


Prismatic views: a look at the growing field of transgender art and visual culture studies

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Abstract. Transgender art and visual culture studies is a quickly growing field, and we present it to readers of this themed issue less as a linear discourse or a set of parameters than as a prism, with no clear temporal progression or geopolitical center. In this introduction, we not only announce the articles in this issue and discuss their convergences and divergences but also survey works in transgender studies that have proven critical to discussions of the visual and material within transgender cultures. Reading what follows, we hope any shared notion of transgender art and visual culture is expanded rather than contracted – that we find new ideas rather than merely those that reconfirm our existing sense of things or serve a monolithic construct that limits our future imaginary.

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• necropolitics • spatiality • transgender • visibility

An illustrated rendition of a classically styled museum façade looms large at the center of the 2019 Oakland Museum exhibition ‘Queer California’, curated by Christina Linden (Figure 1). Black, squiggly lines suggest the acanthus leaves of four Corinthian columns that flank the arch of an entryway large enough for viewers to pass through. Above this arrangement, small, vertical hash marks create the impression of architectural dentils running above and below the word *MOTHA*, the acronym title for artist Chris E. Vargas’s *Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art*. *MOTHA* is a museum within a museum and exists without a permanent site or collection. Rather, *MOTHA* manifests through ever-evolving exhibitions that mix archival objects with materials that give fictionalized and imaginative retellings of transgender *hirstory*. The hand-drawn quality of this giant, illustrated museum front in this particular iteration of *MOTHA* signals that transgender history and embodiment are rooted in unique contingencies and transformations, are hard to classify, and, as a result, are hard to see within the organizing logics of museums and other institutions. This flat façade further signals that, as



Figure 1. Chris E. Vargas, *Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art* installation shot in *Queer California* exhibition, Oakland Museum of California, 2019.

a whole, MOTHA is designed to critique the institutional forces that seem to either keep transgender people invisible within their collections and exhibitions or include works by and images of transgender people in ways that ignore the nuances and stakes of visual representation for transgender people themselves.

Vargas's museum project is among a few innovative exhibitions dedicated to transgender art and the visual materials of gender transgression mounted in the last decade. Curators Stamatina Gregory and Jeanne Vaccaro included MOTHA along with works by 16 other transgender artists in 'Bring Your Own Body: Transgender Between Archives and Aesthetics' at the Cooper Union in 2015, an exhibition that explored relationships between personal experiences of transition or gender transgression and their archival representations. With the 2017 exhibition 'Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon', curator Johanna Burton of the New Museum followed 'Bring Your Own Body' with a show of more than 40 artists whose works engage in what can easily be called the renewed culture wars by producing works that refuse to adhere to binary logics of gender.

The very existence of these exhibitions demonstrates that robust materials of transgender art and visual culture indeed exist, and the catalogs and literature that have circulated around these exhibitions hint at the growing existence of transgender art and visual culture studies. The contributions included in this

themed issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* serve to bolster and expand the development of this field.

The abstracts that precede the contributions in this issue allow us the luxury of avoiding summaries of each in this introduction; instead, we choose to use this article to focus on convergences and divergences across the issue as a whole, and the emerging field of transgender art and visual culture more generally. The longer articles and shorter 'case studies' herein vary widely in method, object, context, and time period; we see this as a strength and even a logic of our selections, as we wished to avoid an overly hermetic or monolithic sense of what might comprise the intersections of the transgender, the visual, and the material. As many of the contributions suggest - and as queer theorists have often reiterated - coherence as a value is itself a suspect notion, a path away from some of the more liberatory potentials of linking transgender studies, art history, and visual culture. In gathering together these contributions, we instead hope to show the reader a collection of transgender art and visual culture more like a crystal one might hold in their hand, turning it around to see the prisms, the ever-changing colors of its spectrum, catching the light and reflecting it in new and different ways, with no clear center or linear progression through time or space. We question 'transgender' as a distinct category of study even as we present ideas, images, objects, and artists under its rubric. Reading what follows, we hope any shared notion of transgender art and visual culture is expanded rather than contracted, that we find new ideas rather than merely those that reconfirm our existing sense of things or serve a monolithic academic construct that limits our future imaginary.

That said, there were (perhaps unavoidably) some ideas and thinkers that surfaced repeatedly during our development of this themed issue, even if in distinct contexts. Consistently referenced throughout the contributions were the work of our own Susan Stryker as well as Judith Butler, Dean Spade, Jasbir Puar, C Riley Snorton, Jack Halberstam, and Jay Prosser. Viewed together, these theorists provide a useful catalog of methods that, when used to consider visibility and materiality, create space for understanding how notions of regulation, incoherence, instability, and regeneration, among others, describe so much of transgender experiences and transgender cultures that appear within them.

In Stryker's '(De)subjugated knowledges: An introduction to transgender studies' (2006: 3), she characterizes this then and still burgeoning field as:

... concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected

to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.

This robust definition bears repeating in full at the opening of this themed issue for at least two reasons. First, it anchors this collective investigation of transgender art and visual studies in a capacious description of what is meant by the term ‘transgender studies’ at all. Second, by describing transgender studies as ‘making visible’ the existence and stakes of sex and gender transgression in myriad contexts, Stryker implicitly positions the study of transgender art and visual culture at the core of transgender studies, rather than as an adjacent subdiscipline. Of course, the term ‘visible’ here refers not only to that which can be observed by the eye, but its use here as a metaphorical tool also makes clear that experiences of seeing or not seeing, being seen or not being seen, the damage done and potentialities that are central to the very possibility of transgender life.

The materiality of transgender bodies is one of the ways we become visible. This visible materiality – especially of Black transgender bodies – also gets many among us killed. From Marsha P Johnson in July 1992 to Dominique Remmie Fells in June 2020 (just two months before the publication of this article), and to the scores more names that are read aloud annually at Transgender Day of Remembrance gatherings, it seems there is never a shortage of examples of the inseparability of visibility from materiality in transgender existence. The 15,000 people – both cis- and transgender – who put their own visible, material bodies into the streets in front of the Brooklyn Museum on 14 June 2020 to protest the murders of Fells and another Black trans woman, Riah Milton, as well as the photographs of the event that drew international attention, demonstrate the potential of using this link between visibility and materiality to resist transphobic violence. Thus, in this article – and in this issue as a whole – we also extend Stryker’s assessment of transgender studies as making the logics (and illogics) of gender ‘visible’ by describing transgender studies as attending to the materiality of transgender existence.

Foundational for the emergence of transgender studies and for the contributors to this themed issue is Butler’s now classic text *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990). This text builds on the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray (to name just two) that traces the social and economic construction of the category *woman* as subordinate to *man*. Looking at the construction of both of these categories, Butler casts the very idea of gender itself not as evidence of belonging to one sex or another but as a performative apparatus that brings men and women into existence through particular, distinct, and often oppositional sets of socially coded signifiers. In *Undoing Gender*

(Butler, 2004), she expands this idea in response to what she calls the ‘new gender politics’, or the transgender and intersex movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s (p. 4). This important expansion considers gender as a regulatory apparatus and questions how individuals whose genders do not adhere to social codes of woman or man come to see, feel, and understand their relationships to regulatory structures. Again, ‘to see’ is not exclusively a visual term; rather, it is also material, and its visual implications assert the stakes of transgender art and visual culture studies not as simply a recuperative collection of biographical case studies but rather as analytical mechanisms for understanding how these regulatory structures shape the very existence of transgender people.

As another frequent touchstone for contributors to this themed issue, Dean Spade’s *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* (2015) identifies how the regulatory power of gender manifests in legal institutions in ways that particularly impact trans individuals. These include the limitation of gender classifications on state identity documents, sex segregation in bathrooms, shelters, and jails, and healthcare legislation that limits access to gender-confirming healthcare. As Eliza Steinbock points out in their article in this issue, works of art and visual materials are also part of institutional apparatuses that regulate cultural production. Thus, Spade’s (2015: 32–33) call to move away from ‘recognition-and-inclusion-focused’ approaches to legal reforms that merely try to situate trans people in existing binary gender regulations and toward deeper restructuring of institutions in ways that allow for the ‘so-called “impossible” worldview of trans political existence’ is also a call to center the disruptive power that transgender experiences ignite within art institutions.

Echoing Spade’s Foucauldian recognition of laws that govern access to medicine, Jasbir Puar’s *The Right to Maim* (2017), another touchstone for our collective thinking around this themed issue, forges critical links between gender regulations within medical narratives of sex and gender transformation and those of disability. In these narratives, to be transgender is framed as an ailment to be cured through medicine that will make a person appear to adhere to normative standards of male or female embodiment. Similarly, disability is framed as a condition, or set of conditions, that a person has been subjected to and thus looks to medicine to overcome in an effort to exist as closely to normative notions of ability as possible. Since the objective of both of these biopolitical regimes is to transform trans people and people with disabilities such that they are visually indistinguishable from people deemed normatively sexed, gendered, or able, our contributors, especially Stamatina Gregory, demonstrate how Puar’s work helps foreground medicine itself as a mode of visual and material production that appears again and again in transgender art and visual culture.

One alternative to medical frameworks for describing transgender bodies that some of the contributors to this issue have turned to is Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), which casts trans bodies as materials and surfaces through which the results of transgressing gender regulations can be felt and seen. In this text, Prosser frames the 'material body' as that which physically exists and the surface of the body as the 'body image' that both projects these experiences to the world and creates new experiences for a transgender person through the responses (amenable, hostile, or otherwise) their appearance inspires in others (p. 69). In this equation, the body image is the primary vehicle through which the very idea of 'transgender' can be known to transgender people themselves and to the world of people around them. Describing the surface of the body as such not only privileges the visual again but also activates the multiplicitous materiality of trans lives in a way that suggests that portrayals of transgender people are more than discrete portraits: they are portals to deeper nuances, tensions, and knowledges that exist within transgender cultures and embodiments.

The term 'transgender cultures' is used advisedly here, as many of the contributors in this issue recognize the provincial nature of trans experiences. That is, they recognize that transgender culture is not monolithic but rather unfolds amidst and within other cultural networks. Aren Aizura astutely addresses this in his *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (2018), and he and many of the contributors presented here uphold the significance of the attention Jack Halberstam pays to the temporal and geographical variability of queer and transgender experiences in his *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005). Halberstam delivers an overt warning against assuming that transgender life is only ever an urban life and a more subtle caution against looking for transness in only a few times and places and not others. For students and producers of transgender art and visual culture, this serves as a reminder that transgender in art and visual culture appears as more than the shape of a figure, but as a view of a relationship between a figure and its ground.

For many transgender people – especially trans people of color – lived experiences of this figure/ground relationship include not only what Spade has described as administrative violence, but also physical violence and homicide. Murder rates for trans women of color are particularly high, and the stories of their lives after their deaths are often mobilized in service of LGBTQ movements that seek to be included in institutions that contribute to the targeting of trans women of color in the first place. Our contributors in this issue have noted that in 'Trans necropolitics: A transnational reflection on violence, death, and the trans of color afterlife', C Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) use Mbembé and Meintjes' (2003) notion of necropolitics – or the power of a given regulatory system to decide 'who is disposable and who is not' (p. 27) – to characterize and challenge

this pattern. Applied to art objects and visual materials, this challenge implores art historians and scholars of visual culture to consider the choices we make about what objects or images to attend to and what our methodological approaches do to contribute to the valuation of some transgender bodies over others.

The 2017 volume *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Tourmaline (formerly Reina Gossett), Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton, addresses this problem of valuation and devaluation within transgender art and visual culture directly and powerfully. This volume of essays and interviews is the most extensive collections to address transgender art and visual culture to date, and the editors' introduction is one of the most important essays about the stakes and tensions that those materials present. In it, Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton make the pathbreaking assertion that the very notion of transgender visibility is a 'trap' (p. xv). On one hand, visibility, or representation, is said to 'remedy broader acute social crises, from poverty to murder to police violence' especially when it is crafted in ways that are designed to make transness more palatable to people outside of transgender social and political circles (p. xv). On the other hand, as long-time transgender activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy described in a video posted to social media on 27 March 2019, it is visibility that is 'getting us killed' (Griffin-Gracy, 2019: 0:27). The essays included in *Trap Door* centralize this paradox while also creating 'doors into making new futures possible' (Gossett et al., 2017: xviii). This orientation toward the future builds on the idea that queerness and transness are always rooted in the hope for ever-arriving futures that José Esteban Muñoz (2009) offers in his definitive work of queer theory, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Referencing both *Trap Door* and *Cruising Utopia* frequently, many of the contributions included in this issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* are driven by this hope and these commitments to creating ever more points of entry into new futures.

The contributions to this themed issue also build on the roots of transgender art and visual culture that began to take shape through the work of scholars and curators like David Getsy, Jeanne Vaccaro, and Lucas Crawford who deploy the unruliness of trans identity as a theoretical model for discussing works of art and architecture that resist fluid narrative logics, clear definitions, and structural stasis. In *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*, Getsy (2015) for instance uses the methods and theories of transgender studies to reexamine how gender manifests in sculptural works that are most often discussed as 'minimalist' or absent of overt references to anything outside of their own materiality. Paying attention to materiality itself, Jeanne Vaccaro (2013) uses felt – or fabric created by matting together distinct yet interwoven threads and disrupting woven grid structures – in her article 'Felt Matters' as a way of describing how transgender embodiment appears within sculptural objects. And, extending from the sculptural to the architectural, Lucas Crawford's *Transgender Architectonics: The Shape of*

Change in Modernist Space (2015) looks at architectures that resist fixed forms and collapse boundaries between interiority and exteriority as sites where transgender embodiment becomes spatial.

Such texts make clear that a canon of transgender art and visual culture studies is in development. They all have their attendant problems, but they are strong shoulders we stand on as we look to the far horizons of this field. Perhaps more impressive in this supposedly new moment for transgender scholarship is the variety of other trans-specific authors, academics, researchers, scholars, critics, visual artists, poets, and cultural producers referenced in the following contributions. Things are changing quickly even as we attempt to capture, attend to, and amplify what may otherwise be a transitory interest in transgender cultures within broader disciplinary bounds. Recurring themes within this volume include those you might expect from the scholarship cited above (corporeality, visibility, self-fashioning, necropolitics, the archival turn) and those you might not (unruliness, stealth aesthetics, haptic temporalities, spatial aesthetics – and people whose identities we don't always try to pin down). Indeed, this tension between the canonizing nature of a developing academic area of study and our hope for its boundless, anti-hierarchical, unstable and unruly possibility is perhaps one of the clearest uniting elements of this collection and of transgender studies as a grand(er) project.

We begin our themed issue with Eliza Steinbock's 'The wavering line of foreground and background: A proposal for the schematic analysis of trans visual culture'; Steinbock's powerful warning against the visual essentialisms that so often accompany current discourses on transgender culture is a necessary jumping off point. Focusing on how transgender visibility is given value (political, symbolic, and commercial) in contrast to non-trans normativity, this article grounds us in a critique of even the more positive-seeming developments in trans visibility and sets the tone for how we might try to dismantle the 'arts industrial complex' and its traps for transgender art forms. Some of the articles that follow demonstrate how difficult it is to reconcile what Steinbock calls the 'representativeness of representations', while others strike off on new paths – the struggle itself is conducive to the methodological richness of transgender visual culture studies as we present it here.

Archival revelations are never far from the center of scholarship that prioritizes identity (whether literally or conceptually), and KJ Rawson and Nicole Tantum deploy their work for the *Digital Transgender Archive* to introduce us to Marie Høeg, a 19th-century Norwegian photographer whose archival traces include portraits here read speculatively as affirming gender nonconforming selves. KJ Cerankowski playfully draws together two ghosts of the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria (founded by Aaron Devor) and the happy

accidents that come when we listen to our longings – indeed, the longing itself becomes an archive.

Sascha Crasnow explores the intersectional experience of artists Saba Taj and Raafat Hattab by turning postcolonial theories of liminality through a transgender lens, in this case to show how their play with hybridity in written and visual languages allows for a more capacious, integrative middle ground between multiple identitarian and spatial binaries. Robb Hernández investigates David Antonio Cruz's portraits of murdered trans women and their attempts to undermine the carceral state's active role in erasing selves and spirits. Inverting color palettes, postures, compositions, and perspectives, Cruz's paintings, as well as his collaborative photographic and performance work with Elia Alba, are shown by Hernández to 'activate what E Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servera call a "blacktino . . . critical optic"'. Trans femme of color ghosts haunt not just Cruz's art (or his cisgender sorrow) but also our landscapes of carceral, climactic, and representational violence.

The art and performance of Two-Spirit queer and gender non-conforming artists Dayna Danger and Jeneen Frei Njootli is read by Sebastian De Line through decolonial Indigenous ways of knowing that foreground kinship, trust, and relationality, and deny colonizer categorizations and translations. Kinship takes a central role, too, in Cole Rizki's analysis of vernacular photographic practices within and around transgender sociality in Argentina during dictatorship, but in this case by making it familiar and reinserting it visibly into history. In both cases, the visual serves to evoke memories of a past the oppressor would erase and challenges mainstream notions of a transgender artistic practice in the same move.

Rawson and Tantum, Rizki, and Cerankowski all re-center or reveal photographs that were previously hidden, secreted away, marked 'private', forcing us to think about the politicization and ethics of the archive, and how the archive makes transgender histories material and thus makes them matter. Kara Carmack reminds us of Potassa de Lafayette, reinvesting her with a specific visual, rather than corporeal, aesthetic agency and self-fashioning that successfully diverted otherwise fetishizing representations of her by others. Yet the dominance of photography in these articles continues an ongoing focus of the 'real' and the performative that is perhaps our longest-standing approach to transgender visual culture. What are we looking for, or as Cerankowski might say, what are we longing for, in these photographs?

Chris Straayer's contribution to the stealth aesthetics discourse promotes attention to the importance of functional design and use, rather than exclusively appearance, in the creation and use of prosthetic penises. As the diversity of prosthetics contributes to the diversity of ways trans men might express self-fashioned embodiment, Straayer hopes for an upending

of cis ownership of genitals and their production of gender, replaced by a 'transing' – a becoming that foregrounds infinite forms of transgender embodiment. Stamatina Gregory likewise examines prosthetics, this time within the discourse of cancer and disability, as heterosexualized and cisnormativized corporate management techniques in need of the complex recasting they and other visual materials of cancer treatment receive in her analysis of Patrick Staff's 2016 video *Weed Killer*. Heather Holmes's case study of Jesse Darling brings with it its own ghost, a willful child punished but still twitchy for a haunt – and counters Straayer's function-as-form considerations with Darling's flinging, laborious, unruly sculptural body defying classification without pretense to neutrality. Straayer, Gregory, and Darling return to a body in process, becoming, the embodied object or image pointing elsewhere, vibrating somewhere between expectation and promise, control and will.

Susan Stryker's case study of El Kazovsky situates the Hungarian painter within the paradoxical homoprotectionist realm of a government that renders invisible by making visible, pointing to a form of agential existence that itself might seem paradoxically instructive. Steinbock, Crasnow, Hernández, Rizki, De Line, and Carmack reinforce the urgency of queer and trans of color critiques and a decolonizing frame of mind or, like Holmes, question the role of whiteness in our understanding of transgender aesthetics. The violence of capitalism and its governmental and disciplinary systems everywhere takes a well-deserved hit, countered by the satisfactions of self-fashioned luxury and self-produced armor. Cerankowski and De Line evoke Jeanne Vaccaro's notion of handmaking as collective work, a subversive stitch weaving together the optic, haptic, and affective in communities of love, desire, pride, and self-determination.

Cerankowski, Rizki, and De Line, especially, draw the reader in to their analyses through a first-person narrative that emphasizes their (and thus our) sensory experience of the subject (matter or mater, or pater or sibling); as we widen the audience for trans thinking in all its manifestations, the intimacy of these texts builds community not just among others in limited networks with shared experiences, but also with those who are still resisting the pull of relation, of our own affective kinship across genders. Recently a colleague said to one of us, 'I found this great article from my area of expertise that might be useful in your queer and trans art history class!', and we responded 'why don't you use it in your expertise class instead?', and it sounded like a thunderclap to them. We hope at least one of the contributions to this issue will inspire the same thunderclap moment in readers of *Journal of Visual Culture* for whom this journey is utterly foreign. While some among us risk far more by taking it, it's not just a journey for some of us, but for all of us, and we need to take it together. As we face a global pandemic intensifying an increasingly international demand for racial and economic justice through

mass public protests and widespread calls to abolish policing, surveillance, inequitable medical treatment, and the prison industrial complex, we note that the articles herein discuss these issues directly or are built on a transgender textual canon that has been making these demands for some time.

We turn you now to the contributions themselves, which we hope you will read (counter to dominant practice) from first to last in order and completely. We appreciate that this is an increasingly outrageous request, and we ourselves have been known to cherry-pick articles from themed volumes. But our goal is that the picture these contributions present as a group is even greater than that they present individually, imbued with the spirit of aspiration, of memory and projection, the shading of loss, the wily cleverness of survival, the refusal of regulation, the kinship of community, the demand to be *seen* (or not!) but on our own terms. The stakes of transgender visibility are high, but together we stand on strong shoulders.

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