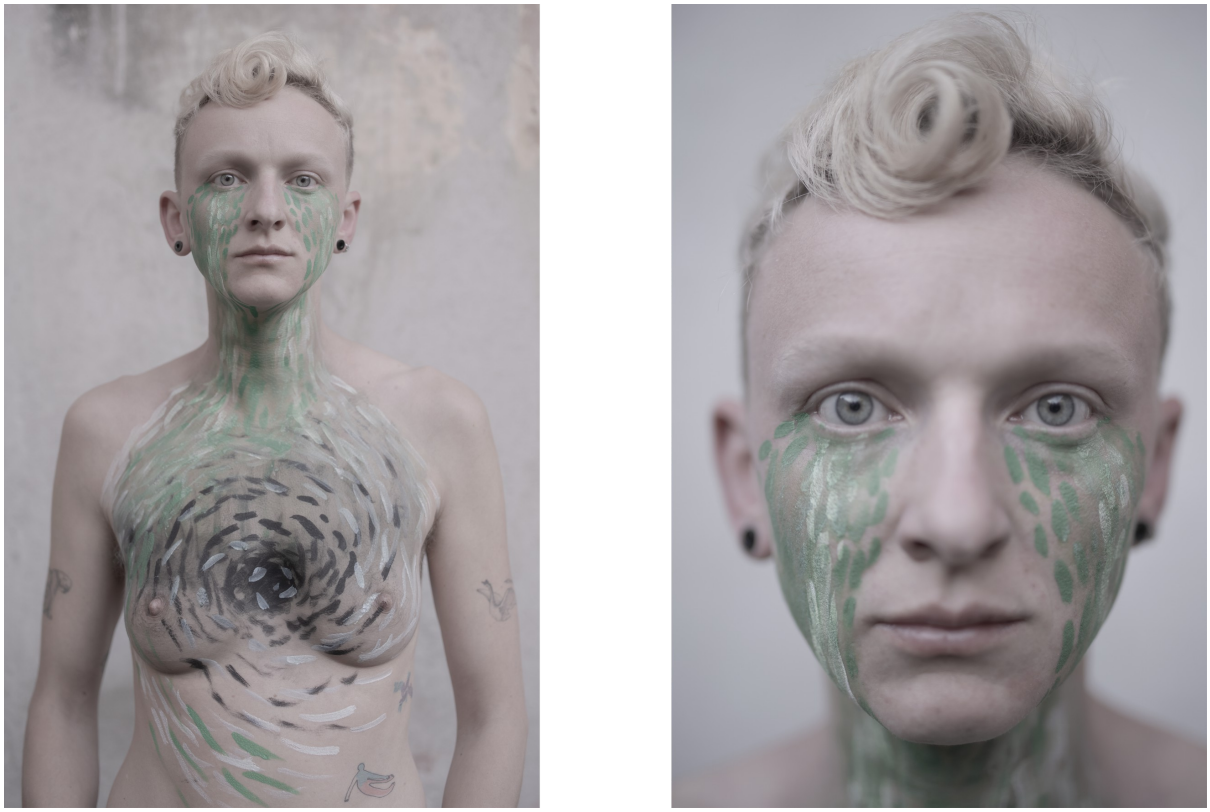
Dark Realism:
An auto/biographical enquiry
into creative strategies of queer resilience

Ivan Kirchgaesser, 20/3/2021



For all the tears I cannot cry. Ivan Kirchgaesser, photo by Allan Laurent Colin (2021)

Note from the author

The images in this Thinking Piece that are not me are portraits of my lovers, themselves queer artists, who nourish my will to live with their creativity.

I. Portugal, October 2020. A story about almost dying

Trigger warning: homophobic violence.

We are in the Portuguese countryside. A retreat for queer people. Here, you can invent a new name for yourself every day. The others will call you by it. No questions asked. When I step out of the house, I look down a scorched valley. Wildfires turned the green land black. Large rocks and boulders are strewn around. They light up golden this late afternoon in October. I scan the horizon. Because of the clouds' reflection, it looks as though the sun is setting in six different places. We are quiet for a moment and drink it in.

The day before. A friend and I are doing push-ups outside. He presses down between my shoulders to make it harder, hovering over me. Suddenly a wooshing noise. Something whizzes past, right between our heads. Time slows down. The instant stretches out. Someone is shooting at us, my friend shouts. We run inside. This place has a neighbour who is scared of us. Our queer existence – so triggering that he wants us dead.

We don't leave. Not immediately. The police is hardly helpful. They tell us to come and file a complaint. But we look after each other. That is more important than getting away from the danger. I refuse to respond to fear with fear. That night, three of us sleep downstairs in front of the fireplace. We guard the frontline in case something happens. I feel safe between two people.

In the car to the police station, we check our accounts of what happened against each other. Some of us can barely remember. I retained a lot of details. We realise that we must tell the story using each other's document names. Not the names we know each other by. Those beautiful, fluid, shifting names. I feel paralysed. Can't get it out of my mouth. We listen to Queen. The officer is friendly but can't take our reports. He is alone at the station. Come back later.

So we drive to the supermarket. Usually, we have a plan for what we need. This time, we gravitate to whatever appeals. We end up with a huge pile of pastries, crisps, and liquor. When we get home, we eat. One of us brings out their accordion. Another prepares a bowl of Dead Sea facial mask. We all help ourselves. Five queers surviving and still being fabulous. I love these people so much.

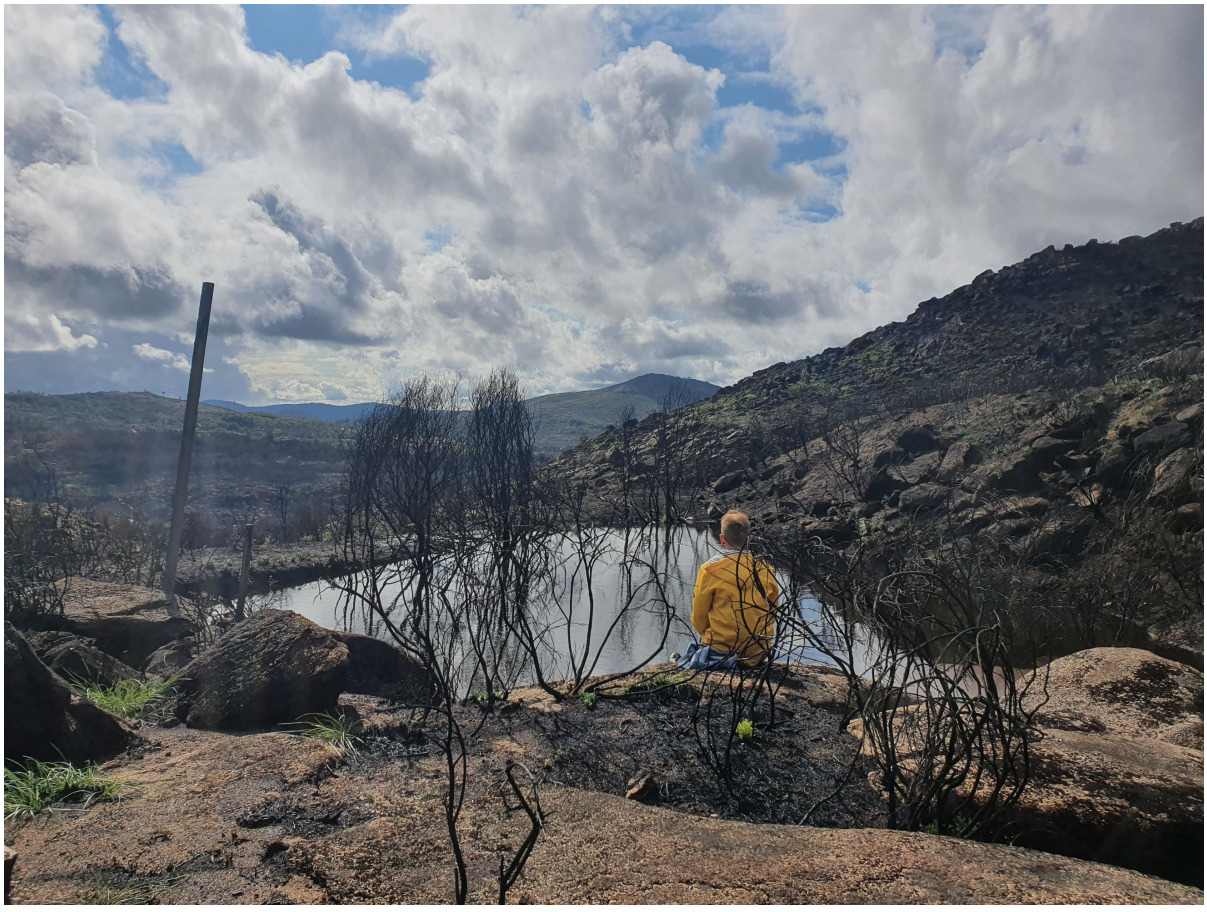
On our last night together, we decide to throw a party and dress up for the occasion. This place has a transformation room full of costumes, wigs, shoes, and jewellery. I ask for help picking an outfit. I am handed a body suit with green and blue flowers and rhine stones over a netted pattern. It has been worn by many members of the community. This skin feels good.

The next morning, I ask if I can borrow the suit. I want to be able to slip back into this feeling of being held in the right place. I pack some stale pastries for sustenance. On the plane back home, I write the abstract for this paper. The deadline is tomorrow.

Three months later. I ask my friends: was it irrational of me to stay? The danger was real. I could have been killed. People I talked to after the shooting urged me leave. I didn't. As one of us said: I am tired of running away. Out there, we created a retreat for ourselves where we could be on our own terms. Where we could live according to our values without being questioned by a

heteronormative society. A little parallel queer universe. We weren't prepared to let that be taken away by one scared individual.

My one friend says: I think you were rational. Risk-aversion shouldn't be the only factor in decision making. The other adds: I didn't understand at the time why you weren't leaving. But now that you've told this story, I see why you stayed. Processing is required for healing. And you couldn't have done that to the same extent if everybody had fled.



The day after the shooting. Photo by Eyal Alef Ophir (2020)

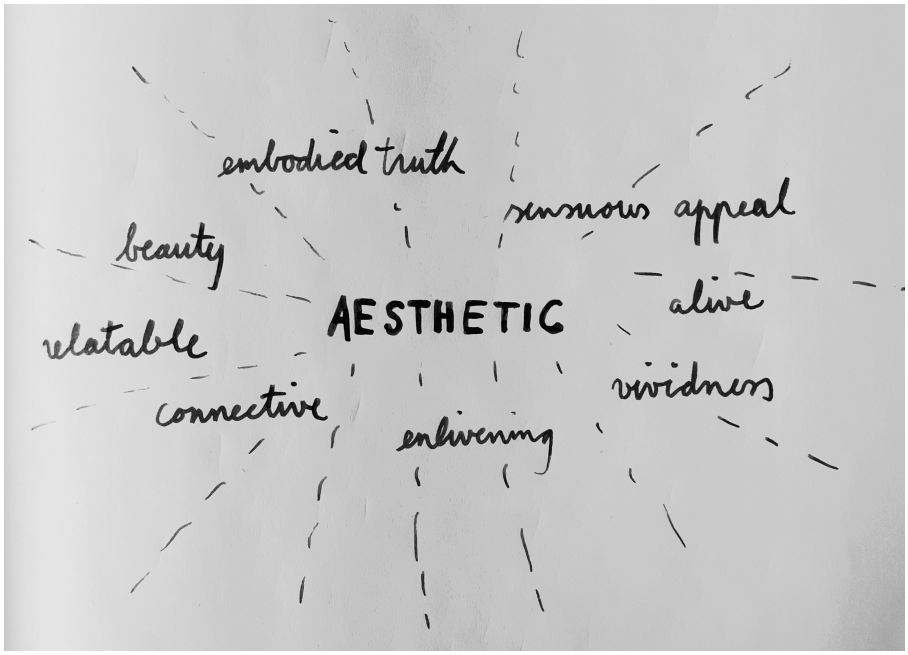
II. On the value of aesthetic practice for learning, growing, and healing

Learning from life

The situation described in this story is one about trauma and resilience in the context of queer life. My queer life. By writing this text, I try to make sense of what happened and distil new insights from it. This is my life research. By sharing it, I hope you can learn something, too. Auto/biographical enquiry may not be generalisable in the traditional sense. However, what speaks for this personal approach is that I have unique access to my experience, and I can get to a depth that is hard to attain otherwise (Merton, 1988). Also, I find that listening in to someone's story can be a beautiful organic way to learn. It is more than conveying information, it evokes care. Giving you a glimpse into my life may enable you to recognize yourself in me, or to live into an experience that is unfamiliar. This is how perspectives can be expanded beyond the individual bubble: we don't have to be the same in order to relate. We can draw on the intersubjectivity given to us by the grace of living as human beings in a shared world. Clearly, we all inhabit this shared reality in different ways. We experience it from different social, geographical, and temporal locations. Sometimes, it may seem as though our life worlds are too separate to ever meet. But we need to connect to make it work together! Therefore, the least I can try is to build bridges by sharing my experiences. Between queers and non-queers. Between traditional and progressive academics. Between Familiars and Others.

Aesthetic turns

What I need in order to learn about human experience is not an objective, distant observer's perspective. I need for the phenomena to come alive. Feminists and auto/biographical narrative researchers have been working from this insight for decades now (Tompkins, 1987; Freedman, 1992; Stanley, 1992; Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 2003; Clover, Sanford & Butterwick, 2013; Formenti, West & Horsdal, 2014; Formenti & West; 2018). They have created countless precedents that make a case for more relatable and participatory (academic) practices – using presentational methods, bringing in different types of voices, dissolving traditional researcher-participant hierarchies, and taking experience seriously. Interestingly, in the early days of science, criteria for validity had not yet settled in favour of objectivity, generalisability, and replicability. In the eighteenth century, when philosophy, literature, and science were still more intimately connected and embedded in life, "the vividness of evidence, or the immediate sensuous appeal of the fact itself" (Jackson, 2003, p. 126, paraphrasing Schaffer, 1994) was thought to be essential in conveying knowledge about human experience. An aesthetic turn *avant la lettre*, if you consider that aesthetic can be understood in an expanded sense "as that which enlivens our being in contrast to the *anaesthetic* or numbness" (Sacks, 2018, p. 175). It is akin to the pragmatic perspective on beauty as a quality that can be experienced when reasoning and imagination are unified to get to an embodied truth (Leddy, 2016).



Mapping the aesthetic. Ivan Kirchgaesser (2021)

The aesthetic, framed in this expanded way, can be seen as a crucial factor in learning *from* and *in* life, as well as in processes of growth and healing. Let me unpack this a bit further in the light of the case story. What were the dynamics at work? First of all, it is interesting to note how life can appear more vivid in the proximity of death. Secondly, that which made life worth living in the face of violence and fear was the way we responded as a community – and how we established this sense of community in the first place. None of us knew each other particularly well when we met. However, we were able to tap into practices that have a long history in queer culture, and, more specifically, in the international network of non-assimilationist gay people that the retreat place belongs to. They include the permission to experiment with identity through the daily name-stating ritual and regular dressing up, the creative processing of various life experiences through performing for each other, as well as a shared appreciation of music, nature, good food, and personal care. Each of these things have a positive effect on the quality of life. They are connective in the sense that they bring people closer to themselves, each other, and the place.

Queer resilience

> Being resilient means claiming my life. It's the antideath.
>
> Transgender participant Jay in Singh, Hays & Watson (2011, p. 24)

Resilience, seen as the capacity to deal creatively with novel, potentially challenging situations, as well as to heal from trauma and to grow as a person, gets strengthened in a rich social context like my queer community. Note that I am taking a relational perspective as put forward by feminist psychologist and scholar Judith Jordan (1992), rather than an individualistic one that conceives of resilience as the skill to 'bounce back' that only some intrinsically tough people happen to have. As therapist Linda Hartling puts it, "Jordan (1992) opened the way to understanding resilience as a human capacity that can be developed and strengthened in all

people through relationships, specifically through growth-fostering relationships." (2010, p. 52). Studies in the LGBTQIA+ community (Bartoș & Langdridge, 2019; Singh & McKleroy, 2011; Singh, Hays & Watson, 2011) confirm the relevance of such an ecological perspective. This body of research in particular also questions the use of the picture of 'bouncing back' as returning to a prior state of normality – a metaphor commonly used in individualistic models of resilience that originates from the science of how materials (rather than humans) behave (Bröckling, 2017). It assumes that it is desirable to return to a state of normality, and that there was normality to begin with. One way of reading queerness is that it implies questioning normativity and hegemony. Knowing what it feels like to be different raises some salient questions about the power dynamics involved in so-called normality – which can only signify the comfort of familiarity to those who 'fit in'. Because who gets to define what is normal? And who gets to define what needs 'fixing'? For all I know, my creative agency to name and place my own experiences is one that I worked and suffered hard for to achieve, and I am not planning to let go of it any time soon. Coming out as a gay trans man has made me more acutely aware of the damaging effects of (hetero)normativity and gendered oppression in its various manifestations – even in so-called progressive Western societies. Ironically, it made me more feminist. Hence, my aim is certainly not to bounce back, but if anything, to bounce into a new place, and bring you along with me.

In the spirit of relational resilience and bouncing forward, I can confirm that the communal culture of aesthetic practice such as the one I experienced in Portugal has been both empowering and enlivening. It certainly contributed to my decision to stay after the attack. Furthermore, returning to these memories, drawing out what gave me strength, and processing them by treating them as the subject of my life research is proving to be an aesthetic (self-) healing practice in and of itself. And finally, the sharing of this story becomes a form of social activism, in the sense that "[n]arrative provokes thought, thought provokes conversation, conversation provokes change" (Thomas, 2010, p. vii, in Bartoș & Langdridge, 2019, p. 242).

On ways of making life worth living

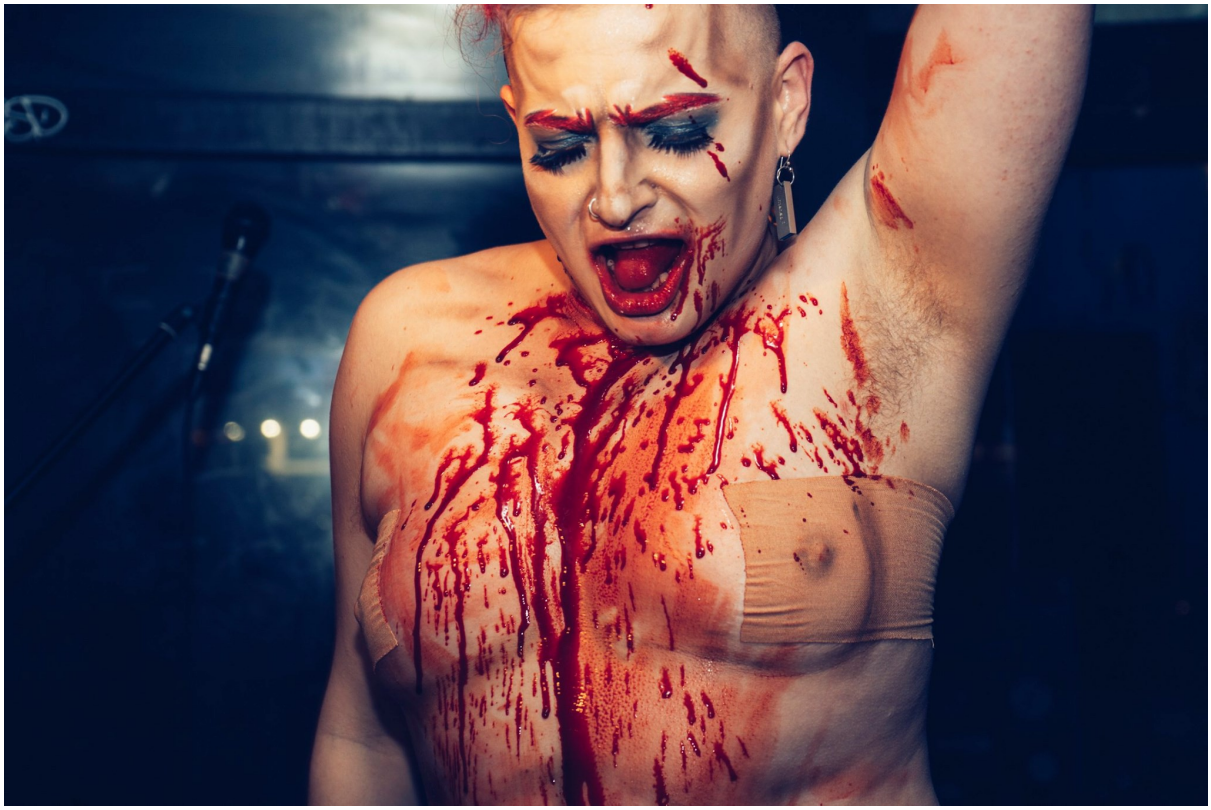
> Despite the health, legal and social challenges, many LGBQ individuals and communities thrive. More than this, LGBQ people have also transformed the social world through the creative ways they have met these challenges and resisted their oppression (Seidman, 2002; Weeks, 2007).
>
> Bartoș & Langdridge (2019, p. 235)

"You are not the way you are supposed to be!" This is the message queer people get from living in a heteronormative reality. It is communicated in many ways: parental disapproval; lack of representation; verbal and physical violence; discrimination; being conceptualised as a sinner in religious contexts; a lack of understanding your experience through lack of education. Doubting your identity becomes an internalized oppressive voice that is constantly there in the background – even if you find yourself in a supportive environment. It is the cause of anxiety, trauma, and potentially problematic coping mechanisms. Much research has been done to map out the stressors that LGBTQIA+ people deal with on a daily basis. This work is needed to advocate for changes towards a more inclusive, educated society that is appreciative of all its members. Here, however, I consider the ways in which queer people make life worth living in a world that is not yet like that. I need to in order to make sense of and do justice to the subtle,

empowering dynamics at work in my own experiences of queer survival. Because, as researchers have pointed out before me, the LGBTQIA+ community is far from a sinking ship (Bartoş & Langdridge, 2019; Singh & McKleroy, 2011; Singh, Hays & Watson, 2011) and the creative ways we developed to deal with challenges could be of inspiration to others.

To some extent, the experiences in my case story may be exemplary of the ways in which people in the LGBTQIA+ community people make life worth living. However, it needs saying that the LGBTQIA+ community is diverse in itself. Subgroups such as transgender people deal with different struggles than, for example, cis-gay or intersex people. Even within the 'community', battles are fought over who belongs and who doesn't. Furthermore, geographical and social contexts make for extremely different experiences. Covering all perspectives would be out of the scope of any one study. Therefore, I focus on the strategies of resilience that I know first-hand from my engagement with people who consider themselves 'queer' – and I am one of them. Queer can mean many things, but here, it roughly denominates a questioning attitude towards normativity and hegemony of any kind, a "commitment to a wandering curiosity" (McGlotten, 2012, p. 3), and a non-assimilationist attitude. Most people in 'my community' I met in Berlin or through Berlin-based contacts – including the group in Portugal. They are trans men and women and non-binary people of various sexual orientations, as well as cis people. Many are migrants from Latin and North America, the Middle East, and various European countries. All speak English and most attended higher education – though plenty dropped out of school and are self-taught. In terms of occupation, there is a high proportion of artists, drag performers, and people working in LGBTQIA+ advocacy and support organisations.

What makes these people strong? The big number one factor is the sense of community (Singh & McKleroy, 2011; Bartoş & Langdridge, 2019): being 'other' is what connects us. Fellow queers become a family of choice, replacing or substituting the family of origin. Encountering humans in a similar position allows for mutual support, validation, and empowerment. We learn from each other. Additional factors are queer people's creativity and their ability to think 'outside of the box' – capacities needed to make life work in the margins. These skills make for vibrant arts practices that are both political and close to life. The Berlin drag scene is a great example. It commentates on what it means to live in a heteronormative society and draws on the artists' rich imagination to put forward alternative ideals and realities. It functions as an educational and politicising platform, addressing issues of gender, sexuality, racism, the ecological crisis and more. Drag shows also fulfil a therapeutic and spiritual function, as rituals involving preaching, song, dance, poetry, and collective cheering. They provide a sense of belonging and meaning, as well as a space for communal grief and cathartic excitement. Most of all, they give performers and audience a sense of recognition by communicating that it is okay to be who they are. There is a strong aspect of celebration and pride. Derogatory slurs like 'faggot' and, historically, 'queer', are turned into badges of honour. Imperfection and contradiction are acknowledged as part of reality and not something to be hidden. Moral imperatives are challenged, boundaries of comfort are pushed. Beauty and fabulousness in their many forms are displayed unapologetically. Everybody can be queen, king, quing, or thing – as per their desire. An inclusive and DIY spirit makes it possible for complete newbies to appear side to side with professionally trained artists. People unite in the intention to not go under.



HP Loveshaft at Morgan's Dragshow for Busy People, Berlin. Photo by Aaron J. Cunningham (2020)

Dark Realism

Communal experiences like the Berlin drag events are created for a reason. They are life-giving, necessary to survive in a world that would rather not acknowledge your existence. Not all forms of dealing with oppression and trauma, however, may seem as constructive and wholesome as what I just described. Examples of edgy coping mechanisms are excessive hedonism and drug use, sometimes framed in the community as self-medication. The decision to stay in the Portuguese retreat in spite of the ongoing threat to our lives was arguably questionable, too. In good psychoanalytical fashion, however, I believe that every 'symptom' is the best possible response a system can come up with (Jung, 1953-83, CW 18, par. 389). Therefore, withholding judgment is in place. As it happens, some responses to stressors defy the usual categories of healthy and normal, making them queer in some respect. To echo Burstow (2003), this is not to say that someone can't benefit from making an effort to change habits that are perhaps not as life-giving in the long run.

> [S]o-called symptoms are best theorized as survival skills. Correspondingly, traumatized people are most adequately conceptualized as competent practitioners of their lives, none of which means that they do not get stuck or that help is inappropriate.
>
> Burstow (2003, pp. 1305-1306)

The picture that emerges from my reflections on creative strategies of queer resilience is one of Dark Realism. To speak with Brown (1995), people who have experienced trauma and

oppression have lost the “cloak of invulnerability” (in Burstow, 2003, p. 1298). But rather than looking at trauma from a deficiency point of view, assuming that the wounded need to be ‘fixed’ and returned to a so-called state of normality, one can acknowledge the value of the realism that ensues from their experiences. Burstow goes as far as to say that “a case could be made that the highly traumatized person actually sees the world more accurately than the less traumatized” (2003, p. 1298). Hence, it appears that something can be learned from the ways how queer people handle oppression and create healing practices. Being marginalised, othered, and sometimes violated is a dark place to be. But darkness doesn’t necessarily equal bad. Light is often associated with clarity and order, whereas darkness comes with images of chaos and being lost. But there are two sides to the coin. Light can blind one to aspects of reality, and order can turn into rigidity and oppressive normativity – harming not only queer people, but *all* people. Darkness as the locus of chaos, on the other hand, can act as a birthing ground of new ideas and ‘queer’ approaches to life – which, again, could be beneficial to everyone.

In the end, I find that resilience is not a matter of either/or and black/white – beautifully exemplified by the queer attitude of thinking in spectrums rather than binaries. Learning, healing, and growth happen in the movement between the poles of darkness and light, chaos and order. Clinging to either end of the spectrum causes anxiety and frustration. In some way, one-sidedness is self-destructive. What is required to let go of either extreme and allow inspiration from ‘the other side’ is love and trust. Not a blind trust that the world is “essentially benign and safe” (Burstow, 2003, p. 1298), but a trust that emerges from knowing that there will be someone who will catch you when you fall, and that there is a place where you are seen and where your experiences are validated. This is something my queer community has ample practice with.

III. Mexico, March 2021. A love story

The love and trust required to be able to live well enough and be able to cope with challenging situations is the same love and trust that allows for creativity to thrive. I am in La Fábrica Puebla, an old metal factory where I am doing an artist residency with my lover and collaborator Allan Laurent Colin. We hadn't seen each other for almost a year when I finally made it to Mexico six weeks ago. Corona. One of the things that connects me and Allan is that we discovered our queerness together, dancing at a party, then in my flat, then in the woods. I felt like a boy dancing with a girl. The feeling was mutual. And so it happened that for each of us, this encounter marked the beginning of our exploration of what it means to be transgender. (Does this mean our souls are connected? Inlakesh. Alakesh.) Coincidentally, the living space and studio we find ourselves in now, one and a half years later, is in the colours of the trans flag. Blue, pink, white, pink, blue. We take pleasure in seeing them everywhere we look and make a game out of spotting them. In a church, a girl's dress, in someone's hair at a party, on cigarette filters. The colours even start making their way into our work.

Arriving in Mexico for me is entering into a context that is different from anything I am used to. I spent all my life in Europe. Allan was concerned about this – after all we'd met in the 'free' city of Berlin, where allegedly anything is possible and there are so many queer people that you can pretend there is nothing outside of this bubble. To arrange for my travel in these strange times, I need an invitation letter. Unfortunately, it has to have my document name on it, but I am so excited by the idea of receiving an official invitation that I ask Allan to write me an *actual* one. It says:

> Querido Ivan
>
> (…)
>
> I feel a lot of excitement for you to come, to see you again, to introduce you to my country, my dynamics, so that you can understand how my performance of gender unfolds here.
>
> I would be lying to you if I told you that I am the same, I guess I have geographic facets that dissolve and reconstruct themselves between frontiers. But that's what excites me, that you come and experience another reality.

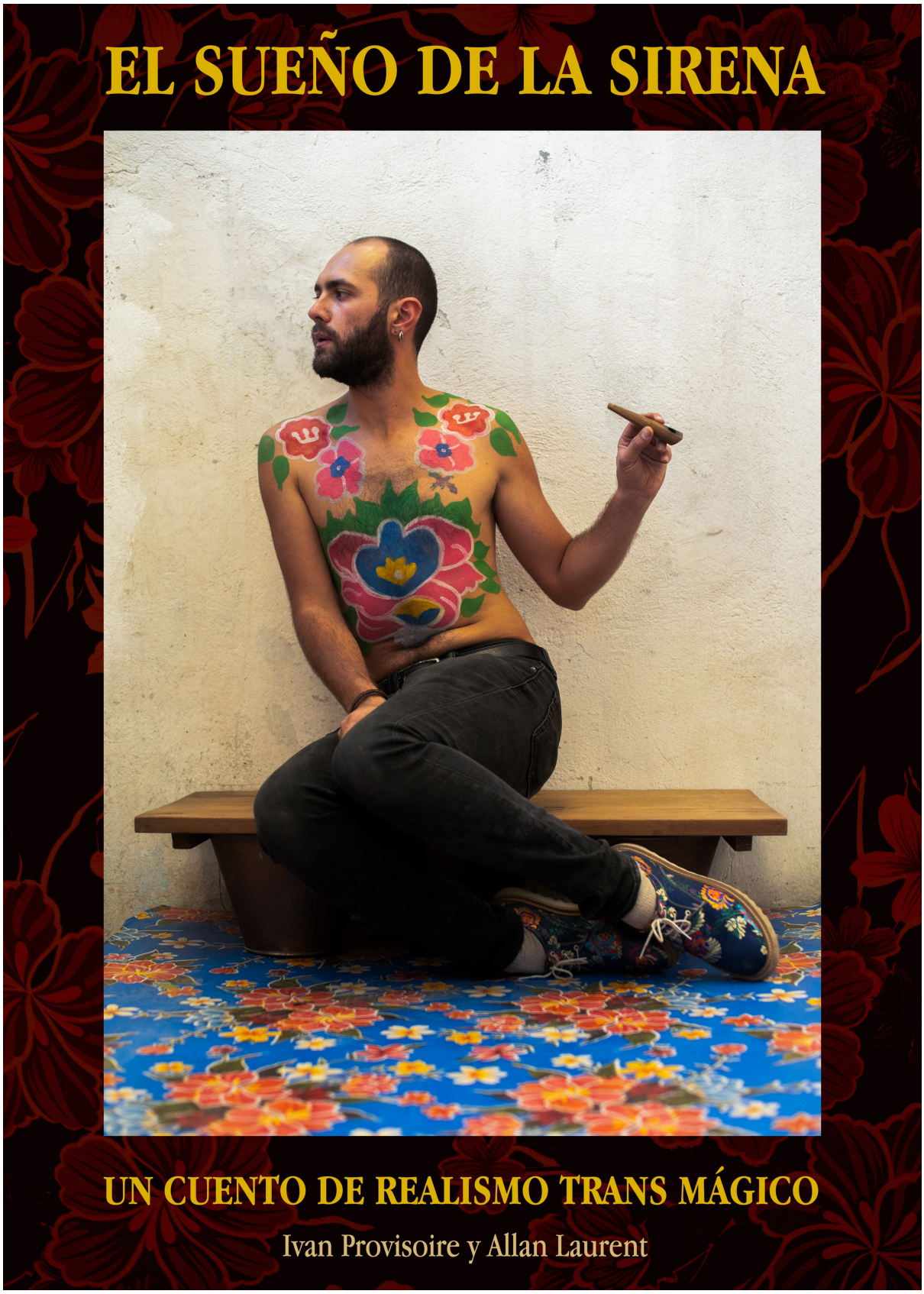
Coming here, I am trying to understand this different location and its gender dynamics. What is it that makes Allan feel less free here? What is it like to be queer in Mexico? They tell me about the culture of machismo with all its expectations around being 'a real man', and coming with that, the blatant misogyny. They despise it and yet they feel associated with it. Being together again, though, seems to help them reconnect with the sense of possibility they'd experienced with me back in Berlin. They start dressing differently, more feminine, less in boy disguise. What I have seen in them from the first moment begins to show on the outside once more. As for me, I am delighted to discover that everyone here reads me as a man – in spite of being well aware of the problems with toxic masculinity. (Why must I be one of them? Why can't I just be nonbinary?) In transgender terms: I am consistently passing, even if I am wearing more flamboyant, feminine clothes myself. We end up walking outside together, holding hands, most likely being read as a gay couple. Sometimes, people look – but if anything, a little startled, never aggressive. We may just be lucky, because it is not uncommon for visibly gay and trans people to

be subject to violence here. It could also be that so far, we have been spared such attacks because we appear white and non-local (Allan is half French and therefore often perceived as a foreigner). Yet, we both can't help but feel some excitement over the unexpected absence of the public homo- and transphobia we experienced even in Berlin.

It turns out that for both of us, life feels easier since we are back in each other's company. We are adapting to co-existence on this other continent. As we share new experiences, we continue to learn and grow together. I remember a sticker I saw on a bin back in the streets of Berlin. It said: TRANS HAPPINESS IS REAL. I paint a little sign with this text and put it on my desk. A few days later, a law is approved in the state of Puebla that allows trans people to change their name and gender in official documents. Allan and I had been to a trans protest outside a government building, but we were under the impression that we were just making pressure into the void with a handful of others. On our way back, Allan lamented how difficult it can be to organise for change in Mexico. Hence, the actual approval of the law on that very day – after a process of more than 10 years – caught us by happy surprise. A rare moment of witnessing how things that appear as static and heavy as a law can actually shift in a positive way. We are in a celebratory mood and more good things are about to happen. Opportunities to share our work and make new connections appear spontaneously. On some days, inspiration feels effortless. We work and work and work when we enter into the flow of creating images together. I paint our bodies. We let objects and places speak to us as we make films and photographs. I watch over my lover's shoulder as they are handling their camera. I learn to see the play of light, which is also always a play with moments. Nothing is more temporal and site-specific. Light *is* a moment, Allan says. We need to be present with it, not dwelling in the past or the future.

The way we experience our collaboration is as a space for play. Here, we can do those things we have too many doubts about much of the rest of our time. In a magical way, we seem to be capable of taking away each other's fears and anxious life expectations – for some precious moments. This alchemy of love and trust allows for our creativity to come out and for us to express ourselves more freely. We co-exist without a plan, take time to share experiences in the world, and then suddenly feel the urge rising to bring out what we have been gathering, only half-knowing what it is but finding it along the way. Whatever needs to happen will happen, says Allan. Go with the darkness. I add how we are also creative agents in making things happen. Artists of life can also play with the light.

We are working on a new short film. As we are making different shots, all the conversations we've been having about the joys and struggles of queer life feed into the images we create. *El Sueño de la Sirena: Un Cuento de Realismo Trans Mágico* offers an entry point into what is difficult, what is not yet resolved as long as 'otherness' remains a problematic category in many people's minds. But the portal we build is beautiful, and it carries the viewer on a wave of love and a celebration of life. I can't help but feel that there is something in this aesthetic mode that can act as a catalyst for mobilising the energy needed to shape a better world.



Film poster El Sueño de la Sirena. Allan Laurent Colin and Ivan Kirchgaesser (2021)

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