

"To Transform Shit into Power"

Pêdra Costa

Pêdra Costa is a Brazilian-German performance artist and visual and urban anthropologist based between Berlin and Vienna who collaborates with queer artists internationally.

This conversation with Lena Fritsch and Mathilde ter Heijne was recorded in Berlin on April 26, 2019, as part of Mathilde ter Heijne's exhibition *Women to Go: Das Persönliche und Unpersönliche in Präsentation und Repräsentation* at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig.

What was the moment you realized you are different than others, that you have to take your own specific path and create your own life?

I have my first memory of life from when I was two years old. I remember I received the first queerphobia from my father. And then every day, from five years on, in the school, on the street, I suffered from the fact that I wasn't a normal girl. My body was not read as normative male or female, but I was something else, abject, something that was not able to be alive. When I was around 14 or 15 years old, people in the street stopped me to call out to me, asking why I looked different. When they realized that I was not a girl and at the same time not a boy, they got aggressive. For someone like me, there was everyday life violence. Different kinds of violence of course. People shout at you in the streets or try to beat, or kill you, or arrest you to be put into jail. My situation with my nuclear and larger family got better when I went into university and got a bachelor's in Social Science. I was one of the first to study in my family, so that was important for the status quo of the family.

I recognized myself as a queer person, not only trans or homosexual, in 2005. Queer means for me something like a non-binary, anarchist person. My gender identity or the way that I have sex or the way I present myself to society is in an anarchist way, it is a political way to break the rules of the binary system or the gender norms in society. What resilience means for me is, in a simple way, that you transform shit into power. This is a kind of quality I admire in people because it is so important because if you only have the experience of violence and you don't transform it into something else, you'll be stuck and the trauma will break your path. For me, I understand this as the process of my life. For instance, there is no space for people like me in the world so I have to deal with it, and transform that trauma, and create that space for myself.

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Mathilde: How did you create that space? How did you get rid of your traumas and how did you transform?

Pêdra: I came to Berlin in 2010, because, first, the queer movement, queer culture, and groups were so amazingly alive and different here, with people from everywhere, and in Brazil, I was still

working to build up the queer movement. The second reason was that I wanted to understand what it means to be an immigrant. I came as a tourist, speaking only Portuguese, with no insurance. And stayed until now....

Europeans have been socialized within this imperial system, with imperial bodies, behaviors, and minds, and in Brazil and Latin America, we have been shaped by oppression and sexual- and psychological violence. Normally we don't have the means to step out of that.

Mathilde: Are you involved in activist groups? Do you consider the work you do as an artist or scholar as activism?

Pêdra: First of all, I don't see myself as an activist. I think there are different kinds of activism. In Europe to be recognized as an activist is different than in Brazil. In Brazil, you don't decide to be an activist, we just have to do things to survive and fight against systems of oppression. In Europe, you have to share some kinds of ways of being an activist. So, in Europe I discovered I am not an activist, but I am involved and interested in the culture and political history of Latin America.

Queer means for me something like a non-binary, anarchist person.

Do you identify with the heritage of people who were brought to North and South America as enslaved people?

I place myself as a person of color, not as a black person. Although in Brazil I am a white person for sure, in Europe I became a person of color, because I started to face racial profiling from police in the streets and on the trains, and so on. I thought it was because I was trans but years later I understood that was because they thought I was an Arab person.

When I was studying with Grada Kilomba at the Humboldt University in 2013, she was the first person who placed me as a person of color, and of course, it opened a big box with a lot of information about my family and about my heritage and my knowledge.

I received the spiritual heritage of my mother and I have the ability to transform and be empowered. I am not sure about the term empower, I feel empowered through or by or from my religion and not only by queer theory or queer texts. My religion is Umbanda, which means 'we are one.' It's a Brazilian religion like Candomblé, mixed with the Catholic religion, other first nations' beliefs, and spiritualism. For me, there wasn't a change from colonialism and capitalism. It is still the same thing. Colonialism is still running and running and killing and stealing our energies, our lives, our knowledge. And colonialism, or the colonial project, destroyed everything inside Europe and outside of Europe.

Is it possible to practice Umbanda religion in Berlin?

At this moment, as I have the privilege to be in Europe, I went to the Weltmuseum in Vienna and

there is a room with Brazilian stuff. And there is an altar from my religion Umbanda. I saw it and it's so funny because it is like souvenirs for tourists. My religion is not only about objects, my religion is about invisibility, it's about being invisible, not being recognized. It was a way that we survived under the colonial period of Brazil or how we survived the inquisition from the Catholic church for example. We are invisible. It was a kind of strategy in the countries from the colonial project. We mixed and survived by not expressing ourselves, but hiding our knowledge and passing it through generations in a kind of oral history. Not only in words, because our knowledge comes from the drums, and the songs, and the dance, and nature, through many ways to have knowledge. But the colonial project understands or sees or recognizes only one kind of knowledge - knowledge from books or the knowledge from the university or academic discourse, or so on. So, it was easy for us to pass our knowledge through generations because it was not recognized as knowledge.

It's like, for example, Capoeira. Many people say that it is a dance, others say it is a fight. It was a dance for the white people, the colonizers, and a fight to attack and to escape the slavery system, and the condition of being enslaved.

Lena Fritsch: What was the moment you realized you are different than others, that you have to take your own specific path and create your own life?

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