

(Re-)Covering Queer

Restarting public space and sexual politics

by Marty Huber

Ten years after the first gay pride march in Vienna, much criticism of the consistent increase in commercialization of the parades has been voiced. What went awry somewhere between reclaiming the streets and the evolution of the parade as just one more titillating (queer) annual event? What possible detours can we take when passing through the politics of public space? However, before we walk the streets, we will need to gather some things together: what theoretical companions could be useful in a fight for repoliticizing public space and for creating queer interventions? The question of commercialization is a theme that will be interwoven throughout the text as we pass through theory and practice.

I. Backpacking: theory on the go

The ground we will wander is made up of queer interventionist practices with a dash of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on the carnival. The Brazilian anthropophagian movement¹ will remind us to laugh along the way. I write from the position of a queer activist keen on performing arts and performance theory. The act of writing is that of an illegal hunter. As a writer I poach my way through the rhizomes of theory and practice. I would like to start off with the importance of daily clandestine interventions through accessing some of Michel de Certeau's contemplations on *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In order to more closely analyze these practices, de Certeau offers an important distinction between strategy and tactics. He states that strategies are linked to institutions of power, whereas individuals utilize tactics to create a space for

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themselves in environments that are predefined by strategies. In *Walking the City*, de Certeau likens the act of walking in urban systems to the speech act: "The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered... It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation." (De Certeau 1984: 97)

"The city" appears as a concept generated by the strategic movements of governments, corporations and other institutional bodies which produce things, such as maps, that describe the city as a unified entity. By contrast, the walker moves in tactical ways that are not fully determined by the plans of organizing bodies, as the walker takes shortcuts and meanders through the cityscape. De Certeau asserts that everyday life functions by means of "poaching" in the territories of others and recombining the existing cultural rules and products, which are influenced yet never fully determined by cultural rules and products. These acts of poaching and recombining are cobblestones in the tactical movement of queering public space. He states that "walking the city" is not a way of appropriating the topography - the strategy - of predefined public space, but also a means by which the space unfolds and its relations are defined (Ibid: 98). According to de Certeau, the walker is defined by three criteria: the present, the discrete and the phatic character of the walk. The walker's statement is tactical due to its inherent sense of stopping, detouring, walking paths and shortcuts.

To speak with John L. Austin's words, the question raised is: "How to do things with/in steps?" What happens when so-called Christopher Street Day parades, the origin of which I will explain below, are scheduled as a summer event? Are they somehow already "strategies" because they have been institutionalized (in many places)?² Or do they still have some tactical potential - if they ever had any to begin with?

Before we come out of the buildings of theory, there are still a few stories to be (re)visited, one of which is the issue of governmentality in the age of neo-liberalism. How are bodies ruled by technologies of governance? As Foucault says, the regulation of sexuality is not primarily produced through repression, for example laws, etc.; rather, it takes place through discourse, one which is signified by a production of particular sexualities, lifestyles, etc. However, his work also draws attention to the desires for self-governing and the connections between what he called technologies of the self and technologies of domination, the constitution of the subject, and the formation of the state. In her article "Wie regiert die Sexualität?" Antke Engel states that these technologies are simultaneously mechanisms of repression and dominance as well as of empowerment and resistance. (Engel in: Pieper/Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2003: 226) In her argument she also incorporates feminist theorists such as Kaja Silverman and Isolde Charim, who link the Althusserian notion of interpellation with the voluntarily subjection of the interpellated individual.

In the neo-liberal system, technologies of the self have shifted to become a form of empowerment through responsabilization, which refers to an age of increased privatization, self-care and individualization. But as Thomas Lemke puts it in his paper Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique (2000): "... Neo-liberalism is not the end but a transformation of politics that restructures the power relations in society. What we observe today is not a diminishment or reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government." (e.g. NGOs)

In this sense, the gay and lesbian communities also found their way into voluntary subjection under commerce with all its repercussions. The anger in queer communities surrounding

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ignorance towards the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s led to the formation of some of the most important activist groups, such as ACT UP,³ an anger which later dissolved and gave way to a consensual system of self-care and self-management. Has the signification of the precarious gay body transformed since the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s into a symbol for "managing diversity?" Has he - and I may say "he" here - come to signify the homo oeconomicus, a gay man wanted for his "gay money?" How manageable have queer folks become in our desire to "mainstream" gender diversity? It seems that the management departments are flourishing as they regulate queerness and set controlling standards for the private which once was political. Is "gender mainstreaming" hype just another shadowboxing match in which former feminist demands are turned around and aimed against women? Several of the fundamental injustices remain in place, such as the lack of equal pay for equal work, as care labor in families continues to be sustained by women, etc.

II. Disidentifying into the grotesque body and anthropophagian laughter

As we continue to walk with the backpack carrying de Certeau's strategy and tactics, critiques and additions to Foucault's (self-)governmentality, I will add José Esteban Muñoz's political concept of disidentification.

The latter is yet another tool for dismantling these vehicles of individualization. In line with Antke Engel (Ibid: 237), who calls on scholars and activists to develop new forms of intervention and resistance, José Esteban Muñoz's method of disidentification is a further tactic that interferes within rather than from outside the system. Disidentification is "... a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressure of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of

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its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance." (Muñoz 1999:11) Disidentification seems to be a street-level route to roof access, enabling us to walk under the stars while offering a critical view of systems, for example the carnival and demonstrations, which we work with. Nowadays it seems that both carnivals and demonstrations have become comfortably numb, as both have certain established rituals and structures, are embedded in society, and fulfill certain functions. On the one hand, there is the sheer antagonism between demonstrations and their administrative regulations, and on the other hand there is the carnival, which functions as a valve devoid of any further meaning for political struggle. In terms of Muñoz's concept, disidentifying with these systems is to rework them from within and use them as plateaus for bringing about ruptures and dysfunctionality.

Bearing in mind the method of disrupting the system from within, let's combine ideas from the anthropophagian movement with Mikhail Bakhtin's thoughts on the carnival. The Anthropophagite Manifesto (1928) works with disidentifying tactics and states: "For what can we do with the enemy? - We incorporate him/her!"

Only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically.
Philosophically.

The only things that interest me are those that are not mine.

Law of man. Law of the anthropophagite.

Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes.

We were never catechized. What we really did was Carnival.

Happiness is the proof of the pudding.

(Excerpts from the Anthropophagite Manifesto by Oswald de Andrade)

However, I would like to highlight the disidentificational potential of Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, which is a strange, and - in its original meaning of the word - queer body with a carnival attitude towards the world. It is liberated from fear and the offspring of fear, which itself is "dogmatic and inimical to evolution and change, and seeks to absolutize the given conditions of existence and the social order." (LaCapra 1999: 241)

Overcoming fear and departing from the classical body, which is per se disconnected from the world, Bakhtin suggests the grotesque body as seen in the carnival. This body is not a closed unit, as it repeatedly renews, recreates and recombines itself. It is an outgrowth of itself, it transgresses its own borders, and it is a body that likes eating, drinking and sex. "The grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange, and it is never closed off from either its social or eco-systemic context. The classical body on the other hand keeps its distance. In a sense it is disembodied, for it appears indifferent to a body which is 'beautiful' but which is taken for granted ..." (Stallybrass, White 1999: 249)

In a queer world, there is no classical body. Instead, queer bodies proliferate in everyday cross-dressing, joyful tactics of passing, drag queens and drag kings, transgressing patterns of desire through "unnatural" sexual acts, shifting body images with dissimilar identification politics, including conceiving and living transgendered lives.

The tool for overturning the established order in the anthropophagian movement is incorporation, and the carnival is its true breeding ground, due to the carnival's hostility towards everything that is immortalized and complete. The digestive process symbolizes the melding of the eater and the

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eaten. "The lion is made of assimilated sheep." (Paul Valery)
The desirability of the "Other" nourishes the (possibly
unwillful) change within, it is taken over and becomes
integrated through disidentifying; and the wholeness/holiness
vanishes.

Incorporating laughter is another carnivalesque weapon of the
anthropophagite: a laughter that thrives on parody, lack of
respect and irony. This laughter resounds in city chasms and
echoes through the alleyways, the parks and the parades. "The
carnival laughter... is not an individual reaction to some
isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of
all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is
directed at all and everyone... Third, this laughter is
ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same mocking,
deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives."

(Bakhtin 1965: 200) The moving, dancing and laughing body has
become a speech act, into an act of walking the streets in
high heels and combat boots. It comes out in all shapes and
forms of desire and ridiculousness. In grotesque realism "the
bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a
private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of
life, but as something universal, representing all the
people." (Bakhtin 1965: 205)

III. "If you can't dance to it, it's not my revolution!" (Emma
Goldman)

The dance was interrupted somewhere on a side street in
Greenwich Village when the police raided the Stonewall Inn on
Christopher Street in New York City. It was the end of June
1969 and what followed were five days of riots in which drag
queens, lesbians, gays, transgendered people and bisexuals
resisted the police violence. "Gay Unity!" and "Gay Power!"
were their rebel calls in an era already afire with anti-
Vietnam protests and the civil rights and women's movements.

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In 1970, one year after the riots, the first "gay pride liberation march" took place.⁴

The acute awareness of victory over fear is an essential element of medieval laughter. (Bakhtin 1965: 209)

Since then, annual so-called Christopher Street Day (CSD) parades have taken place all over the globe. In 1996 the first CSD march took place in Vienna, Austria - in a country that had only just abolished anti-gay legislation (e.g., § 220 against the "promotion of homosexuality" and § 221 which banned gay organizations), yet still argued for upholding a higher age of consent for gay men (§ 209) until 2002.

It's been ten years since the first "parade," and more and more activist groups have begun to criticize its commercialization and depoliticizing. Floats that focus more on selling products than promoting gay rights and visibility were the most frequent images shown in the mass media, as well as in queer-community media. Interestingly, in the last two years, the disparity has increased between large commercial floats or party floats and activist groups on foot. However, for several years, different groups have intervened in the commercialization and adaptation process of the parade, which has also come to represent heterocentric, bourgeois lifestyles - including lobbying for gay marriage.

In the following I would like to focus on the activist examples of the group Lila Tipp, with which I have been actively affiliated since 1996. Lila Tipp is the lesbian counseling center and switchboard at the Rosa Lila Villa, the gay and lesbian community center in Vienna.⁵

"Put the sister in the closet! The Lesbian Freak Show's in town!"

After discussing the lack of recognition and visibility throughout the entire pride circus, Lila Tipp decided to

perform its ascribed role of the "freak" on the street by putting on a sideshow within the pride parade circus. Following the tradition of so-called freak shows, Lila Tipp staged the Lesbian Curiosity Show featuring well-known figures such as the bearded lady, the virago, the lady without a lower body, the twelve-breasted seductress, etc. The sideshow gathered lesbian clichés: those with too much body hair, testosterone and masculine appearance; those fully disinterested in sex; and her lusty hypersexual sisters. We wanted to be a threat, especially for the (female) spectators, simply waiting for the sexy, sweat-covered gay dancers moving their hips to the beat. We had a little present in store for the onlookers: candies wrapped in paper that said "Eat me and you will become a lesbian!" We wanted to exhibit our position and express what it feels like to play the part of the exotic animal in the zoo in the parades. (Huber 2004)

These moments of exoticification show a clear discrepancy between a cohesive concept of the carnival (such as in Bakhtin) and events like the pride parades. Bakhtin asserts that there is no "audience" (spectators) in the carnival, that the "carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it." (Bakhtin, 1965: 198) Although the parades address a very diverse audience with differing desires to be there - and surely there are also grotesque bodies in the so-called audience in a Bakhtinian sense - there are also people who come to see "freaks," to frown upon them and experience the thrill of "othering."⁶

In the freak show action, the candies bridge the unspoken desires between spectators and actors using anthropophagian (incorporation through ingestion) logic: "Eat me and you will become a lesbian" is the significance of the ever-present possibility of assimilation and incorporation of queer desires. And: it's not about candy... It's about disrupting the heterosexual matrix in its most efficient way, by penetrating the classical conceptualization of the body with the

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grotesque, proliferating, borderless body and thus fully dissolving the classical body. "... For long periods the carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects, but given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle."

(Stallybrass, White 1999: 248)

Not only have gay parades been subjected to attempts at subversion, but many other demonstrations have become the setting for Pink & Silver actions or Radical Cheerleading. Their tactical frivolity and gender-troubling gaiety transgress the militant machismo of the police and of the so-called "black block" of demonstrators. During the gay pride events in Vienna in 2006, Rosa Lila Tipp participated with a small float with cow posters that pointed out the parade's commercial pitfalls, saying: "Not your cash cow!" or "Not your product!" Mainstreaming, head on toward capitalism, is to dissolve within a diversity management system most concerned with profit maximization and which simultaneously reproduces nationalist resentments. During the parade, a float with Austrian flags saying "Equal rights for all Austrians" was asked to change their banners. After they refused, several different activists forcefully removed parts of these banners. This courageous intervention resulted in banners stating "Equal rights for all" after having disposed of the "Austrians."

Dyke March takes spaces

Since 1993, when the Lesbian Avengers organized the first Dyke March in Washington, D.C. at the LGBT March on Washington, dykes have also come out to demonstrate for lesbian rights and visibility. The Dyke March aims to create a space for lesbians and queers, and for political struggles beyond the depolitized framework of CSD parades. The first European Dyke March took place in Vienna in 2004, organized by Lila Tipp and Ladyfest

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Vienna. The motto was: "Lesbolove: anti-commercial utopias in motion," focusing on dismantling homophobia and celebrating queer and lesbolove's existence. "Because we overcome the hurdles of internationalized homophobia anew every day and have to argue about our existence with more or less stupid/ignorant people, today, for a change, we don't want to talk about it at all! Instead, we are going to celebrate the space we have created for ourselves and make ourselves right at home." (Goutrié, Schönflug 2004)

The Vienna Dyke March is a place for lively, vibrant, constantly transforming community far removed from marketing strategies and TV soaps, such as *The L-Word*.⁷ In the spirit that the Dyke March is for everyone, the organizers' statement began to address the multiplicity of genderqueer participants: "lesbians - dykes - bi-women - boychicks - tomboys - grrrls - lesbian femmes - moms - butches - transwomen - androgs - queer - woman - gay girls - womynists - dykes on bikes - Asian dykes - tranny fags - African lesbians - leather dykes - babydykes - migrated lezzies - tranny bois - dykes on wheels - and YOU!" The multifarious queer concept of the Dyke March incorporates a distinctly anti-nationalist position. Unlike the Gay Games, which, aside from their importance for gay and lesbian visibility can also be read as mimicking the nationalist sports concept of the Olympics, the Dyke March 2005 promoted a clearly anti-nationalist and genderfucking policy. The theme of the second Dyke March in Vienna in 2005 was "Welcome to Trans-Josefs-Land," which refers to Franz-Josefs-Land, a former Austrian colony, i.e. an iceberg in the Arctic. The demonstration dragged an iceberg through Vienna to the Empress Maria Theresia monument proclaiming Trans-Josefs-Land, stating that it has no borders and that, like an iceberg, it is constantly in motion and can even come to your town. In this vein, everyone can be part of "Trans-Josefs-Land," which corresponds to the idea that everyone who is here is also from here. A critique of the Austrian blood-and-soil ideology and

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legislation, the mobile iceberg symbolically crisscrosses and migrates through the city, meandering and taking off-roads, and no one knows where it will end up. The right to migration not only entails issues of mobility in the context of nations, but also in the context of gender. Thus, Lila Tipp creates, works on and walks upon anti-heterosexist and anti-essentialist paths toward and in support of acts that "queer" both public and private spheres in collective ways. "The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding... The trace left behind is substituted for the practice." (De Certeau 1984: 97)

It seems to be that all the actions described here can only ever leave traces, whereas the expectations of these interventions and their effects are quite high. Queer communities in Europe are indeed embedded in societies that only conditionally accept "other lifestyles" - as long as they assimilate and adhere to the norm. In this sense, "recovering queer" means rediscovering the strength in the position of the grotesque, uncertain and strange (bodies and acts), and taking off-roads rather than traveling at full speed on dogmatic highways.

Rosa Lila Guerilla - Love Attack. Offensive Love the Happy Homo Way

The annual gay pride event, the so-called "Rainbow Parades," has been a tradition in Vienna since 1996. In many other cities this public celebration that aims at acquire greater visibility and social acceptance for lesbians, gays, transgenders, queers, intersex persons etc. is also known as the Christopher Street Parade. Historically, these events commemorate a five-day social uprising and riot that took place Christopher Street in New York in 1969. A mix of drag queens, lesbians and gay men who were fed up with the police raids and arrests that regularly took place at their venue, the Stonewall Inn, had taken to the streets. "Gay Pride" was

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the battle cry heard during the nights of the uprising, which also served as an inspiration for other civil liberty movements during this era, such as the civil rights movement in the USA. The out-and-out boom of such parades in several North American and European cities has increasingly raised the question of what activists can do to counteract the festivalization and exoticification effect these parades have come to have. Furthermore, over the past few years the number of violent attacks on "gay pride" marches has greatly increased in cities such as Belgrade, Moscow or Jerusalem. At the same time, in many west European cities concerns have been raised about the high degree of commercialization of the parades. In Vienna and elsewhere, one strategy particular has been to stage interventions within the parade in order to address certain aspects regarding the commercialization of the politics of visibility.

Rainbow Fun Parades in the wake of Ethno-carnivals

Some people may still remember the Viennese Hallamash Festival of "cultural diversity" that the City of Vienna still proudly cites as an example its cosmopolitanism and tolerance, professing the link between tending to/supporting folkloristic traditions as a way of attracting tourists. Today, what used to be the festival is now www.hallamasch.at, an event planning agency offering "exotic artists" and acrobatic acts for large-scale events, for example the City of Vienna's "Stadtfest" (City Festival funded by the ÖVP, the moderate to right-wing Austrian People's Party). How can we curb the carnivalization of the "Rainbow Parade"? Does it attract such a wide audience because people are eager to feast their eyes on the titillating parade participants before going back into their mundane everyday (heterosexual) lives? According to Mikhail Bakhtin, there is no audience at a real carnival. In this vein, we haven't yet managed to carnivalize the parade to the extent that there is no longer a division between the parade

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and the audience? Have we just been skirting along the borders of our so-called "ghettos" all this time? Those from "the left bank" know that there's a vast sea of possibilities that lies between us, which is precisely the reason that the group Rosa Lila Guerilla (Pink and Purple Guerilla) devised the action "Love Attack," which, in other words, sought to dismantle these unnecessary borders, if only for just a few hours. The action was targeted at the assimilation of a particular portion of the audience into the street party, namely bystanders who come armed with their cameras each year, assuming they have the right to take pictures. In the same way, we assumed we had the right to pick them out of the audience, identify them as "homo-sisters" and "homo-brothers," and to congratulate them on their coming out with a family photo in which we, in bright costumes, posed with them.

The "Love Attack" Battle Plan

The plan was to form small pink and purple task units and disperse them among the crowd. Each unit received and welcomed people in celebration of their "coming out." People who did not seem very comfortable with identifying as queer were the main target group for this action. First, members of the task units put stickers shaped like prize ribbons (a coming out award) on unsuspecting onlookers, and then they held a congratulatory speech in celebration of their coming out. Some salutations used to welcome bystanders to the community (with a pat on/arm around their shoulder) were: "It's great you came today! Congratulations on your coming out! It's wonderful that you are finally able to admit to your gayness!" Or, "Yay! Another lesbian who's brave enough to come to the parade! Welcome!" This was then followed by the mandatory photo for "our" family album. Who can't help but think of the disco smash hit "We are Family" here? Then we all crowded together to take numerous pictures of people who would have usually taken pictures of us. We performed "community" for them while

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assimilating them into something that only exists as an imaginary place: a lesbiangaytransqueeretc unity.

Irritated, amused and dis/identified

More often than not, the spectators were irritated by their inclusion in the spectacle. Some literally looked as if the situation was uncanny to them. They may have been asking themselves if it's possible that—through their sheer presence at the Rainbow Parade—they could be perceived as gays or lesbians? "Why me?" "Don't they have gay-dar so they recognize each other?" "Maybe this is going to keep happening to me, or people will stop thinking I'm heterosexual?" It is highly unlikely that most of the spectators went this far in their considerations, but for a single moment the cameras and all eyes were on them; for a fleeting moment their normative heterosexuality was challenged. For a moment, the parade's queer scope of action expanded to incorporate the spectators. The parade itself became a tableau vivant in which a queer "normality" superimposed the normality of being conceived as heterosexual. Inviting the heterosexual societal majority to be faced with this everyday queer experience not only caused confusion of the disidentified participants, it also empowered the protagonists to reclaim and create the "Rainbow Parade" public space.

When posing together for the family photos the reactions among the audience-participants were remarkable: even if some had felt uneasy or had been noticeably tense, the enactment (repetition) of the very familiar situation of the group photo brought on a picture-perfect moment of relaxation that is clearly visible in the photos.

Maybe it was just another bodily exercise in politeness.

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Notes

¹ This was a literary movement in Brazil in the 1920s. It asserts that Brazil's history of "cannibalizing" other cultures is its greatest strength and states that incorporation becomes a way for Brazil to assert itself against European postcolonial cultural domination.

² More or less every larger European city hosts a parade, and most of them have become commercialized events. Gay, lesbian and transgender groups in cities like Beograd, Moscow, Riga and Warsaw have fought for the right to march, but have met with homophobia, chauvinism and violence. For more information see: www.queerbeograd.org, or www.ilga-europe.org

³ ACT UP: AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power was founded in New York in 1987 to fight ignorance towards HIV and AIDS. For examples of the diverse actions that were taken, please see the ACTUP Oral History Project. www.actuporalhistory.org

⁴ See: website of veterans of the Stonewall riots on www.stonewallvets.org or Duberman (1993)

⁵ There are many other groups that perform interventions at the parade, such as Ladyfest, quote, Happy and gaj, to name a few. They often use clandestine tactics, such as photographing the spectators that come to photograph the "exotic" crowd, or

distributing stickers that say "We support lesbian divorce!", "No girls, No boys, No government!", etc.

⁶ In addition, there is the complex issue of homophobic violence that pride parades provoke. This includes right-wing attacks on participants and spectators at the parades in many European cities.

⁷ In the anti-commercialization and commodification "Not your cash cow" action, Lila Tipp included a sign stating "L is not the only word" referring to the US series.