The attempt of a self positioning by a white and cis-queer university student

Abstract

As students we write about queer Art in Africa and beyond. In my article I ask myself some questions: Who am I according to my writing? What is my concept of queerness with which I look at the art? Is the art which I define as queer queer at all?

Many of these questions rather disqualify me as an authority of writing. So questions are: What might qualify my writing and how could this writing possibly look like? Finally, what is my own position of writing and what are my privileges that I have to be aware of?

I myself am of the opinion that we have to give African concepts of sex and gender more space in Western academics. For example, our Wiki is one opportunity to approach this importance. It offers also a possibility to expose regimes of gaze and image with which we look at so-called “Queer (in-)visibilities in the art of Africa and beyond”. By putting these in question we can suggest alternatives.

This article does not represent the thoughts of the group but rather tries to document ideas and questions that came to my mind during the seminar.

1. Introduction

As students we write about queer (in-)visibilities in the art of Africa and beyond. Speaking for myself, the seminar got me involved in the academic discourse of queer theory and its role in art from Africa and beyond for the first time. For that reason I was obliged to put in question everything I knew or believed to know about them. Soon it became obvious that I could not talk or write about the topic as long as I did not have a clear picture of my own role.

For a semester we concentrated on texts, articles, theories and movies from different disciplines to gain an insight as broad as possible into the topic. Therefore I chose texts from different disciplines to achieve an intersectional approach to the art. For my article I made use of literature from Art History Studies, Queer Studies, Black Queer Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Critical Whiteness Studies and Queer Art Studies.

Nonetheless, this is neither a summary of current or past discourses, nor an introduction in the topic and definitely not a creation of new theories. It is rather a documentation of personal experiences and thoughts that came up during the semester. Therefore it might be called the attempt of documenting the process of a person that approaches the topic and its discourses for the first time. Surely this includes personal ideas and links.

2. Me as a writer

Before discussing different ideas of queer theories and their influences on art I want to make my own position clear.

My self-identification would be that of a cis-gender performing, female and heterosexual white university student in Germany. I am therefore living the normative way in the sense of Western occidentalism. Why do I have to make that clear?

- When I attempt to write about (in-)visibilities of queerness in the art of Africa and beyond I first have to make my own position clear. Sexuality and even gender is a very personal issue which is not comfortable to display. It is easier to analyze sexual desires of artists or to search for signs of queer activism in their art. However, when I want to write about representational strategies of sexual desires in arts, the own sexuality has to be part of the positioning1. As Devon W. Carbado notes in the context of Black Queer Studies: “Self-identifying as a heterosexual is a way to position oneself within a discourse so as not to create the (mis)impression of gay authenticity”2. To expose my whiteness is necessary to acknowledge the privileges I have and to make obvious where my own stance comes from. This is necessary since avoiding it would mean to deny historical and recent racism3.

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1. Devon Carbado
2. Devon Carbado
3. Devon Carbado
• Being a student means that I am writing out of an academic position but still studying and therefore on a very low stage of expertise if there is something like ‘expertise’ at all. One critique of Black Queer studies is the focus in Queer studies on white and academic theories, whereas other theories are often considered less academic and are therefore being less valued. Being a student at a German University means that I have privileges that I have to acknowledge and to be aware of. My privileges allow me to study, to have easily access to a German university and to be able to discuss questions of (in-)visibilities in the art of Africa and beyond. The question is what will I do with the privileges that I was born with.

The Wiki we created throughout our seminar is supposed to offer a platform that is both easily accessible and understandable for a high variety of readers. Since the articles will be published on the internet, they could be read in almost every part of the world. English as the chosen language of writing makes it possible that the articles are also understandable beyond the German context. But since English is not my mother tongue, how could I guarantee that the words I use are correctly chosen? By using the English language we might give our ideas a rather universal character which is intensified by the glossary that is supposed to offer universally applicable definitions of some of the terms we are using in our articles. English is an Imperial language, and its terms can never be universal since every local context has its own connotations and own words to describe them.

The sheer number of local contexts makes it obvious that there can not be homogeneity in the whole of Africa. Writing about art from Africa and beyond means writing about a huge range of art. It is important to note that there is not the African art or the African concept of queerness. Therefore specific examples are examined and others are therefore left behind.

3. The concept in question

In the 1990’s, when ‘queer’ was re-signified from an insulting term about homosexuals towards a chosen self-definition of specific groups, the idea was to create a inclusive, pluralist construct of non-normativity which is not universal but dependent on historical and local contexts (see also “About the queer concept in the African context”).

To sum it up, queerness as a concept intends:

• Resistance against normativity (not only regarding to sex, gender and sexual desires)
• Denaturalization of sex and gender binaries
• Dehierarchisation and deconstruction of identity categories
• Promotion of plurality and temporality of individual positions and desires

Even though the concept was not supposed to be an identity label, it became useful for others in order to define themselves and helped as „modalities of unification through difference“; ‘difference’ here in the meaning of non-normativity. Therefore it can serve as political, action oriented strategy, as a means of activism to fight violation and discrimination.5

The introduction of queerness as a performative category clearly played its role in the process of self-empowerment of marginalized queer communities and helped in achieving agency. But even an inclusive construct like this is not safe from excluding processes within: namely the establishment of racist hierarchical structures in queer politics and academic life. The fact, that most of the knowledge production in Queer Theory is white only even though many ideas have been drawn from black theorists.

In parts of Western society and queer settings a queer racialisation (german: “Queere Rassifizierung”) takes place: Not only are new binaries created but also a new normativity within the queer settings takes hold: The white, gay, outed, monogamous and assimilable individual becomes the norm whereas those who differ from this norm are still being excluded and discriminated against.

For one kind of this phenomenon the term *homo-nationalism* has been introduced: Within (white) homo-nationalism a society opens up temporarily for a part of the marginalized group that seems assimilable. By doing so, the society is illustrated as open and progressive, and a united national identity is reshaped. In this sense queering has even been utilized as political strategy as in the example of South Africa where freedom of sexual orientation was included in the constitution of 1996. To include queerness meant to promote a new national identity of inclusiveness to create the impression of a state which is not universal but dependent on historical and local contexts. But since English is not my mother tongue, how could I guarantee that the words I use are correctly chosen? By using the English language we might give our ideas a rather universal character which is intensified by the glossary that is supposed to offer universally applicable definitions of some of the terms we are using in our articles. English is an Imperial language, and its terms can never be universal since every local context has its own connotations and own words to describe them.

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This process takes place simultaneously in different parts of the world. Throughout postcolonial structures even queerness could not be saved from racial tagging. Not in the sense of a biological, but rather in form of cultural racism certain racialized groups are postmarked.
In Germany the racial tagging focuses especially on the Islamic communities. In opposition to the impression of a tolerant and liberal white majority the Islam is generally presented and naturalized as being homorphic. This conjures up hatred of the white German majority and leads to a marginalization of Islamic peers. The process can easily be transferred to the narrative of the homophobic continent Afric a. There certainly is a danger in seeing social, legal and political structures in African countries as homorphic, backward and therefore inferior. This image is only partly true. The question must always be where such structures emerged from and where the own responsibility in historic events, such as proselytization and colonialism, lies. The constant representation of homophobic Africa has to be examine d. Maybe it is not the local structures that are homorphic but our interpretation of them, when compared to Western concepts. Hence it is important to draw attention to similar phenomenons. (see also “Queer practices in traditions, history, culture, and society in the African context”)

**4. Queering the art**

We want to write about queer (in-)visibilities in the art from Africa and beyond. Therefore it cannot be a valid to write about queer art in general because what would queer art possibly be? Do we have to see, feel or experience queerness when looking at it? Does the artist have to be queer? What makes art queer at all? The focus in our studies thus has to be on questions of (in-)visibilities.

**Queer Theory** is a Western concept that has been transferred to African contexts. Only in some parts the application worked or seemed suitable. The question is whether the concept is actually globally applicable and if a Western concept should be used to analyse phenomenons in Africa at all. That queerness is a global phenomena we can be sure of. Or as Donald E. Hall notes:

> Queer did not translate well as a term, even if the underlying principle animating the field - resistance to systems of sexual normativity, destabilization of gender binaries and notions of ‘natural’ gender identity, and validation of the individual’s right to self-define sexually […] do resonate across nations and cultures. In practically every country I have ever visited [...] I have met and interacted with individuals who live in ways that ‘queer’ the sexual norms.

But maybe there is an alternative term that could be better applicable in certain contexts. That it is difficult - if not impossible - to find a concept that fits for all phenomenons in the world or in the whole of Africa we should be clear of, but why should we not accept and be animated by local phenomenons that have been existent for long times? Tommaso M. Milani suggests for example the term ‘Isitabane’ in isiZulu: It “refer[s] to both gender non-conformance and same-sex desire”10 Similar to queerness Isitabane came up as a discriminating label and is now in the process of ‘re-appropriation as a signifier of proud self-identification’.11 Milani suggests: ‘One could propose ‘to stabarnise’ as a radical, decolonizing academic practice that queries northern identity categories and ideological formations through the lens of (South) African experiences’.12 Certainly there are more examples like this one more suitable to make local experiences more understandable. (see also “Queer practices in traditions, history, culture, and society in the African context”)

An approach that might be well applicable in parts of the world is that of intersectionality. If we would look rather at the multidisciplinarity of identities than on only one self-definition we might even see the artworks differently. Intersectionality is the productive destabilization of hierarchies of different forms of discrimination. An individual might suffer under different forms of marginalization in different scenarios or even in one and the same situation. There is no better or worse of racism, sexism, homophobia or other kinds of discrimination. If we want to understand one’s motivation to produce art it might be necessary to look at the artist’s various identity categories: ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, sex, gender, class, handicap, to mention only a few. Every human being combines various kinds of self-identification that are not constant and might differentiate from the context he or she finds him- or herself in. We are quick to fit artworks differently. Intersectionality is the productive destabilization of hierarchies of different forms of discrimination. An individual might suffer under different forms of marginalization in different scenarios or even in one and the same situation. There is no better or worse of racism, sexism, homophobia or other kinds of discrimination. If we want to understand one’s motivation to produce art it might be necessary to look at the artist’s various identity categories: ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, sex, gender, class, handicap, to mention only a few. Every human being combines various kinds of self-identification that are not constant and might differentiate from the context he or she finds him- or herself in. We are quick to fit people in specific stereotypical categories, but forget the heterogeneity of every group. Only a few months ago I was convinced that queer people should stick together and are all unified in the same fight for their rights. At an event of Rainbow Intersections in Berlin on the 23rd October 2014 I understood for the first time what heterogeneity meant: Audrey Mbugua, a transgender activist from Kenya explained her position:

> I’m not homophobic, but I don’t want to be seen homosexual […]. As true and honest Christian someone could not be able to promote homosexuality.

Leaving all questionable disputes about the interrelations of Christianity and homosexuality aside, the stated rejection of homosexuality by a transgender person proves the incoherence of self-identifications under the umbrella term of queerness.

Queerness alone has proven itself as categorization not sufficient enough. When reflecting individuals’ identities or their motivations for activism, we have to choose an intersectional approach.14

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Constitution of South Africa, Chapter 2: Bill of Rights, Section 9: Equality,

(3) The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.

Firstly, it is a matter of outing. Is it necessary to know if the artist behind the artwork is queer? Or if the artwork has any queer activist purpose? Art often has the benefit of bringing issues to the public. One opportunity of the visibility of queerness in art could be any following public discourse it might possibly entrench. A discourse deeply necessary if we want to get over sex and gender binaries. For some artists it might not be attractive to be identified or attributed as queer. May it be out of personal preference or out of reasons of self-protection, protection against discriminating laws or against violation or hatred out of society. Others might like the idea of establishing a self-identity by outing themselves publicly through their art. Therefore art can considerably contribute to activism in the sense of questioning representations of bodies, sexuality and gender. It carries the opportunity to give the marginalized an agency and voice to be heard publicly. But how could queerness possibly be made visible? Commonly, the body is used as direct agent of sex and gender politics (see also “About the visibility of bodies in queer art”). Discourses about bodies have the effect of questioning the common view of biologic naturalness of the sex and gender binary that only came up throughout the age of enlightenment in the 18th century15. By denaturalizing familiar body images, artworks play an important part in queer politics. Illustrating female masculinity is one example of a tactic to destabilize common images of gender. On the other side one could criticize, that even in this way gender norms are being reproduced. Altogether representation of bodies bare dangers of misinterpretation or negative response as it is a sociopolitical heated subject. Judith Butler notes:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose is to the gaze of other, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.16

There are other ways in which artists succeeded in making queerness visible. Barbara Paul suggests a usage of ‘cultural codes and systems’ (“kulturelle Codes und Systeme17). That is not to focus on what is viewable at the first glance but making use of representative symbols which were taken out of the local contexts of thinking and dealing. Especially when we want to look at art from Africa from our point as ‘Westerners’ we have to acknowledge the cultural context of the artwork. Art studies suggests an instrumentarium for this kind of analysis of arts: It is about taking into account immanent tensions like the interactions of history, the viewers and the institutions around the artwork.18

Other artists dissociate themselves entirely from a symbolic representation of queerness. Jack Halberstam, for example, interprets abstract painting as a queer strategy of refusing representative norms.19 This might be read as a willing contribution to politics of representation. The discourse about representation in arts will never stop as the conflict of regimes of look, gaze and image will be present. The cognition of art is always shaped by sociocultural influences and still a product of individual and personal interpretation. Herein lies the power of arts. For it is always an interpretation of realities. It has the potential to create new, ambitious and maybe even utopian realities.20

5. So how are we writing?

Especially in postcolonial and critical whiteness studies a self-positioning before writing about any topic is obligatory. By doing so the authors can feel on the safe side of writing and authorized to discuss their opinions. When looking at or writing about queerness in art a similar self-positioning might be a solution in qualifying the own writing since understanding the contextual background of the discussed artworks and the explanation of the own gaze are important issues in holistic art appreciation.

The first steps to take is to ask: Am I aware of the difficulties of writing? Did I get clear about my own position, my background and my images that I have? Do I have a clue of the consequences my writing might have for others? Will I put anyone in danger or expose personal issues that were not supposed for the public? I have to question my own role in order to be able to write about others.

Because when I am aware of all these issues the writing itself can bare opportunities. As I made clear earlier, African concepts have not gotten much presence in Western academics yet. Our Wiki could be a way of informing more people about concepts, theories and forms of activism from Africa and beyond. We as the students who concentrated on the topic the last semester are the first audience the Wiki reaches. Others will hopefully follow.

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