of the sexual issue, the consolidation of an official movement and the growing citizen tolerance towards diverse sexuality have somehow annihilated the “perverse” practices that occurred in Bogotá and in other parts of the world, practices deeply rooted in art and performance without denominating themselves thus: the *go go boys* masturbating in the coffins or having sex in public inside a coffin in the legendary pub *Las Calles de San Francisco*, the *drag shows* in the pub *La pantera roja*, which were expressions of a passionate transvestite sexuality...I feel these things have calmed down, they are not so much on the surface.

VMR: I don't believe that a consequence of the social and political struggles in favor of the legalization of some rights which have been infringed may be the disappearance of a “perverse”, *underground* sexuality. Sexuality always de-stabilizes any ideas of hegemonic order, both individual and social. Because of my age I remember that Bogotá's *queer* scenario in the 1980s permitted some forms of articulation and solidarity that were strictly *queer* in the sense that they were not circumscribed to the LGBT community exclusively but to all the “weird” people who gathered together in public and private spaces and who shared the idea that we were not “normal”. But of course, today those scenarios of solidarity, of collective fight against normality are not there because there has been a proliferation of a gay popular culture: there are 140 gay pubs in Bogotá, for example, that guarantee socialization spaces for some, and represent normalizing spaces that must be resisted, for others.

The fight for rights is valid and legitimate. Anything that lets the State know that the right to life and the right to be different must be guaranteed is fundamental.

CM: I agree, but observing the processes that are taking place in different countries, I perceive that many times the discourse of the LGBTQ movement has disarticulated the right to be different. It is precisely to defend the difference, the idea that I do not feel “normal”, that I feel different, that I am developing this project!

VMR: I totally agree. Just like you, I resist normalization and I deeply value the difference.