

Kira Xonorika

Post-genitalist Fantasies / Temporalities of Latin American Trans Art

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The Cistem

Live on television, a Paraguayan news reporter interviews Maritza, a trans woman. She denounces a man who requested sexual services from her and who offered only ten thousand guaranies (US \$1.45). Offering such a pittance is offensive, she says. A verbal altercation between her and the man and another trans woman followed. Maritza, live on television, decries the dehumanization to which she was subjected. The clip, edited to enhance its comedic effect, went viral on YouTube, and remained popular all through the 2010s. It became a multi-platform meme.

The Maritza meme: the laughable constituted as other to the politics of respectability. The failure to perform choreographies of civility. Her disposability due to the prejudice towards sex work and what is “morally corrupt.” Her voice, imperfectly speaking a language that is indigestible to the masses: the Spanish colonizing tongue. All this is present in the meme, in conjunction with an unintelligible transfemininity.

This was not the first time that the circus of trans pain was exploited by broadcasters: there was the manipulation of the image of Zulma Lobato in Argentina, Cristina “La Veneno” Ortiz Rodriguez in Spain, and so on. In all these instances, we see the conditions of existence of a vulnerable body devoured by a mass-media economy. One which obliterates the complaint that might expose the scope of a necropolitical “cistem.” One that reduces the value of the trans, racialized, and fat body to a negligible sum.

What is unsettling is how the conservative and corporate cis-epistemology metabolizes the documentary record of Maritza’s complaint, made on public television. A complaint that questions the precariousness of conditions of existence that are shaped by transphobia and patriarchal regimes. A complaint that at the same time is ignored in favor of focusing on the transfeminine body as something to be consumed. No remuneration (material reparations) is ever offered by a historical tradition that had framed images of the trans body as nonhuman, putting them in the same ecosystem as the abject, the monstrous, the hypersexual, and the laughable. What is nonhuman is other.

The task for thinking and organizing in the trans community is to collectively counter all of these elements of the “cistem.” In what follows, I first want to work through the collective knowledge of interregional trans communities across Abya Yala (the precolonial name, among the Cula peoples, for Latin America) and in Paraguay specifically. I then want to bring that experience and insight to bear on strategies



Sofia Moreno, *Porn Again*, Vol. 2: *Divas from the Underground*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

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Sofia Moreno, *Porn Again*, Vol. 2: *Divas from the Underground*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

deployed by artists across Abya Yala, in and against the necropolitical containment and disposal of the abject trans body.

The grassroots construction of trans community often happens in response to an absence of infrastructure, of support systems that allow for a life worth living. It is a process that unfolds between the promises of legal reform and the political will of trans people. This construction of communal pathways of shared languages and practices is a laborious process that requires asking uncomfortable questions. It requires thinking hard about shared precariousness and unmet affective needs – thinking in and against a society shot through with the historical and necropolitical legacy of the colonial cistem. In this society, the cognitive possibilities of trans life are constrained by both biomedical and legal devices.

The first issue around which the dynamics of power are organized is accessibility. By accessibility, I mean the ability to enjoy the fundamental conditions of existence. Accessibility is what expands or constricts one's circulation and participation in localities and surrounding ecologies.

Expanding access is a key part of the politics and goals of many grassroots organizations in the Global South, since institutional mechanisms designed to protect life fail to do so. Questions about access have been fundamental to the process of elaborating transfeminist theory and practice, given that the essentials of life – food, healthcare, and housing – are still not available to everyone, if not most.

Constructing community, and its attendant modes of thinking and engagement, firstly requires an autoethnographic process of self-investigation, which identifies traumatic transgenerational fissures. As bell hooks has said, such forms of trauma can only be healed communally.¹ This is where affirmative affectivity is essential, as an engine of change.

In her 2015 text "House," Julianna Huxtable writes about houses created by families-by-choice whose

internal functioning was engendered by the intuitions of bodies subjected to processes of ostracism by the biological family units based on the failure to respond to sex-generic patterns assigned. These intuitions are shaped and informed by collective memories of denied work. The work of self-care, love, contribution and family participation in the social and political functions of society at large.²

The first institution of society, the family structure, provides training for insertion into

larger structures. It is the nucleus of the system of binary reproducibility: the establishment of genital hierarchies, behavior patterns, and distribution-remuneration based on work. The family, in other words, is the first regulatory mechanism of gender technologies. It defines one's emotional infrastructure – an infrastructure that is precarious by design.

The construction of difference and its assigned value is not determined by subjective choice, but by a well-established distinction between the familiar and the "the other," as Sara Ahmed has written.³

Monstrification

Paraguay is a country whose invisibility on the global scale speaks to the devastation that has occurred there on account of supremacist systems of military-political dominance. In recent history, Paraguay has been identified as a laboratory for the advances of regional neofascism, especially in gender politics.⁴

In 2017, Paraguay's ministry of education became the first in the region to prohibit the circulation in schools of material about sexual and reproductive rights, which they refer to as "gender ideology" (a term coined by the Vatican in the 1990s). This happened within a political context that since the 2000s has regularly slowed down and blocked parliamentary antidiscrimination bills designed to integrate multiple gender perspectives.

"Don't mess with my children" has been a pervasive slogan in reactionary campaigns across the region. Over the past decade it has spread to multiple predominantly Spanish-speaking territories of the Global South. The campaign against "gender ideology" is organized in conjunction with Christian religious institutions. The campaign links what it identifies as feminist policy positions (pro-abortion, pro-union, financial autonomy for cis women) to non-cis gender identities and nonheterosexual orientations, accusing the latter two of denaturing the nuclear family. The right's preferred model of gender and the family is coded into the colors of their posters: pink and blue.

The lack of state protection for gender rights reflects the state's refusal to provide care for or even recognize certain political subjects. Instead, the right defends the self-reliant legal person-subject who is supposed to preserve a white, Christian, male-centered, supremacist, biological heritage.

In recent years, conservatives have succeeded in blocking legal reforms and limiting access for trans people. This campaign has been especially successful in countries with strong traditions of instrumentalizing colonial



Sofia Moreno, *Porn Again*, Vol. 2: *Divas from the Underground*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.



Sofia Moreno, *Porn Again, Vol. 2: Divas from the Underground*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

spirituality. These are territories in which Catholic and evangelical forces hold political power and promote a perverse myth of nationalist purification. In this way, institutionalized religion uses the language of love and family to weaponize bodies and sexualities that do not engender other offspring and that consequently do not reproduce cis-hetero patriarchal power. The interlocking of church and state cultivates the brutality that the necropolitical landscape is all about: full abandonment of vulnerable populations, or the right to expose people to social and political death.⁵

Christian conservatives demonize transness as a pathology that is unintelligible and therefore *monstrous*. The success of this campaign relies on the historical practice of using the language of monstrosity to dehumanize vulnerable groups. As Anson Kock-Rein argues, the monster is a common figure in reactionary speech, used to delegitimize the struggles and identities of the oppressed. This reactionary speech often frames transness as that which “fails” to assimilate to an intelligible model.⁶ The apparently inherent “incongruities” are understood as abject.

The abject here is what Robert Phillips defines as “the vague sense of horror that permeates the barriers between being and the other ... [It is] the process by which identification regimes exclude subjects that are illegible or undergoing classification. Instability and uncertainty pathologize and frame their subjectivity.”⁷

This “monstrification” becomes the antagonistic opposite of humanization. A monster is never healthy, and consequently, its body spreads disease. The normalization and naturalization of this perspective can also be found in the spread of essentialist ideas about biology, which naturalize the observable evidence of genitalia and reproductive functions, linked to the domain of compulsive heterosexuality.⁸ This perspective favors only those bodily self-determinations that align with normative gender affirmations – that is, those that come from a place of cisgenderness. According to Viviane Vergueiro, the normalization of the gender binary can be understood as a colonialist and socioculturally constructed categorization that defines corporeality, sexes, and genders according to criteria of prediscursive objectivity. It figures gender as something static and permanent, without taking into account self-perceptions or intersectionalities.⁹

The colonial form of gender is also present in the surveilled subjectivation of gender and the foreclosure of other possibilities. In Paraguay, it resulted in the institutionalization and

enforcement of strict gender norms in the dictatorial era, under the administration of Alfredo Stroessner (1954–89). This was a time of persecution for those with dissident gender orientations and sexualities, including torture, kidnapping, and disappearances. Today, this hypervigilance around gender has only mutated in form, remaining a central component of social control and policing – including within the world of culture and art, as we shall see.

Cis-coloniality and the Transphilia Continuum

Returning to the viral exposure of Maritza, in recent years the meme has been used by cisgender artists in illustrations, pictorial representations, and a neon piece that spells out the phrase “For ten thousand guaranies, you are not going to take me.” The appropriation of Maritza’s complaint into artistic practice exemplifies an ongoing colonial extraction. Her complaint is instrumentalized and rendered as a consumer object, devoid of critical content. What is evident here is that the material basis of a reparation politics hasn’t arrived. Nor has the trauma of mass-media exposure been addressed, despite Maritza’s objections to it.

Under this operation of aestheticizing poverty, precariousness becomes an object of consumption. An anti-transmisogynist advocate is devoured by the colonial art system and reduced to an object-fetish. The transfeminine body is not only expelled from the domain of life, but is ultimately stripped of even her rage.

The conditions that shape this art production are the same conditions that shape the life trajectories of trans bodies. Attention to trans bodies alternates between transphobia and transphilia, maximum disgust and fetishistic fascination, two perspectives that ultimately fall under the same logic: the expulsion of othered bodies. This is the art-world version of larger institutional structures, and trans artists can try to intervene to disrupt these structures.

The work of multimedia artist Sofia Moreno addresses the Western art world’s transphilia “continuum” (a term she borrows from Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*). While trans bodies may be experiencing a new art-world visibility, this is driven by dynamics of fetishization. The relationship between art institutions and trans bodies is ultimately an extractivist one, suggests Moreno.¹⁰ Despite its rhetoric of inclusion, the art world uses trans bodies while having no interest in material reparations for people who have historically been oppressed because of their biopolitical markers. This “trend” taking place at the peripheries of Western art worlds highlights the dynamics of the current global economy.



Arian Carrillo, *Tengomásdedosvistasyestántodasborrosas*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

The Transerotic

According to research on trans participation in the formal labor market, transphobia and lack of accessibility often lead trans people to rely on sex work as a primary sources of income. This leads to a hypersexualization of transfemininity, writes theorist Aren Aizura:

Frequently the expressions of transmisogyny encrypt transfemininity as only existing within, or for a sexual economy, resulting in the hypersexualization of trans women. This allows us to understand transphobia as embedded in transnational circuits of reproductive labor and biopolitical control: the same gender-variant bodies on which violence is visited also circulate as valuable within global capital.¹¹

This hypersexualization is useful for an economic system that relies on the subjection of certain bodies. As Rycca Lee has emphasized, to be a woman* is to belong to a globally subaltern category.¹² In Western art, as in capitalism in general, the female* body has historically been a treat for sociability and consumption. Even through there is a socially constructed hierarchy dividing cisgender femininity and transfemininity, they are subject to similar dynamics of power and control.

In mass-produced pornography and mainstream-media entertainment, transfeminine bodies are coded and packaged as sexually deviant, as monstrous oddities to be consumed at a distance.¹³ Transfemininity has been (and still is) highly sexualized, both aesthetically and economically. This is a theme that Moreno explores in her work *Porn Again* (2010–present).

In the mid-2000s, when celebrity sex tape scandals in the Global North were the center of pop-culture attention, Moreno took her laptop to a computer technician for repair. He stole her private erotic videos from the laptop and sent them to the company where she worked at the time, with the aim of exposing her as “morally corrupt” – according to a logic that demonizes her particular body and sexual choices. At the time, Sofia tells me, she worked for that company in order to have access to hormone replacement therapy. Even though she experienced daily transphobia at the company, working there was a “choice” to enable her long-term self-determination. Faced with this violent attack, Sofia started the film project *Porn Again*, which explores the economy of desire on the internet and the destabilization of the division between private and public.

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The first video in Moreno’s series opens with a cacophony of voices of heterosexual men who are consuming the exotic spectacle of a female body with a penis, the differentiating marker. The viewer sees images of a girl touching herself – private sexuality that is now for public display – while faceless men stroke their pink cocks and cum in slow motion, which Moreno presents as a recording of a recording, “for texture.”

A recurring theme in the series is the appearance of fragmented bodies masturbating when they glimpse a transfeminine person. An illuminated “applause” sign faces the audience of a late-night talk show. “You’re better than a regular girl,” one man says, though we don’t know who the speaker is. What is evident is that the power dynamics of sexual exchange involve a certain opacity of identity.

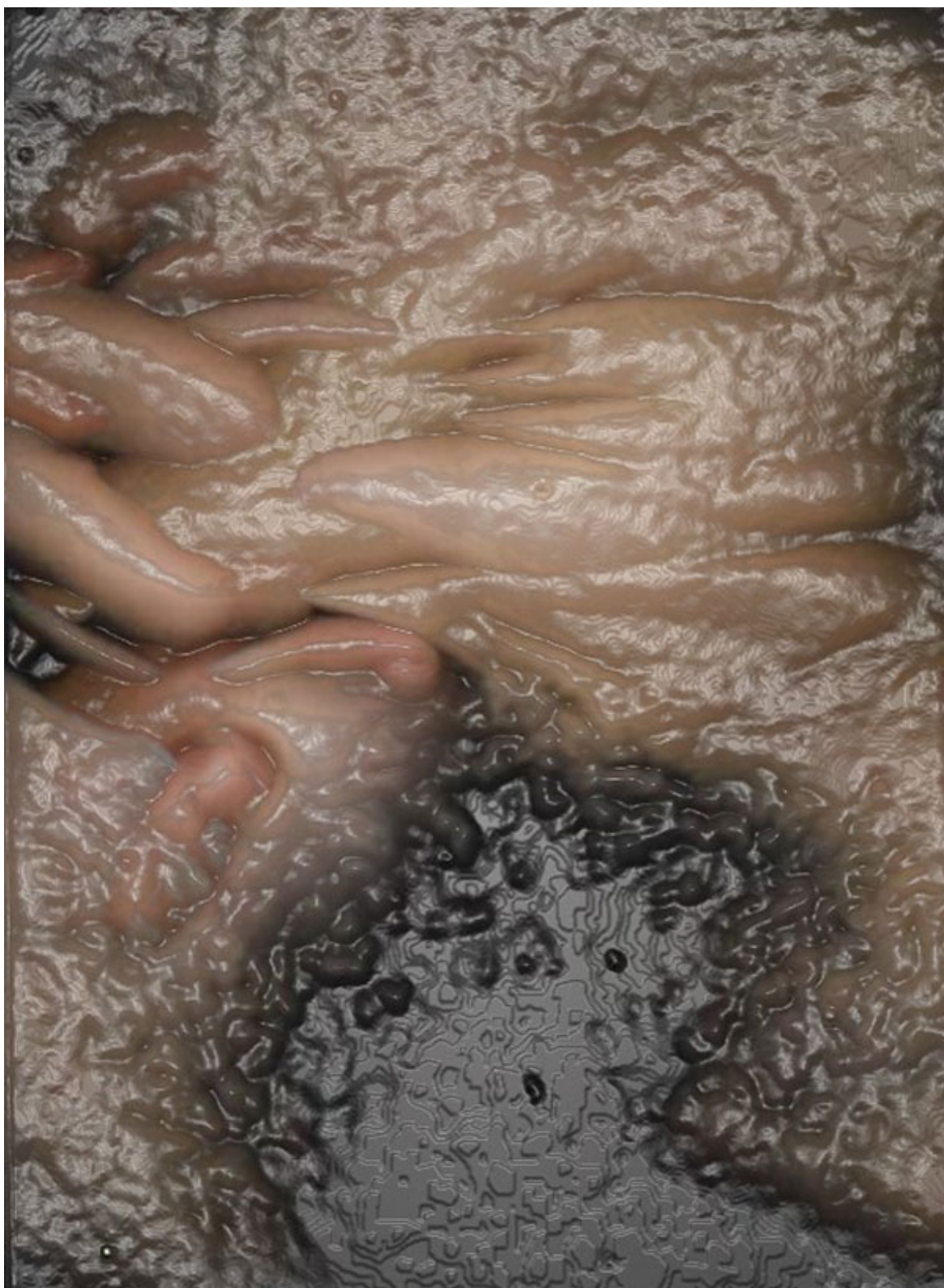
Porn Again, Vol. 2 – *Cyber Nymph* (2012) features cameos from Tumblr icon Molly Soda, as well as Sofia’s friends. Tumblr mothered an entire generation, serving as a place for queer and trans people with political affinities to find each other despite their geographical separation. Reflecting back on such spaces of engagement, Sofia says: “It’s important for me to make art for my community.”

In the most recent installment of the series, *Porn Again*, Vol. 2 – *Divas from the Underground* (2014), Sofia takes us to the club Diva’s in San Francisco. The film is a tribute to Filipino and Cambodian trans women who taught Sofia about resistance. It features the artist’s friends Kiam Marcelo Junio and Keijaun Thomas, voguing and slaying the audience. As Sofia says: “The trans body has been used as a muse but not as a content creator. It is important for me to consume myself because there is a culture invested in consuming me, and it does not know how to do it.”

Rejecting the Cycle of Annihilation

European colonization of Abya Yala initiated the dispossession of material resources from the Global South for the development of the capitalist economy of the white-cis-hetero Global North. This led to the devastation of the worlds of those who now appear as monsters within that matrix, those who resist. In addition, the dispossession of knowledge is a form of annihilation. Fran Demétrio and Hilian Nissior Besuan write about “epistemicide” as a genocidal process that erases memories, perceptions, intuitions, and traces.¹⁴

One of the reasons that Spanish and Portuguese colonizers brought Baroque art with them to colonies was to advance their conquest through the splendor of the image. This strategy of seduction aimed to achieve ideological dominance over indigenous populations.¹⁵ Today,



Arian Carrillo, *Tengomásdedosvistasyestántodasborrosas*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

a similar strategy of seduction is deployed by the transnational fashion and beauty industries. Their white cisgender anthropometric fascism borrows from Renaissance notions of symmetry, harmony, beauty, and synthesis.¹⁶

The Jesuit and Franciscan missions in Paraguay opened wood-carving workshops, following a European model of instruction. It is important to understand the cognitive effects on colonized people of this prioritization of the ocular. This privileging of the eye, and the hierarchies that come with it, still define not only bodies and stories, but also desires. The colonial imposition of the visual defines what is intelligible and what is abject, monstrous, and other.

The Madrid-based art collective Colectivo Ayllu points out that Spanish colonizers often gave mirrors to indigenous people in exchange for gold. The mirrors helped establish a regime of referentiality (around universal whiteness), differentiating the colonizers from the colonized and imposing ontological categories of objectivity and subjectivity.¹⁷

Artist Arian Carrillo aims to fool the objectifying cis gaze through the use of fragmented mirrors. Carrillo's work *Tengomásdedosvistasyestántodasborrosas* (I have more than two views and they're all blurry) explores the perception of his own body through a camera lens. As Carrillo tells me, "I was starting a series called 'Prettier in Fragments.' It was a way for me to make sense of a couple of things – how I perceived Instagram images to be all about 'zooming into already cropped images' and my own experience with embracing the details of my body."¹⁸

Narratives of transness through mirrors: in the earlier days of transitioning, I recall that reflective surfaces caused me a great deal of unease, as echoes of internalized pathologizing gazes. So when the "beauty enhancer" selfie app Facetune came out, it became a playground for those who felt limited by the ontological possibilities of the material world.

In 2016, Facetune was at its peak, it was free, and its interface was easy to navigate. For many young nonbinary people, the app was a way to shape their own personal aesthetics, especially on Instagram. Around this time, electronic trans musicians were also making waves through alluring soundscapes that ranged from glistening pop to abstract computer music. It was all synchronizing. By exploring the internet aesthetics of apps like Facetune, Carrillo develops images that operate outside the identity prescriptions of particular sex characteristics.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with Sofia on bodies enfolded in nonlinear timelines

of reverberation – how all of our South latitudes have been toxically named and dissected. The present collapse of Western systems of subjectivation has been in the works for a long time, at least since the advent of modernity, with its labyrinths of extermination.

To critically disavow institutions that uphold hidden time frames of brutalizing necrocontinuity is a redistributive quantum shift. It is a serene gesture of commonality that nurtures conscious interconnected coexistence, against the alienating regimes of value extraction.

What are ways of relating and touching the skin that reject the cycle of annihilation – that enable transerotic desire to emerge?

x

For Sucia

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Kira Xonorika is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and theorist. Her work draws on the complexities of trauma and colonial powers, pathologization, trans and cuir temporalities, knowledge production from the Global South, internet aesthetics, and resilient organization. She teaches at the National University of Asunción in the areas of research in art and Paraguayan art history. Her work has been featured internationally in the Independent Chair of Trans Studies (UBA), Genderit, Tonantzin, and e-flux.

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See Igi Ayedun's Instagram stories, which analyze the history of the Western aesthetics of fascism.

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Francisco Godoy Vega and Colectivo Ayllu, "Programa Orientado a Práticas Subalternas (POPS)," 2021.

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Conversation with the artist, 2020.