

Viva Ruiz: ProAbortion Shakira: A Thank God for Abortion Introspective

by SIMON WU

PARTICIPANT INC. | FEB 3 – MARCH 10, 2019



Installation view: *Viva Ruiz: ProAbortion Shakira: A Thank God For Abortion Introspective*, Participant INC, New York, 2019. Courtesy Participant INC.

Viva Ruiz is the daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants, a Queens native, and an artist for whom showing in a gallery is the exception rather than the norm. For the last two decades, she has forged a collaborative practice in and around institutions, gracing nightclubs, telenovelas, and online spaces as equally vital forms of engagement. Most recently, her ongoing project *Thank God for Abortion* (TGFA) (2015 –) appeared as a float in the 2018 New York Pride March, mobilizing a crew of dancers, activists, and performers to advocate for free, safe, and legal abortion. Ruiz's work inhabits rich social worlds outside of the gallery, and it is a challenge to preserve their vitality inside of it. It is her deft navigation of this tension in *ProAbortion Shakira: A Thank God for Abortion Introspective* that makes its presentation at Participant feel joyously, dangerously alive.

The works in Ruiz's show were originally conceived of as "practical protest gear," and were used just a few months ago in her float at Pride. These include riot shields, protest posters, "ABORTION" flags, and t-shirts that feel fugitive in the gallery; it is not hard to imagine them getting pulled off the walls to be used imminently, given how her platform invites right-wing extremists. Two riot shields lie propped



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Introspective, Participant INC, New York, 2019. Courtesy Participant INC.

against a wall, placed directly on the floor. Gold mannequins she calls “Icons” wear TGFA “Party Looks,” custom costumes that were previously worn and are “infused with the energy of many conversations and actions.”¹ Clearly, Ruiz is interested in the lives that these objects hold outside of their temporary run in the gallery. This emphasis on the use-value of the objects, on the lives they will return to, creates an atmosphere that feels immediate, providing what Ruiz calls both “safety and agitation” in the space.

This tension between safety and agitation is nowhere more evident than in the strategic language that surrounds the exhibition. The phrase “Thank God for Abortion” is a precise linguistic intervention that juxtaposes rhetoric so often used against abortion in direct proximity to its

advocacy. It is a speech utterance that, in its repetition in various media, works to rewire our dominant cultural associations. Other phrases, like “God loves me, and blesses the two abortions I had” recounted in an Artforum interview,² or “We are already the miracle of life,” installed on a wall in the gallery, register with cognitive delay: you have to read them twice to grasp them. This delay is evidence of residual stigma, and Ruiz’s language works to condition our ears to a world where those phrases are commonplace. Her project hopes to bring about the conditions of its own redundancy, a future where claims to bodily autonomy are a self-evident, even boring, platform.

Much of Ruiz’s work is indebted to her experiences as a nightlife organizer and as a member of activist circles, and those social worlds press themselves into the gallery in a mix of spirituality and pleasure. Three “Icon” mannequins pose in mid-rave or mid-rapture, hands in the air, hips cocked, with elaborate headdresses evoking both the Pope and drag performance at once. Hung high on the back wall of the gallery, a neon-lit dove (the graphic symbol for TGFA) occupies the place of a cross. This church-like atmosphere serves as a backdrop for a series of discussions moderated by Ruiz, featuring speakers from Planned Parenthood, New York Abortion Access Fund, and Shout Your Abortion. These “TGFA TV Talk Show Sunday Prayer Hours” give a sense of the partners that she aligns her artistic practice with, as well as the constituencies that she serves. Ruiz’s long-time investment in these circles evidence a trajectory that does not hold museum/gallery display as its target; rather, the show is like a pit-stop, a garage to hold her stuff, a fabulous floating-through.

In this touch-and-go relationship to the institution, she articulates a way of engaging with cultural institutions that feels apt in a moment where their funding structures feel more fraught than ever. She’s here for the resources, but she’s not interested in your retrospective. By emphasizing the use-value of her works and foregrounding the primacy of the social worlds these objects live in *and will return to*, she aligns herself in a long lineage of community-based work that existed far before the rhetorical gymnastics that modernism had to flex to arrive at “social practice.” It’s a potent critique because it’s not really a critique; it’s against *having to be against* the institution at all. The contradiction of art historical institutional critique, as articulated by now-canonized artists like Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke, was not that it was swallowed by the institution, but that it married itself to the museum. By making the crux of their practice wholly dependent on the object of its animus, it melded itself in an odd, unhappy marriage. For Ruiz, it’s not so much institutional critique as much as *indifference* towards a project that enacted (and continues to enact) countless acts of violence against her ancestors and friends; she has her own projects to attend to. Ruiz is single, free, and flirty, and this gallery show is a one-night stand where she steals from her lover.

1. <http://participantinc.org/seasons/season-17/pro-abortion-shakira>

2. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/viva-ruiz-talks-about-thank-god-for-abortion-75854>

CULTURE | MAR. 8, 2019

Would You Wear a ‘Thank God for Abortion’ T-Shirt?

By Svetlana Kitto



Photo: Courtesy PARTICIPANT INC. Photo: Mark Waldhauser

The first time I saw the THANK GOD FOR ABORTION logo was on a friend’s T-shirt at the Dyke March last June. The shirt was black with white print, with the words THANK GOD FOR ABORTION floating above an image of hands releasing doves into flight. Numbed out as I am to the mainstream political T-shirt trend, in which once-potent activist slogans are repurposed by everyone from Urban Outfitters to Prabal Gurung to Benedict Cumberbatch (he is what a feminist looks like, after all), I didn’t register the slogan as particularly radical at first.

Then, on my birthday last fall, my friend Martin Keehn, a designer and a friend of the slogan’s creator Viva Ruiz, gave me a THANK GOD FOR ABORTION T-shirt. The words, doves, and hands were printed in white against a white background, giving it a crisp and holy hue. I remembered the phrase from the march, and felt slightly more affectionate toward it, as if re-meeting a forgotten mutual friend. The next day, I got dressed to leave the house and I put the

T-shirt on. I was uncomfortable, but I wasn't sure why. Truthfully, I had not felt emotionally connected to the issue of abortion rights in a very long time. As a lesbian-leaning queer, I hadn't had pregnancy-risk sex in (many) years, and most of my friends, also gay and/or of a certain age, if interested in babies at all, were desperately trying to get pregnant. As I gathered my things to leave in my new T-shirt, I realized: I was scared.

From hour to hour, my feelings wearing the shirt changed, expanding my understanding about its power. On the subway, I felt very nervous as I sat down across a mother and her young child; I instinctively crossed my arms over my chest. Uncrossing my arms and sitting back up, I interrogated the ideas behind the discomfort: it was as if my self and my body weren't mine suddenly, and had been politicized into an incontrovertible, scary, public debate. In this way, sporting TGFA mirrors the experience of being a vulnerable person trying to get an abortion this country: in, say, one of the 27 cities in the U.S. where one has to travel 100 miles to get an abortion, or as one of the 18 to 37 percent of women on Medicaid who would otherwise get an abortion but are forced to give birth because of lack of funding.

“Thank God for Abortion,” is a multi-platform art project by Ruiz — queer video artist, performer, and beloved NYC nightlife luminary. Part fashion object, part meme, part prayer, part coup, it's a call for change and a spiritual “tool for celebration and agitation,” says Ruiz. After my own experiences with the T-shirt, I wanted to understand the project better and sat down to talk with her after catching her show, “ProAbortion Shakira: A Thank God For Abortion Introspective,” which is up at

Participant Inc on the Lower East Side until March 10. With its clear, direct message, the exhibition is uncharacteristically political for the art world. “I mean, it would be ideal if this issue was irrelevant; that's the goal,” Ruiz says. “Normalizing abortion by repeating it over and over.”

Viva Ruiz was raised by working-class Ecuadorian immigrants in Jamaica, Queens, and the Catholic Church loomed large in her childhood. “I loved church,” she says, which was every Sunday and unabridged: communion, confirmation, confession, all of it. “I was a lector but wanted to be an altar boy — wearing that gown, smoking the place up with incense.” Gender expression and experimentation were not exactly encouraged in the church: “My



Photo: Courtesy
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Photo: Mark
Waldhauser

love for Jesus got beaten out of me” in that “misogynistic gender cage.” Ruiz would get to fulfill her genderqueer aspirations when she discovered gay nightlife as a teenager. “I learned how to be a performance artist dancing in strip bars” and transgressive, “very chic and really dirty” queer NYC dance clubs like Jackie 60 and SqueezeBox! in the 1990s, later joining performance group the Dazzle Dancers and DFA band Crystal Ark as a vocalist, and screening her experimental films at Deitch Projects, Outfest, and MOMA PS1. In that time, she also had two abortions, for which, she says, she is truly blessed. “Now, I can claim this in the name of Jesus Christ: Thank God for abortion. I’m walking with this and it’s true for me.”

Ruiz debuted the TGFA slogan on T-shirts and tote bags at a LadyFag party back in 2015, going on to emblazon it on large banners, stickers and posters for the Women’s March in 2017 and NYC Pride in 2018, where she created a full-scale TGFA float. Amid air raid horns and thumping reggaeton, float players dressed in TGFA jumpers danced and chanted, with Ruiz in a crown and white cape at the helm repeating: “I’ve had two abortions and God loves me!” to roars from the crowd. For Ruiz, Thank God for Abortion is more than a political platform: “It’s a lived, emotional truth ... and the release [that happens] when people identify or wear the [swag] is so strong.”

A friend of mine who attended the Gay Pride March in June told me she was excited to see the TGFA float, with its striking black and white lettering amid all the rainbow flag paraphernalia, but also nervous: “I felt scared for their safety.” Indeed, the very sight of “Thank God for Abortion” has the effect of conjuring and indicting the violent pro-life movement to end abortion in the same breath. People who have joined TGFA in the Women’s March and Gay Pride report having difficult but empowering encounters. Ruiz collected some testimonials



Viva Ruiz, *ProAbortion Shakira: A Thank God for Abortion Introspective*, 2019, installation view at Participant Inc, six b&w photographs © Safi Alia Shabaik. Photo: Courtesy PARTICIPANT INC. Photo: Mark Waldhauser

people shared with her from the NYC Pride March into a zine: “I have had two abortions, and I’ve never talked about it. As I was passing out stickers along the route, a woman took the little stack from my hand and threw it back at my face, screaming, ‘I’m pregnant.’ *By choice?* I asked. *Be grateful for that. I have two brilliant daughters of my own. By choice.*” Others, like reproductive rights activist Stephanie Castro, said that wearing the T-shirt works as a spiritual, transcendent salve: “When I put on my Thank God for Abortion shirt I felt an immense power overcome my body and surrounding space. As if generations of women ... had been freed to live unapologetically and in control of their destiny and bodies.”

Ruiz herself recalls that while marching with a TGFA banner at the NYC Women’s March in the months after Trump was elected, a contingent of white women in pussy hats yelled at her: “This is not your march!” And queer people have questioned Ruiz about why abortion rights should be part of a conversation about queer rights. “I identify as a queer person and the first person I was pregnant by was a trans woman,” she says. “Penises don’t just belong to men ... People get very proprietary about gay rights, but gender complicates that.”

Ruiz describes the power of the slogan as “kaleidoscopic.” “It’s not centrist, the middle or even the left.” We decide that maybe it beyond politics; as Ruiz told ArtForum back in June, “This work is a futuristic piece, a vision of a time when the ‘Thank God for abortion’ statement would be banal.” Oh, TGFA: I look forward to your banality.

Talking with Ruiz, I’m reminded again of the revelatory experience of wearing the shirt that day back in the fall. How by crystallizing the experience of living in a targeted body as it relates to abortion, it made me think about the experience of being targeted for other reasons, being a woman, being trans, being POC. In this way, the shirt shifts perspective, connecting the wearer to an embodied experience of “standing in a bunch of intersections.” For Ruiz, intersectional feminism is not just a theory, “I am a queer person and I needed abortion access.” To quote another TGFA testimonial, “The shirt is magic, period.” Indeed, the future might be TGFA. I want to believe that.
