

RE/WORKING AFFECT—QUEER FEMINIST ENGAGEMENTS. A WORKSHOP REPORT. 1

1. Introduction

Why do queer-feminists engage in the study of affect and emotions? This was one of the focal questions of a one-day workshop jointly organized by the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI Berlin), the Center for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies (ZtG), Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, on June 27, 2013 at the ICI Berlin. “Re/Working Affect—Queer Feminist Engagements” provided the frame for a host of specific issues about the current queer-feminist turn towards affect. Three noted scholars and contributors to emotion and affect studies highlighted different aspects of this broad field and offered insights for engaging debates: Marie Luise Angerer (Cologne), Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (Gießen) and Deborah Gould (Santa Cruz).

Historically and until the present day, affect and emotions have been associated with femininity and effeminacy. It therefore seems obvious that queer feminist engagements address questions of affect and emotions. While the realm of affect and emotion has thus far been assigned to the private and intimate sphere, it was excluded from an analysis of politics. Yet, affect and emotions play a crucial role in both the political and in politics. Affect and emotions fuel political life, but have also proven to be a stumbling block for political change. Arguably, it was social movements, most notably the women’s movement, that put emotions and affect back on the agenda. The slogan of the private being political succinctly indicates this. As a result, affect found its way not only into the political arena, but also into epis-

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temology, where feminism embraces affect as a mode of critique.

Although scholarly research on social movements glossed over emotions until relatively recently, activists' and especially feminists' pre-occupation with feelings did stimulate a more general social study of emotions, which by now has a history of several decades. At the same time, the turn towards affect in queer-feminist research has recently been a highly debated development and not without controversy. On the one hand, the turn to affect has been welcomed and pushed by numerous queer and feminist scholars. This may not be a coincidence given that emotions like shame may arguably be a constitutive element of queer experience. On the other hand, the turn to affect has equally been questioned or downright rejected within queer and feminist discourse.

Exploring such diverging views on the matter was the central purpose of the workshop. It aimed at gauging the potentials and pitfalls of the affective turn for queer feminist studies and politics. "Re/Working Affect" functioned as a focal lens onto these issues. It was meant to capture several meanings:

Firstly, a perspective on the transformability of affect. This also puts at stake the meaning of affect as either something spontaneous and unruly or rather historically and socially determined.

Second, a perspective that renders visible and recognizes the work of the transformation of affect. This involves advocating a wide understanding of work. Therefore the focus was not only on wage labor and its necessary emotional work, but also on art work, reproductive or domestic work and the work of activism. On the one hand, such a perspective highlights how gendered, racialized and sexual subjectivities are produced within these processes. On the other hand, it raises the question of how affective work can contribute to counter-hegemonic movements that go against or beyond these processes of subjectification.

Third, by re/working affect, that is through a debate of its limits and potentials, the workshop also wanted to reassess and enhance the current paradigms of affect. Rather than academic navel-gazing, it asked how the current queer-feminist work in affect studies can contribute to transforming regimes of sexuality, gender, race and class.

2. Presentations

Marie-Luise Angerer (Academy of Media Arts, Cologne) started her talk on "Representation and Affect. Or: Blind Gaze vs. Blind Emotion" with Yoko Ono's "The Fly" (1971), a film where the

camera closely follows a fly exploring a naked female body, supported by sounds resembling a fly. Angerer took this piece of feminist artwork as a reference point in order to elaborate on the significance of the current turn to affect in film studies, asking: What did we see in the 1970s? What do we see today? Western feminist art of the 1970s, she argued, was characterized by the critique of the male gaze and the patriarchal gestures. With affect, however, the production of representation and the critique of the image is no longer predominant. A reading inspired by the current turn to affect emphasizes less the gendered viewer and instead stresses the pleasure of the tactile, the movement and the dimension of imitation. While 1970s (feminist) film theory can be associated with Jacques Lacan's idea of the mirror, current readings rather follow Karen Barad who criticizes the idea of the mirror because it refers to reflexion and representation, emphasizing instead the figure of diffraction. Angerer took up this critical stance on representation turning, however, to Alfred N. Whitehead, whose critique of visual perception and insistence on affective perception—prehension—make him into a theoretician of affect *avant la lettre*. Between the Lacanian notion of the “blind gaze” (neither gaze nor subject can see each other) and Whitehead's “blind emotion” (since there is no subject feeling this emotion), Angerer posited her take on affect as a “blind movement.” Doing so, she claimed for a reworking of affect that goes beyond the two readings as mutually exclusive and that instead relates movement and the tactile to the dimensions of ideology and critique.

Moving from the artistic to the sphere of labor, *Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez* (University of Gießen) added another aspect to reworking affect. From a Marxist perspective she was concerned with affective value as a core issue within domestic labor and care work. In her analysis she draws on interviews with Latin American domestic workers in Spain, Britain, Germany and Austria and their employers. The concept of affective value is linked to the Marxist concept of surplus value: affect is thus understood as a relational category. Affective value in the case of domestic work is moreover embedded into political and historical power relations as Gutiérrez Rodríguez emphasized. It also needs to be understood in the context of a devaluation of this kind of labor by its feminization and racialization. Gutiérrez Rodríguez emphasized the colonality of labor which shapes very specifically domestic work and inscribes itself into the bodies and minds of domestic workers. Negative affects attached to domestic labor are transferred onto the domestic employee while the employer—usually also female—profits from this transfer and enjoys the positive affects emerging in this situation. Putting

the emphasis on relationality means looking at the circulation of affects in the context of exploitation. The discussion following this talk focused mainly on two points. First, several interventions tried to pin down the difference between the notion of feelings and the notion of affect as used by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez. She made clear that affect to her is of interest because it enables us to interpret the value of domestic labor on yet another level than the mere economic output. It is rather located in the exchange of affects. Secondly, the question of political consequences and organizing was brought up. On an individual level Gutiérrez Rodríguez pointed out that there were diverse strategies to undermine these exploitative situations. A lot of domestic workers also organize collectively. Still, that does not interrupt the transfer of negative affects e.g. of disgust. On a more general level, Gutiérrez Rodríguez hinted at the possibility of taking the thought of relationality beyond the mere sphere of domestic labor. This also aims politically at an understanding of “caring as essential to our being, trying to move the debate to a kind of a planetary vision of how we should live together.”

A third and final facet of reworking affect was explored by *Deborah Gould* (University of California, Santa Cruz) in her talk “On Moving Politics: Emotion, ACT UP, and Beyond.” She highlighted the non-rational, contradictory, inchoate and often non-acknowledged qualities of feelings and explored their potential to both hinder and propel political action. It was her own feelings in the process of researching ACT UP that drew her attention to the long-neglected role of emotions in political action. The emergence of ACT UP constituted a break with earlier forms of AIDS organizing, involving on a fundamental level a new emotional habitus, which in turn entailed new political imaginaries. Specifically this shift replaced an ascent to pride about gay community organizing and a hope for normalcy that were ultimately rooted in a shame-ridden ambivalence about dominant society among gays. In its stead, ACT UP’s emotional habitus highlighted anger together with a range of accompanying emotions such as comradeship, joyousness, feelings of purpose and love. These stimulated a different course of action than was dominant before the emergence of ACT UP—a focus on direct action. Gould also explored the role of despair in the movement’s later decline. This was related to the continuing death toll that AIDS took despite all the political successes and was particularly efficacious as there was a taboo on it in ACT UP. Finally, Gould extended her analysis to a subsequent activist group, *Queer to the Left*, which forms an alliance with an evangelical group in order to fight for low cost housing.

3. Panel Discussion: Queering Affect—Does it Matter? Does it Work?

The concluding panel discussion focused on the potentials as well as the potential pitfalls of inserting questions of affect and affective work into queer-feminist theory and practice. A large part of the debate circled around the conceptual distinction between emotions as socio-culturally shaped and affects as indeterminate bodily phenomena. A certain consensus was reached that charting the wide range between emotional articulations and affective disarticulations was more promising than continuously pitting the two definitions against each other as incompatible approaches. The discussion also discarded certain naive celebrations of affect as inherently beneficial. Instead it emphasized the ambivalent effects, for example of supposedly bad feelings like inferiority or shame that can stabilize as well as transform heteronormative power structures. This led to the question in which ways one could handle or fruitfully analyze the moments when the indeterminate power of affect was translated into specific impacts. Some discussants recommended a tentative and daring openness to affective encounters the effects of which could not be controlled, but only retrospectively evaluated. Such strategies help to challenge established categories as well as forging unexpected coalitions. Thus, the emphasis on affect and emotions that threatens—as some speakers critically remarked—to replace queer theory's hitherto focus on sexuality and desire can as well contribute to establishing new links e.g. between queer and feminist approaches or between different marginalized groups. These contestations of prevalent boundaries as well as fresh strategies that combine a certain risky openness with a simultaneous call for critical reflexivity might well prove to be fruitful effects of the encounter between affect and queer theories and practices.

4. Coda

The encounter between affect and queer studies opens up an intriguing and inciting field comprising the body and the social. This terrain not only triggers new questions about subjectifications and subjectivities, but also calls for venturing beyond such issues. Thus analyzing and engaging with irritations of established ways of seeing, with the circulation of values in the economic sphere, and with the stimulation of alternative modes of protest allows for a thorough reworking of hitherto prevalent no-

tions of affect, of long practiced queer-feminist strategies and of existing heteronormative and racist power structures.

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