

## **New boundaries of the well-being of vaginal ecosystem**

*Text by Lucrezia Cippitelli*

In *Gender Trouble* (Judith Butler, 1990, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge), activist and philosopher Judith Butler explores performativities of gender, which we all experience during our entire life, being pushed to reiterate them as a norm, as an unavoidable condition of our very existence.

“Performativity is not a singular act – says Butler – but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body”.

So little girls show “instinctual” carefulness; boys hide emotions and show confidence; women research stability through heterosexual partnership and procreation.

“One is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame” says again Butler, “and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one’s sense of place in gender”.

Since 2017 and through different releases (Rome, Italy; Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain; Valparaiso, Chile; Lucena, Spain; Bruxelles, Belgium), Anna Raimondo’s *New Boundaries of the Wellbeing of the Vaginal Ecosystem* asks women to remember and recount personal stories which involve specific places. In most of these collections of narrations, women underline the way their bodies are called to act in public spaces, which imply the way they are expected to walk, dress, respond to solicitations, often being sexualized. They embody the assumption that the only fact they are somewhere, implicates they are objects, available to the the will and sexual desire of male subjects.

Butler talks about performativity describing the reiteration of certain norms society imposes to the gender. Her idea of reiteration is focused on sexual orientation and behavior in society, more than on the way sexualized bodies are expected to behave in spaces. But the very idea of reiteration emerges every time one listens to the sound pieces Anna Raimondo produced in the frame of this multifaceted project.

*New Boundaries* investigates different geographies and it is, in fact, a listening tool from a gender perspective. Any time we listen to one of the outputs of this long-term artwork, we grasp the reiteration of the very inner clash which emerges when we cross any geography: a collision between a desired, liberated femininity and the persistent feeling we must suppress it, in order to be safe.

The voices of the many women Anna Raimondo called to participate – and each of them could be anyone of us – underlines the repetition of this very happening, and its universality. Raimondo pushes us to ask ourselves what are the common experiences and which the differences when we are exposed to different geographies. Is there a possible universalism in this reiteration? How urban environments receive women bodies (despite their sexual and biological orientation)?

This is not the first artwork where Raimondo investigates feminine feelings and desires related to surrounding environments. In *Femminisme quotidien #1*, produced in Rabat, Morocco, in 2017, she asked a group of women to conceive and share a series of sentences which could express the relationship of their own bodies with the spaces which enclose them. One of these sentences stated “Je ne suis pas un bout de viande” (“I am not a piece of meat”): a simple and almost naive sentence. Indeed what emerges here is again the reiteration, which follow us every step we take, every gaze we cross, every behavior we embody. To be a woman is part of this very reiteration, of this redundancy of movements and postures we embody as an automatism, in order to avoid the intervention of the surrounding space and on our sexualized body.

For Anna Raimondo – who “found” the title as a ready-made during a conference of his brother, a physician gynecologist – Vaginal Ecosystem is “a magical word” and “a metaphor”. It plays different feminist and gender matters: from the images of 1970’s demonstrations, where radical feminists mimic the vagina with a triangle drawn with their hands, to the coldness of the medical language. Yet, we don’t use the word vagina that often. We imply it, we name it by using allusive, “sweeter” words, we provide hints. The “V” word is in itself a statement. And using it in connection

with the idea that vaginal health is related with the possibility of feeling free and liberated in the spaces we cross, and not in connection to the organic health of our reproductive organ – the organ which defines our feminine mission in this planet – is extremely playful and radical at the same time.

As playful and radical is the nature of *New Boundaries* in itself: Anna spent time with different women; walked with them through sensible places; listened to and collected their stories mixed with field recordings; figured out with them a collective outputs, entertaining and serious at the same time.

The result is a psychogeographical map of different cities, a mix of voices and soundscapes, “which we often experience without hearing” underlines Raimondo, a sonic map, which is not functional or objective, sketched by the voices of women. It doesn’t follow historical trajectories, but instead put the spectator in the position to embody a subjective (and though universal) narration. A flânerie that leads to perceive urban spaces through female feelings.

A significant reference for the conception of this work is Gillian Rose’s *Feminism and Geography* (Gillian Rose, 1993, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* Univ. of Minnesota Press), as Raimondo declares, quoting few of its stronger sentences: “Geography is masculinist because while claiming to be exhaustive, it forgets about women’s existence and concerns itself only with the position of men.[...]

Masculinist geography generates its concepts and organizes its knowledge in order to exclude women’s issues. [...] It is reluctant to listen to anyone else”.

This essay shaped Raimondo’s very initial research, by essentially providing a conceptual and academic framework to an ethical need: according to her own statement, *New Boundaries* is a “feminist work”, a praxis conceived to “open up established boundaries of habits we usually deal with”. And she adds: “One of the reasons why I am a feminist: the possibility of social equality”.

What does it mean the behavior of women in public space? How urban space responds to women? How to map a place according to gender perspectives? Rose sets up the questions and proposed possible answers by deconstructing geography as a discipline in itself and focusing on how its knowledge is constructed.

*New Boundaries* moves on from here, by addressing bodies, the way geographies shape them and their behavior, and how they embody the knowledge constructed under the name of “geography”. “A geography which is made of our bodies and experiences and our subjectivities, presences and present. A geography which takes in account the multiplicities of gender perspectives”, underlines again Raimondo.

“When you walk on *sanpietrini* (roman cobbelstones, ndr) you feel constantly in danger, you feel you can not control the territory, you don’t feel safe”. “Every time I park the car, at night, before I unlock and get out, I look carefully the rear mirrors, to check if everything around me is quiet and safe”. “Yesterday on the bus, as usual extremely crowded so that we feel as anchovies in a box, I felt something leaning on my butt. Something firm but soft, inserted between my buttocks. I bounce, trying not to walk over any other anchovies, who already look badly at me, and I turn. It was the hand of a man, standing there behind me, with a vague gaze on his eyes”.

These are a very little part of the many fragments of conversations collected for *New Boundaries*, which remind us how the design of every urban context links with masculine needs or metaphors, not responding to female needs or sensibilities.

In Rome, a sound piece collecting voices and soundscapes was meaningfully installed in the spaces of Ex-Elettrofonica, with a physical detail which transformed its listening in a site-specific, immersive experience: the gallery – designed as a cave, with smooth corners and round-shaped volumes – was transformed in a welcoming, fuchsia, organic environment with the simple installation of magenta filters on the normally white lights. Listeners felt like being warmly hold in a womb.

Raimondo developed the second chapter in Valparaiso during the Festival Tsonami 2017, together

with Chilean sound artist Fernando Godoy as curator. After many “urban dérives” with different women, Raimondo conceived a collective and participative sound walk, still available online as a city guide.

*Nuevas fronteras #4 S.Cruz de Tenerife*, curated by Juan Matos Capote at the museum TEA, is shaped as a 6 channel sound installation and a series of portraits of women in significant places, for which they proclaim another narration asserting their active presence. For instance, Magda, a fatphobia activist, sits in front of a sad, fat statue in a public park, reclaiming the positivity of struggle against self-blaming as a form of identity.

For the Lucena version, in the frame of Sensxperiment Festival, Raimondo experiments with a new, site-specific and participative format: a street parade. A group of women is this time called to perform with their bodies and their voices a non-linear, sonic narration in different spots of the city. From the city narrated through sound and voices of the earlier versions, in Lucena we assist to an ephemeral, collective event which uses urban space as display and its inhabitants and involuntary public. A collective, female prayer to St. Theresa in Santiago Church; or a group of women sitting at the Paris Bar, where usually only men spend time.

Together with the site-specific outputs, Raimondo conceived a series of vinyl records and maps for every geography she researched, so to build an archive of words and sounds combined with a topography of “gestures of resistance” – gestures which the artist extrapolate from every conversation she had with the women involved in *New Boundaries*.