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Membra(I)nes. Technologies, Theories, and Aesthetics of Im/Permeability. Introduction

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Abstract: Under the conceptual metaphor “membra(I)nes,” the 12th annual conference of the Gender Studies Association (June 15–17, 2023) focused explicitly for the first time on approaches to intersectional gender research from the perspectives of media, art, and cultural studies. The fact that the conference was held for the first time at art academies and in the eastern German cities of Leipzig and Halle (Saale) continued the programmatic theme of crossing boundaries and permeability at a structural level. In this special issue, the considerations from the event are further pursued, deepened, and expanded beyond the ephemeral format of the conference and made accessible to a broad public.

Keywords: Membrane, Permeability, Threshold, Decolonization

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Membra(I)nes was the first annual conference of the Gender Studies Association to explicitly address intersectional gender research from the perspectives of media, art, and cultural studies. This 12th iteration of the conference format took place – as a first for the series – at art academies rather than universities. The idea of the membranous was built upon also in a structural way by the conference hosts, Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle and the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig, whose venues allowed for different levels of border crossing and permeability. With Leipzig and Halle (Salle), two East German cities had deliberately been chosen as conference locations – also for the first time. In these places, current epistemological and geopolitical dynamics of border demarcation (between East and West, civil society and elite, etc.) and limitations (of migration, diversity, and inclusion) materialize most significantly, while the permeability of class barriers (in the wake of educational mobility) and political values are particularly palpable. In its very infrastructure, the event thus brought into debate selective yet permeable border spaces between cities, political systems, and academic spaces.

Based on the idea of the membrane as a thin border with the ability to separate but also to generate resonance through vibration, our aim was to stimulate a dynamization of gender research in art and media cultural studies and to point to art as a form of knowledge relevant to the imagination and constitution of gender within gender studies. As a model, the membrane promised to make this disciplinary permeability productive in a way that had not yet been consistently implemented in German-speaking contexts, a desideratum of the professional community. At the same time, the areas in which membranes or membranous rationales occur are diverse; they transcend questions of aesthetics and cultural studies yet connect to them. In addition to bio-membranes, there are numerous artificial membranes – some originate in everyday life, some take on high-tech forms, some are used industrially, and some enter into syntheses with living beings. In the simple form of vibrating skin, they have played a role in musical and sound instruments for thousands of years. Clothing and fashion function as a membrane between bodies, protecting, communicating, and negotiating social values. Artistic practices use the membrane as a material and a tool, opening up knowledge production beyond the verbal and the written. In

regard to the materiality of membranes, we are confronted with questions of sustainability, not only in artistic practice but also in everyday life when dealing with clothing and all other shells (such as cars and airplane cabins), the porosity of which – in terms of emissions or microplastic contamination – is a constituent factor in climate change. Here, too, the question arises how the metaphor of the membrane is suitable for recoding. For with every act of permeation, something begins to vibrate, generating resonances whose potential needs to be explored.

The membrane can be viewed as a zone of multiple contact in which displacements, divisions and separations, as well as fragmentations and interruptions take place. As such a zone, it can be linked to various issues in gender and queer studies, enhancing perspectives on the relationship between difference and equality, on vulnerability as well as on relationality and temporality. At the same time, it describes a spatial relationship of the “in-between” and the transition zone, which in turn emphasizes a processual quality. Following the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who describes this space as a “point of cultural articulation of identity and difference” that reinscribes “human, historical commonality” in the present (Bhabha 2011 [2000], 185, 10), the metaphor of the membrane allows us to shift the focus: While Bhabha describes this zone spatially, the present issue takes a closer look at the functional structure and effects that this space produces. The membrane as a figure of transition and transfer in which processes of selection as well as their very criteria and actors are mobilized, shaped, and reconfigured, is not a neutral medium. In this sense, it is a venue for power relations and must itself be subjected to critical readings. It has the potential for renewal, reassembly, reconstruction, and thus for change.

The membranous therefore not only refers to techniques of visualization through flat materials such as canvases, screens, foils, and textile fabrics, which are important for artistic discourses and practices, but also to the problem of pollution by plastics, electronic waste, and toxins associated with these materials. The concept of the membrane further raises the question of selective migration and the mechanisms and technologies of asymmetrical regulation of movement between spaces – but also between genders. Using the spelling “membra(I)nes” attempts to express the complexity and tension between permeability and selection. The parentheses symbolize interruption but also mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

At the same time, the spelling “membra(I)nes” draws attention to the brain, to intellectual and cognitive capacity. This reference raises questions as to how processes of subject constitution and the formation of an “I” can be examined and negotiated in a discursive context where rigid boundaries

between humans, plants, and animals are challenged. The membrane represents a commonality between single-celled organisms, plants, and human and non-human animals, and is a connecting denominator between human and more-than-human organisms. How do we negotiate intelligence and cognition based on this commonality? Can current discourses on artificial intelligence be examined and discussed using the membrane as a category of analysis? Can the membrane be used to address cognition as an ability to separate and oscillate, to encase and permeate? To what extent does this bring sensory and affective, technological and media-cultural, and/or performative and artistic dimensions into the focus of research on knowledge and knowledge processing? The unfamiliar spelling was therefore not simply a self-indulgent play on metaphors, but rather a critical response to a discourse in technology research, computer science, and social sciences, as well as media, art, and cultural studies. This response is particularly pertinent against the backdrop of recent developments in the field of machine learning, namely the assertion that the systems based on data mining and machine learning that are used in commercial applications, such as ChatGPT or Google Gemini, are intelligent systems.

The introduction of the “brain” as a membrane and thus a sensory medium challenges the anthropocentrism of AI discourses, which place intelligence at the center of their research and align it with the thinking ability of humans in the long tradition of binary divisions between body and mind. Insofar as this tradition also provides a basis for racialized understandings of the human, the conference title forms an important link to sometimes insufficiently intersectional discussions of posthumanism within gender studies. Since divisions of intellectual capacity are grounded in racist reasoning, the conference aimed at encouraging a discussion on the sometimes presumed agency of non-human intelligence in posthuman discourses.

We felt that such a discussion was particularly necessary in light of the events during the previous installment of the conference series – the 11th Annual Conference of the Gender Studies Association that took place in 2022 in Kassel under the title “Decolonizing Gender Studies” (Bahadori et al. 2022). Our aim was not to use decolonization as a metaphorical game, contrary to what the title might suggest, but to implement it, at least to some extent, through organizational practices. Against this background, decolonizing gender studies meant not only diversification in subject matter but also practicing participation, economic dissemination, and inclusion, thus taking decolonization seriously as a methodology for revising academic spaces of which conferences are only one instance. Since this was not considered in the organization of the conference in Kassel or implemented in practice, racialized scholars and artists at the Mem-

bra(l)nes conference organized a fishbowl discussion for the closing panel. The participants addressed issues of (colonized) vulnerability, reparations, and power sharing, eventually raising the question whether the academy can be decolonized at all.

The organizing team, whose members are situated in various professional roles and contexts and are white and non-white, less or more queer, neurodiverse, and abled-bodied, had set itself the goal of scrutinizing the interdisciplinary horizon not only in terms of content but also in terms of form, personnel, and infrastructure. A space was to be created in which scholars and artistic researchers – primarily in person – could exchange views on an equal footing. In lectures, workshops, and panel discussions, talking and thinking *about* art was transformed into an epistemic practice *with* art. This way, participants explored the potential of the membrane for academic investigations in the field of artistic practice and vice versa – not least in order to negotiate the place and practice of decolonial knowledge production themselves.

A central element of the event was an expanded understanding of what the conference format should and could be. In addition to the discussion sections, a two-part exhibition at the Gallery of the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig and at the Burg Galerie as well as the broad supporting program translated the conference topic into an aesthetic experience. On the other hand, the exhibition and participatory programs, such as queer ping pong and karaoke, as well as a free concert facilitated easier access for an interested public beyond professional affinities. These activities provided opportunities for informal encounters and exchange; moreover, they were decidedly physical in nature. Thus, the conference topic did not remain a mere abstract reference on an intellectual level but continuously materialized in new constellations.

Contributors to the conference were able to make the concept of the membrane productive for their own research and, in return, provide inspiration for the discussion of the epistemic figure of the membrane. As hoped, this was achieved in a critical manner in regard to the question of the permeability of gender studies and further pursued in the context of STEM subjects in terms of technology policy. Equally prominent sites for debate were the more or less dense boundaries between science and activism as well as material manifestations, such as the resilience of queer printed matter. Furthermore, the membrane proved to be a powerful body of resonance for approaches that dealt with gendered modes of sound, voice, and popular music. Approaches to gender in art and in visual culture studies, which often focus on visual phenomena, were thus significantly expanded. Similar moments of transgression were observed in regard to natural science. Here, for example, phenomenologies of the cell

membrane and corresponding models of visualization were examined from a historical perspective, while biochemical processes of the brain were placed into a critical dialogue with socio-sensual contexts.

This productivity inspired us to further reflect on the membrane beyond the conference and to open the discussion to a broader and international audience in this special issue of the Open Gender Journal. The conceptual metaphor of membra(I)nes addresses current, highly relevant issues in several respects: It opens up new connections for gender studies to international research on artificial intelligence, critical Anthropocene research, queer-feminist new materialisms, and racism and migration research, which are explicitly located in the field of the humanities. The present issue offers an opportunity for the continued exploration of the membrane's epistemological potential to (un-)regulated transition and for discussions of it in a transdisciplinary forum.

The selection of contributions is at least indirectly representative of the event. The issue focuses on the biological and technical aspects of the membrane while also addressing social, cultural, and political processes in the field of intersectional gender studies. Once again, the team of editors, which was formed in part from the organizing team (Huber, Köppert, Nastold) and expanded to include a participant (González Athenas), extended an invitation to operationalize a material formation within gender discourses on the one hand and to design speculative spaces for negotiating abstract dynamics within the areas outlined above on the other. To this end, selected presentations from the conference were further elaborated, and new contributions were requested specifically for this publication.

As intended, this compilation of contributions also includes reflections on the topic of permeability. In addition to regular research articles, which refer to current debates, the expanded essay section and, in particular, artistic contributions once again overcome the hermeticism of academic knowledge production, both in terms of the form of articulation and the authors' positioning. The issue hosts contributors from the field of academic practice as well as artists and colleagues who move between these structures, temporarily use one form of articulation or the other, or resist conventional categorization qua institutional framing. By integrating artistic forms of expression, the issue continues the disciplinary and interdisciplinary transgressions that were tested at the conference. The resonance between, for instance, Hongwei Bao's lyrical portrayal of queer desire under the conditions of transcultural (mis-)understanding, Anna T.'s experimental exploration of queer multilingualism, and Lissy Willberg's artis-

tic research practice dedicated to active-passive dualism allows a glimpse of how membranous effects are mobilized intertextually and visually.

Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer's contribution takes the slimy bio-membrane and its smooth muscle fibers as a starting point for reflecting on regularly occurring phases of stress in university teaching and the resulting psychological and physiological reactions. Lorenz-Meyer asks to what extent stress within academic learning processes, under the imperative of constantly increased productivity, often causes unnoticed damage to the body and how this damage can possibly be compensated for through solidarity, care, or adaptive tactics. Drawing on early psychoanalytic concepts of the energetic-sensual capacities of mucous membranes to interpret student exercises in memory work, the article takes the sonic, haptic, or contractive reactions of, for example, stomachs and throats seriously as expressions of physical negotiation processes with specific learning environments.

Mart Busche's article also questions teaching and learning spaces, examining the impermeability of schools' gender orders with a look at the opportunities offered by membranous thinking. Based on neo-materialist and post-humanist approaches, schools are described as mobile contact zones in which discourses, bodies, things, and spaces continuously co-produce gender. The metaphor of the membrane shows that permeability is never a given but only established through discursive and material struggles – and embedded in colonial, racializing, and heteronormative power structures. Interviews with queer teachers show how routines and affects can either hinder or promote the recognition of trans*, inter*, and non-binary students.

Rena Onat examines decolonizing perspectives in queer art, specifically in the areas of performance and photography. The artists discussed address the separation between body and mind, masculinity and femininity, or rationality and intuition. In their performances, they deal with colonialism, grief, and trauma, focusing on embodied knowledge for resistance, healing, and transformation. Onat works with concepts from Latin-American theory and activism, such as "*sentipensando*" (feeling-thinking), to examine queer and trans* activist art.

The concept of the metaphor "membra(I)nes" is discussed in Kara Keeling's contribution in relation to the work of African-American feminist critic and theorist Hortense Spillers, who introduces the notion of "vestibular" to distinguish between "body" and "flesh". Spillers uses the term to open up a space that lies outside the sphere of culture. This space is close to the cultural sphere but can also be read as the spatial-temporal dimension of the "unconscious", which offers meaning in an indecipherable way and represents an instance of utopia.

The concept of the “vestibular”, which is derived from the physiological balance system, represents the sixth sense or “sense of movement” in such a utopia.

The conversation between Ama Josephine Budge Johnstone and Heather Davis, which took place during the conference and is presented here in the form of an edited transcription, deals with relationships between plastic, the body, and pleasure as performed in highly complex and at the same time ethical practices. The conversation provides personal insights into the authors’ understanding of intersectional issues of race, class, gender, and queerness in the context of climate colonialism. The plastic material cellophane, a physical substance, is seen as both pleasurable and harmful, turned into an analogy for the effects of white supremacy and academic discourse – seemingly impenetrable and almost invisible. The conversation explores ways of rethinking this issue from a queer perspective and possible changes away from a perspective of mere survival.

Hongwei Bao’s series of poetic snapshots traces the affective stages of a queer relationship over the course of time. The lyrical “I” speaks from the perspective of a queer person strongly influenced by Chinese culture. Alternating between I, you, we, and us, Bao’s vignettes explore the role of cultural and personal differences in the mediation of queer intimacy. In the form of self-questioning, they examine the (de-)territorialization of queer desire via familial or elective affinities, as well as racialized, ethnic, and cultural identification. In Bao’s description, the bodies of the protagonists can be understood as only partially permeable structures through which desires and needs as well as fantasies and hopes are translated into often sensual impulses of varying intensity and duration: tastes, smells, temperatures.

Anna T.’s performative essay combines membranous thinking with multilingualism, taking a joint project with Antke A. Engel as its starting point. It deals with migration and queerness as conditions that both rely on code-switching for finding one’s way in the world. At the center of the discussion are various forms of discrimination and the desire to connect – with other people, with an audience, with other animals. The essay oscillates in form between article, diary, and lecture, inviting participatory and interactive elements through anonymous writing. Membranous thinking becomes an im_permeable contact zone, questioning the common binary between author and reader.

Antke A. Engel’s individual contribution reviews the online padlets that were developed over the course of the conference. These were intended to make the conference’s anti-discrimination agenda accessible beyond the academic context, both in the run-up to and during the documentation of the event. The padlets illustrate how the organizing team – supported by the Gender/Queer Association as well as by funding by the Federal Agency for Civic Education and

by Aktion Mensch – attempted, on the one hand, to combat discrimination in its diverse, intersectionally interlinked dimensions and, on the other hand, to create the necessary conditions for a specific aspect of inclusion, namely the participation of deaf people. Engel's critical reflection as part of the team makes an important contribution to the retracing of processes of learning, unlearning, and failure.

Lissy Willberg's artistic-research contribution places similar themes at the center of the visual-textual examination and asks questions regarding an active-passive dualism: participant or observer? Above or below, swimming or crawling, penetrating or being penetrated? At the conference, Willberg offered a physical exercise based on their research paper "Amoeboid swimming is propelled by molecular paddling in Lymphocytes" (2020) in the context of a lecture performance, which served as a basis for imagining and tracing inner (membrane) movement. Willberg's contribution to this issue collages four main elements of the performance lecture and invites the reader to interactively engage with it.

In Mayra Citlalli Rojo Gómez's text, which combines words, graphic textures, and sounds, scientific and artistic research intertwine. The concept of "Ši: Book of entities" is examined: "Ši" comes from the language of the Hñähñú, an indigenous ethnic group in central Mexico, and refers to a worldview in which all living beings are interconnected. This view is transferred to the concept of a book with inscriptions that are considered beyond the text. The boundaries of writing and meaning are transcended by emphasizing the book as a space of hybridization between art, sound, and the biological processes of mold, and thus as a mutable body.

Beyond the pure text and the collection of letters, Dan Dansen addresses non-binary and trans* ancestors in performance and essay. Dansen's performance was presented at the conference; it is made available in this issue in the form of image and video documentation. The contribution reflects on trans* ancestors before the European Enlightenment and before the systematization of European historiography into binary, heteronormative, and racist heroic narratives. Dansen explores the potential of a non-binary historical narrative that is capable of challenging normative, exclusionary historical narratives.

Leipzig-based artist Agnes Lammert presents another artistic research contribution, in the form of a series of images. For the exhibition "Membran" at Kunstverein Bautzen, Lammert developed a walk-in, space-filling installation. In a two-week work phase, she created a space inspired by the cavities of the inner ear, using wax, permeable fleece, and a raw outer framework. The shape of this space was reminiscent of the "membranous labyrinth" – the ear's system of

ducts and sacs responsible for the perception of movement and space. If this system is disturbed, humans experience a loss of orientation. Thrown back to one's own physical experience, intimacy and vulnerability become palpable. "Membran" raises questions about boundaries, fears, health, fragility, and about the individual and collective dimensions of physical experiences. The documentation of the installation is accompanied by a text by Katrin Köppert, stretching the membranous resonance space even further.

Petja Ivanova's contribution, following a participatory workshop, summarizes electricity as a socio-material, somatic, and epistemological force in an undisciplined manner. Ivanova draws on feminist technoscience, membrane theory, and erotic pedagogy to render porous the binary between electricity as a technical-industrial extract and as an immanent, bodily, and relational phenomenon. By placing the bioelectric, the planetary, and the affective at the center, Ivanova shows how electricity begins to oscillate not only as a metaphor or infrastructure, but also as a method, a feeling, a relationship. For this publication, Ivanova has developed a series of poetic (Fluxus) scores inspired by Yoko Ono that invite an embodied exploration of charge, transmission, and touch.

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