

Kathrin Dreckmann

Artists Talk – A Conversation on Queer Pop

In the artist talk that follows, Berlin-based artist and producer Sue Lèwig, the author, musician, lecturer, DJ and radio host Thomas Meinecke, and scholar and artist Sookee engage in conversation on the topic of queer pop with Kathrin Dreckmann, assistant professor at the Institute for Media and Cultural Studies at Heinrich-Heine-University Dusseldorf.

Sue Lèwig's tripping techno composition such as epic downbeat breakbeat post-techno, slowly swells and breaks the tempo again and again, develops into a dramatic pressure machine on the dancefloor. She has releases on the record labels Kaos, Examine Archive and Seelen. Thomas Meinecke, a formative figure within what is referred to as German pop literature and, as a member of the band *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle*, has also participated successfully and innovatively in pop music discourse since 1980. A particular interest in contemporary feminist theory permeates his work and informs the themes of his writing.

Through her music Sookee has been a sharp critique of a hip-hop scene that still largely serves and reproduces sexist, publicist, and racist prejudices. Her music can be understood not only as a counter-project to these tendencies, it also always represents an invitation to explore the content boundaries of hip-hop anew and to find strategies of empowerment for previously marginalized groups in music.

Kathrin Dreckmann: The idea of this artist talk is that after the extensive theoretical and academic examination of the topic of queer pop, we gain insights into the practical work that focuses on queer feminist themes and perspectives. I am very excited that we have three yet very different artists* visiting with us to lead the conversation: Sookee (musician), Sue Lèwig (musician), and Thomas Meinecke (author and writer).

I would like to open the discussion by taking up a question that Swiss media and culture theorist Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky raised in her book on the film *BRIDGIT*.¹ Astrid mentioned the swan. Especially in the animal world, the non-binary

¹ *BRIDGIT* is a film shot on an iPhone by Charlotte Prodger for which she was awarded the Turner Prize in 2018 and deals with queer identity between nature and aesthetics through a cinematic gaze. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky / Philipp Hanke (eds.): *Queeres Kino / Queere Ästhetiken als Dokumentationen des Prekären*. Vienna 2021.

Note: in Conversation with Sookee, Sue Lèwig, and Thomas Meinecke

becomes demonstrable as a concept. Sookee, how did you get the idea to write a song about *Queere Tiere* (queer animals).²

Sookee: Some people think that love is curable and controllable or selectable, which is not so. Desire and emotional attraction exist without them being influenceable or it being possible to decide who one falls in love with. The persons who deny this to others are also aware of this from their own experience, for example, if they have never loved or desired the same sex or if something has happened so far outside the realm of feasibility or intentionality. These people still believe that anything apart from heteronormativity could not work. Then they sometimes turn to theories on evolution and argue that same-sex desire will lead to the extinction of humanity because of liberalization. This view, of course, only works within a binary logic. This thinking, which I find absurd, led me to engage in this logic and pursue a thought experiment. Empirically, it is nonsense that there is no form of desire, cohabitation, relationship, collectivity, or sociality apart from heterosexuality. This also raises the question of why one draws on the animal kingdom at all and transfers human norms or phenomena to animals. What does this say about one's stability when a penguin is used to justify that someone can't handle same-sex love? That is absurd.

In my song *Queere Tiere* I set out to trace what this mindset is actually trying to accomplish. It took me half an afternoon to write the lyrics. If you google homosexuality and animals or intersex and animal world, there are countless results, because the relevant studies exist. Everything is journalistically processed and academically founded. I did not discover a secret science by chance. Every example and every concrete suffering mentioned in the song actually exists. Be it the two penguins from the New York Zoo or the giraffes from the study. Looking closely at the study, one can additionally also recognize how knowledge production works. This example from the song, "this is not a turf war, these are gay giraffes," refers to scientific research dating from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century that show that two male giraffes perform certain practices with each other. The authors of these studies apparently could not handle the fact that there was some penetration after the scramble and instead explained this act as a turf war. In the research results this was omitted. Only in the additional material of the research did it become clear that the scientists questioned the meaning of this behavior. Scientific accuracy goes only this far.

I'm sorry if I'm being disrespectful. Yet, it's no secret in science that humans declare themselves to be the objective measure of the world. Of course, my comparison of humans with animals has also caused much criticism from an academic perspective. Nevertheless, we compare humans with animals more often. The idea is to lower the exaggerated position of humans a little bit. Although, this can end in fascism, as

2 The queer feminist song *Queere Tiere* by Sookee deals with queer behavior in the animal kingdom and toys with the parameters surrounding the arguments of homosexuality being against biology and not natural [Own translation, K.D.].

we all know. Therefore, *Queere Tiere* features satirical lyrics, while it was also my little entry into the more childlike musical world. The video turned out cute. I liked it a lot. Therefore, I then decided to continue in that direction. *Queere Tiere* marked the ending of her career as Sookee and the beginning of her new persona Sukini.

Kathrin Dreckmann: What Sue Lèwig and Sookee have in common is that they appropriate “male” sound spaces. Sue Lèwig realizes this appropriation by using technical devices that have masculine connotations, such as the synthesizer and the way she mixes and performs live, which didn’t always go down well. As German media theorist Friedrich Kittler described in his text *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, the misuse of military devices such as the synthesizer and vocoder, which were important decoding systems during the 1940s were therefore used in spaces and career paths dominated by men. Do you still experience this while working with music technology? Do you still have to fight for a space in this male-dominated work?

Sue Lèwig: As a girl with blond, long hair, earrings and a summer dress, it was unimaginable and absurd that someone like that would know anything about sequencing, DAW, MIDI, VST instruments, was impossible that someone like that could have a say about big mixing consoles, be technically proficient, know how to program beats, and want to study sound engineering. It did not fit together. It did not fit the norm. This notion had been commonplace in the electronic music scene for a long time. You felt that strongly. I was interested in it from a young age, always found motherboards more appealing than playing with dolls, first playfully, then more and more adeptly. I knew the direction I wanted to go and that I wanted to intern at a recording studio. Today I am lucky and grateful that I always had mentors who supported me to learn to produce electronic music, who explained equipment, software, showed me things in the recording studio. Still, it was hard to gain knowledge in this male-dominated producer scene. Especially if you started very young and also like to be a woman or a girl and also sing, you often hear phrases like:

“Ah, you produce music, okay, so, you sing.”

“Yes. And I write and produce the music.”

“Ah, and who programs the beats, the music? Your boyfriend?”

“No, I do.”

“Yes, but who produces it?”

“I do that too.”

“Ah, I see.”

It was definitely a challenge. Even if you have strong self-confidence, are tough, have a strong character, and have an irrepressible thirst for knowledge, it took incredible strength to make it in this industry.

It was a real struggle. Even though I have this tough side of being technically proficient. Sometimes there were moments when I wished I was a man or a boy so I could have it easier. This thought is nonsense, of course. Because I am happy and

proud of what I do and what I have achieved so far, and I am hungry for much more. Today it's already much more painless and I've had consistently positive experiences so far since I've been releasing tracks (2021) and performing LIVE (2018). The live engineers, promoters, producers trust me after a short time of getting to know each other. I also benefit from the current situation and I am happy about it. One example is the emancipation of the queer movement, where young queer artists find a place in the industry, go public with their stories and comfort their fans with their lyrics, fans who think and feel the same way as they do, so they realize that there are people who are like them. In such moments you start thinking about it for the first time, like it made me think about it myself. We don't have to bear everything silently, we can change things gently in a positive way and the first step is to realize it.

During the time I did a lot of internships in recording studios, I became addicted to creating music to a certain extent. At that time, I thought I only had a chance if I produced music with a man. That would have made it easier in the scene, but that's a mistake. To stay true to yourself and courageously find your very own way and persevere and dispel all doubts – that's important. And a symposium like this is important for creating acceptance. It's worth it because our world is diverse. Whether you identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, trans*, intersex, whether you identify as male or female, whether you feel like anything in between, or whether you have male, female, anything in between parts as a woman, it doesn't matter. It's perfectly fine, because nature has designed it that way.

Kathrin Dreckmann: Thomas called himself a feminist early on in the 80s. We were talking about pop feminism today because there are T-shirts at H&M and Urban Outfitters that say, "I'm a Feminist." My question, which is intentionally a little polemical, is, as a cis heterosexual male, do you look at queer pop differently these days, or has it always existed in that form?

Thomas Meinecke: I didn't call myself a feminist until the 90s. Although I had sympathized with the idea in the 80s. It's always such a story with sympathizing. When the Museum Ludwig in Cologne had an anniversary exhibition on queer art, *The Eighth Square*, they invited me to write a book about it. The book I wrote was called *Feldforschung* (*Field Research*), in which the Pet Shop Boys and Mae West played a role, and that opened up the whole pop context, which for me goes back to the nineteenth century.

For me, it just goes on. The roots for house in Chicago's South Side and ballroom in Spanish Harlem were underground in the 80s. I was out with an African-American social worker on the South Side and wanted him to show me all the spots, but he said he had no idea. It was "a gay thing." He could show me the rap scene, which isn't that wild in Chicago now, but he couldn't show me the house scene. You had to know people who would introduce you. What's also fascinating is that techno, unlike hip-hop, basically has no street. It has a pronounced invisibility. You couldn't really get to it. It was the same with house or ballroom. When Willi Ninja died, perhaps the most prom-

inent voguing dancer, I was in New York. There was a memorial at the Cielo Club on the Westside in Manhattan with Mom and Pop. Willi Ninja's family and all the other famous voguing dancers were there, but it was also open to the public. I could buy a ticket there as a "fag hag" and go to the Cielo Club and see all these people, also in action. They moved me to tears. I have a hunch that this arrives via Baudelaire, vaudeville, and Mae West and whatnot, where I think that's the whole idea. Yes, not least, a central chapter in Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, the film by Jenny Livingston about the ballroom community in Harlem, about recognizing what we do, not being men and women, but performing as men and women.

This community is vital and beautiful. And it is its beauty that touches and captures me. I stood there in tears, because before that, I never trusted myself to go and ask about these places, to stand there and watch, because I thought it was a world of its own, a total sophistication. And then I read up on it. Just this concept of realness, everyone talks about realness. I also talk about realness, because I think it's one of the most interesting, also philosophically interesting concepts from the community, which is also so great in terms of worldview; because this reality of being able to perform is not granted to this group of marginalized people. Thus, they manufactured a highly sophisticated cultural technique.

1979 was the year of the Disco Sucks movement. Sylvester was one of the very great disco artists. Everyone probably knows his hit *You Make Me Feel Mighty Real*. I think it's so great that you take it for granted: That's real. We've discussed the term "authenticity" over the last two days. I want to take it up now. Who is allowed to do that? Are we? And if so, who is this "we" actually? I would say I'm the total fan. I'm devoted. Yet, I still don't allow myself to go right in because I think it's so beautiful that we get this as a kind of art form in the highest sophistication. It's very elaborate, and many acts of imitation or emulation are so crude, uncouth, and strident. I actually feel it's very soulful and deep, and that's why I think this term, the ballroom category "realness" is fantastic. It's such a highly evolved art form that I say, "Yeah, I can just adore that and be moved by that." Architecture can do that too sometimes, just think of the ongoing bass drum in the club as ancient columns. So in that sense: a funny answer to your question.

It has always been difficult. Maybe since minstrelsy or even vaudeville. I love that Mae West says she learned her act from female impersonators in the 1910s, over 100 years ago. A derivation – the original comes after the copy. We can see that also in Mae West. Later Elvis Presley walked all over the screens and had heavy eye makeup on. But nobody talked about it. No one said that man wears heavy eye makeup, which is very interesting. But then he moved his hips. That was a big scandal because he moved his hips. And, supposedly, he was wearing a toilet roll in his pants. So he was also a drag king because of the loo roll in his pants. Others say it was a chrome bar, a chrome pole. I don't know. But it's interesting that with Elvis, male impersonation was already there in a cross-female direction. I think this "everything has always been there" sounds so limp. It's not. It's highly explosive.

Kathrin Dreckmann: One must also then approach the matter in a nuanced way. The argument here has been that there is an increased presence of topics that we can locate in the field of queerness in its broadest sense. Here we have very different perspectives.

Based on this panel, one could consider whether the question of positioning the drag or ballroom scene in relation to posing or voguing needs to be addressed again more pronouncedly in academic research. So that not only the gendering of poses and gestures in music videos and on stage are open to negotiation. What becomes clear in this interview, as well as with a view to the history of queer pop, is that posing and voguing refer to systems that are constantly renegotiated. Pop performances in particular can uncover layers of different encodings and allow encodings to float anew, renegotiating the subject matter and, if necessary, ironizing it. Susan Sontag's essay *Notes on Camp* is the earliest evidence of such mechanisms. However, reflecting on pop cultural masterpieces is only possible if their historicity allows for negotiating exclusion and inclusion, as it were. Artists such as The Carters and Janelle Monáe gain their particular advantage precisely because of this. They empower posing and cast it anew. They equally question binary constructions between male, female, white and black in the music industry. Exactly this questioning already appears in Sontag's question of exaggeration. It also comes to the fore in *PARIS IS BURNING* and is the core of Butler's gender theory. So there is only one thing left to say: Pop is beautiful.

Bibliography

Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid / Hanke, Philipp (eds.): *Queeres Kino / Queere Ästhetiken als Dokumentationen des Prekären*. Vienna 2021.