

## **“El Beso en el Bosque”: prácticas artísticas etnográficas queer e identidad relacional”**

"El Beso en el Bosque" (Toxic Lesbian 2019-2023) da título a este proyecto de creación artística en el marco de las Prácticas Sociales en el Arte. Se aborda como caso de estudio para ilustrar un nuevo paradigma de producción, una alternativa en los modos de relación con los públicos en el arte que difieren del sistema de mercado convencional.

Esta investigación vincula el caso de comunidades disidentes sexo-género-antirracistas de la ciudad de Madrid, colaboradoras del proyecto, con las claves de por qué artistas críticos con lo establecido abandonan los esencialismos del arte elevado y el mercado y se adentran en sus procesos en la generación de comunidad y su relato.

A la luz del análisis etnográfico de Ardenne, Foster o Rockwell se conectarán estas metodologías con otras vías para la experiencia estética. Hernando, por otra parte, aporta la referencia teórica acerca de la construcción de identidad relacional que subyace en este tipo de prácticas.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE:**

Disidencias, comunidades, feminismos, Prácticas Sociales en el Arte, Queer

## **“The Kiss in the Forest: artistic queer ethnographic practices and relational identity”**

“The Kiss in the Forest” (Toxic Lesbian 2019-2023) is the title of this artistic creation that is set in the framework of Social Practices in Art. A study is done of a case that illustrates a new production paradigm, which is alternative for other ways of relating with the audiences in art that differ from the conventional market system.

This investigation links the case of dissident anti-racist-gender-sex communities in the city of Madrid which collaborate in the project with the keys of why artists that are critical with pre-established things, abandon essentialisms in high art and the market and penetrate in their processes in the generation of that which is communal and its story.

As a result of the ethnographic analysis by Ardenne, Foster or Rockwell, these methodologies will be connected to other ways for the aesthetic experience. Hernando on the other hand, will provide the theoretical references to do with relational identity construction that underlines these types of practices.

### **KEY WORDS**

Dissidences, communities, feminisms, Social Practices in Art, Queer

## 1.Introduction

As Ardenne (2002) explains: “Many artists, turning their backs on art for art's sake or on the principle of autonomy, claim the enhancement of raw reality. For them, art must be connected to everyday things, produced in the moment, in close relation to the ‘context’” (p. 10). This is the case of “The Kiss in the Forest” (fig. 1) that we present here: a project of Social Practices in Art by Toxic Lesbian, which began in 2019, and in collaboration with various queer communities in the city of Madrid. Formally, it takes the form of photos, several video creations and documentation videos distributed among the 6 cases covered. The entire production is placed on the internet through live streamings or through actions on social networks that make it visible throughout its creation. The creation culminates in 2023, when it engages the last collective participating in the process, which was opened years earlier.

We will show how, precisely because it is an artistic production from and through dissidences, the rupture with the traditional methodologies of creation, historically carried out several decades ago, moves through the territory exhibited here. This is a work by the author of this article, with the dual role of researcher and visual artist, and using the collective designation “Toxic Lesbian” since 2005 for the purpose of anonymizing authorship from a feminist perspective (García-Oliveros, 2016).

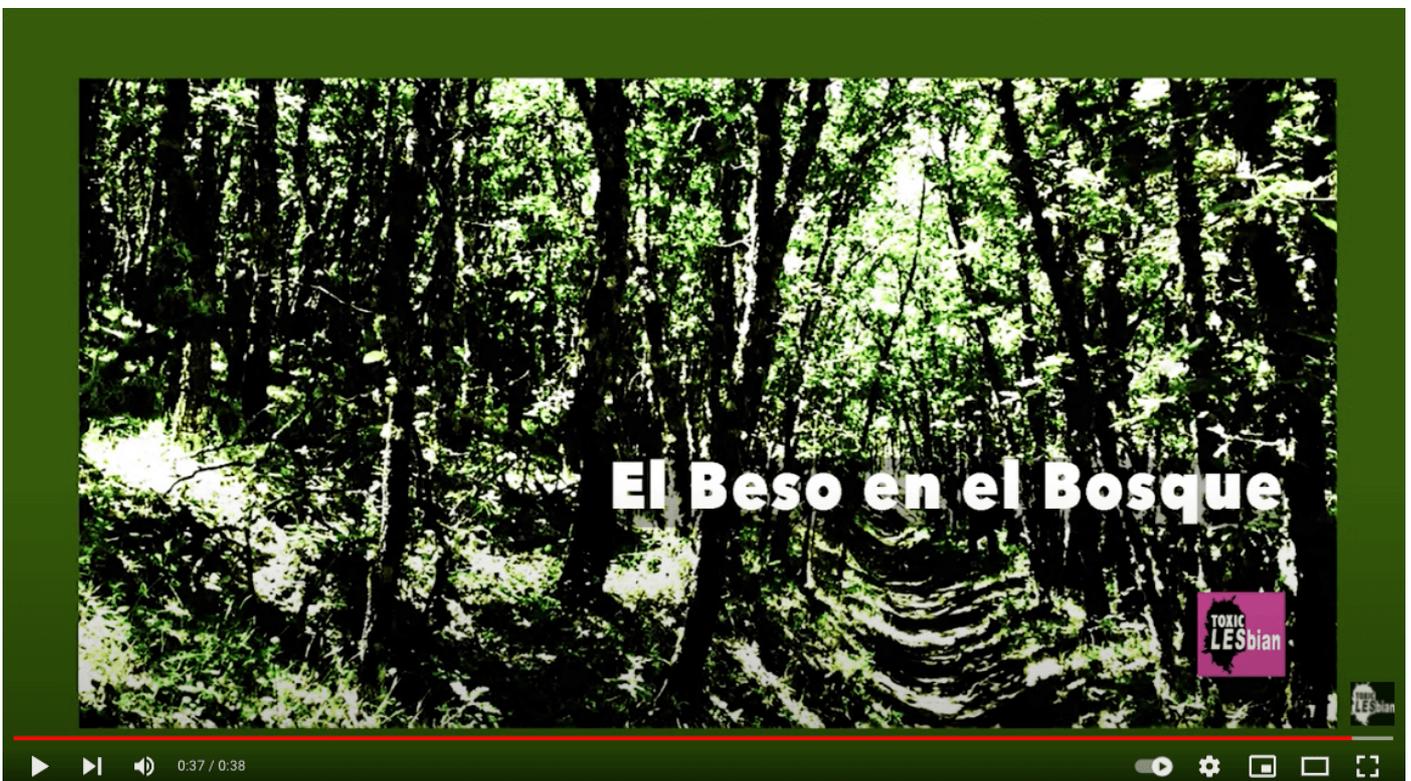


Figure 1, presentation of the video creation “The Kiss in the Forest” with which the process of community creation begins. Toxic Lesbian, 2019 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhWBL1Ac3U4&ab\\_channel=TOXICLESBIAN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhWBL1Ac3U4&ab_channel=TOXICLESBIAN)

We will observe how, currently, these practices are developing to connect audiences with artists and institutions. This creates an alternative framework for producing and engaging with artwork, as well as a different model for financing and supporting communities that are involved in the aesthetic experience. Toxic Lesbian designs the creative process not from the conventional artist-genius perspective, but from a community perspective. Thus, “The Kiss in the Forest” (2019-2023), as an action research project, is conceptualized based on the artist's practices as an ethnographer (Foster, 1996). The artist acts as an observer of a reality that is not foreign to her and with which she is deeply engaged in her communication. These practices are used as necessary to illuminate the aforementioned formal artistic production that illustrates this article. Similarly, they focus on a very localized and particular community, allowing for engagement to create on this basis of reality. In this example, artistic creation will allow us to investigate and understand the facts that we intend to observe.

Thus, the study from an ethnographic theory perspective - represented by texts by Paul Ardenne, Hal Foster and Elise Rockwell - will reveal the keys to why dissident artists, such as Toxic Lesbian, delve into their production through these methodologies, abandoning the essentialisms of high art, the market and the creation of the object as an end in itself, seeking, on the contrary, the generation of community and its narrative as the purpose of creation.

More specifically, “The Kiss in the Forest” is articulated as a portrait, offered through photographs and video-creations, of those who belong to the social groups addressed: queer activists (fig. 2), representing the framework of their dissidence and the way they relate to each other in a network. As an artist-ethnographer and in order to produce the images that are the subject of her work, Toxic Lesbian delves into the everyday life of these communities: their interventions in the street, their places of dissidence, their social circles and even the very metaphors they create as a result of the clash with the realities that do not understand them.



Figure 2, portrait of one of the participants in “The Kiss in the Forest”. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

On the other hand, the contents of “The Kiss in the Forest” relate to the way in which these communities create their relational identity, understood as outlined by Almudena Hernando (2015, 2018, 2023). We will connect what Hernando (2018: 23) articulates about relational identity as belonging, belonging to a reference group, the community created by bonds and affection, with the approach of the project itself, whose title refers to the idea of ambush, of hiding in the thicket to attack by surprise. The metaphor of 'being forest' (2020), created by the French environmental activist Jean-Baptiste Vidalou in the 17th century, explains the idea of resistance in territories in conflict. We will reconcile Hernando's postulates with the description of the communities that participate in “The Kiss in the Forest”, structured by mutual help and care between people of non-normative sexualities (fig. 3) and feminist militancy, other corporealities, anti-racist and queer, connected by activism that unite them and lead them to encounter one another.

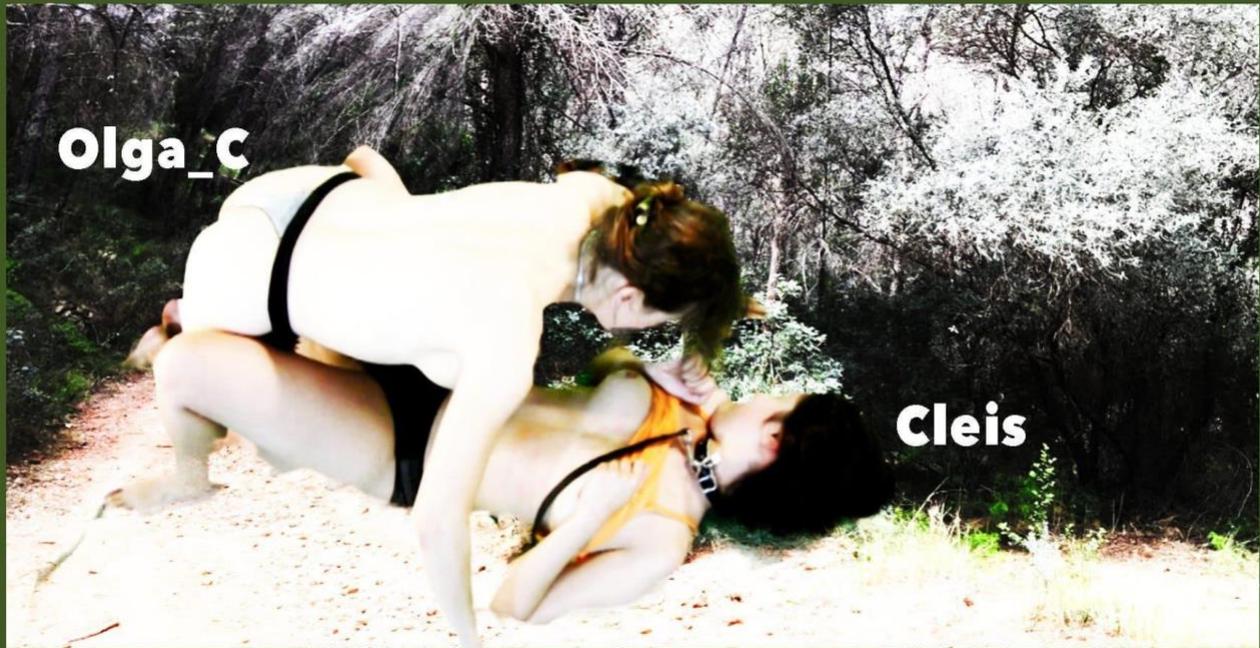


Figure 3, queer BDSM communities with whom Toxic Lesbian has also collaborated for this process, 2019

The associations made here are entirely new due to the very recent publications, especially by Hernando (2023) and the creation process itself - in progress until this year -, providing a greater relevance due to the contextualization from a queer perspective and more specifically in the dissidence of the women's movement (fig. 4), which has been less researched. In this regard, the contributions have a special documentary and analytical value for broadening queer studies within the framework of art, and within this, particularly insofar as they deal with social practices that are less systematized in academic studies because they are positioned in different paradigms than those of the conventional art-system.



Figure 4, Transfeminism dyke activism as part of the "The Kiss in the Forest" communities. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

## 2. Materials for the analysis of the artwork from ethnography, the concept of relational identity and its connection to queer dissidence

The creative project offers with its title, “The Kiss in the Forest”, the metaphor of how, historically, dissident communities escaped to forested areas to live in opposition, to flee from the processes of imposed social governance which, in their view, broke their own standards. As opposed to hiding, this means being active. To ambush would be to live in the disputed territory, to build a community there in order to resist the vandalism of the institution.

“The Kiss in the Forest” project is initiated with a video-creation (fig.1) generated between 2019-2021 with the participation of the individuals or collectives described above. Between these two years, the protagonists created performative interventions in the urban space that symbolize their personal resistance, the way in which they enact their dissidence. Toxic Lesbian accompanies them and later constructs with them, on the photography set, the metaphor that connects them all, mounting in the same pieces both the original live intervention and the one recreated with the artist.



Figure 5, the members of Muy Machx. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

The group of performers involved in this Toxic Lesbian project are prominent anti-racism activists (figs. 2 and 5), dyke urban artists (fig. 4), queer transfeminist collectives (fig. 6) and anti-fatphobia activists (fig. 7). They converge in the dissident landscape of sex-gender-corporalities-anti-racist movements inhabiting self-managed spaces and the libertarian environment.



Figure 6, the Postpotorras during their performance. Toxic Lesbian, 2021

This project crystallizes the extent to which, as an artist, Toxic Lesbian coexists with these communities. Foster (1996) lists the requirements of the artist as an ethnographer and describes how the artist choose the 'site' where to develop it and it is part of their culture to carry it out. Focusing the creation on reality itself, as Ardenne (2009) points out, is a characteristic of this contextual art that prefers an “anti-idealist art, at the very heart of the concrete” (p. 14).



Figure 7, the two authors of “Nadie hablará de nosotras” (No one will talk about us), an anti-fatphobia podcast. Toxic Lesbian, 2022-23

Ardenne and Foster provide a connection to this first axis that explains a new methodological paradigm around creation, while Hernando (2015, 2018, 2023), on the other hand, enables an in-depth analysis of the creation of community, its motivations and peculiarities from the dissident that these models harbor in the margins, as the second axis of the study. This author notes (2023), in relation to the LGTBIQ+ community, how essential it is to make visible their processes of construction of relational identity to avoid feeding the patriarchal discourse that they would have to oppose as a result of the logic of their struggles.

In this sense, the communities featured in the project are an example of the demand put forward by the author (2023): the coexistence of the subjective, embodied in the emotions and care with through which they relate to each other, with the socio-political dynamics which are the object of their activism.

### 3. Methodology

In order to expose the complexity suggested in “The Kiss in the Forest” (fig. 8), a synthesis of the everyday life of this social reality is necessary, which is usually hidden, making it difficult to understand these social dissidences. This echoes Rockwell's (2009) need to document the undocumented. The milestones of this community artistic creation are portraits of this time and space: the artist-community proximity allows synchronization with the occasions when these activists decide to intervene in the public space and keep a visual record, as well as opening up the necessary dialogue to create, with all of this and as creative material, a final work that is the result of the community process.



Figure 8, one of the presentation covers of the audiovisual pieces of “The Kiss in the Forest”. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

The action research at the core of this collective creation entails open processes that symbolize the personal resilience, the way in which they activate their places of social and political resistance.

As Ardenne (2009) argues, for these artists, contributing to the improvement of social life by exposing conventions, or aspects that have been suppressed, would be a part of a full civic experience and a way of expanding the boundaries of civil society, which the establishment always insists on restricting. It is this precise fact that “The Kiss in the Forest” seeks to reflect: the institutional vandalism that seeks to suppress forms of life that do not conform.

In the same way, and as the author further argues, there are artistic means being used insofar as they are conceived as “capable of arousing a sharper, more singular attention than that permitted by social language” (Ardenne, 2009: 26). This transformative sensibility which is relegated to the margins that the aesthetic experience would be capable of illuminating, is connected to a role of art in unconventional terms, beyond what particular interests would have made of it. In this process, these practices brought creation closer to places that are completely alien to those where the usual audiences act as passive spectators. Foster (1996) points out that the artist's intervention in these contexts elicits an activist reflection and the creation of innovative projects.

This desire for the social for the contextual artist is their primary *raison d'être* (Ardenne, 2009). For this reason, he or she intensifies his or her presence in the collective reality choosing how he or she carries out his or her creative process. As the author underlines, "always from a perspective of involvement" (p.30) by which he or she becomes part of the observed reality. Foster (1996) also points out the same fact, signaling the true coexistence with the community that the artist-ethnographer experiences.

And it is this ethnographic turn that is key to understanding the artistic proposal of Toxic Lesbian, since, as Foster (1996) argues, artists who transform themselves under these coordinates will receive an impulse when the art institution is externalized beyond the walls of the museum or the gallery, encouraged by the pressure exerted by dissident social movements, among which he cites racialized, homosexual or feminist movements, who will support the repeal of the restrictive definitions of art and artist (Foster, 1996: 189). Precisely, Toxic Lesbian's production is possible because it is activated in connection with other subjectivities in places beyond the conventional places of so-called high art. Ardenne (2009) discusses how the museum or the gallery "has become for many creators too narrow, too circumscribed" (p.15) and becomes an obstacle that impels some artists to break down these barriers.



Figure 9, the protagonists of the anti-fatphobia podcast “Nadie hablará de nosotras” (No one will talk about us) portrayed surrounded by seals. Toxic Lesbian, 2022-2023

On the other hand, and referring to the contents of “The Kiss in the Forest” that delve into the relational identity of each group participating, it should be noted that for Almudena Hernando (2018: 28) human beings require identity for their balanced development. Relational identity is formulated, forming the structure of the person, through the sum of his or her bodily characteristics (fig. 9), the contribution of the material culture in which he or she is inserted in terms of the use of objects (fig. 10), the actions shared within that community

(fig. 11), and also the ascription to one or more spaces (fig. 12) as well as the connections established within the constituted community (fig. 13). In the pieces created, we see all these aspects reflected individually in order to create the portraits of the performers, whose identity is configured in the images through the aforementioned factors.

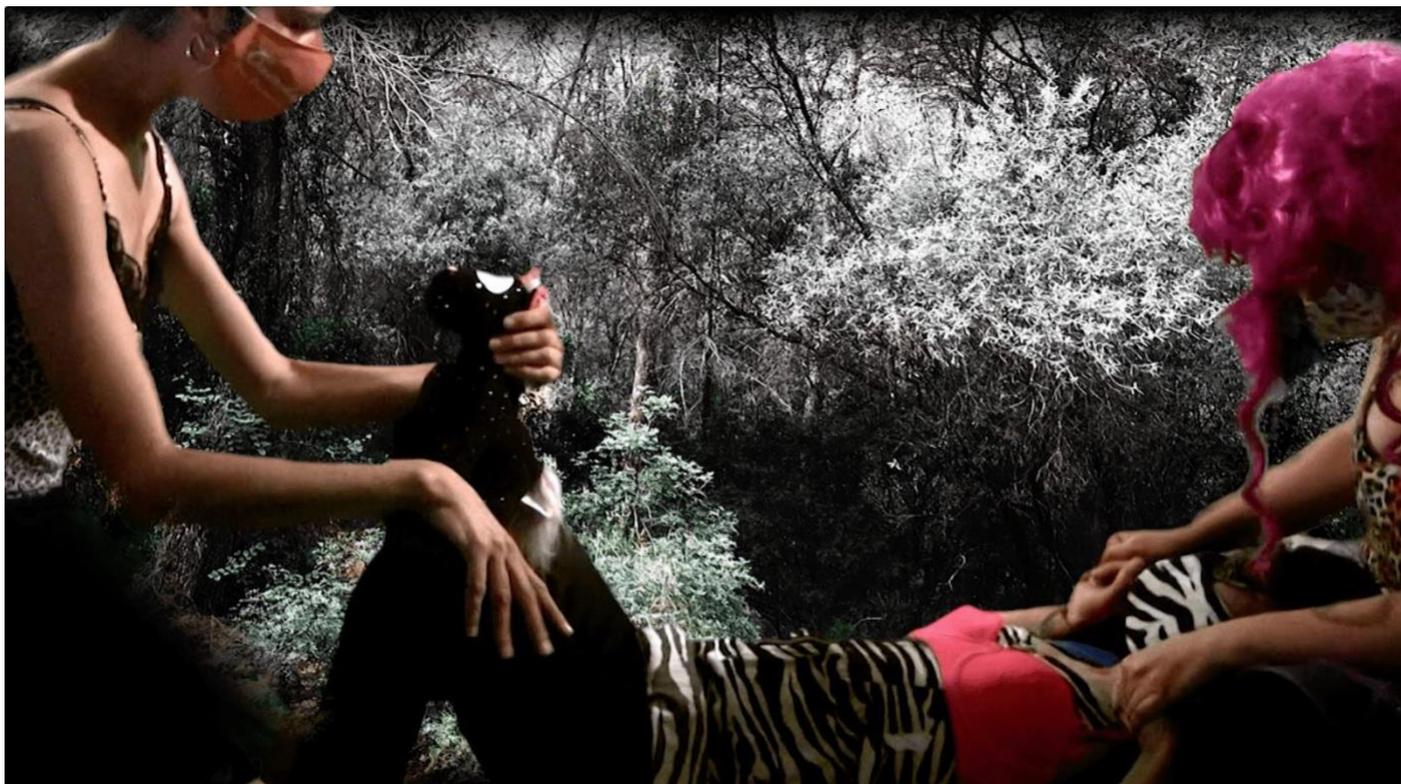


Figure 10, A scene from the Postpotorras' performance on set in which they give birth to a unicorn as a queer symbol. Toxic Lesbian, 2021

All of these are sources (Hernando, 2023) from which the members of these groups take inspiration to constitute their own relational identity. And it is the importance attributed to the body in the development of this identity that speaks of 'acted identity' as opposed to the 'thought identity' of individuality. This framework of action, of performance, of doing what one is, is very specific to the queer, where the performative and the corporeal occupy the foreground (Butler, 1990).

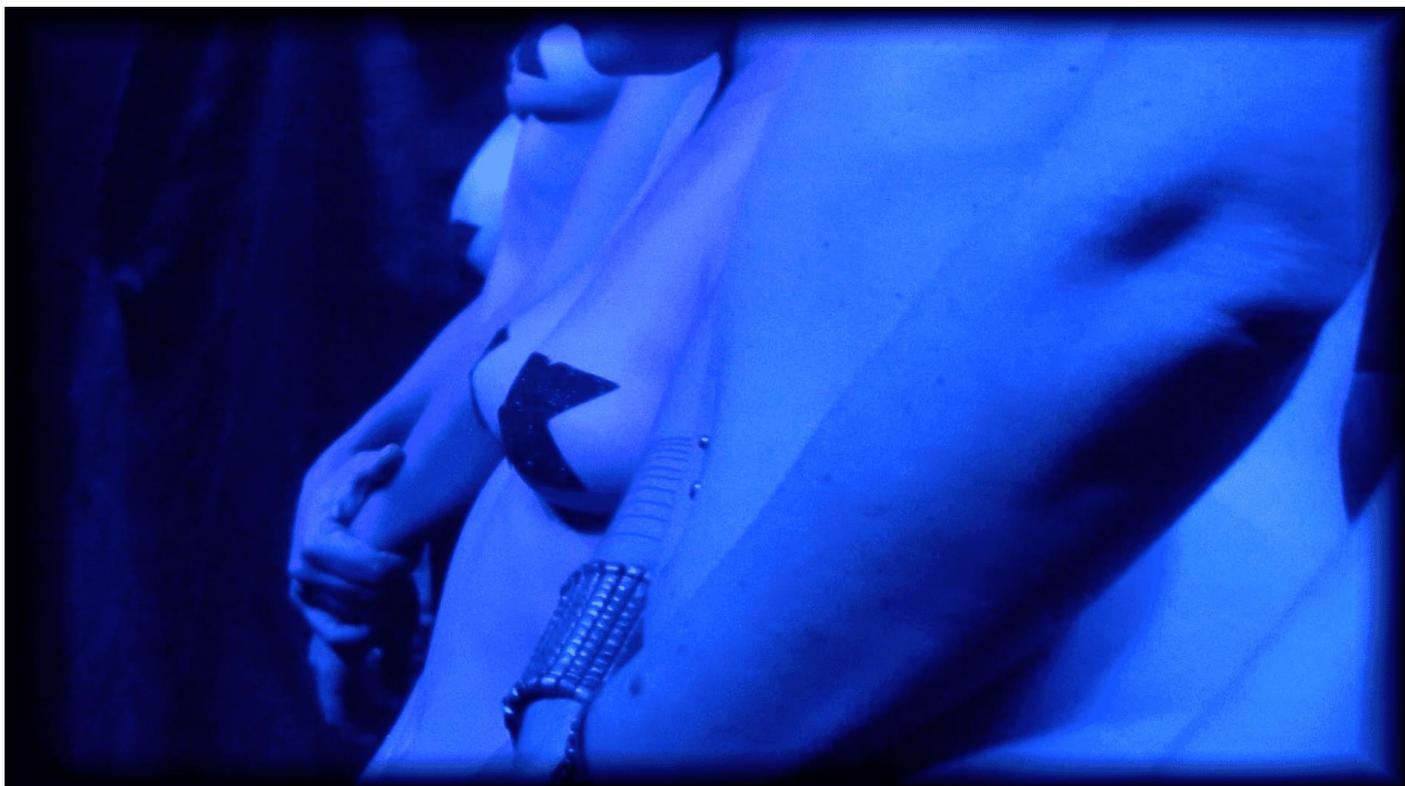


Figure 11, a BDSM performance by women in Madrid. Toxic Lesbian, 2018

“Without relational identity, people would not have been able to sustain themselves emotionally, nor could the historical process have taken place”, Hernando (2023: 26) states. What is needed for anyone else is of vital importance for these activist communities, in ways unknown to most people. Hernando (2015) goes on to explain the characteristics that relational identity has for those who do not exercise power, as is the case here, highlighting the interdependence, empathy and care among its participants.



Figure 12, Photo session with Bolloguerrilla St. in the squatted social center EKO in Carabanchel, Madrid. Toxic Lesbian, 2022

“The Kiss in the Forest” has been produced as process art from 2019, date on which it is presented publicly with a video-creation, until 2023, when it concludes with photographs and videos of ethnographic documentation of the last group approached. The project ends when the artist herself decides that the documented cases show with sufficient forcefulness the metaphorical and visual basis of the proposal as a whole, the common thread that unites them all. During the creative process the partial pieces can be contemplated, but it is not until its conclusion that the vision of the whole that was originally intended to be shown can be attained. It is a clear example of 'work-in-progress', an unfinished work during the course of the research. The artist seeks, throughout the period of production, to culminate the artistic communication of the conceptual background of the work, and therefore chooses, with this in mind, its successive protagonists. For this reason, these projects can last several years, as they do not depend on the artist's will, but on the behavior of the community with which they collaborate and the occasions that arise in this cohabitation of dissent.

The use of the internet and social networks is an intrinsic part of their dissemination and a politically explicit choice. By doing so, the visibility of the collectives mentioned and their modes of relationship and environments of struggle is enhanced. This choice is connected with the xenofeminist manifesto of Laboria Cuboniks (2018) in the sense of the use of technologies and the web as strategic places to be used by feminist activists.



Figure 13, Gabriela Wiener and Muy Machx at the 8M anti-racist action coordinated by Bloque Bollero, Madrid. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

#### 4. Results of “The Kiss in the Forest” as Social Practices in Art

The video-creation pieces, photography sessions and performances, both urban and on set, integrate the audiovisual production of this project which has been developed on a relational level over several years.

The first work as such in “The Kiss in the Forest” is a video-creation (figs.1 and 13) that captures the moment in which anti-racist queer militancy comes together in 2019 for the interventions in the streets of Madrid on the occasion of the 8th of March. Among them, the participation of the racialized queer activist Gabriela Wiener with the collective Muy Machx, with masks designed by themselves using the aesthetics of the fighters in Mexico (fig. 14). Both performers subsequently come to the artist's set to rework the symbols used in their urban interventions, using the distinctive aesthetics from the territories of Abya Yala. Muy Machx, specifically, convey their non-binary dissidence in their performance and costumes.



Figure 14, Performance by Muy Machx with their own costume design and making. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

That same year, Olga\_C and Cleis, who are involved in BDSM sexual dissidence and present themselves with objects and modes specific to the community, intervene in the context of a hardcore public event (fig.15) that takes place a few months later in the city.

The PostPotorras, after the pandemic, are the fourth case of the community project in this phase. They appear on the set accompanied by their own iconography and visually associate themselves in the montage of the video creation of this part of the process with extracts of a collective action with other protagonists of the queer scene (fig. 16). This intervention takes place years before the conceptual reworking in the study of Toxic Lesbian.



Figure 15, superimposition of images of the feminist BDSM performance in a Madrid venue and the on-set recording of Olga-C and Cleis. Toxic Lesbian, 2019

In this phase of the process, Bolloguerrilla St. appears for the first time, with whom in 2022 they are going to create a solo project. Their activist action is rooted in their sense of belonging to the neighborhood movement and their support for the women and dissidents who live there.



Figure 16, frame of a collective action organized in a well-known Madrid bar by the Postpotorras for the recording of an activist video clip, 2018

There are therefore several examples to configure this portrait, not only of themselves, but also of the contexts they choose and their symbologies. From these emblematic first cases, the project then develops with the choice of groups that militate, intertwine and find each other in their habitual socialization, occupying places that are said to be on the margins and from which, not only they do not intend to leave, but on the contrary, they find their idiosyncrasy in becoming strong in them.

Thus, the dissident dyke community in Madrid is the breeding ground for Bolloguerrilla St., which emerges to occupy the streets and the night with their shouts painted on the walls. Toxic Lesbian organizes together with them a photo session (fig. 17) in the squatted and self-managed social center Eko, in the Carabanchel neighborhood.



Figure 17, Bolloguerrilla St. at the EKO. Toxic Lesbian, 2022

In that same year 2022, Toxic Lesbian continues its dissident immersion with fat activism, whose strength in the queer milieu is reflected in its participation in the Madrid Critical Pride demonstration (fig. 18) on 28 June as the Bloque Gordeer (Fat Block). Captures of various activist and community milestones in Madrid and an on-set session were developed with this collective.



Figure 18, Bloque Gordeer participation in the Critical Pride. Toxic Lesbian, 2022

In the symbolic construction session in the studio, fat activists move from subjugation to humor, posing with dignity as giant animals (fig.9) or in the challenging medium of 'fitness' (fig.19). Using these metaphors, Toxic Lesbian creates several series, some of which are shown here.



Figure 19, “Nadie hablará de nosotras” (No one will talk about us). Toxic Lesbian, 2022-2023

They will be the culmination, in 2023, of the process launched in 2019, which will be mediated through ethnographic practices that will enable the above-mentioned artistic concretions.

## 5. Conclusions

The pieces of “The Kiss in the Forest” (fig. 20) would offer us this reading of the dissident groups that would meet together in these metaphorical "forests" in which they would be integrated. It is to them that they symbolically and voluntarily 'turn' in order to express their differences, to develop the values that define them and by which they wish to distinguish themselves from mainstream society, which seeks to dominate them and erase their identity traits that they find shameful.

However, as we have seen in the resistance attitudes of our protagonists, far from eradicating them, they strengthen each other. They read each other's differences and accept each difference as part of a common political and social manifesto.



Figure 20, video-creation produced for Bolloguerrilla St., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT0IdDkRR6E&t=6s&ab\\_channel=TOXICLESBIAN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT0IdDkRR6E&t=6s&ab_channel=TOXICLESBIAN). Toxic Lesbian, 2022

“The Kiss in the Forest” (2019-2023) is a work of 'contextual art', to use Ardenne's term (2009), insofar as, not only is it not an artistic expression in the traditional sense, but, on the contrary, it is an art of intervention, committed by its activist profile, and which, moreover, becomes part of the urban space through what this author calls participatory aesthetics.

It is therefore another paradigm that breaks with the usual frameworks of the art system and gives us an example of complete ecosystems of experimentation, recognition and funding that have nothing to do with the museum or the galleries, but with the outsourced cultural institution.

For this process of creation, Toxic Lesbian chooses not to show simulacra, but reality itself, in a way that could almost be described as voluntarily 'not very elaborate', the reasons for which we have set out in relation to Ardenne's analysis (2009). This adherence to what is happening is an integral part of the desire for social transformation, to reflect other ways of being in the world by placing them at the center of artistic practices.

As part of the action research that informs this artistic process, social transformation is sought by revealing these realities, showing them to social majorities who undoubtedly live with their backs turned to all this richness. In this way, always within the discourse of the real and without resorting to the platforms of high art, Toxic Lesbian resorts to the presentation of the project as a whole on the Internet, with YouTube being Toxic Lesbian's main gateway, from which they collect thousands of views.

In these practices that activate immediate reciprocity, the principle of passivity cited by Ardenne (2009) and attributed to spectators is overturned. This model of creation involves simultaneously speaking to audiences and listening to them in the process. The superhuman power associated with the artist as demiurge becomes empty and devoid of such power by unmasking the artist as elite and placing him or her on the same level as the portrayed.

Each of these social groups is characterized by relationships of care, affection, support and mutual help. These groups recognize in their members equals who are subject to the same or similar situations of subalternity as dissident bodies. This is a characteristic that is mentioned here and that Hernando (2018) exposes in order for a relational identity to emerge. And it is precisely for this purpose that these communities are brought together, to create an identity that does not conflict with the individuality of each person who makes up the community.

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