Screening Room no.4: QC-2020
A conversation between artists Shreya de Souza, Mylou Oord and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia
Hi Mylou and Shreya.

Mylou
Hi Giulia and Alex.

Giulia
It's the first time we're doing a two-to-two, screening room conversation. So this is cool. Very well balanced.
We're really excited to talk to you about your film that is screening in our screening room for the entire month of March. Is it QC 2020? Or is it titled Queer Choir 2020? I'm not sure how to pronounce it.

Mylou
QC-2020. And it stands for Queer Choir 2020. And it is a little bit of a… I think the hardest part of the project of the film was coming up with a title. Every title we came up with was just like, yeah that doesn't quite cut it. And I think this became a bit of a working title at some point. Because we started in the midst of the pandemic. And we kind of took the COVID-19, like the letter dash 2020. Yeah, it's a bit lame. But then at some point, we were like, you know what this is fine, this is a title.

Shreya
Titles are stressful

Mylou
I mean, sometimes they just come to me. And I'm like, Yep, that's it. But with this–maybe because we were working together and we both needed to like it. There's a quote–which I saw in the questions you wrote, which we can absolutely talk about later– but it was like a commitment to questioning.

And I was like, God, it's such a good one. Maybe that should have been the title.

Giulia
I like the title. It's quite straight to the point. And it makes sense to kind of the documentary style of the film.
This thing about collaborating, and making this film together to go straight into my first question– Or actually maybe it'd be nice if you would both introduce yourself a bit. And tell us a bit about your practice. And perhaps how you started working together. And if your working together is something that you do separate from your own practice, or if you're growing towards just like a collaborative practice.

Mylou
My name is Mylou Oord. My pronouns are they/them and I'm an artist… I guess. And I said, I guess, because the last thing I've made was the video. And after I got my masters, I'm more and more letting go of that title, I guess. Because I, for many different reasons, don't really feel comfortable with it anymore. But that's maybe not for now. That's a whole other thing that I haven't even properly unpacked yet. But no, actually, Shreya and I, we both very much have our own practice. But when we started dating, we also started collaborating. And it was always more on the social projects like Vegan Lesbian Curry that we did for the Rietveld and Sandberg and eventually Queer Choir. I think this video was maybe our second video collaboration. Yeah and if this is something that we are going to continue to do… I don't know. For now, I think the organisation of the choir is where we collaborate in an artistic slash administrative, coordinative way.

Shreya
Hi, I'm Shreya de Souza. My pronouns are she/her they/them. And yeah, I'm an artist. And I'm very interested in socially engaged practices. And that's why we started Queer Choir Amsterdam but also to understand how to have a socially engaged practice and how to make that work without being the person who holds all the power. I think we're figuring out a lot along the way, which is also kind of a testament to Queer Choir

Amsterdam, because there's a lot of things that we don't know how to do and we're figuring out. And also thinking more about, like, horizontal ways of communicating and collaborating with the choir members to become not just a choir, but definitely foremost a community initiative. And, yeah, we're figuring out a lot of things. And so a lot of my practice these days is in admin, which is crazy, but the amount of admin that goes into getting a group of people together, and functioning is kind of crazy. So, I make films and I make photographs. But that's kind of being put a bit on the side, for now, until Queer Choir can kind of, you know, survive and thrive also on its own, and with the help of the members involved.

Giulia
You spoke a lot about this administrative part of like, well, your practice almost now. Maybe that kind of fits into a question I had about what your experience was like making a film about Queer Choir that you are both observing and part of as a member of the choir, but also an organizer, also an artist. Yeah, and where that separation lays, and if you felt a different relationship to the choir by observing it from a film perspective?

Shreya
Yeah, so that's a really great question. I think with me, it's not so much a separation, as it is just part of what's going on in my head. A lot of the themes that we sing about or the themes that we talk about, even within the choir, it's all stuff that's going on, and that we are kind of politically and socially engaged with. And to be part of that was a very empowering experience, because suddenly, you're not all alone in your feelings. And you're sharing with people and you're talking to people about all the injustices that you're seeing, or all the funny, weird stuff that's happened to you. And being in it. And also being organizing it was a way of suddenly being like “Oh, I have the power to do this. Oh, all these people come together, and I can be a part of it and we are creating such a happy, lovely time”. And I think I felt a lot of agency with that. And I think also a lot of choir members who come in also feel the same sort of empowerment, because when they're in this choir setting, suddenly they can be like “Oh, I think we should do it like this. Oh, let's try it this way” and that's such a.. I

don't think I've ever been in a group that's been so accommodating before. And so like, recurringly, lovely to return to.

Mylou
Yeah, that's a very beautiful way of putting it. Yeah. I think also, those are my favorite moments when a choir member who is maybe a shy person or wouldn't get noticed in a big crowd. And then they're like I really want to sing it like this? And then it happens. And I see that empowerment on the spot. And I'm just like, Yay, it's so beautiful to see that. Yeah.

Shreya
And so as much as we're observing, we're also being observed by the choir, and also now by an audience. Yeah, I think not just being people who started it, but also being within it has also changed our perspective, where we are like “Oh, what are we comfortable with? What Is everyone comfortable with? What would we not like?” We want to see an extension or a reflection of ourselves and our principles and our interests. And we want to make sure that those come to the forefront, and that everyone in the choir feels safe, comfortable and brave. Because we want to feel like that too.

Giulia
And that's something that really comes across–you've basically already said everything that I was gonna ask about vulnerability–but there is this vulnerability in the members of the choir. And of course, you're also physically present in the film so there’s a vulnerability in you as well. I really liked the part where everyone's singing in the church, and people are giggling about the lyrics or something not going like right, you're not really sure.

Mylou
I really wanted to have that in there. Especially those moments that are a little bit like, is this a formal setting? Is this not? Are we supposed to.. Yes, we are supposed to make jokes, even when we're having a performer or camera crew or something? I like that.

If I can go a little bit back to your question about this observant role and being a part of the choir. Basically, the first five months of rehearsals, I only filmed and I barely participated. I knew all the songs, more or less, but I actually only filmed and then after summer, I was a bit like, well, the film is done, I'm going to participate now. That was a very interesting transition because suddenly I felt what it was like to be in the choir and to have to sing. And it's pretty hard. Also, we're all untrained singers and that's also I think, the beauty and I think our strong point, but at the same time… it's sometimes quite difficult to understand how a melody goes. And especially if you're singing in one voice, and you hear the high voices doing it differently, it's very hard to not sing with them in your mid or low range. And that's quite a challenge sometimes. But I also really liked that. And that's only something I started to feel and experience when I started singing.

Giulia
You think like the documenting and making the film was actually helping you as a tool to gain confidence? And to actually become a participating member?

Mylou
Yes! Definitely! I was hiding behind this camera 100%. And that's why it is also nice sometimes when Vera or choir director would be like “Mylou do you want to sing today” and I was like No! And then eventually really slowly at some rehearsals.. but then after summer, I was like, I have so much footage, I'm going to sing now, I don't want to be behind the camera. Also, we didn't have a camera because it belonged to the Sandberg Institute and we couldn’t film anymore. But that was actually really, really nice.

Shreya
Speaking of Vera, who is our choir director, and also about vulnerability, I think having a good conductor has been so important. Because Vera allows us to be like “Hey, do you want to conduct today? Hey, why don't you try this?” And she just kind of pushes us a little bit. And so it's not just like us being like “oh, you know, we could do it this way”. it's very much where we are as much a part of it as everyone in the group.

Mylou
Yeah. And what I like is that there is some sort of a hierarchy because we are the people that organize it but at the same time, when those moments happen, when a member goes “why don't we sing it like this or like that” and we try it and it really works and everybody likes it, that's such a beautiful moment.. that hierarchy for me then doesn't exist anymore.

Shreya
Yeah. And that's something we're also working towards, breaking down the hierarchy, so that everyone feels comfortable contributing at any point. That's ultimately very soon what we want. And we're trying to achieve that.

Giulia
I should have started with this question at the beginning. You've basically already spoken about it alot, but I really liked the part in the film at the beginning, where members of the choir talk about the word queer and what it means to them, and also what Queer Choir in itself means to them and this one member who talks about Queer Choirs–Q..r Ch..r.. Ah its quite hard to say, ok QC–“giving a voice to the queer community” literally a voice through singing is what I think about then as well–maybe, could you for those that don't know Queer Choir, maybe say a bit about what Queer Choir is, but also what it means personally to you.

Shreya
So Queer Choir is a community initiative. Started in the beginning by Sarah Naqvi, myself Shreya da Souza and Mylou Oord, in the midst of the pandemic, to create a choir community in the midst of a pandemic. It sounds kind of crazy, but..

Mylou
… like the impossible thing to do.

Shreya

It was a really strange and the impossible thing to do. But we wanted to do it because hey, if not during Corona then when. And we wanted to bring together people who are not necessarily artists, but from all walks of life, who identify as being queer, especially BIPOC queers to come in, and where we could spend some time together singing songs and working together to come up with these songs. And that's the idea. That's like the basic framework we came up with in 2020. And now in 2022 we are there and trying to figure out how this is going to work long term. And also how we are as performers because now that's what we do a lot, we perform.

Mylou
Which is also interesting–because that was never–of course, when you are in choir there is that element of performance, right. But I think in the beginning, we were just like, oh, yeah, performance, maybe something, like far far away also, because it was impossible to perform.

Shreya
And initially, the main idea was to come together and form like a brave space where we could explore, maybe, what it meant to be queer and not just fall into the tropes of like, love or coming out, but also just have a lot of fun together. And I think one of the members of the choir in the film says it best “queer is a commitment to questioning”. I think when we heard that all of us just started clapping. I suppose I have never heard it being put in a better way. Just having that as a premise that forces us to question everything that we're doing, within the choir also in our own lives.

Mylou
Yeah, but also as a choir, like I said earlier, we were thinking of performances but we were mainly thinking of rehearsals and coming together on a weekly basis. That was way more important than any sort of performance. But then when you apply for funding, they really want you to have an audience and they really want that. So you have to be like “Oh, we have to perform. Okay. Fine”. And then suddenly after the first time we performed at Sonsbeek Festival’s opening–which was also quite funny. Then, we also kind of realized, were we asked because of what we do, or

because we are just a choir, and we are an artist run choir that they are interested in us? I think that was definitely true for the first performance, but it was also a nice experience. But then after that a lot of requests came in from people asking “I have a show opening or Finissage, do you want to perform at my thing? And do you take requests?” And it was a bit like, maybe that's not really what we do? And also, that's not what we want to do? I guess in that regard, the choir in itself is also a practice. We are not like a choir cover band or something.

Giulia
Curious to hear what some of these requests might be…

Mylou
… And it is sometimes really nice to sing certain songs. Like, especially as Sonsbeek, we sang a lot of songs regarding the topic of work and labour so we sang, of course, Rihanna’s song. And that was a lot of fun, because everybody knows it. And it feels good to sing that.

Shreya
But, we just wanted to be a bit careful with the fact that suddenly, because we were like a group of people, suddenly, people thought that they could access us very easily. And we wanted to not do that. We wanted to not just be an appendage to somebody else's work, but be a work within ourselves. And I think this has also allowed us to deepen this performative aspect, because the choir exists with or without an audience, you know, and one of the ways we thought we could strengthen the choir was to involve the audience with the choir when we're performing. So in our new upcoming performance, we are going to work with the audience a little bit, to kind of have the audience in our space and experience what it means to be part of the community for a little bit.

Mylou
Yeah, we're gonna be queering the choir. Yeah, by having us conduct Vera and Vera conducting us and this sort of power play nice it’s nice if those

roles are reversed sometimes and that becoming an element of the performance. I think that's pretty cool.

Alex
Just really makes me think about striking that balance between coming together and there being a space for exploring and people being together, and then like this professionalism, of taking things very seriously, that you see, like, is quite amazing, and maybe adds more commitment. I think that's probably more than just having a professional conductor. Maybe that gives some kind of guidance, but it seems like everyone is seriously there to be there and to do something together, to build it to be better.
I'm really interested in how the lyrics of the songs are come up with.

Shreya
Great question. The first song Mermaid Orgies kind of just happened one day when Sarah and another friend of ours was just playing on the ukulele and they started to sing Mermaid Orgies and I recorded this because I had my handycam with me. They were singing the song and I was recording it and singing along and there was just this moment where we were just so connected by this weird song. And then when we resaw all this footage, they were like “oh my god, I would love to hear this song by a choir or like a group of people” and that's kind of how the choir started to sing mermaid orgies. The other two of our songs have also been written by Sarah and another person who is also an artist. And then Vera takes these songs and she kind of splits them into different voices, so that it's singable to a group. And now we're trying to work in another way, where we brainstorm with the entire choir coming up with keywords and themes and ideas. And we have these like, phrases or lyrics that come up. And then where we will put it into a melody, and also assign voices. That's how we've made our new song and we will also continue to make our upcoming songs. A very important part of choirs is the improv sections, where we sing stuff like “is there a god for the gays”. And there's also this part where I think some of the members sing “cunnilingus” and that was all improv, we didn't plan on saying it at all.

Mylou

We have this whole sort of language with signs. So Vera instructs us with numbers, and if she says One for example, I'm just going to explain the “one” because it's the easiest one, it's just a long “aaaa”. And then she does like a sign like this so you know it's a high voice “ooooo”, and then low is like “uhhhmmmm”. So she basically conducts us by having us all improvise. Which has, sort of unexpectedly, become quite a big part of our choral body.

Shreya
It’s this idea that with improv comes, ultimate freedom, or a lot of agency again, and independence. And that's true, because I think with the choir members a lot of times, we are the happiest when we're doing really weird improv, and just making really weird noises. Because suddenly that's allowed in this space.

Mylou
Yeah and it's not weird. It's encouraged.

Giulia
I can also imagine that the most interesting things can come through improv because, yeah, it leaves people in their sort of natural state of responding.

Alex
I guess there's also something quite nice that you don't have to sing everything “correctly” in quotation marks. There's no right way of doing something because you're the one telling the story. So playful. Oh, I really want to be part of the choir…

Giulia
The first time I saw anything anything about the choir I was like “I need to move back to Amsterdam”

Mylou

Yeah, you just come in March. Because you're performing in the Oude Kerk. On the 19th of March, we have our own night in the Oude Kerk. It's part of the program that is curated by Radna Rumping.

Alex
I guess going back to the film, because it seems like at this halfway or there's like a second chapter to it is when the kind of digitally animated part of the film comes in, with the landscape. And then you kind of just get crashed landed into this landscape. I wanted to hear some of your motivations or thoughts around how the landscape was mapped out or created and this world was built. Particularly, I want to hear about the kind of jelly-like figures. They really remind me of salt and pepper shakers. I don't know why.

Giulia
I was thinking more like butt plugs?

Mylou
It's a sex toy forest

Shreya
Yeah. I don't even remember why we were thinking about the butt plugs… Ohh yes because of the song.

Shreya
So you know, in Amsterdam, a lot of names of streets are named after men. And then I read the names of a lot of plants and animals, were given by this guy named Carl Linneaus. And then it just got me thinking a lot about ethnology and the origins of the way things are named, and how a lot of it has been dependent on Western modernization and the enlightenment. And we were thinking about "well, we're queer, because we exist in a straight world" but what if we just had this kind of wild space where it was just strange and okay.

Mylou

A parallel to the choir itself I guess

Shreya
Yeah, a parallel to the choir. And we were thinking about an unnamed and…

Mylou
…undiscovered terrain.

Shreya
Yeah. And also, unhumanified–although us humans created it, but you know…– I think Mylou started drawing a map.

Mylou
You said to me, if you think about streets, we should come up with alternative street names. And then at some point we were like, but why should we name things anyway? There shouldn't suddenly have to be like female street names…. I really like maps and Shreya suggested “why don't you draw a map Mylou” and I started drawing this big map.

Shreya
Kind of like an island, and kind of something that is unaccessible. And that we have a camera going through. And we wanted butt plugs in it because of the song obviously, but then also, we were thinking a lot about, like I said, wild spaces, and what that could mean and what that could look like. And we work together with an amazing CGI artist. Her name is Paula Garcia Sans. And we told her we like these kind of textures and this kind of feeling and a pink sky. And then at some point, the camera needs to crawl like a snake. We were so vague, and she created such a beautiful landscape for us. Because the only thing we had to work with was this 2d landscape that we had drawn and colored together. She took that and she CGI-fied it.

Mylou

We had very low expectations, not because we didn't believe in her but more because we were so oblivious to what the possibilities could be with CGI, because I think neither of us had ever worked with it. I mean, we still have not physically worked with it. But we worked with someone who did it for us and with us.

Shreya
It was also having faith in the person doing it that we were like “oh, actually, I don't want to have any control over this”. Except maybe a few vague key terms, and she just did an amazing job with it.

Mylou
Yeah, I think we were collaborating so much, like with the choir, we were also like this also needs to be a collaboration. We cannot just do everything ourselves. Because I mean, CGI is crazy and difficult skill.

Alex
But Alex, your question was about the butt plug characters.. Oh, Oh, Oh, I read through your questions. And then I also read a really good one about this feeling or the statement that you made about feeling you're in a video game, and then you're stuck in something. And I really relate to that. And we actually wanted to have this kind of glitchy environment. We really wanted to have an environment that was kind of like on the edge of not real, and not beautiful.

Mylou
Not perfect CGI. It can be ugly,

Shreya
And something that did give you a kind of a disconcerted feeling, or, like an uncanny feeling of just something gone wrong, but also something that made you want to stay. Yeah, I really like that, because I was thinking a lot about this actually, also, when we're working with Paula. Because a lot of her aesthetic is also like this.

Alex
I kind of just made a comment about there's like one point, when I think it's when, as the viewer, we are the sneak moving through the grass. And there's just these moments that are glitchy, or you're kind of going through a game and you're navigating around, and you get stuck in something like a wall or a tree or just like water, these places when you're not really meant to be but you can still see it. You know, you walk into a wall. It's all like gray and there's different tones

Shreya
And it's all in focus, which is like the weirdest thing.

Alex
It's like, everything has an inside… that you can kind of move through and it's a bit permeable.

Giulia
It's making me nostalgic.

Myou
I remember this a lot on the Nintendo 64 of my brother

Alex
I love that part, in the film, feeling like you're getting lost in this other world. And then because it's got similar kind of, like visual aesthetics to so many games that I remember, that I'm particularly nostalgic about. Maybe lo-fi kind of stuff…

Mylou
I'm just suddenly thinking, I play this game called Fortnite, already for years, which is also an island and you also kind of land on it. Thinking now, suddenly, there's definitely a connection there.

Shreya

But I think we also wanted to stay away from like, very beautiful CGI. That's not what we wanted at all. We didn't want perfect, shiny, glistening, moist CGI. But definitely something that looks a little bit raw.

Alex
It reminds me of those worlds that I used to try and get lost in, gaming. You're Looking to explore a different space. And I think gaming is that for a lot of people. I find it very clever and makes a lot of sense to the first part of the film QC-2020. Like, these kind of building worlds and building the spaces you want to inhabit.

Giulia
Questioning, queering those two worlds, but they also kind of intertwine and are interwoven. Like the fictional world or the created world, or the constructed world and the “real” documentary style world.

Shreya
The nonsensical world

Giulia
Yeah, also, like the virtual world seems, in some ways, even more…like, there's so many memories to those spaces–maybe that also just has to do with our generation–it makes total sense, even though it's nonsensical. More than the real world, you know?

Mylou
Yes, because we spend so much time not in the real world and looking at a screen.

Giulia

It seems like there's a very clear narrative to the film, which I really like about it. It's not trying to trick you in any way to feel a certain way or to do a certain thing.

Shreya
And that's also one of the things that we were struggling with in the beginning, when we were editing the film, because the film is very much like, it's a bit like this, and then it goes up a bit. And then it's mostly just kind of like… there's no crescendo. You know, it's very much like, it just stays the same. And a lot of people that looked at it were a bit confused about it, because there's no you know, start, climax, end. But we're also not traditional filmmakers. So we didn't really care about that. And we were glad that we weren't trying to make a big moment. And it was just telling a story. And just kind of an unfolding of the time. And just taking the viewer into the process of this whole weird mess. And chaos of information that we had in our hands.

How did you guys actually experience the film? I'm curious.

Mylou
In what setting did you watch it?

Alex
The first time I watched it I was in the kitchen which I'm now thinking is maybe to do with the salt and pepper shakers. I watched it, I think three times, in quite quick succession. And I can't remember which way round it was, but one I was like, like, it feels kind of like an art film. And then it felt more like, not documentary but like a personal storytelling, I guess. More for like memory sake, and keepsake. It seems more like it's for the people of the choir rather than…

Giulia
The missionary of the choir

Alex

Yeah…which I think is an amazing thing, because it seems sincere. And yeah, I remember watching it back because I kept restarting the first song, to figure out what the meaning was. I was like “what's this about? And is it about this? And is this a quote from like a Shakespeare play” and then I was just Googling away trying to figure this out. And then yeah, just enjoyed watching it as an experience. I also really liked the mise-en-scene, like breaking it up. I liked noticing these different things, because it is very layered and textured as a film. There's aspects to it that I think because there's narrative, and it's cutting between the visuals, and then also you've got the sound that also has its own narrative. It's very layered. So I think it does need watching few times, which is very easy to do.

Giulia
It’s important to say that I felt like I quite enjoyed being able to watch a video work of art about queerness that at the same time felt really playful and joyful but still had very important things said in there. We spoke about this at the beginning, the quote “queer is a commitment to questioning”, I've really been thinking about that and that sentence has really helped me. Yeah, it was also a very, I wouldn't call it educative, but a film that has helped me and it feels like it is a film for queer people or a queer community and if a non queer viewer wants to access it, that is possible and you can gain things out of it, but I do think that you can gain more out of it if you can sort of understand certain perspectives from the film from your own queer experiences.

Mylou
Yeah, that's very nice. Well put. Now I know why all my teachers were not good and understanding it.

Shreya
Just about Alex and you googling it to find out like if there was a deeper meaning. I think that's so funny because we always think that you need to layer with all this like contextual information that you know, like that relates to like an obscure Russian poet in the 12th century or something and it's really not it's just like, strange things are said and that's okay, I just made

into a song. I saw a Tiktok video today about Mozart. About how he made these really weird songs like “stick your finger up my ass”, he actually made a song like this. And I was just like, antiquity is held in such high prestige, but it's actually.. people are just making shit up or playing all the time.

Giulia
Low culture, high culture is not a thing

Shreya
It's all a mesh.

Giulia
Thanks so much for your time and chatting to us.
Your film QC-2020 will be showing in the screening room till the end of March. Really excited.

Alex
Thank you so much.

Shreya and Mylou
Thank you so much. Thank you guys. This was fun.