

# Hacking the Body

## *A Transfeminist War Machine*

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**Abstract** In this article, the authors address the relationship between artistic production and political activism in Barcelona’s transfeminist scene, by reflecting on the first stage of their joint research project, *War Machines: Transfeminist Practices of Representation*, which maps and interprets the past ten years of transfeminist cultural production there. Transfeminist art practices, the authors argue, offer new strategies that supplement the operational logic of more traditional activisms by also acting in and through creative processes, principally by conceiving the body itself, in relation to technology, as a site for political transformation.

**Keywords** postpornography, transfeminism, Barcelona

*War Machines: Transfeminist Practices of Representation* is a work in process that maps transfeminist cultural production in Barcelona over the last ten years.<sup>1</sup> It is a work that inverts the gaze, turning back to document the emergence of transfeminism there from the concrete activist practices of local feminisms, modes of creative expression, and specific artistic productions, and at the same time to propose situated methods for visual research. This research is a result of the trajectories of our personal lives, as well as our experiences in activism, cultural production, and *trans-marica-bollo-feminist* thought—underlying inspirations that don’t always manifest in clear and distinct forms in the work itself. We investigate the interaction between art and politics in the context of transfeminism, while at the same time playing active roles in diverse spaces of militancy.

### **Transfeminism in Barcelona**

Since the first decade of the twenty-first century, queer theories and sociopolitical movements have materialized in Barcelona primarily through the postporn and transfeminist movements. Through the concept of “transfeminism,” which closely

approximates the notion of a “queer feminism,” some feminist organizations have claimed a word that feels more embodied and more meaningfully contextualized for them than *queer*.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the concept has allowed the articulation of an entire series of new minority discourses, and of new political-cultural practices that are emerging in feminist, *okupas*,<sup>3</sup> lesbian, anticapitalist, fag, and transgender communities. Such collectives are based on fragmented visions of the subject of feminist representation, and they focus on kinds of individuals that traditional feminism hasn’t fully addressed as political subjects, such as transsexual or transgender people, dykes, butches, sex workers, fags, and people with functional diversity, to name but a few.

Little by little, transfeminism has woven a network between groups both within and beyond Catalonia, working through such questions as pornography and sex work; trans depathologization; squatting; migrant resistance; economic precarity; the critique of state feminism; the institutionalization of the LGBT movement; open-source software, copyleft, creative-commons licensing, antisurveillance and data obfuscation strategies; self-training and peer-to-peer education that allows more access to technology for more kinds of people who have been excluded from it; and performance and the body. It is within these multiple contexts that the idea of a transfeminist alliance first began to take shape, a vision first expressed during the Granada Feminist Conference of 2009 and with the publication of the “Manifesto for the Transfeminist Insurrection” (Ideadestroyingmuros 2010). A few months later, this alliance definitively crystallized through the “Transfeminist Conference: Under Construction,” held in the squatted Can Vies Social Center, Barcelona, in April 2010.

### **Mixing Research, Friendship, Activism, and Life**

In this work, we address the production of art within activist movements, without seeking to legitimize it as activism *per se*.<sup>4</sup> The cross between artistic creation and artistic criticism, between political action and cultural action, seems to us an appropriate place to focus on dissident micropolitical practices. This allows us to reassess the cultural production present in any political activity, rather than ascribing legitimacy only to institutional art spaces—an analytical cut that hierarchizes the dichotomy of formal and informal production. We therefore propose a research agenda that doesn’t follow the standard protocols of heteronormative academia, not only in terms of its content but also regarding its styles of research: an investigation by proximity, taking as its subjects some friends and companions in activism; and a process of open, inconclusive research that provides its findings as they happen, and as they are produced. Rather than proposing and proving a formal hypothesis, this research seeks to actively contribute to cultural and creative production, to its documentation and interpretation.

First, we conducted three interviews in video format with key activists and colleagues in Barcelona who have transfeminist art practices. These conversations allowed us to discern two articulated axes of analysis:

1. Dissident bodies and representations of gender and sexuality: Along this axis we grouped cultural, visual, and performative works that operate principally through the body as a locus for political work. This includes work that explicitly focuses on sex and sexuality (postporn); representations of bodies considered by the dominant culture to be abject and/or deviant (disabled, trans, intersex, fat); and works that use the body as a basis for resistance to normalized hetero-binary strategies of gender, sex, and sexuality.
2. Technologies, free software, transfeminist machines, and networks: The practices included in this line of analysis are related to projects, spaces, and works of cultural production that address technology as a site for feminist and transfeminist activism. Such works emphasize autonomy, self-instruction, DIY (do-it-yourself), peer networking, and empowerment, among other themes.

In our desire to implement other ways of doing research, we constructed a series of graphs of ideas—conceptual maps—drawn from the conversations we conducted. This exercise allowed us to perform analysis and interpretation and, at the same time, to deploy a critical and creative methodology. Alongside these conceptual maps, we made some collages from textual works discussed in the literature review that provided the theoretical framework for our project. For us, the collage was something playful that helped us materialize theory, that let us grasp it in an embodied form, departitioning it from objects, and giving it another order of meaning. These artisanal techniques—something like making a fanzine—also linked us with methodologies of production specific to DIY culture and, ultimately, to spaces where knowledge is produced in a manner parallel to the circuits of academic knowledge production. All the materials generated through this process of creation-research (video interviews, graphical maps of concepts, and collages of theoretical texts) are freely available on a website with a creative-commons license.

### **Postpornographic Machines**

Artistic and cultural production has been fundamental to transfeminist politics (Sentamans 2013: 31–44). As Marisela Montenegro, Joan Pujol, and Nagore García point out, a number of artistic movements exist in metropolitan Barcelona that are strongly influenced by queer theories and are articulated with feminism and lesbian culture; they also question sexual categories, thereby opening “a space of

recognition within cultural innovation in the area of sex-gender” (2011: 157). These movements are part of a tradition that seeks to destabilize sex/gender in a politically productive way, by opening up possibilities for the empowerment of sexual practices, bodies, and identities marginalized and disparaged by the dominant culture.

In keeping with this politico-aesthetic sensibility, one of the key arenas for transfeminist artistic expressions in Barcelona has been postpornography. Postpornography, according to María Llopis, is “queer politics, postfeminist, punk, DIY, but also a complex view of sex which includes an analysis of the origin of our desire and a direct confrontation with the source of our sexual fantasies” (Llopis 2010: 22). Postporn practices develop forms of sex-gender-sexuality representation that problematize the male/female binary and compulsory heterosexuality, using the body as a support for visibilizing abject, antinormative, and pathologized sexualities. In this sense, postpornographic practices further elaborate creative and theoretical work on bodies and technologies, articulating them together in an extended manner.

Postpornographic sensibilities materially express themselves in various ways: video production, performance, photography, creative writing, and a lot of online activity through blogs, websites, and social networks. Some common features persist in many postpornographic works. As Elena Urko (2014) says, “Some years, there was a very specific style because we all worked together, we were friends. So many of the productions of those years have a style that could be characterized as the style of Barcelona: bizarre practices, including BDSM, with a lot of DIY and cyberpunk props.” We see in these works how Barcelona has become, almost by chance, a place of reference for that to which radical and politicized postpornographic production refers. This is because of a number of elements that have coincided in the same place: migration from multiple regions, a strong *okupas* (squatting) and hacker scene in the first decade of the new millennium, conditions of economic precariousness that make it difficult to survive, and accessible institutional art spaces capable of accommodating postpornographic work (Ziga 2009; Llopis 2010; Torres 2010).

Different kinds of postporn practices take place in dissimilar kinds of spaces throughout the city, ranging from DIY to the more institutional art spaces, from social centers occupied by museums to the public space of the street, from large parties to intimate domestic spaces. It is difficult to ascribe postporn practices to any particular kind of environment, precisely because they treat dynamics that are interwoven with life and sexuality and with the body itself, as bodies and sexualities go everywhere. What is clear is that, since the second half of the 2000s, postpornographic politics and aesthetics have constructed a space in which minority practices and discourses now run alongside dominant cultural geographies. Proposals that emerge from museums and other cultural institutions

coexist with an infinity of autonomously organized proposals that emerge from social movements, such as Muestra Marrana, which has taken place almost every year since 2008, the TransMarikaBollo Video Festival, and Queeruption 8, to name but a few of these self-organized events (for more references and history of postporn in Barcelona, see Egaña 2011).

Barcelona also provides a particular intellectual and theoretical context in which the politics of the body and technology are closely linked to postporn sensibilities. As Klau Kinki (2014) argues, “Postporn treats gender itself as a technology, the body as technology, and opens up a channel for relating to it directly.” This preoccupation with the body and the construction of sexuality results in a composite of artistic practices and machinic processes, grounded in new understandings of sovereignty as it pertains to the body and to machines. Such positions grant agency to the technological—a perspective that really has not been considered much within other political movements, in which technology functions only as an instrumentality. Within transfeminism, however, we can observe how the technological is, together with the body, a space from which to transform reality. Such a social transformation requires autonomy, construed as being able to count on one’s own abilities, in which we can “rely less on patriarchal and hegemonic structures,” as well as having access to “free servers” where “they do not control or censor us.” “To know the tools,” Kinki reminds us, and to be able to solve for ourselves the technical problems necessary for making technology more accessible to more people, “is also a political thing.”

In this sense, the hacker and open-source software movement has served not only as a means of technical support for transfeminist production but also as metaphors that exemplify the practices transfeminists attempt to carry out. Open-source software offers a set of liberties that private software restricts: freedom to use, copy, modify, and distribute at will. Transferred to the field of gender politics, these ideas provide a new framework for thinking, manipulating, and modifying bodies and desires outside the framework of compulsory heterosexuality.

### **Conclusion**

After completing the first stage of our research, it is quite clear to us that our local transfeminisms successfully enact new corporeal practices of knowing and knowledge production through creative expression. They make new uses of the body and technology, which are themselves arenas for political action. Transfeminist politics and artistic-cultural production feed off one another. This politico-aesthetic relation is key to generating new imagery that directly informs the ways in which people with nonnormative genders and sexualities build their identities and subjectivities, perhaps in a more liberatory and autonomous manner, while also helping to create new social and cultural space for them to exist within.

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**Miriam Solá** studied philosophy in Murcia and gender studies in Barcelona. A researcher and activist, Miriam recently edited the anthology *Transfeminisms: Epistemes, Frictions, and Flows* with Elena Urko.

### Notes

1. *Máquinas de guerra* is the name of the project whose first stages were carried out between September 2014 and February 2015 by Miriam Solá and Lucía Egaña (see Egaña and Solá 2014).
2. The word *queer* in Spanish doesn't have any meaning. The question about its translation is an open debate not without conflict because, among other things, of the colonial relationship between English and Spanish. The word *queer* is a recent anglicized word, the use of which is restricted to academia, and does not refer to stigma, insult, or a history of violence, let alone the possibility of reappropriation or redefinition of injury. Therefore, its use in Spanish is stripped of all subversive potential.
3. Various, the squat movement and/or, post-2011, the Occupy movement.—Translator
4. The translator and managing editor were not entirely clear about the intent of this sentence when translating: "En este trabajo nos propusimos abordar la producción cultural como una parte del activismo, y no buscar desde/en las producciones legitimadas como arte los componentes activistas."—Trans.

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