

*En omsorgsfull strejk** *A Careful Strike**

* *Precarias a la deriva*, 2005

Interview with Sam Hultin by Maya Nagano Holm

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Maya Nagano Holm: Your contribution to the exhibition *A Careful Strike** activates historical documents from the early trans movement's forms of organising and activism in Sweden departing from the club Transvestia that has its 56-years anniversary this year. What is *Transvestia's 56-årsjubileum* [Transvestia's 56-year Anniversary] about?

Sam Hultin: The anniversary is part of the ongoing project *Eva-Lisas monument*, which highlights parts of Stockholm's early trans movement as well as its relation to lesbian and feminist movements from the early 60's up until today. The project builds on the material that the trans pioneer Eva-Lisa Bengtson (1932–2018) collected into a unique archive of her life as an activist, and which I was entrusted with managing after her passing.

Transvestia, which was founded by Eva-Lisa and her friend Erika Sjöman in 1964, was Sweden's first club for trans people*. The anniversary, which due to the pandemic is being postponed to the fall of 2021, is a tribute to the club which during the years towards the end of the 1960's was a vital oasis for trans people, lesbians as well as people with various fetishes, sexualities and dreams that in various ways did not conform to hetero- and cis norms. The event will be held in the same building on Östgötagatan that the club had its parties in.

In anticipation of the anniversary, the video *Dear Eva-Lisa* (2020) will be shown on Mint's website. The video is based on some of the letters that Eva-Lisa received when she started the club which, together with photos from the parties, tell the history of Transvestia.

* The term transperson [trans person] did not emerge until the late 90's. Still, I use the term as it better describes the members of the club in a contemporary context than the term transvestit [transvestite] which they themselves used.

MNH: When I think of trans history in Sweden, I think of historical exclusion and silencing within and from various parts of feminist- and workers movements. But through your artistic practice and the project, *Eva-Lisa's Monument* – and current organizing for the rights of trans people in Sweden and the world – queer historiography and struggle where stories of community and solidarity are prominent is enabled. What do you think? How do you think this anniversary and *Eva-Lisa's Monument* relate to current conditions for the trans movement and the workers movement, and for art which stands in relation to these movements?

SH: An important part of feeling like one's identity is valid is having access to one's history. Being able to reflect oneself in people who have lived in other times, and other places can



help one understand that one is not alone or crazy because one's longing and desires are beyond society's norms. To furthermore obtain knowledge on what the history of homo- and transphobia looks like, on how trans expressions have been stigmatized through colonization and legislation as well as how it has affected other human rights movements' relation to the trans movement is also important for understanding how we today grasp trans identities.

Due to the historical and present-day marginalization of trans people, there are unfortunately big gaps in historiography. This is why archives like Eva-Lisa's become so important in filling in at least parts of these gaps. A red thread through the archive, which helps us understand why today's conversations about trans appear the way they do, is how many marginalized groups distance themselves from even more vulnerable groups as a way to protect what little power/status they have instead of showing solidarity with the vulnerable group. Outside of the archive, this can be seen in everything from the early strike movement's unwillingness to cooperate with women, to so-called white feminism which does not take into account how racism and sexism intersect in the oppression of women of colour. In Eva-Lisa's archive, this is shown in, amongst other things, how the early trans movement develops after a few years. With clear inspiration from the American transvestite movement, transsexual (!) and homosexual people were soon to be excluded, which affects Eva-Lisa who is both transsexual and lesbian. In the American feminist movement during the 70's and the Swedish one during the 90's, we can also see a debate which resembles the one we see today – radical feminists view trans people as a threat to women and exclude them. At the end of the 90's it was for example common to write “Transsexuals and transvestites not welcome” under lesbian events in RFSL Stockholm's magazine *På gång!*, and during the same time, Eva-Lisa was, after nearly 20 years of involvement, barred from Kvinnohuset [Women's House] in Stockholm. But in the archive, there are also examples of the opposite – contexts which have instead been including and where space for more was created. For example, in addition to Transvestia the lesbian Jerry's ladies club of the late 60's as well as the later kink clubs Lash and Wish worked in the same manner. If we can view today's conversations on and understandings of trans in light of the debates of the 70's and 90's, or even broaden our understanding of how fear of losing power works, I think we can have a more reasonable conversation today.

I think working as an artist with these questions based in the archive is a good way to make the trans community of today participate in history and historiography. Collective, inclusive processes where city walks, anniversaries and so on makes for a basis, can make history more accessible to a community it concerns and lets it come together and hopefully also lets it find strength in history and each other.

MNH: *Dear Eva-Lisa* is also a performance and a reading aloud of the letters that Eva-Lisa received, which you did together with parts of Stockholm's trans community at Moderna Museet 2019. I think that this performance is such a collective, inclusive process which you describe. For the video work *Dear Eva-Lisa* (2020) you use the same letter- and photo material, but how do you think that the storytelling differs when the spatial and collective aspects of reading aloud are missing?

SH: Yes, indeed – with the exception that the photos were not shown in the performance, except for a couple in the press release. The strength of the performance situation is the uncertainty and the feeling of absolute presence in the room that everyone is part of (almost) the same thing and can carry the moment with them collectively. A part of my work that I really enjoy is also getting to work with a group and create encounters between different queer generations, which is possible when one can create physical situations. In the performance, we who read aloud sat in a circle and turned towards each other whilst the audience sat around our small “bubble” and listened. The video instead emphasizes the distance between the authors of the letters. In it, there is a fragility which perhaps better portrays how reality actually appeared to them. I also believe that a balance is created

between that fragility and the photos, which I think wonderfully depicts a community. I am also happy to (even in times of a pandemic) be able to share these images with our community. After all, it becomes a reminder of what will hopefully soon be possible.

MNH: What does working as an artist today in relation to the history of the trans movement mean to you? Which questions and challenges do you think can arise when one tries to create art which represents, portrays or depicts the history of a movement?

SH: It is always tricky when one takes on the task of retelling parts of the history of a marginalized group. The life of Eva-Lisa furthermore contains several, sore debates, about vulnerable groups which have been retold to a relatively small degree. My depictions, of course, also become very subjective – I am not a scientist, and I was friends with Eva-Lisa. It does however become problematic when an (art) project is expected to represent “the whole history”, which of course easily happens when something has been described to such a small degree for example trans history. At the same time, the stories must be told, and I also think that there are good reasons to proceed from her queer network. I have since the beginning of the project had much and close contact with her friends and community (which in many cases coincide with my own). These people and contexts have likewise, in several ways, contributed to the project being realized at all. In the long run, of course, I also hope that stories which complement Eva-Lisa’s get to take space, and that people other than me take on the archive and focus on things that I, from my perspectives, am missing.

MNH: The exhibition *A Careful Strike** has its point of departure in Ruben Nilson’s painting *The History of the Workers Movement* (ca 1940). Is there anything in Nilson’s painting which resonates with your artistry?

SH: I like that my work can stand alongside Nilson’s. Not in polemic but more as an addition or a comment. A reminder that more stories are going on and have been going on simultaneously.