

## **The difficult discourse on the very intimate: LGBTIQ in *Mapping the Unseen*<sup>1</sup>**

Martina Ukowitz, University of Klagenfurt

Like all three topics, LGBTIQ was selected by the cooperating artists. The issue of sex, gender and sexual orientation in many western European societies is not really marginalized. In contrary, in the last years in the public discourse in print media and TV several persons from the cultural scene and sports came out and by taking this step they have given courage to many others to not just accepting themselves as they are but also to openly live their life. There are festivals which not only attract persons from the LGBTIQ-scene but people from many different societal fields. And a trend to cast transgender or homosexual people for TV-shows like dance and music competitions or model competitions can be observed. It remains unclear, of course, if the attention in public media derives from the intention to support LGBTIQ people or solely from the necessity to increase quotas and audience figures. Despite plurality and relatively great openness in western societies, the Croatian cooperation partners selected the topic because they observe a fall-back into old patterns and pressing discrimination of LGBTIQ-people not least through political decisions and public media discourses in Croatia. In this sense it is more the fall-back which occurs in an unseen way and which according to the artists requests more attention and should be impeded. All in all, the role of public media appears as an important one, the topic has gained more attention but public medias' role is an ambivalent one. Support *and* discrimination are setting the scene. Despite the improvements for instance regarding the legal status of homosexual couples, at least in some European countries, LGBTIQ people still feel discriminated and their needs being neglected, not only in Croatia. Given the assaults and hostility that people still have to face from time to time it becomes obvious that in parts of the society tolerance is missing and more generally society still hasn't found a way to deal with life scripts differing from "the normal", from the average.

### **Communicating in bubble**

The design of the project provides the opportunity for an exchange among like-minded people. People with similar personal background of experiences, people who are part of the LGBTIQ-community, singular persons with private interests or representatives from organizations dealing with aspects of the topic in their specific organizational function meet each other. The metaphor of the bubble is taken up several times, referring to the observation that in public discourse LGBTIQ issues are not seen, are marginalized and neglected. The view on the community itself, which may act likewise in a bubble, by not taking seriously or even ignoring other perspectives, does not arise explicitly. During the project this "outside" becomes perceptible and visible only at certain points. One example: During the event in Zagreb/Croatia, when the rainbow flag was hung at the location, the next day a Croatian national flag was hung opposite the location. The neighborhood seemed to "answer" to a perceived provocation with a recourse to nationalisms.

### **Exchange in safe spaces and intervention into society**

During the event itself there might have been people who see things differently, but they were cautious. From the interviews, the participant observation and the discussions in the research team emerges that there are many reasons for raising the topic LGBTIQ in that specific

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is basing on primary data through qualitative interviews, participant observation and autoethnographic fieldnotes. Hypothesis building was supported by interdisciplinary reflection of the process among the research team.

design. First of all it's about creating a safe space for exchange. Empowerment of individuals, identity formation as a group, community building, but also simply providing the possibility to get to know nice people and find connections in a new environment. The artistic research design supports these intentions in opening up the communicative space in which art appears as a medium of mediation. Beside the intention to address the community, the contributions of the cooperation partners and the discussions at the events among the audience make it apparent, that there is the intention to intervene into society, too. Awareness building for the needs of LGBTIQ persons, criticism of society, fight for the groups' rights, a bit of proselytizing people who think differently seems to be on the agenda.

### **The personal and the political**

The discourses on LGBTIQ issues are particularly challenging, in the course of the project as well as in society in general. Those challenges concern persons from the community as well as the others. The specific shape of the issue, the characteristic of the aspects that go along with it, makes it an example that can be used to learn a lot about how to deal with sensitive questions. One central issue is the tension between the sphere of the private, the very personal and the public. In the discourses the personal becomes political. Thus, activism means to expose the personal, the personal is the instrument to reach political goals. The exposure bears the risk of being hurt. In the face of gender questions and sexual orientation the risk becomes a very severe one because intimate issues are at stake and eventual harm affects people very personally. People have different approaches to deal with questions of sexuality. The attitudes are influenced by the individual character and by socialization within the family, societal milieus, particularly through religion (like Christian-Catholic norms, where sexuality is largely taboo), and by more general implicit societal norms of "adequate" behavior. The spectrum from cramped and debilitating taboo and complete prudency to unrestricted acting out of sexuality in words and action is differentiated and rich in nuances. The tension between talking about this issues openly and intimacy can be perceived during the events on LGBTIQ, too. It seems to be always a bit of a ridge walk – even within a community. In political engagement in contact with people who think differently that is the case in an even more severe manner. The need for intimacy and the emotionality and vulnerability going along with such personal issues are the background against which people become politically active, fighting for the group's rights and trying to promote societal change.

### **Radical demands for change and resistance**

The short outline gives an idea that the discourse might be challenging also for people whose lives correspond to what is perceived as the "normal" regarding sex, gender and sexual orientation. In the face of a sensitive subject and the fact that everyone is concerned very personally, as sexuality is an anthropological constant in human being, central questions of personal identity, life scripts and concepts of social life are at stake. Two issues that arose in the talks can illustrate the challenges of introducing radical concepts in sensitive areas: The traditional heteronormative concept of family and the dissolution of gender binary. Both of them were criticized during the events. A family consisting of a female mother, a male father, a daughter and a son is considered as outdated and as an epitome of patriarchal, catholic image of society. Raising children as a homosexual couple is described as the better and for children more favorable way. The question of sexual identity as a women or a man, even the pure question of the determination of a sexual identity is rejected. It is easy to understand that in this respect attitudes in society differ a lot and that discourses can become very emotional. It is not only a question how society as a whole develops, by the way a perspective which mostly stands a bit in a distance to individual daily lives. It is a question that concerns the

very personal life and it touches the zone of the intimate. In such sensitive constellations fight against discrimination goes along with devaluation of other positions. Radical demands for change can be perceived as overreaching or even as an assault. Vulnerability might appear as arrogance.

### **Ideology meets ideology**

On a more conceptual level it can be stated that Queer ideology on the one hand, and conservative, anti-progressive ideologies, represented by and attributed mainly to the Catholic Church and right-wing conservative politics on the other, face each other as very different value patterns and life schemes, and they seem to remain without mediation. The first appears as driving force for radical change, the other represents persistence. Necessarily the positions are formulated somewhat pointed and radical. In a certain way observing public discourses, one gets the impression the two forces enter into a dynamic of mutual reinforcement.

### **The complex and the contradictory as the unseen**

Through discourses and the virtual mapping *Mapping the unseen* seeks to trace the marginalized, potential taboos, or – with a view on the dynamics laying beyond – it traces the complex, contradictory and not simply manageable. LGBTIQ-related questions and questions of societal development induced by LGBTIQ positions show that the question of decolonizing societal discourses and the deconstruction of values and norms leads to the question of how to develop desirable futures. Since there are differing value patterns and because of the fact that gender and sexuality related questions are very sensible, challenging discourses are to be expected also in future and multi scale efforts are necessary to overcome fixed positions.

### **Mediating between perspectives**

The project makes aspects of the topic seen and it brings it into attention, raises awareness for it. Through artistic research, the project aims at opening up reflection and dialogue, which is perceived as a prerequisite for change. The reflection of the transdisciplinary process involving artists, scientists, participants from civil society and advocacy organizations into the cycle of intervention-dialog and the reflection of the interdisciplinary dialog within the inner circle of the research team reveal the high complexity of these issues. The main contradiction which appears in the discourse is that between preserving and change, and this includes generation gaps and gaps between urban and rural life. The contradiction between preserving and change is embedded into the field of tension between individual interests, interests of lobbying organizations, and interests of the society (in the sense of a general public interest or welfare), this addresses societal norms and the dealing with differences in a society. The issue of emphasizing differences and defining subgroups leads into ambivalences. Defining a group of interest like LGBTIQ community (with all its inherent heterogeneity) helps to develop and support an identity, helps to support each other, to create safe spaces from which common interests can be brought forward. At the same time, it means establishing a difference, and that leads to a discourse between an “inside” and “outside”, which is rejected, too. The discourse gets into a paradox, fixing ascriptions, that one actually wants to overcome. The demand for the dissolution of differences (arguments like “we are all human beings not women and men”, “LGBTIQ is not a box”) meets the contrary position of community building along value patterns and interests (arguments like “we as a group fight for our rights”, “our subculture should remain subculture”).

### **Dialogue and the readiness to reflect own positions**

With a view on procedural aspects of mediating between conflicting perspectives, a first step lies in identifying critical points and major contradictions laying beyond an issue. The short outline gives a first insight into the general situation and it marks the starting point for a deeper discourse on sex, gender and sexual orientation. Having in mind the contradictory constellations, which can't be resolved by a logic of right or wrong, and which are not basing on individual failure, but on structural problems and inherent contradictions, the dialog can proceed. Important prerequisite for an open dialog first of all is the willingness to have such a dialog. Apart from that the readiness to accept that there are other positions and to recognize them is important, and, going along with that, the readiness to relativize the own position. The latter does not mean to leave a position, but to allow the position to be questioned critically and to be reflected from different perspectives in the sense of systems transcending reflection. A definition of "red lines" that must not be crossed, such as human dignity, personal integrity that might be risked to be violated in a discourse is important, too.

### **Participatory development of socially robust perspectives**

A solely deconstructing attitude or decolonizing impetus without reflective and participatory search for socially robust solutions may lead to change, but it goes along with the risk of dividing social systems (be it a family, an organization or the society as a whole). In a pluralistic world the contrary, namely continuing effort to mediate between different perspectives, is necessary. The procedural aspects, the structures and processes that are needed to support decolonizing which includes the reconstructing aspects are central.