Quito Ziegler: ’The WERRRQSHOP is becoming the kind of intergenerational space of positive energy we imagined.’

February 11, 2015 By Visual AIDS

Quito Ziegler during WERRRQSHOP at the Joan MItchell Foundation

“Can we come together and build community to address the injustices we face--your contributions are an important voice that needs to be heard!!!”

These lines read across the recent posts on the Facebook page for Quito Ziegler and Ethan Shoshan’s WERRRQSHOP, a weekly program held at the Joan Mitchell Foundation Education and Resource Center. As a space for intergenerational mentoring for queer artistic and/or transient youth, the WERRRQSHOP has proven to be a responsive site for on-the-ground activism that aims to do just that: build community and fight injustice through the arts. The WERRRQSHOP is a space for queer youth to explore their creativity with “crafts, drag making, sign-making for demos, last-minute accessories, painting, drawing, and hot glue insanity.”

Since its inception in October, the WERRRQSHOP has responded to the whirlwind of injustice in New York City and elsewhere through sign-making for recent protests and the production of a timely and moving WHAT MATTERS zine (now available at the Bureau of General Services Queer Division). And as a self-described “art hub for queer movement-building,” the WERRRQSHOP has been an ideal partner for Visual AIDS Play Smart packing events, the second of which will be held on Friday, February 13, from 3 to 7 p.m. This WERRRQSHOP will feature facilitated conversation around how HIV affects the lives of youth and transient communities as well as embroidery demonstrations; this intermingling of intensely necessary dialogue and active artmaking gives the WERRRQSHOP its unique blend. Here, Visual AIDS interviews Quito and Ethan about the WERRRQSHOP’s first four months in action.

Describe the evolution of WERRRQSHOP at the Joan Mitchell Foundation: Who was involved, what was the inspiration, and what were the big ideas behind its creation
Quito: Well first of all we are both so inspired, constantly, by the communities of queer artists that we come from, and the communities that they come from, and the people who mentored them, and so on.

Ethan: And in the summer of 2013 Hunter Reynolds relaunched an old program at the Easton Mountain retreat center called "Arts in the Woods" (AITW). The program offered queer homeless youth a week in the woods with all kinds of arts classes. I started working with Hunter in the initial stages, going to the different shelters in NYC and doing demonstrations to show the young folks there a taste of some art classes in store for them if they decided to come.

Quito: My faerie sister Wil Fisher/Sylvia London worked for Easton and helped organize AITW on their end; we had worked together on a couple of plays in the deep Vermont woods and she was the one who invited me. Hunter was encouraging collaboration between teaching artists and when I heard Ethan was going too it was sort of a no-brainer.

Ethan: During AITW, Quito and I took over Hunter's art shack, filled it with donations from Materials for the Arts and let the young people take over. They got excited by fabric, beads, glitter, and all sorts of playful exchanges and kiki, using the tools as a way to process all of our experiences and make something for each of us. It was important to us not to structure it as a formal class so we could hang out in a relaxed environment and really not feel pressured. It was amazing what the young folks learned when they let go of the drama around them. You could see them get excited and focus on something they really wanted to make!

Quito: It was also where we met our favorite co-conspirator Kristen Parker Lovell, who does HIV testing at Sylvia's Place and whose activism roots from when Sylvia Rivera was still around and mentored her. Kristen was the chaperone of the group from Sylvia's, and is also a pretty amazing artist and performer herself (with a real flair for the video selfie). We wound up spending a bunch of time together at the craft shack, which is when we discovered our shared love of scheming for revolutionary purposes. This is also where we met Ky'iera Campbell, another dear collaborator who was working with Kristen on Trans in Action (a trans empowerment and education group based at Sylvia's Place) at the time and eventually became one of the stars of my movie [Wild Ponies].

Ethan: We ran the craft shack for two summers at Easton, and this summer the young people will be running it themselves with my help. Quito will be co-directing the camp. It was and is a truly inspired program, and the amount of talent these young people have is astounding. When we came back to NYC, Travis Laughlin from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, who provided a grant to support AITW, invited us to bring the magic of the "Craft Shack" to the Foundation's new Education & Research Center. We started doing the WERRRQSHOP in October 2014.

Quito: When I first met the young people in 2013, I was nearing the end of three complicated years of transience, myself. At Easton, I found myself bonding with them through our strikingly parallel, yet critically different experiences. Most people arrive at transience, or homelessness, through

circumstances far less voluntary/far more systemic than mine. I had the privileges of broad social networks, some scattered sublets, advanced degrees, white skin and 20 years of independent living. Yet there were elements of our experiences and exhaustion that were very much common. I was really moved by the stories I heard--and it got more intense later in the week when Islan Nettles was killed, and we addressed it in the woods as a community.

Upon return to NYC, I felt like I couldn't just drop the relationships we had opened up at the Craft Shack so I started spending time at Sylvia's Place. I made a 3-year commitment to apply my energies towards developing sustainable projects that would support the young peoples' survival and growth. Kristen has been on staff at Sylvia's for eight years, and we started scheming about the best ways to start connecting the tight networks of young homeless queers with the interconnected queer communities that Ethan and I are a part of.

Eventually we hit upon the "winning" formula of the Thursday night Family Dinners program, where a group of volunteers, staff and former clients make dinner and eat together at the shelter with the current residents there. Cooking skills and recipes are shared across generations and cultures, young people and former clients and queers of all stripes have space to be together, and we all eat REALLY well. It's kind of a beautiful phenomenon on a lot of different levels.

The WERRRQSHOP is a way for us to continue building these relationships and interconnect our networks and provide mentorship for the young people in their artistic development, which all contribute to movement-building in the long run.

What communities are you hoping to reach through WERRRQSHOP? What are some of the challenges specific to these communities?
Quito: So--clearly--thing #1 is that many of the young people we know through Sylvia's are struggling with housing, which intersects with a lot of other shit going on in their lives: terrible family situations, for starters. Transition is exciting but it's kind of a bitch. Lack of employment opportunities, lack of savings, discrimination against trans job applicants, outright racism. High levels of depression and mental health troubles, violence, PTSD, loss. Relationships that don't work out. Evictions.

Many of these reasons are systemic or cultural challenges that require the work of a movement to address. Some of them are simply bad luck. Maybe it's a naive hope that tapping into a slightly older and (questionably) wiser set of queers with different kinds of resources might help them move forward in their lives, and doing what we can to help connect them to greater movement work, but it's definitely a concept we are hoping will have a positive effect. So that is why we encourage basically any queer we know to stop by, it's all about the mash-up. People don't always realize how much they have to teach, and to learn, from each other.

Also, the young people RULE, and I am constantly *constantly* learning things from them. If you looked up the word "resilient" in the dictionary you would probably find them there, pretending to barf.

How does HIV/AIDS affect these communities?
Ethan: HIV/AIDS affects everyone alive on this planet, basically. In terms of the young folks that come through the shelter, they are at higher risk, some even recently or already seroconverted, but the real problem is the mindset needed to maintain a healthy balance of body/mind to be able to deal with their lives and serostatus. When you lack a stable living situation, you are bound to a bureaucracy that makes you jump through hoops to fill out the ascribed forms in the correct way or be forced into displacement. If you don't fit neatly in that box, you are going to be struggling to get the care you need, and you may already feel emotionally vulnerable, which leads you to make certain decisions when you seem to have fallen into any sort of intimacy with someone. It's hard to be safe or play safe.

Quito: We are excited to be working with Kristen and Visual AIDS this year to develop a street-based outreach team and leadership development program for young artists/activists. We want to empower the young people to be community activists, help educate other young people about HIV/AIDS and other risks, and to try out ways of using the arts in their strategies.

What were some of the more awesome moments that have taken place at the WERRRQSHOP so far?
Ethan: The connections, collaborations, and experiences are too many to recount and we've only been going since October! So far, we can say that the drag made at the WERRRQSHOP has been AMAZING!!! (particularly the gem bras made in a workshop with Caitlin Rose Sweet the week after the MIX festival, with all those leftover gems... omg!) The conversations we run into on a weekly basis make us think bigger and feel more connected to the influences and experiences that can help each other change the world. Seeing some of the young people get excited over our material surplus which makes them crafty in ways we would have never guessed! The fact that we are getting support from Sylvia's Place, Joan Mitchell Foundation, the young people, MFTA, Visual AIDS, the Bureau of General Services Queer Division, and even the Italian restaurant Bottino giving monthly food donations, makes the work we are doing easier and allows us to focus on bringing shape to our creativity and ideas.

Quito: It's also really awesome to feel connections forming between the young people and some of our artist friends. It took a little while for the young people to start coming to an unfamiliar space but now that they're around it's definitely becoming the kind of intergenerational space of positive energy we imagined.

How do you see art, craft, fashion, and style as important for activist or community-building causes?
Quito: From the beginning the WERRRQSHOP was conceived of as a space for queer movement-building and collaboration. It isn't *just* about connecting the young people to artists who can mentor them--it is about helping them understand the systemic forces behind their very personal struggles, and connecting them with groups like Trans in Action or the Audre Lorde Project who are organizing to address some of those issues. It doesn't always work, but we try to seed the conversations we have while we craft with current issues or histories they should be aware of. We're really excited about the upcoming Play Smart WERRRQSHOP with Visual AIDS on February

13, where we can be super explicit in discussing HIV/AIDS. The first one we did, last fall, was a blast, with some pretty vibrant cross-pollination.

For many of the artists Ethan and I have pulled into the WERRRQSHOP, being queer is an inherently political identity. Many of us are involved in one form of activism or another--the very way we live our lives is a form of resistance. How we present ourselves in the world as queers, the external markers of fabulosity or gender non-conformity that become part of our personal style, are a form of visual resistance to the dominant culture. Not to mention many of us are in one stage or another of questioning our genders. Providing encouragement and a safe space to make identity-specific drag is a form of activism we are delighted to provide.

Ethan: Exactly! Its important to express what we feel on the inside--outside, to bring out something within ourselves that stirs our emotions, things we need to address for ourselves and share with others. It's a way we can begin to form a community that can share and help each other grow. Using our materials to make protest signs used by the Audre Lorde Project in a march against police brutality was a good starting place (our 2nd WERRRQSHOP), and we are hoping to interconnect our lives to issues that address our community in a way that gives weight and presence to social justice.

Quito: Every time I read about another state deciding to allow gay marriage, I think about the young people. Our problems as a community are not over when the issues personal to one demographic are resolved. As long as there are young people who still show up at Sylvia's for emergency shelter, we as a queer community are not fully mended.

We queers are supposed to be looking out for each other, supporting each other in healing from the lies and violence of our post-colonial world, sharing our skills and resources with each other. But the bridges between us are not always there, or can have fucked-up power dynamics attached to them; not everyone has worked out their shit yet. Family Dinners are great--we all have to eat, so why not eat together? Making things together at the WERRRQSHOP is an extension of that family time, another cross-community-building opportunity.

Ethan: I'm glad to be part of all this with you Quito. I would note though we are not living in a "post-colonial" world, in fact we are living in a very misogynistic, xenophobic, racist, homophobic, classist, economically disparate gender-biased patriarchal consumer culture which disconnects us from the very real impact and weight of our actions and words. In fact its very colonial. I think bell hooks says it best with "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" because its the interplay of the social and political systems prevalent in the US and much of the world. Its like we live as 2 or even 3 different kinds of identities and sometimes have to fight with our own internalized destructive tendencies, self hate and shame on top of all the social injustices. Anyway this is a larger discussion and we try and let it all out creatively.

Describe the WERRRQSHOP zine: how it came about, who contributed, and your thoughts on the finished product.
Quito: The decision to make the "WHAT MATTERS" zine was both intentional and intuitive--there

was so much going on in the streets and in our hearts, so much to respond to and reflect on and heal from. It was, and still is, an emotional time. One of the beautiful functions about making art is how it can provide a release for hard feelings. It also felt important to acknowledge and capture the sentiments in a format more tangible than Facebook or Instagram.

It felt not just appropriate but, somehow, necessary, to direct the resources we had available at the WERRRQSHOP to doing SOMETHING to contribute to the seemingly seismic shift in public dialogue around police brutality, state violence, racism, all of the issues that play out in the lives of the young people we love, and the others like them who have gotten killed by police. It felt equally important--as two white artists--to acknowledge our whiteness and open up space for other white queers to work through the feelings raised by witnessing the anger and injustice of our loved ones, brought on by a system of racism that I for one was raised to support. Lots to unpack there.

Zines are awesome as they allow different perspectives and voices to co-exist. Everyone gets their own page, first-person confessionals are totally encouraged, it is a good space for release and creativity. The group of people that responded to the call was a really diverse mash-up of age, race, work style, a lot of perspectives and levels of experience. Joan Mitchell Foundation let us print the zines in color which is pretty awesome. Ethan just dropped off a bunch of copies to the Bureau--check one out for yourself and let us know what you think.

Ethan: Surrounding all the rage, emotion, and vulnerability of the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown and countless other young black men, the Ferguson grand jury decision to not indict Officer Wilson, the history of racism and violence from the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Islan Nettles (who was friends with some of our young people) and so many other black trans women... all our experiences as queer people seem to come to the surface as we fight for justice. The experience of racial violence, the inherent racism of our society, police accountability and injustice... As a white ally, I feel most in need to speak out and not ignore the injustices facing our greater community because if I do so I am part of the problem and not moving forward. The zine is clearly a small start. I would have liked to have made it bigger and spent more time with it, soliciting contributions, and designing it better, but the messages are in there and we are thankful for all the voices of contributors.

How has WERRRQSHOP developed over the months and how do you see it continuing to grow?
Ethan: We are dedicated to holding this space open to all levels of collaboration and exchange in the hopes of building community, mentorship, creativity, and change...to focus on things we want to see grow! I want to see it take off in multiple directions, like opportunities for the young folks to apprentice with artists, designers, industry and be able to get paying jobs. As artists we struggle all the time to find ways to make the things we do work while we battle with financial woes...

We plan to also work on a Spring Showcase for all the talent, ideas and projects that have come to bloom. We want to share our creativity on a bigger platform with others, in a celebratory fashion.

Quito: Last week Tiffany Wallace, who blew us away with her Whitney Houston looks last summer in the woods, approached me with an idea she and some friends have for a web-based talk show,

where they will give commentary on current events and revolutionary gossip, but also budget fashion tips, music videos, special guest stars, etc. We started mapping out a timeline for production and I'm super excited to help them produce it this spring at the Wrrqshop. If you are a film person or editor and want to mentor/help, or if you have original music videos or short video pieces you'd like to contribute, please be in touch!

Ethan: Also it's important to note there is no one way to spell this wrqshop, our fluidity in spellings is completely intentional as we acknowledge all the different experiences and histories we are building upon to make this space open and available. The conscious choice was to craft it from references to Riot Grrrl and WERQ, hoping to honor culturally rich and diverse queer experiences in our comfortably fluid community space. The name came from a message our dear silver tongued friend Edwin Ramoran sent to me as we were trying to figure out what to call this program and it stuck to us instantly while we were having our first brainstorm poster crafting on the lawn in Tompkins Square Park watching Circus Amok set up their free performance.

The WRRRQSHOP meets every Friday afternoon from 3 to 7 p.m. through May at the Joan Mitchell Foundation, 137 West 25th Street, 2nd floor. Please feel free to stop by! Building is wheelchair accessible, snacks and metrocards are available if you need 'em. Correspondence can be directed to werrrqshop@gmail.com.

Quito Ziegler has been working at the intersection of art and social justice for 15 years. They like to play with gender, glitter, gems, community organizing, afghan blankets, and their old Nikon camera. Outside of the WERRRQSHOP, they are currently directing a collectively-imagined feature film called "Wild Ponies Dancing", reflecting on the impact of white supremacy in mass culture, and cooking family dinners at Sylvia's Place, a queer youth shelter in NYC. Learn more at quitoziegler.com.

Ethan Shoshan is an awkwardly shy social ecologist. He can be seen wearing an orange cap, which he has a complicated relationship to. He has volunteered with Visual AIDS, Democracy NOW!, MIX NYC Queer Experimental Film Festival, Gay Men's Health Crisis, Food Not Bombs, and Sylvia's Place. He has collaborated with Carlo Quispe and other artists; exhibited and performed on the streets and at the Kitchen, Aljira, Envoy Enterprises, Commonwealth & Council, Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Judson Memorial Church, The Center for Book Arts, La Mama La Galleria, Dixon Place, Le Petit Versailles, and other venues. His previous projects have been reviewed in The New York Times, Art In America, LA Weekly, Huffington Post, BlackBook, The Brooklyn Rail, Artforum, Washington Post, and have aired on Public Access TV. Shoshan's projects bring back art and life to our human condition--the need to share and connect with others on something deeply personal, political, and social in a heartfelt experience. More at disiterate.com.

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