

No longer seeing us as other, and instead seeing us as one



© Alex Alvina Chamberland

Alex Alvina Chamberland is a Performance Artist and Author. We talked about trans identities, male attraction to trans women, gender studies and queer alliances.

By Silvan Hagenbrock

Alex Alvina Chamberland, what would you like to see from human beings?

More empathy, more intensity, more vulnerability, less fear of these characteristics, critical compassion, the will to engage, to learn, to combine knowledge with emotional intuition, to question both facts and fake facts, to write more long letters of love and depth, to write less short text messages “hey what’s up” on whatsapp, to replace casualness with magic connections, to reflect and listen and stay, and react & act when necessary, to pay attention and be fully present, to care less about conventional beauty and more about the beautiful moments that rival eternity, to relax into melancholy & joy, and dare the vulnerability of balancing across a

tightrope in Autumn or should I say Fall?

Heidi Klum will have a new show in autumn 2019 called Queen of Drags, which is inspired by the successful US-television show RuPaul's Drag Race. RuPaul's Drag Race Fans were shocked, when ProSieben television announced their plans and critics said that this show approach is more than "cultural appropriation" – it is "cultural abuse". How do you value the discourse (on mainstreaming intersectionality)?

I've never really followed RuPaul's Drag Race, so it's hard for me to answer this question. On the one hand it's nice that drag culture isn't pushed out to the fringes of society, on the other hand it's quite typical that the entertainment aspects of queer culture get celebrated. And a lot of politics and deeper issues get pushed out in that process of neoliberalization...

You apply your own texts, voice and elements of dance on stage. Recently, you have performed your piece about your access to trans identity Heal the world or die trying/Witches decide/My (trans)femininity/Danse Sacrale/No title only tidal wave during Wienwoche - a festival against the norm of political and social repression. Site-specifically, your performance took place at Otto-Wagner-Hospital, a place where women and children were pathologized and killed during World War II. What does depathologizing trans identities mean to you today?

Well, first of all the piece isn't really about trans identity – that is only one aspect of its broader message of femininity, self-sacrifice, care, empathy and intense engagement with the world. But in general depathologizing trans identities is precisely about that, letting us be ourselves, but also letting that self be more than just the trans identity. I abhor these kinds of over-simplified narratives where “being yourself” is equated with allowing yourself to express your transness. This is only one aspect of the self, an aspect that has unfortunately been stigmatized and oppressed, but being yourself is a question without a definite answer, because even if we regard ourselves less river-like and more akin to a placid lake, a lake still has new water flowing in and out of it, evaporating and pouring down through rain or snow. My point is, my vocation, what I wish to give to the world, is poetic prose and art that expands existence – my transness is secondary to that, though the interruptions of my existence caused by sexual and hateful projections are also central to my work. I believe that the most political thing I can do with my writing is to tell the full, sensitive, emotional, complex, and sometimes embarrassing truths of my life and therefore hopefully connect across identity borders without compromising for a second.

Another important element of this question is realizing that trans people have always existed. It's a colonial white-washed, ahistorical and dangerous idea that trans is some sort of “new trend”. What is newish is hormone replacement therapy and surgery, but this shouldn't be the focal point of transness, though it does change certain aspects of our reality.



Performance by Alex Alvina Chamberland in Vienna © Silvan Hagenbrock

What is the target audience you are addressing and what impact would you like to achieve with your piece?

I've never really had a target audience for anything I've ever done. My job is to be as honest and open as possible, and speak to whoever feels compelled to listen. When I perform my aim is to go so deep into myself that I'm no longer aware of my self or an audience. This is an invitation, and a deep form of sharing that is a rare

way for us humans to be in touch with one another – in the nakedness that has nothing to do with clothes. It's certainly a cathartic and brief escape from loneliness for me, and I can only hope that this transmits to the audience – whoever they may be. Of course I also hope to make life a little more bearable, a little more understandable, a little more magical, for other trans girls, but if they were the only ones who felt strongly about my work I would be humiliated as a writer/artist/soul/human/jellyfish/catwoman. Luckily, this does not seem to be the case. And while my work is very political, it does not subscribe to the politics that tries to murder the abstract and unknown. Politically I wish to shift things in the parts of ourselves that we have not been paying attention to, opening the world, and keeping it open until we no longer fear our own vulnerability.

„Although, this is a balance that I wish for all of the world, not just for us, and until that balance has been reached I still prefer to be on the more giving side... “

- Alex Alvina Chamberland

How can cross-border queer alliances combat the pathologization of transgender people?

Whether it's trans femmes being at the forefront of the Stonewall Riots, or Paola Revenioti financing the first Athens Pride Festivals with her sex work money, trans women have often been the mothers of the queer movement and the instigators of rebellion and radical change. Yet, here we are, still at the bottom of both the female and LGBT-class. Perhaps it is high time that we start getting back as much as we have given... Although, this is a balance that I wish for all of the world, not just for us, and until that balance has been reached I still prefer to be on the more giving side...

And how can cisgender people be part of an alliance with you?

No longer seeing us as other, and instead seeing us as one. Openly being our friends and lovers, not seeing us as hypersexual OR asexual. Understanding that being trans often carries with it knowledges, spiritual and political, that are relevant to us all. Provide opportunities for us to get other jobs than sex work, while simultaneously supporting sex workers rights.

You have mentioned male attraction to trans women and what kind of potential this brings in creating a position of vulnerability for heterosexual men. Could you please elaborate on that?

This is something I could write pages about. Within the porn industry it's well-known that trans porn is the bestselling porn genre among heterosexual men. Since I started living my life as a trans woman full time around 5-6 years ago, it's become increasingly clear to me that a large portion of straight men are extremely attracted to trans women, and many men outside of the western world have come a lot

further in understanding that their attraction to women includes trans women. Now, as long as this attraction remains clandestine, it loses its radical potential and reinforces the stigmatization of trans women as something dirty. But, if and when it becomes something open and undramatic, it places straight men in a rare vulnerable position, and this has the possibility to alter the ways we view sexuality and gender, and more importantly can help dismantle binaries, normal life-hegemony, and abusive masculinity. Basically, since trans women come in so many different forms – many are on hormones, some have vaginas, some have penises, some look more like cis women than most cis women, many have long legs and body proportions like female fashion models (which shouldn't be a beauty standard to begin with), all men who are attracted to women will be attracted to *some* trans women, whether they are aware of her being trans or not. And it is bigotry that gets in the way of this simple truth that needs to be explored.

You have studied gender studies at Södertörn University focusing on trans-gender and intersectionality. What would you recommend to students who are thinking about starting studying gender studies? Will the study program empower students in changing society?

I don't know, there are so many different gender studies programs, some of which teach things in a way that are much too dogmatic and uncreative for my taste, putting us into neat little boxes, without thinking about ways to open them... Other gender studies programs give remarkable tools for analyzing and deconstructing complex intersectional power dynamics, which if utilized of course can be used to change society. Personally I studied gender studies because I felt that my embodied knowledge regarding societal structures could use the enhancements given through reading a diverse range of course literature. This is different from my view of art, which I never studied at university, because I wanted to be as free as possible in my inspirations and various mentorships, jump between Clarice Lispector to Arundhati Roy to Violette Leduc to Marina Tsvetaeva to Diamanda Galás, without being enrolled in a program. I guess I feel that art and writing can't really be taught in school. At least not predominantly. Which in turn translates to me always feeling like a disaster when I attempt to teach "creative writing courses". I think the fact that I cry at every lesson, as we read through excerpts of my favorite literature, is the most important thing I teach my students. Be vulnerable, don't hold back, allow yourself to flow endlessly, and say fuck you to the professional role of "teacher" or for that matter "writer" or "artist", and maybe you're taking your first baby steps to something truly interesting.

What attributes and characteristics are needed to be an inspiring performance artist to you?

Hmm the question is if we need to be inspiring? What constitutes an interesting artist is not really possible to answer anyhow, even though depth, sincerity and a pinch of humor (preferably the dark kind) are important attributes to have (as a human.) There are so many forms of intensity, a loud shriek and complete silence

are equal to me, and both should be given more space in performance and in our everyday lives. Oh no, I can't answer this question. Although it is wonderful when you feel that a performer/writer/artist creates the work because it is central to their life force, a blood jet that can't be stopped.

Thank you very much for your time and insights!

Questions by Silvan Hagenbrock und Jeanne Schmidt.

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