# Everything We Build

# In Conversation: Aay Liparoto and Lorena Juan

*Feminist queer ‘spaces’ are often far more than just bars, just book clubs, just dances, just sports teams, just magazines, or just performances. They are sites of community building, sites of resistance, sites of political organisation, sites of transformation, sites of healthcare, sites of survival, and sites of knowledge creation. How can we record and share these queer feminist practices in a meaningful way for our communities? What can we learn from each other?[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Multidisciplinary artist Aay Liparoto and their long-time co-conspirator, curator Lorena Juan met in Berlin in 2011 and soon spent their Friday nights discussing art and feminism around the kitchen table. Within the frame of Liparoto’s collaborative project *Not Found On* (2019–ongoing) and audio installation *no bodies welcome | all bodies welcome* (created withHOT BODIES – CHOIR,[[2]](#footnote-2) 2019), the pair share thoughts on their joint interests in community building and strategies for celebrating queer feminist knowledge both online and ‘IRL’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Now based in Brussels, Aay Liparoto works with long-term performance as a form of research in order to examine the power in the banal. Liparoto’s output is predominately video, text and performance, using accessible technology, personal digital archives and DIY strategies to reflect on the mechanics of the everyday life. In her curatorial practice, Lorena Juan works with experimental formats, public space, and collaborative processes. She is a cofounder of artists’ collective and online platform COVEN BERLIN, which aims to create an open sphere for deconstructing assimilated social structures of sexuality and gender. Their practices and research have solidified on common ground, although their meetings are often held in cyberspace.

**Lorena Juan:** Over the last decades, through the democratization of digital technologies and the digitalization of society, we have seen how social movements and political art have found new forms of expression, community, and connection. Since its inception, the internet has been a transformative space for artists, especially for those belonging to groups that have been historically excluded or confined to the private sphere. Queer and feminist activism has certainly found new tools in new media. How do you see your practice and *Not Found On* in particular within this genealogy?

**Aay Liparoto:** As an artist I engage with deconstructing the power dynamics of everyday objects – I am a person with a body and a phone and I rarely leave the house naked. Our daily life is saturated by new and old technologies, tools that transform us and with which we coexist. Clothes and mobile phones are technologies of bodily extension that we use to code/signal to various publics. However, with phones, the scale of the public is different. I am interested in actively using such technologies to question how their materials produce behaviours and what capacity to shift, disrupt and demystify we might have.

This questioning led me to initiate *Not Found On,* a collaborative projecttocreate an online space to record, share, and value queer feminist arts and social knowledge. The project is based on an open source wiki structure, and has been designed, developed and written through workshops with, by, and for queer feminist bodies.Through the collective processes of thinking and making, there is an invitation to question the culture and politics of the online platforms in which we participate, the idea that ‘the internet in itself offers no guarantee of transformation.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

**LJ:** Was *Not Found On* born out of the urgency of creating an alternative to Wikipedia for queer feminist knowledge sharing?

**AL:** Initially I was invited to publish my book *Andrew Has His Period* within the frame of an accessible archive, which came out of my experiences of researching and struggling to gain access to media and information in remote feminist archives due to their location, high price, or being out of print. How to publish, value and share access was pivotal. It seemed natural to look at Wikipedia’s recording; however I soon realised that what I was proposing would not be eligible based on their benchmarks for inclusion: a writing style with a ‘neutral standpoint’, no original content, required notability and criteria of verifiability.

I began applying these conditions to much of the culture, magazines, spaces, and artists, I respect, read, and visit, and it became clear that almost all of them would not be accepted, including whole communities and networks across multiple cities. These are networks of self-organized counter-publics evolved from the need to fill gaps in mainstream publishing and programming. However, in order to be included in Wikipedia, they would need the validation of mainstream media to be acknowledged as legitimate. It was a reminder of the emptiness of the statement ‘the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.’[[5]](#footnote-5) – In reality, a space with rigid power structures and inherent race and gender biases, where some types of knowledge are respected and others aren’t.

Where do feminist queer bodies value and share knowledge created by our communities? Facebook pages, tumblrs, reddit, email newsletters, their own websites, archives, zines, bars, kitchen tables? What are the politics of the spaces we use? Who owns the data and images collected? How are our experiences regulated and shared?

**LJ:** Wiki technologies have been around for quite a while. Why should we still use them?

**AL:** Wikis are not sexy. They are clunky, labour intensive and totally have their limitations. Still, they are an open source tool that enables co-writing among larger numbers of people and includes multiple media formats: text, audio, and video. It is also stable and easy to install your own version. And, crucially, it has a large community sustaining the technology, which is necessary with a limited budget, for the longevity of the project.

There is still the simple beauty of the visible history function, transparency about the evolution of ideas through the evolving layers of an entry. I stepped into this wiki world through the project and have found it a good space to slow down, to step back from the seduction of smooth operating sites and to become more aware of organising structures. A learning and testing space, this slowness allows more time to question what and why we want to share.

In some ways the desire to create a space to document ‘queerness’, something sticky and blurry, something essentially undefined within a wiki is absurd. The *Not Found On* wiki desires to be more of a junction box, collecting certain pieces of knowledge while also connecting out to other sites, projects and networks.

**LJ:** There is something inherently queer about collective work in the arts, about defying the idea of the autonomy of the single author. Is meeting in real life for collaborative co-writing sessions a big part of *Not Found On*?

**AL:** Meeting and working together is so vital in order to understand our relationships to each other via digital technologies. Co-learning and co-creating is essential to *Not Found On* as a feminist practice. The project launched in March 2019 with a think-tank day with ten guests who work around queer DIY publishing, activism and organising, such as yourself (Lorena Juan), Mert Sen, Tyna Adebowale, Marnie Slater and Karol Radziszewski. The aim was to discuss how to create a safer online space for recording and sharing queer knowledge. There was also a workshop by Just For The Record, a group that addresses ‘how gender is represented in new media and writing/publishing tools like Wikipedia, and what influence this has on the way history is recorded’.[[6]](#footnote-6) The event, hosted at WORM Rotterdam to coincide with International Women’s Day, was really a catalyst point to flag concerns and for proposing strategies.

The project has been built through existing networks of DIY queer feminist organisations over eleven subsequent workshops in Brussels, Liverpool and Rotterdam. The site went live in May 2019 and has been shaped by around ninety-five queer feminists, in particular social designer Cristina Cochior and in various capacities, Laura Deschepper, Priya Sharma, Carlos Marfil Rodriguez and Conway. *Not Found On* is an intensive on-going process of co-learning, with everything built step by-step via IRL workshops. Our most pressing focus is working with different groups to test and adapt the input forms, interfaces, and design accessibility.

There is an intense labour in collective work that requires time and care and also allows for error and accountability. The desire to have a physical community is something that has come up over and over again in our workshops, and will remain at the project’s heart. We are still seeking collaborators to work with us in defining the space further.

**LJ:** Is your work with HOT BODIES – CHOIR an extension of this practice?

**AL:** *no bodies welcome | all bodies welcome* made in collaboration withHOT BODIES – CHOIR,is about the embodied experience of knowledge and its transmission. The desire was to create a piece around this research and methodology without directly exposing the *Not Found On* platform, which has a specific public and intention.

Through a series of workshops we looked for a way to combine the writing and singing practices of HOT BODIES – CHOIR in Brussels with the co-writing of *Not Found On*. To find words and voice to together acknowledge our interdependence with digital technology as queer feminist bodies for information, work, sex, entrainment, communication, social life, healthcare and combinations of them all. In *no bodies welcome | all bodies welcome* we transmit a sticky mixture of reflections on cyberspace and offer unsolicited advice sent directly into your ear canals via an audio installation.

**LJ:** Virtual space can change the habits of the subjects who inhabit it and subsequently have an impact on the broader dynamics of social production and reproduction. However, as Rosi Braidotti points out, in times of great technological developments, Western society reaffirms its traditional habits, especially the tendency to create hierarchies. In what we know as ‘pink washing’, corporations appropriate the struggles of queer bodies in order to obtain economic and social benefits. Which strategies do you use in *Not Found On* to challenge this commodification?

**AL:** There are a couple of aspects I want to touch on here: first, the practical function and structure of the project *Not Found On*, and second, the reliance of marginalized bodies on commercial spaces and the idea of ‘identities’ going mainstream.

The project comes out of a resistance to the neatly packaged commodification of identities. It seeks to be a hub for recording a multiplicity of voices in their own complexity and connecting to other projects and people. On a practical level, we know what our server looks like, where it is located and the people/politics that care for it. This allows us to collectively run a community space, where we are able to establish our practices, code of conduct, and content. The site itself encourages tactics of obfuscation and won’t sell your data.

From reddit groups on trans healthcare and queer city-based Facebook groups to specific dating apps, there is now, as ever, a great need for marginalized people to form counter-publics; to connect online and IRL to people like us and seek the information we don’t find in other spaces. But what does it mean to use these often ‘free’ spaces that monetize our data? Friedman puts it well: ‘corporations seeking to commodify user information have enclosed the so-called “internet commons” by offering a devil’s bargain trading access to global networks for individual privacy.’[[7]](#footnote-7)We are allowing‘our identities’ to be sanitized, sold back to us at best, and exposing ourselves to real world harm, at worst. Are we suffering from digital apathy or does the need to connect to others just outweigh the time and energy required to question these spaces?

I am cautious that, along with a greater presence of intersectional feminist, queer and LGBTIA+ narratives in mainstream media, there has been a rise in far-right politics across Europe and the USA and, worryingly, an increase of hate crimes. Although one might think that more visibility is a kin to breaking these power imbalances I ask: Who is telling these narratives? Who is profiting from them? I am cynical of feminism, decolonization, and queerness being ‘trends’. These are not and never have been trends: they are urgencies, and as long as these systems of oppression go on, there is a need to self-organise opposition and find ways to build energy in our communities.

**LJ:** In questioning the spaces that we inhabit, the artwork of Tabita Reizaire comes to mind. In *Afro Cyber Resistance* (2014), she draws upon discourses of e-colonialism to show up the internet as a ‘white space’. How do you see *Not Found On* in relationship to this?

**AL:** What resonates in Tabita Rezaire’s work is the need for people to register their own knowledge and embodied experience, such as in her example of Wiki Africa, to resist being subjugated by the existing power structures, now reproduced online. The work is a call to consciousness and action.

*Not Found On* can’t and does not seek to be applied as a one-size-fits allmodel. This platform comes out of the needs and desires of a particular context: created in English, in Western Europe, and tied to ideas of Western feminism, queerness, gender and LGBTIA+ narratives. We acknowledge the rich and varying articulations of gender and sexuality that exist globally and the lasting legacies of colonial laws still enacted upon predominantly black and brown queer bodies.

In its conception, *Not Found On* suggests two significations: Firstly, all that is not adequately recorded nor respected by historical and mainstream canons. The narratives we were never told in schools, the artists, thinkers, and achievements that were and are left out on the basis of class, race, religion, gender and sexuality. Secondly, the attempt of this space to house and connect diverse queer feminist experiences, while ultimately knowing that it can never and should not try to represent all.

*Not Found On* takes Flavia Dzodan’s scream ‘MY FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT!’ as a founding statement. These lines are just lip service unless participation, action, and critique are applied. We seek to manipulate the tools and language of the site in an attempt to not submit to established power dynamics for example by looking for alternative ways to organise and search information, by embracing non-standardised language, by asking users to offer a ‘politics of location’[[8]](#footnote-8) statement, and by clearly stating our limitations, where the project comes from and how we are funded. The site itself invites you to be critical of the spaces you participate including ours.

**LJ:** Radical queer and feminist offline spaces employ strategies to create ‘safe spaces’. Can a virtual platform aspire to be a ‘safe space’? If so, which protocols should be followed?

**AL:** I feel that the question should always be: What is a safe space and for whom? Regardless of whether off- or online, we can only ever speak of a ‘safer space’ and never a ‘safe space’. Safer space is more about the community and culture you build around a space which is an active and on-going process.

Our aim is to be at use for a specific public, but this of course is tricky online where there can be no expectation of privacy. We prefer not to appear in search engines, we ask not to be crawled and from our community we ask not to be shared on social media. However, this is no guarantee. It is crucial for us to make our community aware of the structure we are participating in. For example, we make it clear that you can register for an account without providing an email address or legal name. Despite this, your IP address leaves a trace and you may be identified by your location or name on an internet contract.

We do not use categories in our data structure but define each entry via an array of descriptors, some based on more literal properties such as location or form; others on energy, mood and associations. We are looking for alternative overlapping and subjective ways to find and think about content and context. We are attempting to use the wiki structure unconventionally to escape the toxicity that has been enacted via taxonomy.

Currently we are small-scale by design, and opening up to people personally via workshops. As the space grows there will be new urgencies, with the tension between protection from vandalism and reaching a wider audience. We will soon host *Not Found On* workshops looking at existing social technical protocols among feminist and LGBTQIA+ forums, private groups and archives. Seeking to collectively address whether they deter people with a legitimate claim to the space, asking how we can build community on *Not Found On* whilst addressing privacy needs.

**LJ:** For me *Not Found On* is about self-preservation and, at the same time, embracing vulnerability. So it may not be so far away from our initial encounters at the kitchen table and the desire to find community.

**AL:** It so often starts in a kitchen, I think this might be the least respected seat of knowledge but such a vital setting, especially for othered bodies! The desire to self-organise and curate the spaces we need is still so relevant, much as you do with [COVEN BERLIN*.*](http://www.covenberlin.com/) While we want to develop direct community in our local areas with people we know, I think it also goes beyond connection as a purely social function – it’s about supportive networks of knowledge.

I believe collective recording is key to breaking the cycle of the vibrant energies of people in the now only being ‘discovered’ and celebrated 20 or 30 years later when they are no longer a threat to systems in power. This silencing through lack of record in the public domain makes it much harder for that knowledge to accumulate intergenerationally.

*Not Found On* is one gesture towards changing that. We want to invite queer feminist bodies to join us, to take time to grow and to be allowed to fail.

*‘Everything you own you’ve had to build on stolen ground but now we build inwards. Deeper away from all pick up the stones and build with us.’[[9]](#footnote-9)*

1. Text from *Not Found On* introduction, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. HOT BODIES – CHOIR, Gérald Kurdian, www.wearehotbodiesofthefuture.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This conversation has been edited for print. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elisabeth J. Friedman, *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Wikipedia’s description on the main page, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\_Page. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Just for the Record, http://justfortherecord.space/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Friedman, *Interpreting the Internet*, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Adrienne Rich, ‘Notes Toward a Politics of Location (1984)’, in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986, pp. 210-231. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Text from *Not Found On* co-writing session with 9 bodies, Liverpool, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)