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Cover image
David Antonio Cruz, *in my sleepless solitude tonight, portrait of the florida girls* (2019). Courtesy of the artist.

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

Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg

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.

Keywords. biopolitics • corporeality • historiography • materiality • 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 *hir*story. 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

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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 visuality 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 Rem'mie 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 visuality are high, but together we stand on strong shoulders.

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The wavering line of foreground and background: a proposal for the schematic analysis of trans visual culture

Eliza Steinbock

Abstract. This article endeavors to describe the impact of 'visual essentialism' as an approach towards trans visual culture, including the violence it enacts and the mistrust it fosters towards self-defining language for gender identities. It borrows Susan Stryker's insight in her introduction to her *Transgender Studies Reader* (2006, edited with Stephen Whittle) that trans phenomena move to the foreground when set against an ambient background consisting of gender normative conditions. It extrapolates this visual metaphor for understanding trans in contrast to non-trans into a method to analyze trans visual culture. The author argues that, by focusing on how the figure and ground relate in alignment, or not, the analyst can better examine how the components of visuality are working together to position one's value-laden perspective on visible transgender and non/trans things. This elaboration along three proposed categories of value, namely political, symbolic and commercial, is offered to better understand and parse the noted problem of trans visibility increasing alongside transphobic violence.

Keywords. figuration • perspective • trans aesthetics • transgender visual cultures • value • visual essentialism • visuality

With this article I want to introduce a method for conducting visual analysis to counter the epistemic violence that Mieke Bal (2003: 6) has described in this journal as 'visual essentialism', or a 'purity-assuming cut between what is visual and what is not', that is particularly violent when it is enacted on trans bodily representations. Images circulating in visual culture that are considered transgender are primarily determined by how others register and place value on a person's visual appearance. The event of looking sorts them into:

(A) successfully passing as non-trans (and then either lauded for their efforts or accused of deception), or

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(B) as failing to pass and read as trans (and then either lauded for their bravery or accused of being pathetic).

This way of looking disregards a subject's self-identification or self-determining use of language. Trans visual essentialism therefore incorporates a purity politics in seeking to determine which binary sex is visually available or hidden. It presumes that sex is empirically visible and that gender identity, expression or behavior is not to be trusted. This optical check carries the cisgender bias that judges a trans body favorably, or not, compared to a non-trans physical appearance.

The drive to shore up sex as an empirically verifiable visual phenomenon requires a knowledge paradigm in which the visual is extricated safely from textuality, from affect, from other sense modalities. In contradistinction to what might be termed the visual purity paradigm, Bal (2003: 8) understands that the act of looking is profoundly impure, turning instead to make *visuality* itself the object of analysis, and attend to the 'social life of visible things' (a phrase adapted from Arjun Appadurai, 1986). I argue that the social lives of what I am calling 'visible transgender things' also highlight and facilitate scrutiny of how 'visible non-trans things' typically recede from the analysis of transgender phenomena. This methodological move follows one of the founding aims of trans studies voiced by Susan Stryker (2006: 3): to critique 'the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender [or sex] normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background'. Like Bal, Stryker calls for the analysis of the social, epistemological, and visual conditions that structure the eye-popping visuality of trans aesthetics. For my purposes, Stryker offers a model for how to analyze the visuality of a specific instance of a trans figure vis-à-vis how it is set off from a normative soundscape, color field, and environmental setting. What transgender visual culture studies must analyze and critique then is *this* wavering line of foreground and background that outlines the categorical value of trans as it arrives into the domain of the visual.

In doing so, studies of trans visual cultures can lean on theories and perspectives across different artistic media and the debates about visuality such as Bal's article generated in *Journal of Visual Culture*. To these ongoing discussions, an analysis of trans visual culture can 'reveal the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood, and eliminate others' (Stryker 2006: 3). Further, I wish to account for the violence of this imprinting motion in which a figure is pressed forward, thrust out from the inconspicuous, normative background. This involves attention to the vulnerability of 'standing out' as such – especially as trans figures are arriving in ever-greater numbers in visual cultures today. I am guided by the following two questions: Why are transgender bodies made valuable in the artistic and media spheres and not in the political and social

spheres? What forces and factors are regulating this inverse relationship – the multipliying of transgender bodies standing out, and their ever-increasing vulnerability?

Let me begin then with the provocative observation, one that opens the 2017 edited collection entitled, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*: 'We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence' (Tourmaline [Gossett] et al., 2007: xv). The experience of walking while trans, traveling while trans, using a public toilet while trans – living one's life visibly trans – can entail becoming a target. Anti-trans violence involves daily experiences of microagressions, being arrested, harassed, and even killed. Recent high profile cases during the second Black Lives Matter uprising in May and June 2020 highlight the racial index of facing such violence. On 1 June, Black trans woman Iyanna Dior was attacked in a Minneapolis gas station by around 20 cisgender men, and Black trans man Tony McDade was shot and killed by police in Tallahassee on 27 May following an alleged knifing. In this period, multiple reports of extremely violent murders in Brazil and Puerto Rico, and more, have also circulated. This cautionary sentiment about living in a time of anti-trans violence would also be appropriate to the situation in 2009 when the organization Transgender Europe (TvT research project, 2016) began tracking all reported global incidences of lethal violence through their Transgender Murder Monitoring Project, particularly in response to epidemic-sized murders per capita in Brazil, the US, Colombia, and Turkey. As trans visual cultures grow and growing awareness spreads, visibility does seem to form a causal relationship to a spike in mental and physical harms.[1]

Many voices in the trans movement question the rallying cry for more visibility in support of the advancement of social justice causes. Five such speakers who all identify as non-binary people of color assembled for a panel called, 'The Transgender Tipping Point is Crushing Us' held in New York City in the wake of Laverne Cox's May 2014 cover of *TIME* magazine with an article on the 'Trans Tipping Point' and Caitlyn Jenner's public coming out in April 2015. The 30 May 2015 panel described the prior 12 months in the US as a moment of heightened exposure and yet heightened erasure for the majority of Black, Indigenous, and other trans and gender non-conforming people of color. It critically asked, 'What must we compromise for visibility?' (unknown 2015, online). The compromise with having some figures visibly 'sticking out' in visual culture is chiefly one's personal safety but also a concession to the complexity of trans experiences.

In pointing out the role of the 'media machine' in generating trans visibility, panelist Jamal T Lewis (2015, online) explains how its use of exceptional narratives, such as those of Jenner or Cox, excludes regular working class, poor folks who do not have access to white 'it gets better' narratives. Panelist

Shaktii (2015, online) sees that 'the transgender tipping point rehearses the colonial logic of discovery' by making it seem like 'transgender and gender non-conforming liberation is some contemporary phenomenon that just entered the mainstream', which effectively erases the histories of political resistance by Indigenous people. 'Trans people only matter in so much as our representation is more important than our reality', Alok Vaid-Menon (2015, online) continues, emphatic that visibility harms Black and Brown people who are criminalized for being racially visible. Because the standard of gender norms is scaled to (settler) whiteness, to be racialized is already to be gender non-conforming. The ambient background of white-centered gender arrangements therefore thrusts forward racialized non-conformity into figurations of failed, deviant, or queer genders.

Clearly, heightened trans visibility is not experienced the same across the board: racialized (white-failing) trans and non-binary gender subjects bear the brunt of increased exposure while simultaneously becoming erased from trans liberation politics. Hence, let me rephrase my opening question into a statement: the increase in value of mediated (white) trans lives has a distinct proportional relation to the still low value given to actual racialized trans lives. I agree with the panelists and the editors of *Trap Door* that visibility is a political trap, but it needs to be noted that it seems predicated on an emotional trap set for image-makers. This hope that 'good representation' might midwife more liveable lives constitutes what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism'. Her concept of cruel optimism explains how it is that we remain optimistically attached to ideas, behaviors, and material things that are not serving us. Cruelly then, our attachment to the idea of more and better images to remedy the acute social crisis of the loss of trans lives might inadvertently cause increased exposure of trans lives to violence.

And yet, all these panelists as well as the contributors to *Trap Door* create images through photography, film and video art, exhibitions, dance, performance, poetry and music. The answer to the threat and reality of violence is patently then not to stop making visual art or media that represents trans bodies, lives, and aesthetics. (To make such an argument would be to conflate the significant differences between visibility and visuality; and to miss the important distinction between the potential dangers of becoming visible in our visual culture and the critical potentialities of visuality.) Rather, the method of analyzing and critiquing the shifting line of 'transgender' foreground and 'cis-normative' background will enable tracking the conflicts and compromises that are occurring through the ever more visible arts of trans, gender diverse and two-spirit lives. Hence, we must look less to the representativeness of representations themselves to understand what trans is, and more to how the current value of transness regulates what passes for trans aesthetics in the differential spaces of visual culture (e.g. galleries, museums, and digital communities). This searchlight question of value, I venture, provides insight

into why some figurations of 'trans' are pressed or punched out at certain moments and places.

I assert that these moments and places of trans figuration within visual culture manifest across three categories of value – political, symbolic, and commercial – that are structurally operative to either denigrate or raise the profile of transgender and gender variant art works and artists, in the context of their rising numbers and widening circulation. Trans cultural production is gaining traction inside the system we might call the arts industrial complex. This schematic overview of values I offer below is meant to help identify how the uptake of trans art into this capitalism-driven system is predicated on foregrounding certain versions of trans visuality. This analysis is meant to elaborate and also model the method of focusing on the wavering line of foreground and background by showing how the movement in the 'waver' is set off by particular valuations of trans and non-trans life.

Political value

One way that trans artists have become visible to a wider public is through the online listicle culture that collates this information and recognizes their value in being visible trans artists all queers should know. However, a disturbing trend is that many lists appear around Transgender Day of Remembrance, on 20 November, which links the importance of trans creativity to deadly violence. Such 'round-ups' and 'Top 10s' enhance the necropolitical value of trans bodies, that is, the way that vitality is extracted both from the already dead bodies, and the presumption that more or better artistic representation might stem the tide of further deaths. Due to the intense political value of 'trans necropolitics' that Jin Haritaworn and Riley C Snorton (2013) outline in their article of the same name, it seems unfathomable to analyze the political value of trans artistic production outside of how well it articulates the names of the dead. Trans art is presented in terms of its political value: for how it might become instrumentalized for organizing and raising funds, or a lesson for trans activists. Left to the side of the traffic in the political value of trans lives and deaths are the contexts of the actual people who are deceased, and the contexts in which trans artists produce beyond the threat of violence.

Symbolic value

As pointed out by Viviane Namaste (2000) and others, the representation of cross-dressing, cross-identification and androgyny has accrued huge symbolic cultural value in queer and feminist theory. This figurative body is also often reduced in the arts to an allegorical 'transgression' or sign of the times. The action of extracting value by opening trans bodies to the gaze of non-trans viewers – either in the medico-legal archive or in art

spaces – in order to make a symbolic point about the plasticity of gender or fluidity of sexuality, prevents us from attending to the subjectivity and lived experience of trans persons. Further, this limited frame for experiencing trans bodies means that it feeds the expectation that trans artists should figure themselves physically in their work.[2] On this point, artist Geo Wyeth (2017: 193) asserts that 'this kind of self-entrapment/self-determination [to mark oneself visibly as trans] needs to be levied by ways of being that are not reliant on the image as the sole definer of the self.' Wyeth is not demeaning self-determining actions to become visibly trans, but he is challenging us to consider a selfhood that is not entirely ensnared in pressed out, imaged figural forms. What if we skipped asking what trans looks like, to consider what trans sounds like, or texturally feels like?

Commercial value

The pressure to become a trans artist in certain scripted ways is guided by the commercial values dictated by the whims of the art market. Here it is a question of who receives funding for trans themed projects, who is able to compete on US-based art circuits, who shows at Documenta and the Biennales, or is bought by museums. Very few openly trans-identified artists have achieved major commercial success in their lifetime. The commercially viable narrative for being trans must pass through the gatekeepers that determine their selling price, a situation that eerily shares similarities to the power set-up for accessing transition-related care in which a trans subject must adapt to the medical gatekeeper's diagnostic framework. I contend that the administrative violence that Dean Spade (2011) has identified in state institutions has a contingent structure in art institutions. As artist and educator Elisha Lim (2015) explained to me in an interview, the political aim of trans art must be 'about changing the faces of who's in the gallery, not just the faces hanging on the wall'. Is it possible to take part in transforming inherently conservative and profit-driven institutions from the inside? This is not an idle question when the capital available through art making might be diverted to furthering resilient trans lives.

Across the political, symbolic, and commercial value system operating in trans visual culture and arts is what I identify as the complex issue of hierarchized art genres. With the commercial pressure to mark artwork with recognizable trans symbolism, it is unsurprising that trans art that falls outside the genre of portraiture is rarely legible as being trans. Transness seems to demand a body and a face to pronounce incongruence or transgressive ambiguity. Yet portraiture is low in the academic hierarchy of genres because it has limited room for the artist's personal expression. Trans portraits, then, are one of the few ways trans art is legible as trans and, at the same time, is a devalued genre of art.[3] Nevertheless, portraiture that foregrounds figuration can be pressured into being meaningful for trans aesthetics and activism.

To further reflect on how to analyze and critique the wavering line of foreground and background that outlines the categorical value of trans as it arrives into the domain of the visual, I want to work through two examples that speak to different value categories. In the remainder of this article, I will briefly examine the social life of two cases of a 'lead image' that was selected to advertise an exhibition, each featuring a trans (self-)portrait that serves to foreground the problem of figuration/being figured as trans. I have decided to analyze the lead promotional images because even if you do not visit the exhibition site, the print and digital access of the advertising materials makes it one of those 'visible transgender things' with an accumulated social life. Furthermore, both shows were launched in the second half of 2015 to wide acclaim at what seems now to have been the height of the most recent cycle of Euro-american embracing of trans visual culture.

Curated by Stamatina Gregory and Jeanne Vaccaro, 'Bring Your Own Body: Transgender Between Archives and Aesthetics' (2015) scrutinizes values historically cathected to transgender figurations.[4] The programming of works focused on contesting existing narratives and taxonomies. Their catalog rephrases Linda Nochlin's intervention, 'Why have there been no great *transgender* [women] artists?', to invoke her warning about the sexist and racist assumptions invested into the concept of greatness. With Nochlin's insight, we learn that our aesthetic and political value-laden categories need to be reimagined to appreciate trans art. The lead image 'Una nueva artista necesita usar el baño (A new artist needs to use the bathroom)' (2011), from Argentinian–Israeli artist Elizabeth 'Effy' Mia Chorubczyck (1989–2014) sets the tone by capturing a biographically and politically meaningful action of becoming a 'new artist'. She is shown carrying into her trans latinx practice, literally on her back, the names of many heavyweight feminist artists who interrogate the racialized female body (see Figure 1).

The mid-range color photograph depicts the artist from behind as she crosses from the foreground into a background emitting a warm light through a cracked door with a woman's sign on it. On her slim nude back, written in thick black marker, are the names Yoko ONO, Valie EXPORT, Cindy SHERMAN, Judy CHICAGO, Hannah WILKE, Marina ABRAMOVIC [sic], Carolee SCHNEEMAN, Sylvie FLEURY, Barbara KRUGER, Adrian PIPER, Meret OPPENHEIM, Tracey EMIN. The capitalized last names draw attention to their canonized status, emphasize their greatness for art publics, and yet are accompanied by the feminine first names that symbolize rightful, authorized entry into the women's private lavatory. The image thus manages to be a trans self-portrait without pandering to the politics of visual purity that requires evidence of incongruence or the political value of direct commentary on the dead. The violence of gender segregation is invoked by her trans-feminist investigation of structures (public toilets) and disciplinary norms (art history canons). The catalog describes the curatorial

Figure 1. Poster advertisement for the exhibition "Bring Your Own Body: Transgender between Archives and Aesthetics." Detail: Elizabeth 'Effy' Mia Chorubczyck, *Una nueva artista necesita usar el baño* (A new artist needs to use the bathroom), 2011. © Photo: Maria Laura Voskian. Reproduced with permission.

'effort to assign value to where it has been withheld', but Chorubczyck's self-determining action also interrogates the values assigned to performing explicit trans femininity in the face of social exclusion from women's spaces.

Chorubczyck's image raises questions about how the mechanisms of in- and exclusion present in social spaces are absorbed in the arts world. In the arts industrial complex, value arbiters might be human, a policy document, or affective atmospheres. This interrogation of the role of such value arbiters is proximate to that of Susan Cahan (2016) in *Mounting Frustration: The Museum in the Age of Black Power* with regards to their focus on managing the inclusion of black artists in elite US art shows during the 60s and 70s. Any given individual within an institution might not feel personally responsible for discrimination, but they enable and defend policies and conditions that carry out what Cahan calls 'segregation in the guise of integration' that echo social forms of racial segregation (p. 37).

A potential case of trans segregation in the guise of queer integration is the catalog from the German Historical Museum and Berlin's Schwules/Gay Museum's 2015 exhibition with the English title 'Homosexuality_ies'. The lead image for all promotional materials was by the non-binary trans identified North American artist Cassils, who made *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* with photographer Robin Black (2011) that displays their red-lipped contoured face, muscular torso, and a full jockstrap (see Figure 2). It references Linda Benglis' (1974) photographic nude with a double-ended dildo printed as an advertisement for her show in *Artforum*. On posters and the cover of the catalog, bold red typeface reading 'Homo' wraps around their shoulders while 'Sexualität_en' hovers above their crotch and runs right across their bulging pecs above their pierced nipples. The clean white studio background of the photograph could be read as referencing the white, cisgender, gay culture that both yearns for this kind of cut body and (mis)recognizes it as its own, which was how the advertisement originally circulated in gay male image cultures online (personal website for Cassils).

As a trans artist, Cassils is invoked in the exhibition catalog's introductory words in terms of how the exhibition hoped to represent the turbulent space of a 'third gender' (Völckers et al., 2015: 2, 5), language dating back to Magnus Hirschfeld's (1901) pamphlet meant to enlighten and make male homosexuality public. Collapsing Cassils' transness into the visual and verbal grammar of male homosexuality amounts to a limited inclusion of gender nonconforming minorities. The inclusion seems violent in the sense that it is organized by the hegemonic powers represented by these museums, but also since on the whole a very limited number of trans images or artists were included. The exhibition as a whole would seem to extract value from the

Figure 2. Credit Poster HMSX. Homosexuality_ies. Exhibition Poster Schwules Museum with Deutsches Historische Museum, Berlin 2015, LWL Museum für Kunst und Kultur, Munster 2016. Design: chezweitz GmbH, urbane und museale szenographie, Berlin using. Advertisement: Homage to Benglis, part of the larger body of work CUTS: A Traditional Sculpture, a 6 month durational performance, 2011. Photo credit: Heather Cassils and Robin Black. Image courtesy of Heather Cassils and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Heather Cassils and Robin Black 2011.

hypervisibility of gender turbulence that advertised the show while denying trans persons representational equivalency to the cisgender or gay standard of (art) historical representation.

Having said that, the homage carried forward in Cassils' *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* was to mimic dominant male posturing. Benglis' work exposed how cisgender male artists promote their work without fanfare while cisgender female artists are chastised for doing so. Similarly, Cassils's *Advertisement* as designed for the Homosexuality_ies exhibition only seems to promote gay male homosexuality while covertly promoting trans-masculine eroticism. As well, in this context the image that was worked on by a design agency to include the exhibition title and details may serve as a critique of the genealogy of sexology by way of reappropriating Hirschfeld's rhetoric of a 'third gender' and insisting on foregrounding trans embodiment. Interestingly, the public misread the imaged body as being a woman and certain groups campaigned against it on the basis of it being sexist because Cassils was too sexy!

Both advertisements generated major discussions in their reception communities. While in Berlin when the show was on, I saw many 'Cassils/ Homosexuality_ies' posters defaced by being torn, cut into, and with strongly worded graffiti. Pushing the trans body of Cassils out into the foreground of 'Sexuality_ites', while allowing the cisgender queers respite in the ambient background of 'Homo', meant that Cassils' body functioned as a site both of extracting symbolic and commercial value, and for enacting political violence. In this permutation of being circulated, *Advertisement* continued to expose dominant cisgender homosexual male perspectives as well as cisgender heterosexual ones that typically compose the white 'ground' of its figuration.

One of the commendable aims of this issue is to broaden the material and visual archives of trans cultural production by introducing specific image sources and producers who have not had the attention they deserve. In other words, they have not been valued by scholarly knowledge systems as an extension of cultural knowledge systems. In this article, I have sought to explain how, through analysis of the values that structure the wavering line of foregrounding a trans figure against the typically unanalyzed non-trans normative background, the field of trans visual culture studies might critique and reassign value. My hope is that, as trans art works amass social lives within the arts industrial complex, the study of the traps in which they might be ensnared might help avoid getting stuck in and even dismantle these mechanisms.

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Haritaworn first suggested the phrase 'arts industrial complex' to me in an email exchange, for which I am grateful. I want to thank Riley C Snorton, who had an important conversation with me about trans studies and media where I began to first articulate my thoughts about the notion of being pressed into visuality. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful additions and suggestions.

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Notes

1. The fact that reported murders are the basis for the monitoring project means that it relies on local organizations and news outlets, which might not use correct pronouns, name or gender identity and thereby make it hard to know if a person murdered is trans. Steinbock's (2017) article addresses the ways affective atmospheres and shared feelings might be a way to monitor narratives and felt realities around trans (slow) death.
2. An important artistic intervention to this toxic correlation between performing marginalization (e.g. brownness and trans femininity) and receiving placement, payment and praise from the artworld is in Vivek Shraya's 'Trauma Clown' photo series that was created and displayed in May 2019 as part of the CONTACT photography festival at Patel Projects in Toronto, Canada. See the images on Shraya's site: https://vivekshraya.com/projects/visual/trauma-clown/
3. For an overview of trans portraiture practices both historical and contemporary, see Steinbock (2019).
4. The first iteration of 'Bring your Own Body' was in New York City at the 41 Cooper Gallery from October–November 2015. Available at: https://cooper.edu/events-and-exhibitions/exhibitions/bring-your-own-body-transgender-between-archives-and-aesthetics

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Marie Høeg's worldmaking photography: a photo essay

K.J. Rawson and Nicole Tantum

Abstract. Marie Høeg, who lived from 1866–1949, was a Norwegian photographer and activist for women's rights. In this photo essay, the authors feature six photographs depicting Marie Høeg in gender transgressive scenes. These photographs are a few of more than 30 that were recovered in the 1980s from a property where Høeg once lived with her female partner, Bolette Berg. Standing out from the traditional landscapes and portraits that were common for the professional studio of Berg & Høeg, these photographs provide a glimpse into Høeg's playful self-expression at the onset of the 20th century. This photo essay explores not only the documentary value of these images, but also the important considerations of visibility, privacy, and the ethics of circulation that they elicit.

Keywords. gender • Marie Høeg • photography • portraits • privacy • self-representation • visibility

Existence

With a casual grin and crossed legs, Marie Høeg appears to be quite comfortable in her own body as she sits on top of a pile of rocks in this staged studio photograph (Figure 1). Her shortly cropped hair, masculine clothing, and confident pose clearly signal that Høeg was not a conventional Victorian woman. Born in Norway in 1866, Marie Høeg was an outspoken activist, successful businessperson, and talented photographer (Moksnes, 2009). With her long-term romantic partner, Bolette Berg, Høeg owned the photography studio where these photographs were taken, a studio that they gave the gender-neutral name of Berg & Høeg.

The photograph in Figure 1 is one of 440 glass negatives found in the 1980s on a farm once owned by Høeg and Berg. In stark contrast with the collection's

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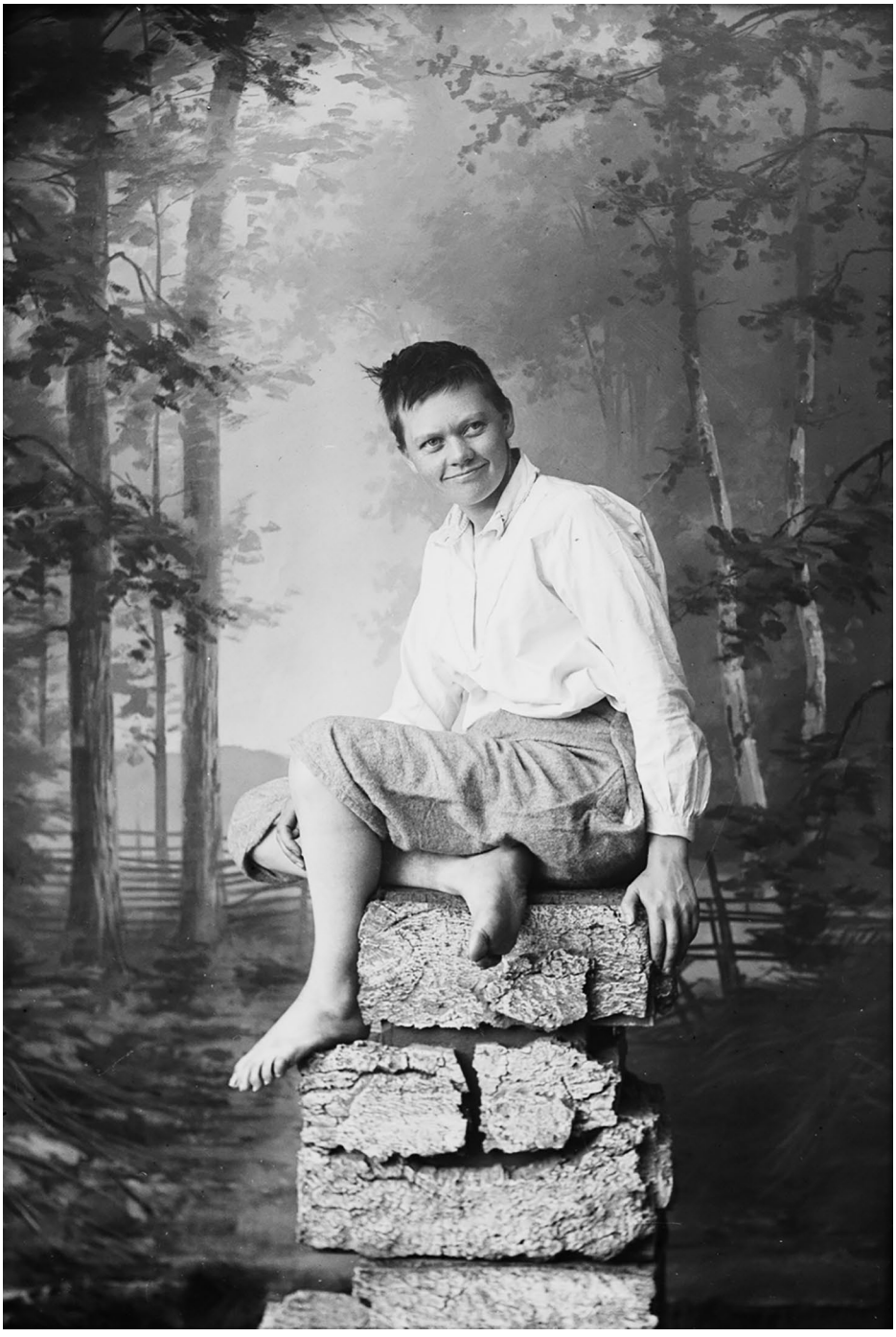

Figure 1. 'Marie Høeg Sits on a Pile of Rocks in Traditional Men's Attire.' Available at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/5999n3588. Courtesy of the Preus Museum.

landscapes and earnest portraits of clients, 31 of these negatives show Høeg and her friends having fun and posing in various outfits, often in gender-transgressive styles. The Preus Museum, located in Horten, Norway, now holds Høeg's photographs and has digitized this set of 31 negatives, which they have made available online.

This set of images is also accessible via the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA), an online archive of transgender-related historical materials freely available at www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net. As the Director (Rawson) and Digital Archivist (Tantum) of the DTA, we decided to include Berg & Høeg's images in our database because they fall within our broad collecting scope of documenting 'non-normative gender practices' ('Policies'). Since we have not found any evidence that she regularly presented or identified as male, we would not suggest that Høeg should be understood as a transgender person.[1] As Figure 1 suggests, Høeg's gender expression appears to be as independent as her thinking – Høeg was comfortable transgressing conventions of Victorian femininity through her clothing, hairstyle, and body language. Although this photo essay is included in a Themed Issue on trans visual culture, we want to be very clear that we are not arguing that Høeg should be reclaimed as a trans historical figure. Instead, our interest here is in introducing readers to her work and thinking through concerns of visibility, privacy, and self-representation, and how to approach traces of non-normative gender expression in historical context.

Throughout this photo essay, we will provide brief introductions to a handful of photographs depicting Marie Høeg in gender transgressive scenes. We have included 6 images out of the 31 that are available on the DTA.[2] As Nina Lager Vestberg (2013) reminds us in 'Ordering, Searching, Finding':

> By virtue of being photographic collections, the very things of which they are made up are always already indexical references to other, pre-existing objects-in-the-world. In addition to being an archival object in its own right, every photograph is in this respect also a mini-archive within the archive. (p. 476)

In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that these photographs are radically decontextualized traces of Høeg's complex and influential life, offering only the most perfunctory glimpse into a few playful moments in a photography studio.

Høeg's life has been studied in some detail in two Norwegian publications (*Marie Høeg: Kvinnesaksaktivist, organisator og fotograf*, 1996; Stuksrud, 2009), although it is unfortunate that these publications have not been translated into English. Perhaps in part because of the limited availability of information on her in English, Høeg does not appear to be widely known outside of Scandinavia. In

fact, the first time these photographs were exhibited outside of Scandinavia was not until 2014 at the ONE Archives in the United States (ONE Archives, 2014). Although these photographs only offer a small contribution to our understanding of Høeg's life, they are quite significant in documenting the existence of a person who playfully transgressed gender norms at the turn of the century.

Self-representation

In this diptych portrait, Høeg's contrasting expressions create a striking duality between the two sides of the image (Figure 2). On the left, a scowling Høeg holds a mirror face-down in her lap as she faces the image on the right. On the right, she glances sidelong into the same mirror as she smiles warmly. This portrait has at least four layers of self-representation – the two contrasting figures of Høeg, the mirror reflection in the portrait on the right, and the photograph itself.

For gender non-conforming subjects, seeing oneself clearly – in mirrors or photographs, for example – can be a lifesaving tool used to gauge and assess how others see you and, in some cases, to determine whether it is possible to pass in public as a particular gender. While we have no indication that Høeg was trying to pass as a man, she certainly would be attuned to the public reception of her non-traditional gender expression. In this context, we might interpret the portrait on the left as a disapproving public gaze that looks scornfully at the Høeg on the right who smiles as she sees her own reflection. Or, perhaps the diptych is meant to represent her dual (or triple) personalities that are in tension as she attempts to see herself.

Posing in her own studio for photographs that are likely to have been taken by her partner Bolette Berg, Marie Høeg had privileged access to a form and degree of self-representation that would have been quite unusual at the time. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, people who transgressed gender and sexual norms were commonly subjected to the pathologizing gaze of medical photography, which contemporary transgender artists are still continuing to grapple with (Steinbock, 2014: 544). Carter et al. (2014) point out in their introduction to a special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* that, by the end of the 20th century, 'trans and genderqueer photographers (e.g., Loren Cameron and Catherine Opie) were actively constructing an archive of affirming images of themselves and their communities' (p. 470). Again, although there is no evidence that we should consider Høeg to be 'transgender' in the contemporary sense of that term, we can chart a trajectory from Høeg's photographic self-representation at the onset of the 20th century through self-identified transgender photographers at the end of the 20th century in that they share a common commitment to developing affirming and positive images of gender transgression.

Figure 2. 'A Diptych Portrait of Marie Høeg.' Available at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/nv935302r. Courtesy of the Preus Museum.

Community

In addition to photographs of Høeg by herself, many of the recovered photographs also include other people (and, in a few instances, a dog). In Figure 3, Høeg poses with another person, both of whom appear to be crossdressed, to impersonate a dapper heterosexual couple. Even with a visible mustache and closely shaved head, the person on the right in Figure 3 calls attention to Høeg's masculinity by providing a feminine counterpart who shyly smiles and gently grasps Høeg's stiff arm. Both subjects are impeccably dressed and elegantly posed, making it clear that they take this moment seriously. In a similar vein, in Figure 4, Høeg poses in masculine attire alongside three people whom we infer are women, whose femininity contrasts Høeg's masculinity. As in Figure 3, the subjects in Figure 4 are transgressing gender norms together since drinking and playing cards would not have been seen as appropriately feminine behavior at the time.

In his 2016 article, 'Breaking the Waves: Tuning into Queer History with FRANK's *Voluspå*', Mathias Danbolt argues that these photographs were 'not taken in the context of art' (p. 144). Instead, he explains, 'the specific contexts of these photos are unknown, but when seen together they seem to give a glimpse into the alternative ways that Høeg, her partner, and their friends lived together and played with the camera's world-producing potentialities' (p. 145). The world that they produced in photographs such as Figures 3 and 4 is one where gender is more permeable, both for individuals who are crossdressed and for a group of women who are partaking in the male-coded activities of drinking and playing cards.[3] The world they produced also appears to be an exclusively white world, which is perhaps unsurprising in turn-of-the-century Norway. Yet it serves as a critical reminder that Høeg's ability to explore and document non-normative gender expression was dependent upon other ways that she and her friends had privilege; even these minimal photographic traces of historical gender transgressions stand in stark contrast to the resounding absence of those who were less privileged and had no opportunity to document their lives.

While we do not know the extent to which these subjects carried this private gender play into public, there is a clear connection between the world that this community was producing in the photographs and the world Høeg was actively trying to shape with her activism. Even though she and Berg lived in the conservative town of Horten, Norway, Høeg founded multiple political groups, such as the Horten branch of the National Association for Women's Right to Vote, the Horten Women's Council, and the Social Discussion Association (Moksnes, 2009). Berg and Høeg opened up their photography studio for these meetings, inviting women through word of mouth and paid messenger boys to reduce the risk of detection. In this light, the photographs

Figure 3. 'Marie Høeg and an Unknown Individual Crossdressed.' Available at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/zg64tm12r. Courtesy of the Preus Museum.

Figure 4. 'Marie Høeg and Three Others Drinking and Playing Cards.' Available at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/5999n355f. Courtesy of the Preus Museum.

of Høeg with her community appear less like titillating private gender play and more like worldmaking exercises in line with their political efforts.

Visibility

In this pair of photographs, Marie Høeg playfully poses in oversized clothing. In Figure 5, she faces the camera with her hands on her hips and her face scrunched into a playful smirk. In Figure 6, she faces away from the camera with her arms folded across her chest and her head looking down, creating a more sullen scene. Both photographs share the same flowery backdrop with an ornate floor molding, which, given its broken and uneven appearance, suggests that it would not have been captured in the professional photographs they would take of others. Danbolt (2016: 144) helpfully explains the significance of the conventionally staged background when he writes:

> Taken in front of the same painted backgrounds with flowery nature scenes and rococo architectural props as the conventional portraits, the person looking into the camera in these images do [sic] not confirm to the conventions of photographic behavior or modes of visibility of her time.

The tension between the background and the subject is particularly evident in these two photographs, given Høeg's clothing, expression, and poses. The overtly staged and picturesque background is in stark contrast to the

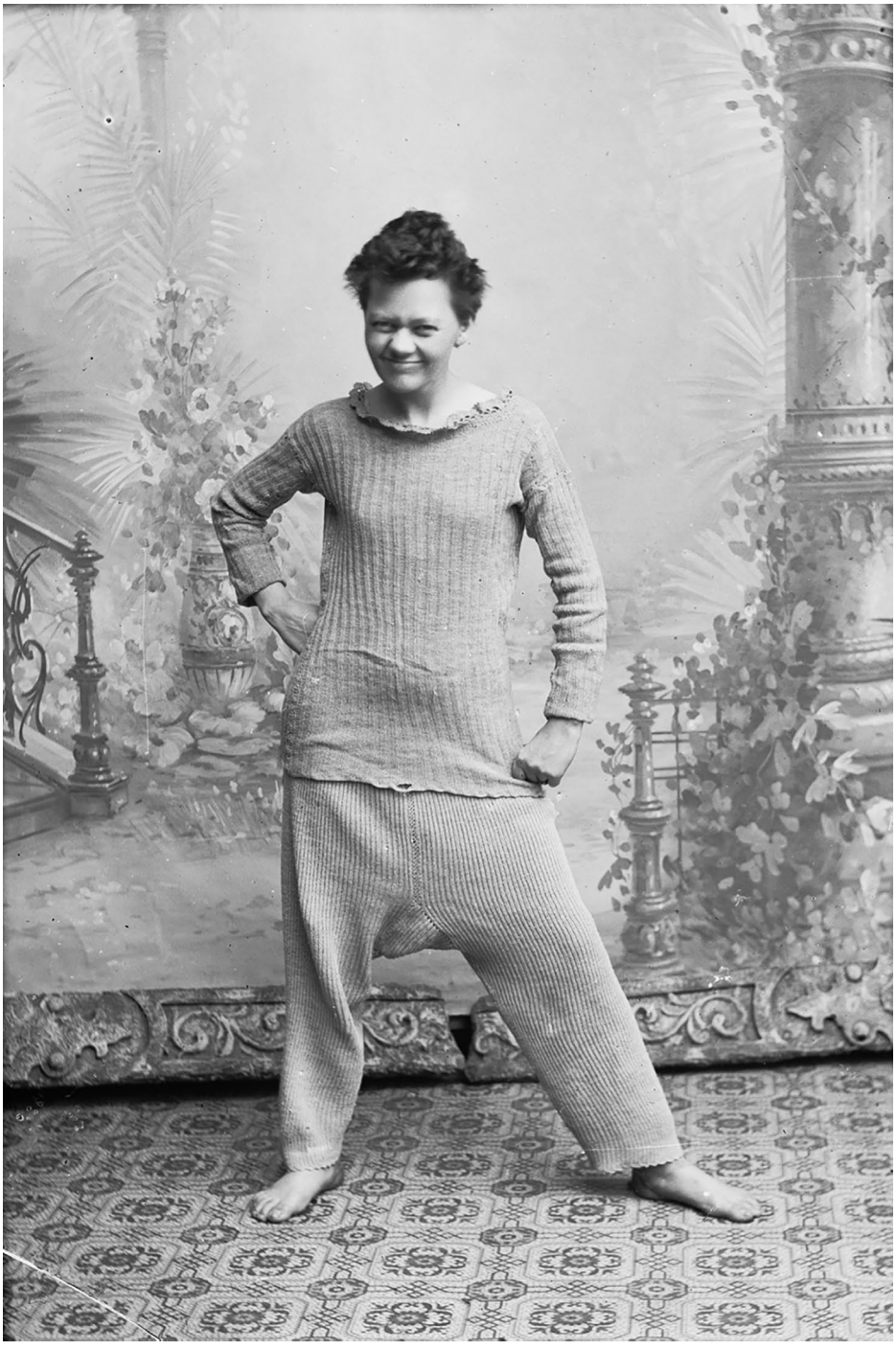

Figure 5. 'Marie Høeg Proudly Wears a Sweater and Baggy Pants.' Available at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/44558d49x. Courtesy of the Preus Museum.

Figure 6. 'Marie Høeg Wearing a Sweater and Baggy Pants.' Available at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/dv13zt38c. Courtesy of the Preus Museum.

barefooted, highly casual Høeg who demands to be seen in one image and refuses to be seen in the other.

Like many items that we include in the Digital Transgender Archive, these photographs present challenging ethical questions concerning visibility. When over 440 glass negatives were found in the 1980s in a barn on the farm that was once owned by Høeg and Berg, this particular collection of 31 negatives were all in one box marked 'private'. If we assume that Høeg or Berg supplied this label, what motivated the desire to keep these private? Would that demand for privacy matter more in the first few decades after they were produced? Or, if an enduring privacy was implied, why keep the negatives at all?[4] Additionally, the act of digitizing only these 'private' images, instead of the other negatives that presumably include Høeg and Berg's commercial work, highlights the persistent focus on what gender transgression 'looks like' instead of how it presents itself in other formats. How would Berg and Høeg feel about seeing these images at the forefront of their legacy, instead of their other photography work?

Whatever the motivation, the labeling of these photographs as 'private' appears to have backfired, serving instead as a tempting invitation for persistent fascinations with the photographs (including this article's contribution to that growing legacy). Given that the photographs were already made available on the Preus Museum website and had been exhibited in a gallery in the US, our discussion about whether to include them in the DTA mainly concerned the impact of our circulation of the images more widely and with a framework of gender transgression. After thinking through how much time has passed, the nature of Høeg's political work, and how much the gender landscape has changed in the century since they were taken, we ultimately decided to include them on our site and to write about them here. Yet this kind of decision is always a difficult one as we attempt to balance privacy with visibility in the most ethical way possible and we are still not certain that we are getting it right.

The images in this photo essay, and the larger collection from which they are drawn, can be helpfully situated in broader discussions about visibility, such as those included in the recent edited collection *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Gossett et al., 2017) and Eliza Steinbock's article in this Themed Issue. These gender-transgressive photographs of Marie Høeg are part of what Gossett et al. refer to as 'legacies of representation' (p. xvi) which, for trans and gender non-conforming subjects, is a legacy that is equal parts presence and absence, visibility and invisibility. As we trace these legacies back to historical periods that predate the emergence of trans identity, one risk involves what Steinbock refers to in this Themed Issue as 'trans visual essentialism' as we rely on highly suspect visual cues of gender transgression. We also risk violating the privacy of historical subjects as we

contribute to the exoticization and hypervisibility of those who are gender non-conforming. These are risks that we believe are worth taking in order to credit Marie Høeg for her worldmaking art that extends beyond her better-known feminist activism and in order to track experiences of gender transgression throughout history. Høeg, and her partner Berg, should be credited for not only having the courage to transgress norms of gender and sexuality in their time, but to powerfully and playfully document those experiences so that we now have a record of their existence.

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Notes

1. Although our contemporary understanding of the term 'transgender' includes a wide range of gender non-conforming expressions and identities, cross-gender expression would have been the most transgressive option conceivable for most people during Høeg's time.
2. The full collection can be viewed at: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/col/4m90dv65c
3. Inspired by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's influential essay 'Sex in Public' (1998), scholarship on queer worldmaking continues to flourish, particularly in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*.
4. There are many examples of people who kept records of their gender expression that were marked to be destroyed upon their death (Davidmann, nd; Rawson, 2012).

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

Familiar grammars of loss and belonging: curating trans kinship in post-dictatorship Argentina

Cole Rizki

Abstract. On 24 March 1976, the Argentine military staged a coup d'état and established dictatorship. To eliminate radical left activists, the armed forces perpetrated mass civilian murder until democratic transition in 1983. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo emerged, protesting their children's disappearance by mobilizing portraiture to make visible familial rupture and indict the state. This article examines the archival exhibit, *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* (2017), which displayed trans women's vernacular photographs and family albums from the 1970s–1980s, the same years as dictatorship. Analyzing the exhibit's curatorial choices and the photographs' material and haptic qualities, this article reads the exhibit alongside the Mothers' iconic activist visual culture and national narratives of family loss. In doing so, the author suggests the exhibit renders trans sociality familial and familiar to a national viewing public, thereby reinterpreting Argentine history by installing trans subjects as proper subjects of national mourning.

Keywords. family albums • haptic • Mothers of Plaza de Mayo • portraiture • transgender

Trans activist Ivana Bordei grabs my hand and whisks me through the Cultural Center of Memory gallery. Ivana's fingers move across prints, tracing a thick genealogy of loss and belonging as she touches each photograph on the wall: 'she died . . . I don't know where she is now . . . she was killed . . . I'm not sure what happened to her . . .' Her voice trails off as she remembers, moving about the room. She ushers me closer, we listen to audio clips, and her laughter fills the space as she recalls acts of care and complicity, building trans memory through touch, laughter, and tears. Between 2012–2017, trans women donated dusty boxes, worn bags, and cracked family albums brimming with photographs to amass the Trans Memory Archive, a collection of over 6,000 personal photographs and objects. In December

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2017, the archive's members curated an exhibition from these photographs titled *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió*.[1] The installation displayed a selection of the archive's materials spanning the same years as Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983) during which 30,000 people were killed because of state-sponsored terrorism. As I claim throughout, this curatorial decision was not a coincidence.

Turning toward the senses, this article explores how trans women's practices of curating vernacular photographs and their tactile and affective encounters with these images ignite political claims and forge trans social formations in the wake of Argentine dictatorship. To do so, I track how the exhibit employs visual grammars of the family album as well as other formal devices that make obvious the haptic qualities of the image. I suggest that, in framing trans community representation through everyday grammars of kinship, the exhibit further puts pressure on existing national visual narratives of death and family loss during dictatorship (1976–1983) that elide trans subjects. As I claim, this framing underscores how dominant representations of the disappeared must shift in meaning as, unlike the disappeared, trans subjects who suffered state violence during this period were illegible to the state. In doing so, I argue that the exhibit renders trans sociality familial *and* familiar to a national viewing public by braiding seemingly discrete activist projects and archives across multiple senses. *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* installs trans subjects as proper subjects of collective memory and national mourning to reinterpret Argentine history.

National grammar lessons

Rushing along Avenida Libertador, I head towards the Ex-ESMA's entrance for the opening of *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió*, the Trans Memory Archive's first large-scale exhibition (see Figure 1). As a former concentration camp turned memory museum, the Ex-ESMA is one of Argentina's most highly visible sites of memory due to the magnitude of atrocities committed – of 5,000 desaparecidos who passed through the ESMA, only 200 survived ('Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos', nd). Here *desaparecidos* – citizens targeted for their left-leaning politics – were illegally detained, were tortured, gave birth, and were executed or loaded into airplanes for death flights in which they were drugged and dropped alive into the Río de La Plata and Atlantic Ocean. The ESMA was only recently transferred out of military control, and some of its spaces were turned into memorial sites such as the Haroldo Conti Cultural Center of Memory. Installing the Trans Memory Archive exhibition in the Conti is thus a highly politicized and even polemic choice given the site's charged history, suggesting a provocative relationship between national collective memory projects and the Trans Memory Archive exhibit.

Typically subdued, the Conti is a multi-level memory museum featuring contemporary art exhibitions centering Argentina's complex past. Such museums are nationally sanctioned spaces of memory that, as highly curated, pedagogical spaces, shape citizen-subjects, transmitting national history through aesthetics. Installing photographic prints and ephemera from the Trans Memory Archive collection in such a space instills alternative visual narratives of trans memory within civic consciousness that insist on trans national belonging, albeit through death. Death is not what I encounter, however, when I enter the darkened Ex-ESMA compound and hurry up the steps into the Conti. To my surprise, this building's typically hushed museum space is dramatically up-lit and jam-packed with at least 50 trans women and another 100 visitors shouting, laughing, and crying all at once as names bounce off the walls over the excited din of voices: 'María Belén! ¡Veníiiiii!' 'Cecilia, ¿dónde estás?' '¡Magalíiii!' Trans woman after trans woman calls out searching for one another across the teeming atrium. Many women enter the Conti for the first time, and their unrivaled fabulousness commands the room – 3-, 4- and 5-inch heels click across the floor while animated gestures and voices ricochet, becoming part of the installation itself. For visitors, it is immediately clear we are not here solely to view photographs – the exhibition has come alive. Yet it is not trans women's bodies on display as has historically been the case – from street corners to Carnaval to tabloid pages – but instead their emotion, and it is contagious. In their corporeal interactions with one another – waving and shouting, touching and kissing in greeting, exchanging gossip and backhanded compliments – these trans women reinvigorate community bonds where these have weakened or fractured due to lived precarity. At times, photographic prints are the only remaining traces of loved ones – many women have disappeared without friends or family knowing whether they are alive or dead, killed and buried in unmarked graves as 'NN' or *sin nombre*. The Trans Memory Archive exhibition's opening has brought hundreds of women together tonight – at least 50 fill the space while hundreds more rest in albums or are supported by gallery walls. The exhibit has decidedly curated a large-scale family reunion, and the wall text bills it as such:

> [The Trans Memory Archive] surges from the necessity of embracing one another again, seeing one another again, of finding each other together again after more than 15 years, with the *compañeras* who we thought were dead, with those we lost touch due to differences or exile; and with the memories of those who are effectively gone. (Correa et al., 2017)

This exhibit surges forth with urgency, from the desire for reunion both visual and tactile – the need to embrace, to see, to physically find one another again, where contact has been lost or is now impossible due to exile, asylum, or death.[2]

Figure 1. Exhibit title and introductory image. © Photograph: Cole Rizki.

As I enter the gallery, a life-sized photograph of trans women smiling and wearing shimmering polyester and sequined dresses steps out of the 1980s to greet me, inviting me to the party. Seven faces smile back at me – some more enthusiastic than others – while two are focused on something else that, *in absentia*, exerts force. Yet the exhibition title contrasts sharply with the image's celebratory iconography: *Esta se fue*, *a esta la mataron*, *esta murió* or 'This one left, this one was killed, this one died'. What could have, at first glance, passed as a guest list (Esta . . ., esta . . ., esta . . .) becomes an impersonal ledger whose enumerating logic is punctuated by loss. Beyond the exhibition's title, there is little wall text to contextualize, and the contrast between text and image unsettles. Indeed, most images convey joy and are even quite playful, yet the exhibition title highlights the spaces between these images and their now haunting presence. As I stare at the photograph, Ivana's voice echoes in my mind, trailing off: 'she died . . . I don't know where she is now . . . she was killed . . . I'm not sure what happened to her . . .' This reunion is bittersweet.

Vernacular photographs and (trans) family albums

The Trans Memory Archive's photographs are examples of vernacular photography, a photographic genre comprised of family photographs,

snapshots, studio portraits – everyday and even ordinary photographs aiming to capture a moment (Batchen, 2001: 57; Campt, 2012: 8). The exhibit includes 500 such photos hung on gallery walls and pressed into family albums. Snapped on inexpensive point-and-shoot cameras well before the digital age, images and reproductions of photographic prints from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s are on display. Many of the photographs arrive at the archive tucked into albums that trans women lovingly (and with great trust) donate temporarily for images to be scanned.

Taken by trans women of their loved ones, these snapshots capture seemingly banal moments of being-together. The snapshot's unassuming generic conventions – frontal pose, centered subject, affectionate gestures like arms around shoulders and broad smiles – are universally recognizable to viewers and serve a social function marking familiarity and often kinship.[3] As 'a private mode of interaction between individuals', writes art historian Catherine Zuromskis (2009: 60), snapshooting enacts relational moments, image-making negotiations that are 'conscious gestures of intimacy'. Viewing snapshots as traces of such interpersonal intimacies performatively inscribes the viewer within snapshooting's familiar relational circuits, reproducing these same conscious gestures of intimacy that now unfold between viewers and trans women. What is crucial about the vernacular and the snapshot as photographic registers that here register 'trans' as a particular social formation is that both banalize trans life, which has historically been represented and consumed as spectacle. Indeed, these everyday images contrast sharply with images installed in the exhibition's vitrines where trans women appear in sensationalist newspaper clippings and police reports from intelligence archives. In these latter cases, grainy images of trans women's dead bodies strewn on pavement or block print headlines promising scandalous news about *hombres-mujeres* made to look monstrous by unflattering image choices and camera angles turn trans women's lives and suffering into near constant media spectacle. The banal, however, is spectacle's foil and, as such, has an opposite effect: vernacular photography *inscribes* trans women within familiar scenes of everyday life. As Trans Memory Archive founder María Belén Correa recounts:

> they were our family photos same as ever, taken by us and in an everyday and familial environment. For the people who attended the exhibit these are photos without any stigma, something to which we [are] not accustomed. (López and Correa, nd)

Familiar genres such as vernacular photography and practices like snapshooting serially reproduce trans women as ordinary subjects with, at times, boring private lives like any other. 'Nothing remarkable to see here, but much to cherish', these images and formal curatorial choices seem to

say. In part an effect of genre, the materiality of these images as *objects* is impossible to ignore: many of these photos exhibit damage from wear, and hold complex histories of circulation and exchange. Historians of photography such as Geoffrey Batchen (1997) and anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards (see Edwards and Hart, 2004: 15) argue persuasively for attention to the materiality of photographs – their dimensionality, material forms, circulation and exchange – as inherently part of photographs' multiple meanings and import as 'socially salient objects'. Scholars of materiality center image plasticity (printing paper, chemical processes), presentational forms (family albums, *cartes de visite*), and traces of wear as evincing photographs' histories and existence as material objects in the world with meaning-effects. In the case of Trans Memory Archive photographs, material degradation hints at the lived conditions trans women experienced during this time period (1970s–1990s) that simultaneously structured photographic exchanges and impacted preservation. Many women, including María Belén Correa, sought political asylum in the US or Europe through the 2000s, fearing for their lives (interview with Correa, 2017). The act of collecting and arranging photographs in albums similarly cultivated kinship networks from afar. When taken in exile, photographs were often inscribed with messages and sent by airmail back to trans women in Argentina, creating a sense of transnational community through photographic exchanges. The physical act of including such photographs in albums performatively made these photos *matter* – and, by extension, trans women's lives took on value through these moments of curation in which photos were arranged and preserved with care.

Many of these photographs show marks of handling – mold, cracks, puncture wounds – the material scars of precarious life. Photographs were often prized possessions. Homeless and on the run, avoiding arrest and violence on the streets, trans women have consistently lacked stable housing to store personal belongings (Berkins, 2015; Programa de Género y Diversidad Sexual del Ministerio Público de la Defensa de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires and Bachillerato Popular Mocha Celis, 2017). At times, the only possessions that remained constant were those that could be quickly stashed in handbags grabbed amidst the never-ending chaos of police raids and evictions. Under such precarious conditions, only a small number of photographs stood a fighting chance:

> There were girls who lived in hotels, and when they were arrested for various days, when they got out, they didn't have a hotel room anymore because they hadn't paid. Their things were all gone, and one of the girls always tried to save the others' photos or a little bag of what had been thrown out, if they had a friend. (La Tinta, 2018)

Disposable, cast off, scrapped, and dumped, these women and their possessions were summarily tossed out. It was not only the police or hotel staff who represented a problem, as María Belén recounts: 'if one of us died in a hotel, our photos and memories were . . . discarded by a family that didn't want to recognize these life choices' (Máximo and Prieto, 2016). She continues: 'it's typical that someone's family, when she dies, they try to erase every trace that that person was part of the family, because it's a disgrace' (La Tinta, 2018). This installation's photographs have managed to survive it all: 'the apathy of the family, the State, and the hotels' and the archive make an opposite gesture to indifference by actively soliciting and preserving these photographs. With *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió*, these trans women move their precious prints from family albums to gallery spaces, displaying their private snapshots in a format that honors the scope of their original intentions: kinship building. Unlike fine art portrayals, this exhibit centers the intimate domestic through the vernacular. As US cultural historian Elspeth H Brown and photographer Sara Davidmann (2015: 190) note, while some attention has been paid to how 'queer and trans* art photography' by artists such as Catherine Opie and Zanele Muholi explores queer kinship structures via formal portraiture, less attention has been paid to the ways in which trans folks' 'domestic snapshots, so-called family photographs' also serve to produce 'trans* family belonging' and trans kinship networks in ways that deserve more studied consideration. Brown and Davidmann together call for a turn to 'domestic snapshots' as critical sites of inquiry that, as image-objects, are 'central to the affective production of trans* family, however defined' (p. 190).

Domestic snapshots are particularly powerful haptic sites, as historian Tina Campt (2012, 2017) elaborates, where haptic images trigger multisensorial exchanges between bodies and photographic prints as images and objects. This is apparent to me as I enter the gallery space: phrases like 'Look at her!' 'Divine!' 'Here I am!' and 'Unforgettable!' reverberate in refrain while these women touch their family photographs. The women move about, touching photos to locate themselves within the images for other trans women who often gasp, laugh or cry, together recalling anecdotes that animate the images for all within earshot. They reach out for their *compañeras*, asking each other 'Do you remember her?'

Their behavior is wholly characteristic of photographic viewing rituals that take place between family or friends who, in the privacy of their own home, might pull out a family album to open it across their laps, touching or even holding photographs, removing them from sleeves, turning them over, brushing their glossy surfaces to remember time and place, names and dates that might locate the image; these vernacular photographs now hanging on gallery walls retain their familiar and familial quality, mobilizing touch that elicits intimate stories and amusing anecdotes, laughter and tears that knit

past with present. I am invited into what feels like these trans women's living room as a distant relative (maybe a trans second cousin) where I watch and participate in image encounters unfolding through touch, propelled by affect that directs the flow of bodies through space.

Perhaps this is what, in part, differentiates this exhibition from installations by photographers like Opie, Del LaGrace Volcano, or Muholi whose foundational and pioneering work so beautifully explores queer and trans kinship ties. While these artists elevate queer and trans subjects and their relations through the conventions of formal portraiture, *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* instead elevates through the vernacular. Fine art portraiture further holds very different energetic valence – one pointedly distant from the very energies that animate 'family' as the Trans Memory Archive installation suggests. Such portraiture can even have the sinister effect of erasing the affective and interactive bonds that constitute family even as it might simultaneously activate other affects inspiring awe or admiration from a distance that is, at times, unwelcoming to touch. These photographs, on the other hand, move these trans women to touch and to tears just as these photos touch them back across multiple senses. As haptic objects that register beyond the visual, these photographs compel forms of viewing that trigger bodily reactions (reaching out, grasping, pulling back) and sensations that manifest as emotions: smiles, laughter, sobs, and tired sighs of exhaustion and elation. Indeed, as Campt (2017: 72) reiterates in recent work, photographs are 'deeply affective objects that implicate and leave impressions upon us through multiple forms of contact: visual contact (seeing), physical contact (touching), [and] psychic contact (feeling)' among other forms. Photographs move trans women to simultaneously see, touch, and feel images and each other. These synchronized haptics unfold through interpersonal and embodied image interactions, creating the quality of inhabiting a live family album.

Trans studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro's (2015: 275) trailblazing work on the relationship between transgender and touch draws our attention to 'the sensory feelings and textures of crafting transgender', centering on the quotidian aesthetics of transgender becoming and belonging. Vaccaro's elegant theorization of touch and other sensory modes productively moves us away from figural representations of trans bodies and socialities.[4] Performance studies scholar Cynthia Citlallin Delgado Huitrón (2019) artfully extends Vaccaro's work, elaborating 'trans touch' as hyper-tender, suggesting the haptic as tactic to combat Mexican state hyper-violence. Expanding on both Vaccaro and Delgado Huitrón's formulations, I propose that trans touch can also operate as a mode of curation in response to state violence where touch curates trans kinship when it has been formally or previously denied. Touch operates here both ontologically and epistemologically – a way of both

Figure 2. Ivana's family album. © Photograph: Cole Rizki.

being and knowing trans, of inhabiting trans as a particular familiar (banal) and familial social formation. Indeed, trans social formations are both fashioned and arranged with care, curated through tact, cohering in gallery spaces and living rooms alike through multisensorial encounters where bodies touch bodies, fingers touch prints, and photographs touch back. Each time these trans women touch one print and then another while moving about the room

and reaching out for their *compañeras*, they constellate kinship, fashioning embodied networks of relation through acts of curation – touch as a form of arrangement with care – drawing themselves into relation with their *familiares* once more.

While the gallery space had turned into a live family album, the material family albums open on pedestals strategically placed throughout the gallery further invite such analogy. As a particularly charged haptic and affect-laden site (Figure 2), the photographic album cultivates alternate modes of trans belonging in defiance of normative kinship structures that exclude trans subjects. On a basic level, family albums install historical narratives locating subjects within existing and evolving kinship networks through photographs and attendant viewing rituals. As many visual culture scholars have noted, family albums, as pedagogical projects, serve several normative ideological functions, reproducing 'the family' as the central heterosexual reproductive unit while installing proper (and disciplinary) modes of familial belonging and aspiration that are both class-motivated and racially-coded (Hirsch, 1997; Spence and Holland, 1991). Consequently, family albums are often sites of violence for trans subjects who do not cohere within such structures. Physical transition, for example, disturbs the visual order of family albums as well as their kinship structures – where there was a subject who (more or less) visually cohered as a daughter for 20 years, a son now emerges or perhaps a genderqueer or non-binary subject whose unruly gender presentation defies normative visual logics of gendered inscription. Similarly, trans subjects have historically been erased from family albums and families alike – their photographs destroyed or otherwise removed if they are exiled from their families of origin (Brown and Davidmann, 2015). Such reflections aim to account for trans subjects' visual representation or erasure within family albums and kinship structures conditioned by family of origin.

Yet, attention to Argentine national histories shifts the valence of family photography, reorienting the reception of the Trans Memory Archive exhibit's photographic albums and prints. Indeed, the foundational importance of family photography and family-based activisms in the wake of forced disappearance during dictatorship renders these albums part of a broader activist history of deploying visual narratives of kinship to resist state violence.[5] One need only think of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who, under threat of disappearance, so courageously mobilized their disappeared children's National Identity Document photos, successfully challenging and perverting the state's logic of disappearance by mobilizing the state's own archival imagery to insist on state responsibility for disappearance and on their children's presence (Figure 3). *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* is in direct conversation with such visual kinship narratives.

Figure 3. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's last march under dictatorship, 8 December 1983. Photograph: Mónica Hasenberg. Courtesy of the Archivo Hasenberg-Quaretti.

This black and white photograph of the Mothers carrying enlarged, grainy black and white ID card photographs of their disappeared children registers their final protest under dictatorship. These photographs of the disappeared, together with the Mothers' familiar white handkerchiefs – the same fabric as cloth diapers – stage these women's roles as mothers, foregrounding ruptured kinship ties. The layered seriality of loss, the repetition of images, the sitters' unsmiling formal poses, and the images' direct relationships to the state (as ID card photos) are quite sinister. Interpellated by the camera's gaze, these sitters have been both literally and figuratively shot by the state – the same state apparatus that disappeared them. Part of what makes the Mothers' demands legible to this day, however, is that these disappeared subjects were *already* considered legitimate subjects by both the state and general public before they disappeared. The Mothers largely mobilize national identity document photographs to stake demands; these national identity documents simultaneously confer state recognition on their subjects. One belongs to the

nation by virtue of identity documents that visually inscribe one as national citizen-subject through, among other identifying information, a headshot. The disappeared were thus subjects previously recognized by the state and therefore worthy of public mourning and intervention on their behalf to secure their return. Trans women, on the other hand, were none of the above until 2012 when the national *Gender Identity Law* passed. Prior, trans women's ID card headshots represented them in drag, forced to present as masculine subjects: it was not possible to change gender markers save on case-by-case basis ('Ley de Identídad de Género', 2012).

As historian Victoria Langland (2005: 88) asserts, the use of photographs of the disappeared has become 'part of a universal symbolic language'. Latin Americanist Andrea Noble (2009: 65) extends such universality to the 'family snapshot', which has taken on 'emblematic status in the context of human rights activism in Argentina' and is 'instantly recognizable by a broad transnational viewing public'. While Noble (2009) and others, such as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003: 174), have pointed to the ways in which the Mothers' use of photography 'caught on' elsewhere with other mothers from across Latin America to the Middle East to the former Soviet Union, I argue here that these tactics – namely, family photographs as part of the material and visual culture of protest – have traveled across seemingly disparate social movements. Indeed, trans activists utilize visual grammars of the family album that remit to the photography of disappearance to trouble the limits of the category of the disappeared as a supposedly bounded identity category.

Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió thus stakes a trans visual kinship narrative that, when read alongside existing *national* visual narratives of familial rupture, reveals the exhibition's aspirations and material stakes. Such aspirations include the desire for national belonging through symbolic recognition as disappeared subjects with rights to material reparations, like all formerly detained and disappeared persons, for detention during dictatorship.[6] *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* forged potent and polemic relationships between these multiple kinship narratives, which rendered its visual grammars powerful and simultaneously audacious. Less evidentiary and more aspirational, these photographs and their arrangements hold particular social, cultural, and historical import for the ways in which they suggestively stage trans social formations *as* familial, which, in the context of Argentina, represents a central mode *par excellence* of national belonging (Jelin, 2008; Sosa, 2014). Such a move reenergizes the past in the present in the service of rights claims by seemingly unrelated collectivities forged through unlikely public intimacies and social bonds.

There is particular visual force to viewing not only a collection of 500 photographic prints of trans women but also cohabiting space with over 50

trans women who come together in a formal gallery to interact with their own photographs which, to them and prior to this evening, were fully vernacular objects. Yet, by virtue of their gallery installation, these photographs have become art objects that display the artfulness of trans life as belonging in national institutional spaces such as this memory museum, and deserving of studied attention, curation, and conservation. Simultaneously (and quite fittingly), these photos also perform a more colloquial and even street definition of art – the purposeful use of skill and creative ingenuity that these women employ every day. These photos display the art of existing, of not only surviving but also flourishing against all odds in a country where trans women's life expectancy continues to hover between 35–40 years of age (Programa de Género y Diversidad Sexual del Ministerio Público de la Defensa de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires and Bachillerato Popular Mocha Celis, 2017).

Unlike both state and institutional narratives of disappearance, the Trans Memory Archive installation recuperates, legitimates, and builds trans familial narratives – both celebratory and mournful. In consequence, the Trans Memory Archive project rewrites history, asserting that dictatorship directly targeted trans subjects, and that trans subjects continue to experience state and extra-state violence in post-dictatorship Argentina. *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* insists on the centrality of trans archival memory and its preservation to a democratic present and future where democracy necessarily remains an aspirational horizon even in the absence of dictatorship.

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Notes

1. Translated as: 'This one left, this one was killed, this one died'.
2. For more on the Trans Memory Archive, see Correa et al. (2019).
3. On snapshot photography, see also Hirsch (1997), Phu and Brown (2015) and Zuromskis (2013).
4. For other excellent trans studies work on visual culture, see Gosset et al. (2017). Prosser (1998) is exemplary of early trans studies work on photography.
5. See, for example, Fortuny (2014), Longoni (2010) and Taylor (2003). For queer contestations of the biological family as Argentina's central paradigm for national belonging in the aftermath of dictatorship, see Sosa (2014).
6. On Argentine trans women's detention during dictatorship, see Rizki (2020).

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

The diversity of the middle: mythology in intersectional trans representation

Sascha Crasnow

Abstract. This article examines the use of mythological hybrid figures in works by two non-binary queer contemporary artists of color. For these artists, the intersection of their ethnic/religious identities and their queer identities leads them to experience a hindrance to full belonging in each of these communities. This results in a feeling of liminality or 'in-betweenness'. In considering this 'in-betweenness' as an intersectional liminality, the author argues that these artists utilize mythological hybrid figures in their work to articulate this experience as one of potential, rather than foreclosure. In so doing, this article seeks to challenge, and possibly transform, the notion of the hybrid as a composite of oftentimes irreconcilable parts one must navigate and move between into a site of creative promise. Rooting this re-evaluation of liminality and hybridity in the verbal and artistic articulations of queer non-binary artists of color centers these voices in the construction of new notions of hybridity and liminality.

Keywords. contemporary art • hybridity • intersectionality • liminality • mythology • queer • trans

Introduction

For queer and trans individuals who have a two-fold experience of non-normativity because their racial, ethnic, and/or religious identity is also treated as nonnormative, feelings of liminality – belonging neither here nor there – may be multiplied. The notion of liminality I employ here stems from the work of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) in relation to transitional moments in a person's life (such as marriage or rites of passage to becoming an adult). It has also been utilized by scholars of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals in more contemporary works, such as Dianne Dentice and Michelle Dietert's (2015) 'Liminal Spaces and the Transgender Experience' to describe these individuals' transitional or 'in-between' identities. For individuals who are liminal both due to their

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ethno-religious identities as well as their queer identities, they experience an intersectional liminality.

Among some queer artists with ties to the Islamic world, such as Saba Taj and Raafat Hattab, hybrid mythological figures have served as an ideal means through which to articulate this intersectional liminality. The use of these hybrid figures allows not only for an articulation of their experiences, but also for an exploration of the potential that the 'diversity of the middle' (as Hattab calls it) can hold (Waxman, 2017). For these artists, the liminal space between binary identifications allows for a potential of multitudes of other unique and dynamic expressions of intersectional identity.

Other queer global contemporary artists have utilized hybridity as a means to explore diaspora identities, queerness, and contemporary existence. Like Saba Taj and Hattab, Kashmiri-British queer artist Raqib Shaw incorporates hybrid figures in his work. Shaw's works embody the diasporic hybridity of carrying multiple cultures at once – evident not only in the creatures that populate his ornate paintings, but also in the array of stylistic influences. Including references to Kashmiri shawls, Persian textiles, and the Northern Renaissance, among others, Shaw's works overflow with their celebratory nature of hybridity and liminality. Other artists without ties to the Islamic world have used hybridity to remark on the nature of our contemporary technological society. Artists such as Ben Ross Davis and Ad Minoliti have created hybrid figures and compositions that combine human and machine – the industrial and the organic – to acknowledge the merging of these forms in our contemporary lives, and to consider these realities through a queer lens, one that is not beholden to rigid binaries, divisions, and definitions of biology and sexuality.[1]

As this small sampling of artists engaged with this concept indicates, hybridity, and in particular the hybrid figure, can serve as a ripe place for exploration of the potential that exists in the space between rigid binaries. As a scholar of contemporary art from the Islamic World/SWANA region, I am going to be concentrating in this article on works by Saba Taj and Raafat Hattab to examine the particular ways that hybrid mythological figures have been productive in articulating intersectional queer Muslim identities in diaspora/under settler colonial conditions. In addition, the fact that each centers around a singular hybrid being makes these works particularly effective for this analysis.

It is worth taking a moment here to note my own positionality. As a white cis-het woman, what does it mean for me to analyze and make claims about the works of two non-binary artists of color? As I cannot speak for these experiences, it has been crucial for me in this work (as with all my work) to centralize the voices of these artists when speaking about their own identifications and experiences, through published interviews, artist statements, and personal correspondence. I use these as a foundation for

my critical analysis of this work. My aim then is to take expressions these artists have made about the potentiality they have found in hybridity, and demonstrate how these are articulated in their works, and what this expansive conceptualization can bring to broader theorizations and formations of hybridity and liminality.

In locating the hybrid as a potential site for the expression of an intersectional liminal identity, I employ Homi Bhabha's (2015) conceptualization of the term. As he explains:

> For hybridity, empowerment is about the achievement of agency and authority, rather than the fulfillment of the 'authenticity' of identity – however mixed, however 'multi', however intersective or intercultural . . . Hybridity derives its agency by activating liminal and ambivalent positions *in-between* forms of identification that may be asymmetrical, disjunctive and contradictory.

It is in the in-between of various forms of identity that a new *liminal* identity is articulated.

While in Bhabha's discussions of the hybrid, his focus tends to be on cultural hybridity, the concept can be extended to, and intersect with, sexuality and gender identity. While gender, race, and ethnicity do not function in the same way, parallels can, and have previously been, drawn between the feelings of 'in-between-ness' produced by trans identity and multicultural identity. In *Second Skins* (1998), Jay Prosser recalls a former student who was able to relate to a novel by a trans author through her own multicultural experiences of liminality (p. 3). In some cases, it is an identification with non-normative gender or sexuality that results in feelings of not-belonging within an ethnic/cultural context. While it is important to acknowledge the colonial influence of gender norms in creating feelings of outsider status within one's own cultural context, it is also reductive to consider contemporary cultural dynamics around gender to be solely the product of colonialism (Rao, 2015: 358–359). Therefore one must consider the multitudinous and situational ways that race, ethnicity, and gender intersect and interact within one's identity.[2] For the artists discussed herein, their identities and the means by which their various identifications are 'othering' are intersectional, encapsulating the struggles *and* the optimism of possibility for which the hybrid identity allows. Turning to the mythological world, one populated by hybrid figures, these artists utilize symbology to enunciate this liminal identification.

Al-Buraq: Saba Taj's *Interstellar Uber // Negotiations with God*

For Durham-based artist Saba Taj, a specifically Islamic mythological hybrid figure serves as the locus for the exploration of their[3] own in-betweenness

Figure 1. Saba Taj, *Interstellar Uber // Negotiations with God*, Elsewhere Museum, 2017. Reproduced with permission.

as a queer Pakistani and Kashmiri Muslim-American. Their kinetic sculptural installation *Interstellar Uber // Negotiations with God* (Figure 1), depicts *al-Buraq*, the flying steed with a human visage that Muhammad rode from Mecca to Jerusalem to the heavens, hell and back again in a single night.[4] In using the figure of *al-Buraq*, a non-gendered hybrid being from Islamic mythology, Saba Taj articulates their own intersectional liminality as a queer individual in a Muslim context and as a Pakistani and Kashmiri Muslim in an American, and specifically southern US context.

Interstellar Uber // Negotiations with God is a multi-media kinetic sculpture. The figure of *al-Buraq* is comprised of five partial mannequins. Three mannequin lower-bodies (from the hips down) constitute the six legs of *al-Buraq* (typically depicted with just four). A fourth mannequin torso and thighs make up the body, and a fifth mannequin torso and head complete the front of *al-Buraq*. *Al-Buraq*'s left, and only, arm is held up, making an ambiguous hand gesture typical of store mannequins that, in this context resembles something akin to the benediction or a mudra.[5] The three sets of legs are each different colors: the first in white, the middle in silver, and the rear legs a pink tone akin to mannequin representations of Caucasian skin, though these legs are covered by a pair of denim jeans.[6] The other mannequins are different colors as well: the body is a dark brown, copper color with more denim reaching about halfway up its length, and the chest and head of the final mannequin radiate in gold.

The figure of *al-Buraq* is heavily adorned. The front and rear pairs of feet each wear glitter-covered roller skates in purple and silver, respectively, and the middle pair of feet wear cream-colored stiletto heels. Glitter, flowers, and beads ornament *al-Buraq*'s skin throughout. A mohawked braid reveals gold geometric patterning, recalling Islamic mosaics, along the sides of the head. A hobby horse emerges at the bottom of the headed torso above the front legs, taking the place of the head belonging to the mannequin torso making up the body. It serves a phallic function, protruding at the front of the figure, and contrasting with the more feminized mop of hair placed between the front legs of *al-Buraq* as pubic hair, on which the horse's gaze rests. The gaze of *al-Buraq* is more difficult to assess, as a multitude of evil eyes are painted as a mask, dripping down the front of the face above a blackened mouth. Evil eyes also run down the sides and back of the figure, even coming to rest on the ground surrounding a cloud, made of cotton and what appear to be small white sandbags, upon which *al-Buraq* stands.

Two large wings protrude from *al-Buraq*'s back. These are made of a variety of fabrics of different colors and patterns, including florals, glitter, leopard-print, and gold, as well as beads, and, as the artist refers to it in their description, 'baubles'.[7] A blue zig-zag runs along the arm of each of the wings – a reference to one of the translations of *al-Buraq*: lightning (Saba Taj, 2019, personal communication).[8] The wings are the kinetic part of the sculpture. By opening and closing the window of the room in which it is installed at Elsewhere, an arts space in Greensboro, North Carolina, the wings rise and fall.

The use of *al-Buraq* in *Interstellar Uber* is an ideal choice for Saba Taj's expression of their intersectional liminality as a queer femme Muslim living in the United States.[9] As stated above, *al-Buraq* is a steed with a human head; however, the gender of *al-Buraq* is left indeterminate (Gruber, 2012: 40–41). Grammatically, *al-Buraq* is both masculine and feminine, and while common adjectives used to describe *al-Buraq* are feminine and depictions with female features have led to the belief that the steed was female or at least feminine, *al-Buraq* is in fact not definitively gendered. As such, within the context of Islamic mythology, *al-Buraq* is well-suited to articulate non-normative gender expressions and queerness – as well as the other realms in which these individuals may feel 'othered'.

Additionally, *al-Buraq*'s in-betweenness is also emphasized by the ability to move between the earthly and spiritual worlds, as during *al-Mi'raj*. This spiritual liminality is articulated by the fact that, in Saba Taj's work, *al-Buraq* stands on a bed of clouds – indicating the ability to travel between the earthly and spiritual realms. The liminality between the earthly and spiritual is also highlighted by the location in which the work is installed. Called the 'Ghost Room', it is 'the most haunted corner of Elsewhere . . . the space most closely connected to the otherworlds. This space is where the physical and spiritual meet, and

where borders and binaries, even those between living and dead, are called into question.'[10] This is further drawn out by the inclusion of 'ghosts' as part of Saba Taj's description of the medium of the work – they built the sculpture in this room and 'spent a lot of time with these ghosts during the creation process' (Saba Taj, 2019, personal communication). *Interstellar Uber* then becomes not just a sculpture that articulates in-betweenness, but the liminality it expresses is underscored by the space in which it was created and resides as well.

Saba Taj has used Islamic mythology and hybridity in other works, in particular, their collage series. As they describe their hybrid figures, 'they are the embodiment of the in-between, of existing in motion – uncontrolled, uncolonized, and with endless adaptive possibilities' (Saba Taj, 2019, personal communication). Rather than restricted by binary categories, the in-between nature of the hybrid allows for the creation of new possibilities in the liminal. Saba Taj's own understanding of this is articulated in their experience with the Arabic language. They note that growing up, they did not learn to speak it. However, in order to read the Qur'an, they had to learn to read Arabic. Ultimately, they learned to read and write it, but not understand it. As they remark:

> In middle school, I transliterated English words and phrases, particularly the naughtier ones, into the Arabic alphabet. [This created] an aggregate language that was arguably nonfunctional (as very few could understand it), with little application due to its fracture and individualized nature. Far from useless, these explorations, and hybridity as a concept, offer a fluid realm of possibility. (Saba Taj, 2019, personal communication)

Much in the same way they took Arabic letters and English words to create their own liminal language, Saba Taj uses the imagery of *al-Buraq*, which includes elements of their Muslim, queer-femme, and American identities, to create a new visual language that articulates the particularities of their own in-betweenness.

As noted, Saba Taj's Muslim identity is articulated through the use of the figure of *al-Buraq*. However, the kinetic feature of the wings also links to a particular Islamic story. The Hadith tell of a time when Muhammad saw his wife 'A'isha playing with a puppet horse 'with two wings of fabric attached' (Juynboll, 2007: 196).[11] The various fabrics that make up the wings, along with the fact that the raising and lowering of the window in the room pull on strings that lift and lower them in the way a puppet or marionette would be manipulated, both link to this Hadith story. The inclusion of the evil eye also connects to Saba Taj's Muslim and South Asian identities, as beliefs about the power of this symbol to cause harm and to protect proliferate in these religious and cultural contexts.[12] The idea that the gaze can cause harm is something Saba Taj considers relevant to their experience as someone whose identity categorizations are often imposed from the outside by normative

societies (Saba Taj, 2019, personal communication). Saba Taj's use of blue jeans points to their American identity, and the inclusion of the glittered roller skates, stiletto heels, sparkling gold, beads, and other bedazzled elements on *al-Buraq* all point towards a queer femme identity.

The inclusion of these components highlights the multiple significant elements of Saba Taj's identity, as well as how their identity is hybridized through the inclusion of pieces of all of these identities. Saba Taj marks the multiple ways in which they are liminal. They are an American, but because of their Pakistani and Kashmiri Muslim identities, an American culture that privileges a normative identity that is white and Christian prevents them from fully feeling that they belong. They are Muslim, but their queer femme identity means that they do not conform to many of the rigid binaries and expectations of women in traditional Muslim cultures. They are Pakistani and Kashmiri, but the fact that they were born and raised in South Carolina means that they do not have the same experience of these identities as earlier generations of their family who were born and lived much or all of their lives in South Asia. Because of the ways in which the world they live in perceives each of these identities (through systems of colonialism/racism/queerphobia/Islamophobia, among others), Saba Taj experiences an intersectional liminality; however, through the use of the image of *al-Buraq*, this experience of in-betweenness becomes an empowered one of possibility embodied by the hybrid. Saba Taj's sculpture is jubilant in its combination of features related to their queer, Muslim, and Pakistani–Kashmiri identities. The inclusion of glittered roller skates and cascading evil eyes, the phallic hobby horse and unapologetic mop of pubic hair, the expansive freedom encapsulated by the mobile wings – each of these elements is a declarative force of celebration of not only each of these elements, but their combination and interaction.

The Mermaid: Raafat Hattab's *Ho(u)ria*

In Raafat Hattab's 7-minute video work, *Ho(u)ria*, the artist utilizes the mythological figure of the mermaid to represent his intersectional liminal identity as a genderqueer Palestinian living within both Jewish Israeli and traditional Palestinian Muslim societies (Figure 2).[13] Utilizing the story of his aunt's experience of *al-Nakba*,[14] imagery of the mermaid, the beach shore at the site of the former city of Al-Manshiyeh, and a Tel Aviv tattoo parlor, Hattab articulates the ambiguous middle ground of the liminal state he, and others like him, experience on a regular basis as non-binary queer Palestinians living in the Israeli state.

Ho(u)ria is a 7-minute video alternating back and forth between clips from three settings: the interior of a family home, the beach at the former site of the city of Al-Manshiyeh on the coast of what is now Israel, and a Tel Aviv tattoo parlor. The video opens on a lone violinist perched atop rocks at the shoreline,

Figure 2. Raafat Hattab, *Ho(u)ria*, 2010. Reproduced with permission.

draped in black fishing netting and playing a mournful song that provides, along with the crashing of the Mediterranean's waves, the auditory backdrop for the video.[15] The video then cuts to Hattab's aunt sitting on a paisley couch, as she begins to tell the story of what happened to her and her family during *al-Nakba*. Her black *hijab* and traditional Palestinian embroidered garments cause her to stand out from the gold and browns of the backdrop, emphasizing her importance. Her story is paused for a brief moment as the video cuts to the tattoo parlor, where preparations for tattooing are being made. The rest of the video continues like this, cutting back and forth between these three spaces. While on the surface appearing disparate, the scenes from the three settings all speak to an in-betweenness, and the potential liberation it can provide, as embodied by the work's title – *houria*, meaning mermaid, and *horia*, meaning freedom.[16]

In the scenes with Hattab's aunt, she tells the story of her parents during *al-Nakba*. While her father's family fled to Jordan, her mother insisted on returning to Al-Manshiyeh, where she was from, to see her family. Upon arrival, however, they found the city destroyed. Al-Manshiyeh itself is a liminal space in Hattab's work. Previously situated on the coast near Tel Aviv, it now exists only as one of the many no-longer-extant Palestinian villages that was destroyed in the formation of Israel. *Ho(u)ria* makes present the absence of the village both through Hattab's aunt's story, as well as through the filming

of the beach scenes at its former site. Notions of a liminality evidenced by an absence-made-present are expressed in the erasure of Palestinian history told in Hattab's aunt's story and embodied by the loss of connection to family, the absence of Palestinian history in the textbooks from which his aunt learned, and the erasure of Al-Manshiyeh from the map. However, there is also an attempt in *Ho(u)ria* to remedy some of the erasure. Hattab notes that the majority of nationalist narratives of Palestinian loss and resistance are told from the perspectives of (cis, het) men. In interviewing his aunt and having hers as the only voice throughout the whole video, Hattab creates a space to include previously elided narratives.

As Hattab's aunt tells more about her family's history, the beach scenes, which take place at the site of Al-Manshiyeh, reveal a mermaid. The mermaid, Hattab wearing a leather tail, appears lying along the shoreline, sometimes on his back, other times on his chest, occasionally slapping his tail in the waves.[17] In most scenes, Hattab's mermaid is alone, or accompanied only by the violinist, but in later scenes, beachgoers and the skyline of Tel Aviv are visible in the background – seemingly unaware of and unaffected by Hattab and the absence of Al-Manshiyeh. Paired with his aunt's testimony, Hattab's return, as mermaid, to Al-Manshiyeh serves as visual evidence of the erasure of the village that once was there. Al-Manshiyeh exists in a liminal state, memorialized in Palestinian consciousness, but no longer standing.

The in-betweenness of the village, and the in-betweenness of many Palestinians and Hattab, specifically, are embodied in the manifestation of the mermaid. The mermaid, half human and half fish, is a liminal being: neither completely one nor the other. As Hattab explains, 'as a mermaid, I am in the middle – not fish enough to be in the sea, not human enough to be on the shore' (Waxman, 2017). In the video, Hattab's mermaid lies right at the shoreline, never committing completely to either sea or land. This parallels the intersectional liminality that Hattab experiences as a genderqueer Palestinian living in Israel. As he notes, 'To live within Palestinian society is to live the lifestyle of a traditional society, to get married, to have a family, to be in the mainstream like everyone else . . . and yet as a Palestinian, I can't be fully part of Israeli society.' Hattab does not feel wholly a part of Palestinian society because he does not conform to traditional expectations of Palestinian life. However, as a Palestinian, he can also never be completely integrated into the Israeli society in which he lives and works, which inherently identifies him as 'other' due to his ethnic status.[18] As such, Hattab and other queer Palestinian citizens of Israel like him remain in a persistent state of intersectional liminality.

Hattab's choice of the mermaid is not simply due to the figure's physical hybridity. He was specifically inspired by the transitional nature of the titular character from Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Little Mermaid'. Hattab explains:

> She can't talk, and she has to make her choices; she has to give up things for her to be a human being, the witch takes her voice to give her legs. But the price is that she can't go back in the sea. She had to give up her family, she had to give up the ocean, to cross to the other side. But without a voice. (Waxman, 2017)

The mermaid in the story is positioned between a number of choices requiring sacrificing some things she holds dear for others that she desires. Hattab's silence throughout the video embodies this sacrifice, while his state of limbo as a mermaid on the shore serves as a visual depiction of his continued in-between status. Regardless of his choices, Hattab, like the mermaid, remains stuck in the middle. Given the mermaid's hybrid state and position as caught between two worlds, the use of the mermaid as a symbol of the liminal state is unsurprising. In fact, the mermaid has been identified as a symbol of queer, and particularly trans, identity in both scholarship and popular culture alike.[19] The mermaid serves as an alternative to binary thinking – neither this nor that, the mermaid offers an example of the diversity of options the middle can provide.

The physical positioning of Hattab's mermaid on the beach reflects his liminality as well. As a mermaid he appears stuck at the shore's edge, unable to move in one direction or the other, yet pulled back and forth between the land and the sea. Hattab's positioning along the shoreline, pushed and pulled by the waves, along with his embodiment of the mermaid, expresses his genderqueer identity – his identification with both masculinity and femininity and his position on a spectrum within the binary, rather than on one side or the other. Paired with his Palestinian identity, he is placed in a middle space wherein he is not accepted by either side. He may have his tail in the waves and his arms along the shore, and aspects of each society pull him towards them at times, but because of his liminal state as genderqueer and as Palestinian, Hattab is also pushed away – ejected from these spaces as well.

In spite of this ejection, the scenes in the tattoo parlor display an assertion of Hattab's connection to the land. In these scenes, viewers witness the process of Hattab getting a tattoo on his chest – the humming buzz of the tattoo 'pen' dominating the audio. As one of the final scenes reveals, the tattoo, which is Arabic calligraphy, reads 'Jaffa: Bride of Palestine'. Hattab explains that this tattoo serves as a contract he is making with the land, certifying that he is from Jaffa, from Palestine (Waxman, 2017). However, even this act is liminal. The tattoo is administered in a parlor in Tel Aviv by a Jewish tattoo artist. Hattab enters into a Jewish space, as a Palestinian, and has the artist tattoo him with a statement connecting him *as* a Palestinian to land that is now part of the state of Israel. The process of getting the tattoo, and one that asserts a Palestinian tie to the land, emphasizes Hattab's quotidian position as a Palestinian in Jewish spaces. However, the means of marking him as such, the

tattoo, is one that also signifies him as outside traditional Muslim Palestinian society. Tattooing is not accepted in this society – indeed, both Islam and Judaism prohibit the decoration of the body. Therefore, Hattab's tattoo adorns his body with a statement that solidifies his outsider status from both traditional Jewish Israeli and traditional Muslim Palestinian societies.

While Hattab enters into the liminal space of the tattoo parlor, as a religiously transgressive site in both Judaism and Islam, he uses the medium of tattooing to re-assert the previously erased Palestinian connection to the land. In these scenes, Hattab engages in a process that is likely quite painful, but does so by choice, utilizing his own agency to make present this Palestinian absence. By doing so in an Israeli tattoo parlor, and having the tattoo executed by a Jewish Israeli tattoo artist, Hattab, at least temporarily, inverts the occupier/occupied power dynamic. Despite being the one to inflict pain, the Israeli tattooer, an embodiment of the occupier, is also made to mark Hattab with words that confirm his, and Palestinians' in general, connection to the land. The tattoo serves as an expression of the resilience of the Palestinian people in resistance – no matter how much pain is inflicted upon them, they will only be stronger and more resolved in their commitment to the land.

Conclusion

In both *Interstellar Uber* and *Ho(u)ria*, Saba Taj and Hattab articulate their experiences of intersectional liminality. This liminality refers to the reality that their intersectional identities produce in a society whose systemic frameworks place them outside. However, rather than being a lamentable experience, both utilize a hybrid mythological figure as an articulation of an empowered integration of identities – one which represents the possibility that these spaces in-between can offer. For queer, trans, non-binary Muslims (secular or religious), people of color, or others who do not fit into the normative categories of their societal contexts, the use of mythological hybrids can be a potentially empowering site of exploration. The space of the in-between can serve as a location that embraces the 'diversity of the middle' and allows for its fullest expression.

In Turner's (1967) use of liminality, the state of 'in-betweenness' is a temporary one – a transitional space occupied on one's way between a fixed 'before' and 'after'. Building on Turner, and in consideration of the experiences of transgender individuals, Dentice and Dietert (2015) acknowledge the potential for this liminal space to be a final destination or revisited site for those individuals who do not identify with the binary, rather than only a temporary site of transition. Bhabha's (2015) examinations of cultural hybridity also note the potentiality of the liminal 'in-between' as a site for the investigation of intersecting cultural identifications. In looking at works utilizing hybrid figures by non-binary queer artists of color, such as those by Saba Taj and Hattab

discussed here, their practices become sites for a re-examination of these terms and expansion of their scope. Through an investigation of these artists' works, and the relationship to their lived experiences, our understanding of intersectional liminality and hybridity can be broadened to include the notion that these terms can embody potent spaces of exploration and celebration of not only multitudinous ethnic, cultural, *or* gender identities, but the particularities of the interaction of these various and myriad identifications.

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Notes

1. See: https://kadist.org/work/g-s-f-c-3/
2. For other scholars who have addressed the intersections between race and queer/trans identities in cultural production, see Muñoz's *Disidentifications* (1999) and Gayatri Gopinath's *Unruly Visions* (2018).
3. Saba Taj uses both she/her/hers and they/them/their pronouns. In an email on 1 April 2019 they noted that they are currently favoring 'they', so I use those pronouns here (Saba Taj, 2019, personal communication).
4. While 8th-century descriptions note *al-Buraq* as solely the steed that carried Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem, a journey known as *isra*, afterwards this would be linked to the story of the *mi'raj*, Muhammad's trip to the spiritual realms, with *al-Buraq* carrying Muhammad throughout (Gruber, 2012: 40).
5. Typical depictions of *al-Buraq* do not include human arms.
6. The color of the denim-clad legs is apparent in process photographs available here: http://www.goelsewhere.org/interstellar-uber/
7. See: http://www.goelsewhere.org/interstellar-uber/
8. Other scholars have translated *al-Buraq* as 'little lightning flash' or 'lightning that flashes in the clouds', which may also be why the sculpture stands amongst the clouds. For these definitions, see Gruber (2012: 41).
9. Saba Taj is not the only artist to use the figure of *al-Buraq* to represent non-binary gender expressions and queerness. Notably, in her *Divine Comedy* series, Lebanese artist Chaza Charafeddine photographed drag queens and transgender individuals in Lebanon and used their images as the human portion of depictions of *al-Buraq*.
10. See: http://www.goelsewhere.org/interstellar-uber/
11. I thank Dr Christiane Gruber for this connection.
12. Saba Taj discusses this in their TedxDuke talk, available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnE0Qn2eJMw
13. In English, Hattab uses he/him/his pronouns.
14. Meaning 'catastrophe' in Arabic, *al-Nakba* refers to the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians from their land upon the declaration of the State of Israel and subsequent Arab–Israeli wars in 1948–1949.
15. The violinist was a former pupil of Hattab's whom he met in 2010 as a tutor. He's an amateur violinist but, according to Hattab, plays the role of a 'young nymph creating the atmosphere'

for the mermaid on the beach – part of the mythological ambiance. The music he plays is '*lamma badda yatathanna*' – considered one of the most famous of its time. The violinist is clad in fishing netting as a nod to the importance of Jaffa as a port in Palestine, as well as the fact that in the original telling of the story of the mermaid, the prince is a fisherman. (Hattab, 2019, personal communication)

16. Hattab's full video is available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AS7dfpYLpAI
17. The tail was designed by a Palestinian fashion designer who is a colleague of Hattab's. Leather was used because it was cheap and gave a natural feel (Hattab, 2019, personal communication).
18. In the Palestinian context, there is the question of whether Hattab, as a Palestinian, would even want to be 'fully' integrated into an Israeli context as this would run counter to narratives and sentiments of resistance and Palestinian national liberation. However, this would be an exclusion of choice from within himself, rather than one foisted upon him because of his ethnic identification from the hegemonic social structure in Israel.
19. See Spencer (2014: 112–127): https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/news/a26117/ariel-little-mermaid-overlooked-trans-icon/; https://www.allure.com/story/trans-women-mermaid-trend-meaning, among others.

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

Decolonizing objecthood through 2SQ Indigenous art: Dayna Danger and Jeneen Frei Njootli's performance, 'Chases and Tacks'

Sebastian De Line

> . . . the creator is trans and the earth is a psychology experiment to determine how quickly we mistake a body for anything. (excerpt from 'The Creator is Trans', by Billy-Ray Belcourt, 2017)

The title of Dayna Danger and Jeneen Frei Njootli's exhibition, 'A Fine Pointed Belonging' (8 March – 20 April 2019) at Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre in Ka'tarohkwi[1] and curated by Genevieve Flavelle,[2] is reminiscent of a riddle. Its meaning escaped me initially, but some months later while walking down the street in Tiohtià:ke[3] I remembered one such fine pointed agent – a needle!

This recent collaborative performance by gender non-conforming, Two-Spirit (2SQ) artists Dayna Danger (Métis/Saulteaux/Polish) and Jeneen Frei Njootli (Vuntut Gwitchin Nation) that threads an understanding of how 2SQ decolonial art praxes must be interpreted through Indigenous ways of knowing (Simpson, 2017) rather than a continual reliance upon Western frameworks. The invocations of transness within this work do not replicate colonial frameworks of gender and transness in which understandings of gender are based on essentialist epistemologies including the gender binary. Instead, this performance takes place at the intersections of Indigeneity and what is known as transness within Western frameworks to honor the inherent queerness and gender-queerness of Indigenous kinships. This brief response begins with an excerpt from the poem 'The Creator is Trans' (2017) by Billy-Ray Belcourt which opens to Danger and Frei Njootli's work in invoking Indigenous epistemologies that disrupt a colonial binary of gender on which normative readings of 'trans' embodiment rely. Belcourt's work and 'A Fine Pointed Belonging' both make apparent the untranslatability of transness between colonial and Indigenous frameworks of gender, by encapsulating holistic understandings of ontological kinships.[4] The generative dialog between the

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works of Danger and Frei Njootli and Billy-Ray Belcourt's writings unravel Cartesian logics that, as Belcourt states, 'mistak[e] a body for anything' through systemic objectification, commodification, and subalternated labor.

This teleological epistemology and ontological passing through and unraveling is what the artworks of Danger and Frei Njootli do – they subvert and complicate colonial categorizations of belonging, engendered and sexualized laboring, embodiment, consent and carcerality. They do this while calling attention to our entrenchment and simultaneous resistance within such systems, particularly in art, prison industrial complexes, academia and *predatory* economies of value through *dispossession* (Byrd et al., 2018; Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva, 2012) as forms of *surplus value* in *originary accumulation* (Marx, 1976[1867]); Federici, 2009) while refusing to become propertized.

Danger and Frei Njootli's exhibition brings together fine beadwork, BDSM, queer symbolism, and ceremony through photographic, sculptural, video and performative media. Curator, Genevieve Flavelle,[5] relayed that the title of their performance, 'Chases and Tacks', refers to the technique of double-needled beading where one hand chases a small row of beads onto a needle while the other hand tacks them down. The use of a needle serves many functions. It can puncture leather or fabric, threading twine or sinew and beads into forget-me-not flowers on regalia; skin-stitch tattoos or hypodermic needles can pass through epidermal layers tying histories of adornment, moments of passage, surgical intervention and kink[6] together.

Reflective of the title of their exhibition, *belonging* speaks to being in relation with all of our relatives while in tension with histories of belonging as ownership and *unbelonging* (Brand, 2001). The impact of tensions between *belonging* and *unbelonging* resonates with *epidermalization* or the racial epidermal schema that Frantz Fanon (2008[1952]) posits as the internalization of racialization [of Blackness] which is schematized throughout the colonial reordering of our relations. Rhyming with Fanon, Billy-Ray Belcourt (2019: np) states that a 'sense of unbodiedness, of having been made to be unbodied, to be that which disturbs the idea of the body and embodiment themselves, is . . . the sensation of Indigeneity.' The *unbodiedness* of Belcourt and troubling of belonging by Danger and Frei Njootli are instantiated by various photographic, video, and three-dimensional works within the exhibition. In the image '*#MetisAF*' (2019), a photograph depicts an unknown person from behind, whose skin has the physical impressions of a woven wicker chair (see Figure 1). The image evokes distinctly Two-Spirit play where the weave is among agential players participating in the scene. Unlike common tropes where furniture play is often equated to forms of submission, the wicker chair silently tops from below. The audience is reminded of Qwo-Li Driskill's (2010) 'doubleweaving'

Figure 1. Jeneen Frei Njootli, Knowledge Transference I (2017). Archival ink on vinyl, metal hardware 52 x 35.5" Photo courtesy of Chris Miner.

concept, in which s/he argues that resurgent conceptions of sexual identity and Indigenous understandings of transness should be interwoven, and not understood as separate (p. 74). Weaving is intergenerationally passed down and the accumulation of ancestral ways of knowing collectively transmit their remarks upon the skin.

A *refusal*[7] (Simpson, 2007) of fetishistic modes of identification (Belcourt's *unbodiedness* as a belonging of colonial property) through the protection of

a subject's privacy within the photograph by close cropping or the use of a leather hood (belonging as objecthood) in order to facilitate negotiations of consent between the model and artist (belonging as relational) are artistic techniques both artists employ. The BDSM hood as a 'fetish' becomes teleologically transformed from its white queer scripting of kink when displayed in the gallery as an Indigenous hood – evocative of ethnographic museum collections displaying Indigenous masks through racialized *biocentric scriptings* (McKittrick, 2016) in art history and archeology. As McKittrick confers, 'engaging interdisciplinarity and forging relational knowledges assist in anti-colonial academic research and teaching while also disrupting biocentric scripts, disciplined ways of knowing, and the spatial workings of knowledge' (p. 4).

Similar to the work of Brian Jungen,[8] Danger's mask entitled, 'From Dayna to Jeneen' (2019), breaks the carcerality of museum collection by negating its ethnographic collection by the outsider (belonging as ownership). It becomes a gift of kinship from one artist to another, its power retained, avoiding consumptive ownership while welcomed as a relative.

Danger and Frei Njootli kneel, facing each other in the center of the gallery upon the concrete floor next to their floor piece, 'Kinship Catalyst' (2019). 'Kinship Catalyst' is comprised of a flat black, rectangular, foldable table rested upon the ground with a shawl of floral fabric folded upon it and two beaded black floggers laid at its center. Their silent anticipatory agony within the audience is palpable as everyone realizes Danger and Frei Njootli are about to destroy their beautifully crafted whips. The beaded tails make contact with an impenetrable, institutional concrete floor, and yet the exactitude of their fine pointed conveyance is what makes the scene pervious. Danger interchangeably flogs their forearms and concrete floor – testing the toy on themselves first, so that they know what sensations they stimulate upon or within another (a good standard for BDSM practice). While the institution bottoms for this playful assertion of reconciliation, as Adria Kurchina-Tyson (2020) iterates, Indigenous governance systems, '[do] not deny that exchanges of power are implicated in relations, nor do they intend to prescribe certain power dynamics' (p. 87).

Seed beads scatter across the floor transforming into atomic particles as the audience's perception of scale shifts toward an agential expanse. With two handheld vacuums, Danger and Frei Njootli proceed to vacuum up the seed beads. Some of them escape capture within cement and limestone cracks. This teleological vitality of the vacuum, where its breath – the inhaling of the seed beads and noisy exhale – shifts the focus from inhaling that which is considered dirty, contained and displaced from the public eye through a *production of social separateness* in *racial capitalism* for the purpose of

expropriating and accumulating resources and property (Melamed, 2015; Robinson, 1983). Resistance bypasses absolute captivity through multifarious kinship relations. The performance culminates in the transference of breath, energy and song through a three-way kiss. A thin metal contact microphone is suspended between the lips of the two artists. Should one let go, the mic would fall. This is a performance about staying connected and being intimately present for each other through kinships, love and ceremony.

They sing the 'Strong Woman Song' into each other, a song that Danger and Frei Njootli recollected with the audience, after their performance, as originally written in Ka'tarohkwi by Indigenous peoples[9] incarcerated in the P4W (Prison for Women) not far from the art gallery. Formerly the colonial capital of Canada, the city of Kingston (Ka'tarohkwi) is the site of a large network of carceral institutions including the former high max prison, Kingston Penitentiary, among numerous, smaller institutions still in operation.

Danger and Frei Njootli call to a necessity of remembering and honoring the Indigenous peoples who walked within the walls of P4W, singing through each other while standing next to a wall in the gallery. The song is recorded and replayed through a looper pedal, becoming both unbodied from the singers and reembodied as their own agential being, singing in the space.

While singing the 'Strong Woman Song' for a second time, the vacuums transform into turtle shell rattles, seed beads transform into planting seeds – their bodies vibrating and dancing together inside this space, singing, shouting, rioting and throwing themselves up against each other and the economized walls impeding the limitlessness of their mobility. As Michel Foucault (1995[1975]: 28), similarly explains:

> It is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.

While colonial systems of (dis)possession and a perpetuity of predatory economies (Byrd et al., 2018; Chakravartty and Ferreira da Silva, 2012) within nation-states upon Turtle Island are prevised to cease inestimable acceleration, they continue to not only fail in reciprocation through empty and half-hearted attempts at reconciliation, but in the unwillingness to capitulate hegemony. Yet as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017: 77) reminds us, 'My Ancestors didn't accumulate capital, they accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust.' Two-spirit queer artistic methodologies have the ability to transform teleological function (use-value and labour of cultural capital) from a prescriptive and

systematically institutional conditioning of objectification through which contingency brings about the emanation of relational *resurgence* (Simpson, 2017). These are the tenets upon which 2SQ Indigenous ways of knowing sing and vibrate.

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Notes

1. Kanienke'ha is the name for Kingston, Ontario.
2. Curatorial essay by Genevieve Flavelle. Available at: http://www.modernfuel.org/files/Essay_A%20Fine%20Pointed%20Belonging_March%2013.pdf (accessed 24 June 2019).
3. Kanienke'ha is the name for Montreal, Quebec.
4. It is important to note how my own reception of another artist's work is complicit in articulating a perspective adjacent to the artist's own intentions and perspectives on their praxes.
5. Conveyed to the author during a conversation via email on 20 June 2019.
6. The term 'kink' is used in reference to BDSM.
7. Audra Simpson (2007: 72) proposes that:

   > to think about 'sovereignty' – a construct which is always a bestowal and as such is deeply imperfect but critical for these moments in Indigenous/Settler–State relations – is to think very seriously about needs and, basically, involves a calculus ethnography of what you need to know and what I refuse to write in.

   Here, refusal is applied through methods of artistic refusal by artists Danger and Frei Njootli.
8. Brian Jungen's 'Skull' (2006–2009), sewn from baseballs.
9. As Yvonne Johnson recalls in the comment section of a YouTube recording, the originators of the song are, 'Joey Twins, Yvonne Johnson, Bev Auger, Molly Goodard, MaNamera, Sandy Papquesh, Eskimo, to a name a few . . .'. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ei4CQWCP4c (accessed 30 June 2019).

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Pretty in pink: David Antonio Cruz's *portrait of the florida girls*

Robb Hernández

Abstract. Roused by the deaths of five African American transgender women in Florida in 2018, artist David Antonio Cruz intervenes in inaccurate media reports about these murders. Painting *portrait of the florida girls* in 2019, his diptych of significant scale and palette, confronts this senseless violence and challenges sensationalized coverage. This article centralizes his work arguing for the ways in which Cruz innovates transgender of color visibility through a queer of color critiquing of the portrait form and concerted use of a 'blacktino' optic. Ruminating on the combined tragedies of gun violence at Pulse nightclub and serial murder of trans femmes, Cruz's work interrogates the posthumous transgender image with a reversal of digital source material and bodily logics in pose and countenance. By turning to the transnational crossroads shaping these communities' shared horrors, central Florida, Cruz activates his audience with a sense of urgency in the persuasive power of pink.

Keywords. blacktino optics • gun violence • hacking • Orlando • posthumous outing • Puerto Rican art • Pulse Nightclub • queer necropolitics

Five figures lounge in a self-display of elegant adornments (see Figure 1). Layers of chiffon, swaths of pink organza and ruffles, lacy embellishments, and fur accent a regal group portrait. These affluent-looking socialites confront the viewer's gaze with undisguised return stares. An eerie air lingers in the parlor surrounds, a phantasmal atmosphere of shadow and fog smoke the backdrop with ghostly effects. The gray hues deaden the domestic space and even stain the exposed limbs of the sitters. Arms and legs rhyme with a frosty chroma like cadavers donning their finest couture for one final look. Their chocolate-kissed visages offset all the gray, drawing attention to their brownness, blackness. These static figures struggle for color legibility against a homogenizing and muted world.

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Figure 1. David Antonio Cruz, *inmysleeplesssolitudetonight, portrait of the florida girls* (2019), oil and enamel on wood, 48 x 72 inches. Image courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery and the artist.

The artwork, *inmysleeplesssolitudetonight, portrait of the florida girls* (2019), is David Antonio Cruz's haunting portrait of five African American transgender women slain in central Florida in 2018. The diptych is the largest contribution to Cruz's *wegivesomuchandgivenothingatall, paintings for Richard* series, a collection of more than two dozen paintings, drawings, and intermedia collages, ruminating on a bold titular statement that trans femmes of color 'give so much' to a state system with 'nothing' in return. Each new murder grows Cruz's oeuvre. Many of the paintings in his 2019 exhibition, *One Day I'll Turn the Corner and I'll Be Ready For It*, at Monique Meloche gallery in Chicago expose how anti-immigrant and anti-trans detention increases non-gender conforming asylum seekers' vulnerability to dehumanizing violence, deportation, and death.

Cruz's *portrait of the florida girls* is an important entry in his trans of color visual practice preceding later artworks investigating trans murders under Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody, some of which are addressed here. For my purpose, the diptych and other complementary pieces from the *paintings for Richard* series center this article, allowing for a more concise investigation into the foundations of his artistic inquiry: a corpus that principally questions gender-nonconforming and queer people of color's vulnerabilities under a militarized police state in the US/Mexico border region and the Caribbean, more broadly. In each painting, Cruz revisits trans femme of color atrocities with a dignified act of recovery. His practices

are emboldened by a distinct standpoint as a queer artist of Afro-Latinx Caribbean descent. He uses washes of pinks and pastels to enhance a more regal reinvention. His palette nimbly undermines repugnant media discourses, gender misidentification, and the inaccurate reporting surrounding these hate crimes. The artist invests the portrait genre as visual artillery to confront a societal myopia, a willful blindness to a transgender of color public erased.

In this article, I underscore the utility of queer of color critique's cross-ethnic solidarities for transgender visual studies. I further explore how this aesthetic allegiance unfurls inside a queer cis Puerto Rican artist's work. I do so, cautiously aware that the specificity of trans of color violence has historically been expropriated by a 'gay and lesbian' movement or worse, amended to a hegemonic 'narrative of homosexuality' as Gayle Salamon (2018: 24) argues, obscuring trans of color lives and deaths in their own right and own terms; while acknowledging the literature on trans of color violence and state policing is an important set of discourses and tactical incursions evocative of what Chicana lesbian feminist theorist Cherríe Moraga (2015: 19) calls a 'theory in the flesh'. None are more aware of this lived theory and politic than the multiethnic, multigenerational, and multigender coalitions fueling Black Lives Matter social uprisings, which engulfed global metropoles in the summer of 2020 after the brutal police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

However, my argument expands upon the allied conjunctions between black and brown, cis and gender variant, mainland and island. To be clear, my intervention is indebted to specific writings on trans of color knowledges of state abuses, vulnerabilities, and certain death though yoking insight from a queer of color critical perspective. As such, my attention turns to that cleavage in Cruz's diptych. As a metaphorical chasm, the discontinuity between the panels requiring reconsideration of the ways in which the gender-nonconforming and queer vicissitudes of Cruz's mixed media work asks the viewer to reimagine that gap, to look beyond identity-affirming cultural representation and exhibition projects that Jeannine Tang (2017: 374) argues 'can also uphold and reproduce sexual segregation through forms of gender policing'.

By relating *portrait of the florida girls* to Cruz's broader set of art practices – as a queer Latinx painter and performer, a collaborator of Afro-Latinx artists like Elia Alba, and a scavenger of synecdochical visual source materials – I show how he activates what E Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servera call a 'blacktino . . . critical optic'. Cruz attends to a cross ethnic, queer, and transgender social affinity 'understanding engagements with black and Latina/o experience, aesthetics, and erotics in performance' anew (Johnson and Rivera-Servera, 2016: 7). He paints at a crossroads of intra- and interethnic affinity, restoring honorific portraits in intimate communion with

trans femme life (and death). Cruz does so through a language of reversals using antithetical relationships to about-face color palettes, body posturing, and media inaccuracies. The result is an inversion of visual pathways seeing transgender of color visibilities and fatalities from an unusual but significant transnational locus down below: peninsular Florida.

Gray skins, pink masks

Gray mists reshape the surrounds of *portrait of the florida girls*. Reflections shade the wall with amorphous impressions of light and shadow. Like the luminous glints cast from chandeliers in Cruz's earlier portraits, such as *not soprettyintheface,buthedoesitgood* (2018), Cruz projects the afterglow of the Baroque era (see Figure 2). Faint glimmers echo queerness's 'ephemeral trace', as José Esteban Muñoz (2009: 81) puts it, a 'hermeneutics of residue' lingering in the monochrome environment engulfing the *florida girls*. Through the fog are impressions of palms. Cast in gray scale, these fronds reverse lush green spaces. Inverting the tropics, Cruz subverts Florida's treasured beaches, marshes, prairies, and everglades, upending a regenerative ecology for its dark underside. The atmosphere is a shadowy malaise of Florida and, in particular, of Miami, that '"veritable Fairyland" where one [can] escape the busy life of the big industrialized city, indulge in paradise and live out a fantasy', as Julio Capó Jr (2017: 1) contends. Of course, this imagined Floridian fantasy is predicated on anti-native and anti-black segregation, as well as a history of US colonial interference throughout the Hispanic Caribbean including the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. In his excellent queer transnational study of the region, Capó further acknowledges that:

> imagery was textured with gender and sexual meanings . . . professional and unofficial promoters and boosters represented a powerful force that marketed Miami as a fairyland where those who could afford the trip could sow their oats . . . could transgress social norms, including gender and sexuality. (pp. 10–11)

Capó's words ring true when viewing *portrait of the florida girls*, in which trans femmes of color representation point to the breakdown of racial, ethnic, gender and sexual structures of power in Florida, the remains of cultural schisms in the 'last Gomorrah' as Capó puts it, the 'Zombie ridden madhouse' that characterizes the region's sexual past of gluttony and promiscuity (p. 1).

These zombie allusions resonate in Cruz's discolored epidermises. The five regal figures in Figure 1 share cadaver flesh symbolizing Floridian indulgent pleasures gone awry. Limbs deaden with a sickly, pallid hue. Each figure poses with ladylike precision: legs cross, arms fold, and hands clasp in laps. Interestingly, they do not touch nor embrace in a collective showing of sisterhood or political solidarity. Their physical disjunctions are reiterated

Figure 2. David Antonio Cruz, *notsoprettyintheface,buthedoesitgood* (2018), oil on wood panel. Image courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery and the artist.

in the diptych structure of the canvas as though another panel has been severed and removed between pictures fracturing the narrative. Linking them is zombie flesh, the muted and discolored façade. Something else has happened to rupture this story, something more insidious than what appears on the surface of ghostly skins. It is a secret known only to the sitters and the haunting foliage behind them.

In 2018, London Moore, Sasha Garden, Cathalina Christina James, Antash'a English and Celine Walker were among the 22 transgender persons reported murdered that year in the United States. According to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2018: 4), 82 percent of those slain were women of color, 64 percent were under the age of 35, and 55 percent lived in the South. With the majority of Florida's trans killings occurring in Jacksonville through gun-related violence, some media outlets reported the work of a serial killer (Fitzsimons, 2018). Activist Christina Kittle, a cisgender African American woman, appealed to the Jacksonville City Council urging action at the murders and panic growing among black trans people. 'Even if they don't have the answers, they need to have the sense of urgency about finding them. And we need to start taking these lives seriously', she told NBC affiliate WTLV following Cathalina Christina James's death. Despite national news attention, local outlets perpetuated hostile anti-trans coverage with salacious headlines and misgendering reportage (Ring, 2018).

Cruz used this media malpractice and the uneven arbitration of hate crime laws as catalysts in creating his counter image. In *portrait of the florida girls*, he offers a rare group portrait with newfound attention to postural details. In the left panel, Sasha Garden occupies the foreground, nestled between London Moore (left) and Cathalina Christina James (right). Garden's frontal stare is not the passive countenance of a dancerly sitter in Cruz's studio. Its source was mined from a Facebook photo and recirculated in the Orlando media, which wrongly identified Garden as a 'man wearing wig' and, in another headline, as a 'man dressed as a woman' (Wolf and Cordeiro, 2018). This abhorrent misattribution caused *Orlando Weekly* writers Colin Wolf and Monivette Cordeiro to report on reprehensible hate speech and terminologies of reporters and police deputies in the aftermath of Garden's murder.

The voluminous feathery trim on Garden's left shoulder intrudes upon her visage, a bulky adornment disproportionate to the rest of her body composition. Cruz's distortion of fabric and human form is curious, a perceptual disorientation of scale. Source photography shows that Garden's left hand curls and rests beneath her left cheek. Cruz's literal 'cover up' is a sardonic play on image and word. The pink explosion of feathery textiles is a possible corrective. The finery reconstitutes her found body. The artist's sartorial device symbolically questions Orlando journalists' discursive negligence in their anti-trans 'miscoverage'.

Cruz's 'cover up' is no work of fashion styling as it critiques the media, an interrogation further stressed when we consider the fragmentation of Garden's head. Atop her scalp lies a mound of blonde hair disjointed from her black tresses. Its stylization, texture, and honey-wheat coloring form

staggering contrasts. At once, this blonde patch literalizes an anatomic butchery, a collaging of human parts. It also echoes salacious press headlines surrounding the slain, perhaps asking the viewer: is this merely a 'man wearing a wig'? Cruz's photorealist acuity, the accuracy with which he paints in oil, tricks the eye by breaking down boundaries of figuration, media, and genre into unstable queerer forms. Cruz's anatomic overlays imitate the aesthetic of collage, evoking what J Jack Halberstam (2005: 107) calls 'a transgender look', 'a mode of seeing and being seen that is not simply at odds with binary gender but that is part of a reorientation of the body in space and time'. More than undoing the look of the transgender body in its fracture of gender dichotomies, Cruz's practice interrogates the instability of corporeal wholeness, media texts, and, in particular, color.

The splicing of blonde hair over black challenges the terms of color legibility for Sasha Garden and her trans femme sisterhood. She becomes visually realized through a destabilization of her racial visibility. She is discolored and disassembled in an anatomical and even digital hack, a piecemeal embodiment of social media found photos. Cruz seconds Halberstam's (2005: 105) contention that 'the appearance of the transgender body in visual culture is instead part of a long history of the representation of unstable embodiment.' However, rather than turn to the reinvention of the transgender gaze in film devices like the shot-reverse shot, as Halberstam does, Cruz attends to another kind of reversal with considerable attention to trans of color self-representation, a turn that digitally born imagery makes possible.

Consider the image of Celine Walker. Located to the far right of the second panel, she is a companion to Garden's reinvention in pink. Appearing with hands folded and legs pouring off the ledge of a plushy chaise lounger, her dainty appearance in crushed pink taffeta disharmonizes with the lobotomized head facing the viewer. The bridge of a white scalp peeks out above the lid of Walker's quarter-turned visage. The disunity between poser and anatomy, the alienation of face from body strikes uncanny allusions to disguise. The particular Florida girl's hacking rhymes to the work of Cruz's collaborator, Elia Alba.

Alba's work 'capture[s] [a] glimpse of incongruously hybrid people, challeng[ing] the straightforward link between how a person looks and who they are', according to E Carmen Ramos (2007: 83). Her photograph in Figure 3 pays reverence to the legendary Paradise Garage DJ Larry Levan, who died in 1992 after decades-long bouts of drug abuse. Alba repopulates New York nightlife with portraits of Levan in photo masquerade. Her project extends a technique that includes using photo transfers onto muslin skin suits and masks. By refashioning the conventions of portraiture, textile construction,

Figure 3. Elia Alba, *Larry Levan (three is better than one)* (2006/2010), gelatin silver print, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Image courtesy of the artist.

and self-fashioning, her practice combines Afro-Latina creative expressions like her mother's work as a seamstress to stage a bold conversation about ethnoracial difference, a turn made possible by interracial *mestizaje* imported from her native Dominican Republic. The result of her body masking

> blends, fractures, mixes, and remixes references . . . hair color and texture, skin tone, and the form of the body to emphasize visual disconnections between color and body, between the fact of sex and the nuance of gender, and between skin, hair, and outward appearance. (Aranda-Alvarado, 2017: 211)

As a collaborator in Cruz's performance-based works, Alba is a consonant influence. Cruz, for example, adapts the photo masquerade in *suddenly,youandiwillwaitinyourdreams. . .tonight, portrait of Camila* (2019), a painted tribute to Camila Díaz Córdova, a Central American trans immigrant

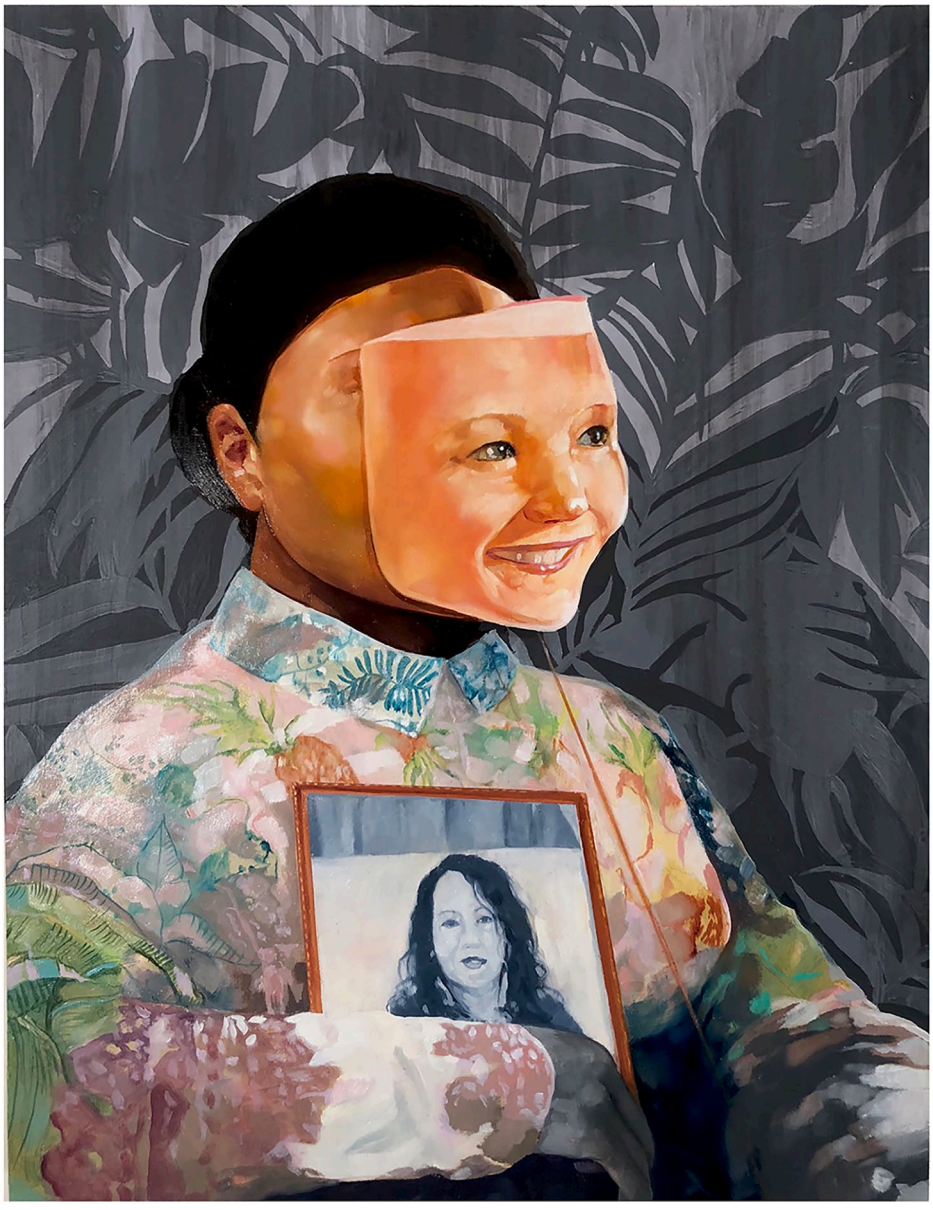

Figure 4. David Antonio Cruz, *suddenly,youandiwillwaitinyourdreams. . .tonight, portrait of Camila* (2019), oil and enamel on wood. Image courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery and the artist.

who was deported to El Salvador by ICE officials and subsequently killed (see Figure 4).[1] He interrogates the precarity of the trans immigrant femme and the unstable passage a mask provides her in a corrupt system of political asylum. Together, Cruz and Alba's aesthetic dialogue questions the terms of racial identification from the manifold complexions of US Latinidad and cultural nexus of blackness and brownness. They propose a queerer and

gender-variant vision of unruly citizen-bodies in places like New York and Florida where blacktino social affinity prevails.

Celine Walker's portrait carries traces of Alba and Cruz's shared interrogation of the portrait genre through facial disguise and misidentification. It offers an equally compelling study of digital media representation and appropriation, which a return to the source material demonstrates. The scarcity of photos documenting trans women of colors' lives places an unusual dependency on social media sources. He mines their self-representations from the web. Thus, Walker's requisite self-portrait is a 'selfie'. It obeys aesthetics of mobile phone technology. Her composition is a beauty shot accenting codes of racialized femininity: pink lips, smoky eyes, feathery lashes, and loose wavy locks. In the painting, her head ends abruptly – perhaps the result of the bleed from the tight framing of the photographic field – making her portrait a conversion of hybrid media forms: portraiture, painting, and selfie.

Her likeness is another alteration, a 'transgender look' as Halberstam (2005: 107) espouses, made possible by the reverse logics of the digital photograph. As Walker's eyes gaze left in the source material, she looks right in the diptych. Cruz proffers another vision of trans women of color visibilities, a way of looking in reverse. He synthesizes media unfixing a stable transference in photorealist painting and, in turn, invites a gaze that reads racialized transgender appearance backwards. In this way, the image of Celine Walker seconds David Getsy's (2017: 256) claim that

> queer existence is always wrapped up in an attention to form, whether in the survival tactic of shaping oneself to the camouflage of the normal, the defiant assembling of new patterns of lineage and succession, or the picturing of new configurations of desire, bodies, sex and sodality.

For Cruz, queer form challenges the portraiture logics, hacks digital texts, and rereads transgender lives of color in reverse. His *portrait of the florida girls* mutates the trans femme self-composed 'selfie' and recircuits it into posthumous photograph, dead metadata, and trans femme woman of leisure in portrait painting. Cruz confronts the many faces of Celine Walker birthed at the end of an iPhone, filtered through social media, sensationalized in accounts of serial murder, and memorialized on wood paneling, though seen in reverse.

Glum tragedies

Cruz's attention to these casualties of anti-transgender, anti-black, anti-queer violence is laudable but raises questions about his own positionality and the ethics of posthumous artmaking. After all, the

wegivesomuchandgivenothingatall, *paintings for Richard* series was generated in tribute to Richard, Cruz's gender non-binary friend in junior high school who endured harassment and assault for refusing to conform to the hypermasculine hegemony of his North Philadelphia barrio. Cruz's cisgender Boricua masculinity left him un-policed by the hostile forces of gender disciplining. In retrospect, Cruz answers this fraught past with a reconciliatory art project amending his queer of color affinity to the intersections of black and brown gender nonconformity. The 'transgender capacity' of his series appeals to a 'blacktino . . . critical optic' dovetailing the intra- and interethnic dimensions of a transnational landscape like Philadelphia to a site of renewed and urgent focus: Florida (Getsy, with Simmons, 2015: 47; see also Johnson and Rivera-Servera, 2016: 7).

Cruz's attention to these Florida girls is no accident. Even he must cede that the work comes on the heels of compounding disasters. On 20 September 2017, Hurricane María made landfall on Puerto Rico and devastated its people, landscape, and tenuous infrastructure. A study commissioned by the Puerto Rican government revealed the deaths of 2,975 people (Baldwin and Begnaud, 2018). The aftermath prompted a mass exodus with approximately 30,000 to 50,000 Puerto Ricans resettling in Florida (Ocasio, 2019). Their primary destination was Orange County, a region in which the most populous city is Orlando.

The transnational connections between central Florida and the Caribbean were tested and tried just one year earlier. Orlando was shaken when a shooter entered Pulse nightclub on 12 June 2016, during 'Latino night'. A total of 49 people perished in the gunfire, and 53 were wounded (Tauber et al., 2016). Black and brown, cis and trans, gay and straight, immigrant and citizen were among the slain; 23 victims were Puerto Rican (Capó, 2016). Many of these deaths prompted posthumous outings where bodies of queer, gender nonconforming, and same-sex people were returned from mainland Orlando to Puerto Rico, sparking in one instance the familial rejection of the queer of color dead (Padilla, 2016). Their pictures recirculated in a posthumous memorialization in mainstream media coverage. Their portraits were mined from Facebook pages crowding the glossy pages of *People* magazine in memory of 'unspeakable horror'. Like *the florida girls*, selfies became final portraits. Postmortem metadata stood in as avatars approximating queer and trans of color visualizations of gun violence. Their collective picturing is a black and brown mutual bereavement, a grievous expression made transparent in the digital remnants of the dead's social media (Tauber et al., 2016).

Cruz's paintings parallel these mirrored tragedies underscoring a broader queer necropolitics for the subjugated queer, trans, and neocolonial subjects of US militarized interventions of the Caribbean and Latin America susceptible to death. Referring to Pulse, Che Gossett (2016) stresses:

> in the absence of safety – as our lives are constantly under threat by police power – nightlife has always been about lines of flight. Yet in Orlando, like so many other places and times, violence ripped the very fabric of that queer and trans entanglement apart.

Orlando, joining Jacksonville and North Point as cities endemic to the murders of these Florida girls, curtails a discourse of 'metronormativity' whereby 'the conflation of "urban" and "visible" in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities' obscures what stands to be pictured from the south, from down below (Halberstam, 2005: 36). Cruz's portraits are profound as they sidestep queer and transgender migratory stories of liberation in big cities and, instead, stress what queer and trans femmes of color endure in the transnational crossroads of Florida. In this way, *portrait of the florida girls* does more than commemorate five lost lives. These trans women of color are born of twinned traumas, of landscapes riddled with cross-ethnic and cross-cultural migrations, of gunfire eclipsing exquisite queer beauty, of a transnational transgender image re-membered in visions of pink.

Definition in a world bereft of color

Cruz's desire to mend these mutual travesties charges *portrait of the florida girls* with new meaning at the porous borders of cross-ethnic solidarities, genders, sexualities, and geographies. In the left-hand wood panel, at the feet of Cathalina Christina James, is a disembodied hand. Easily missed in the dull hued corner of the composition, it lies delicately on the gathered cloth, limp and still. Appearing at the edge, the limb draws renewed attention to the diptych and the cleavage of white void between paintings. Its dismemberment is a macabre disjunction, a fractured hinge crosscutting these trans women of color with that which remains unseen in the negative space. Its insertion is metaphorical, a hand of the fallen, that chillingly reminds us not only of the innumerable casualties of anti-transgender of color violence but also the unreported and the undefined. This scene in the painting is a harbinger of things to come. Like those nearly 15,000 people gathered in Brooklyn on 12 June 2020, declaring 'Black trans lives matter' adorned in white garb to commemorate the NACCP's 1917 Silent Parade, the hanging hand is a strangely unifying citation in pallid finish (Patil, 2020). It wades searching for a way forward, stirring the imagination. What possible liberation could be envisaged in the empty void, in the devastation of post-hurricane Puerto Rico, the travesty of Pulse nightclub, the shared affinity of black and brown in the queer necropolitics of Florida? The answer lies within our reach.

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Note

1. For more, see Binlot (2019).

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

'I'm a person who loves beautiful things': Potassa de Lafayette as model and muse

Kara Carmack

Abstract. In January 1977, Potassa de Lafayette visited Andy Warhol's studio wearing a black velvet and taffeta evening gown. The Dominican model sat for sketches by visiting artist Jamie Wyeth and photographs taken by Warhol that together reveal the sequence in which Potassa raised her skirt and lowered her stockings to expose her penis. This contribution explores Potassa's strategies of self-presentation amid the politics at play in the studio that day. The author reads Potassa as a self-possessed figure fully in control of her image because hers is an identity not predicated on a gendered or sexed body, but on a visual sensibility – as one who 'loves beautiful things'. As an aesthete and as one of the first openly transgender models of color, Potassa, the author argues, negotiated difference through beauty and glamor in Warhol's studio and across New York's high art and fashion scenes.

Keywords. aesthete • fashion • model • portrait • self-representation • transgender

The 'office was jumping' at Andy Warhol's 860 Broadway studio on Wednesday, 12 January 1977: artist Jamie Wyeth was drawing bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger; socialite Bianca Jagger called about that evening's dinner plans; and art collectors John and Kimiko Powers dropped in to get a few artworks signed (Warhol, 1989: 14–15). In the midst of the commotion, Victor Hugo – Warhol's friend and fashion designer Halston's lover – escorted Potassa de Lafayette, wrapped in a gold-lined black velvet cape, to the studio.

Wyeth, who was drawing Schwarzenegger at the time, recalls that all attention turned to the new arrival:

> Arnold had about a cardiac arrest [when Potassa arrived]. I was in my little cubicle, and Arnold was posing and Andy came in and said, 'Look at this really beautiful girl. Oh, Arnold, don't you really love her . . .?' And with that Victor Hugo comes in and with him was this beautiful willowy, clearly Spanish woman, dressed in a taffeta ball gown. (Stoner, 2006: 44)

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Potassa made her way to a chair, where her self-designed voluminous black dress spilled onto the floor. The gold cord tied around her waist accentuated her slender torso ensconced in a velvet bodice, while her dramatic make-up and low chignon emphasized her high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. Abandoning Schwarzenegger, Wyeth began to sketch as Warhol trained his camera on Potassa. Existing today as rows of images across a single contact sheet, Warhol's photographs operate both as portraits of Potassa and as documentation of her visit that reveal the sequence in which she eventually raised her skirt and lowered her stockings to expose her penis to the artists – a scene Wyeth rendered twice in graphite and charcoal.

The visual record combined with Wyeth's anecdotal account raise questions regarding Potassa's agency and strategies of self-presentation at Warhol's studio. How does one read the circumstances and politics surrounding the 'outing' of Potassa's body that afternoon, particularly in light of the asymmetrical power dynamic between the two successful white male artists and the transgender model of color that was likely defined by colonial gazes, sexual curiosity, and artist–model power imbalances? This study argues that Potassa's tactical negotiations of her body were rooted in an identity of an aesthete that framed the body not as gendered, but as a 'beautiful thing'. Realizing the body and its features as possibly performative – even weaponized – embellishments to wear and bare as easily as a Halston tunic at a Valentino party, Potassa actively destabilized the men's objectifying gazes by refusing to occupy a passive subject position. Instead, she wielded her body, her opulent garments, and her accessories to not only *look* back, but *act* back, which consequently affected the artists' representations of her and asserted her own embodied experience in the studio itself.

*

By the middle of the 1970s, Dominican-born Potassa had parlayed her sophisticated, original, and forward-thinking style cultivated in the city's drag clubs in the 1960s into that of a couture fashion model.[1] She entered the elite social circle of Manhattan's most reputable designers and models in the early 1970s with the encouragement and guidance of Maning Obregon and Antonio Lopez, two of the era's most influential fashion illustrators. After a year modeling furs on Seventh Avenue, she worked for designers Stephen Burrows, Don Robbie, and Valentino; appeared alongside supermodels like Apollonia van Ravenstein, Nancy North, and Karen Bjornson; and eventually pursued acting (McEvoy, 1974; Reynolds, 1977: 32).[2] Her growing reputation led to magazines like *Women's Wear Daily* and *Interview* tracking her social life, just as they did Bianca Jagger's and Jane Forth's, and commenting on her Fire Island essentials – Elsa Peretti jewelry, wigs, and Godiva chocolates.[3]

So, in January 1977, when Potassa sat before Warhol and Wyeth, she did so as a successful model and socialite with a reputation for exquisite taste and

a refined aesthetic sensibility that informed the artists' representations of her. The first photos in Warhol's contact sheet capture Potassa looking off to her right with her hands resting calmly in her lap.[4] Gradually, her gestures become larger: dropping her hands down to her skirt, bending her elbow and draping her arm behind her head. Skirt raised, she then reaches her right hand beneath the fabric with her stockings already rolled down. The following image captures a coy smile directed at Hugo, who approaches with another camera. No longer staring off into the distance, but instead making direct eye contact with Warhol's camera, Potassa confidently and defiantly leans back in her chair with phallus in hand. Showing no hesitation or discomfort in fully displaying her body for the artists, she revels not only in their attention, but in the spectacle of her own glamor.

Significantly, Warhol's treatment of Potassa is in marked contrast to that of several other genderbenders of color featured in previous projects. More than a decade earlier, Ronald Tavel, Warhol's then-scenarist, pressured Mario Montez, a Puerto Rican drag performer, to unzip his pants and expose his genitalia during the filming of Warhol's *Screen Test No. 2* (1965). Tavel can be heard soliciting Montez from behind the camera, 'Now, Miss Montez, will you lift up your skirt and unzipper your fly?' Eventually Montez acquiesces to Tavel's orders; humiliated and shamed, he unzips his pants and 'look[s] at it', even as the 'it' remains off camera.[5] Years later, Warhol's 'Ladies and Gentlemen' series (1974–1975) continued his infatuation with 'boys who spend their lives trying to be complete girls' (Warhol, 1975: 54). As Jonathan Flatley (2017) has argued, the screenprints and collages of the 14 black and Latina transvestites in the series interrogate the performativity of gender and race through variously correct and askance applications of color and composition – including the excision of 'male signs', like Adam's apples and stubble, and the exaggeration of 'female signs' like wigs and makeup. *Screen Test No. 2* and 'Ladies and Gentlemen' thus explore, however uncomfortably, the mismatch of such signs and the failures of particular types of gendered and racial performances in both the subjects' self-representations and Warhol's representations of them.[6]

Beyond the cultural and social capital she had accumulated by 1977, Potassa significantly differs from Montez and the Gilded Grape transvestites because her pursuit of fashion, beauty, and luxury reflects an identity not predicated on a body nor on a gender, but on a visual sensibility. Such a position circumvents the vulnerability and exposure that threatened Montez, whose genitals represented a liability, particularly when he performed in drag. Deftly sidestepping fixed positions in favor of something more elusive, more ethereal, and free from a material body, Potassa declared, 'I am not a man, not a woman, not a drag queen. I'm a person who loves beautiful things' (McEvoy, 1974). While these repudiations suggest a frustration with available terminology, they ultimately function to humanize herself – as a *person* – in such a way that renders her gender identity less important or even irrelevant. In effect,

she characterizes herself as an aesthete who, as her statement suggests, is genderless or non-gendered, for whom the act of desiring – one who loves, a lover – is essential to her identity.

Potassa's conceptualization of her identity is not one that disappears the raced, sexed, and gendered body in favor of consumerism, i.e. make-up, clothes, jewelry, accessories. The abundant occasions when Potassa strategically displayed her sex parts at various private parties and public nightclubs support the argument that she conceived of her body itself as one of her 'beautiful things'. In addition to various stripteases that made the *Women's Wear Daily*'s gossip column, she frequently and cavalierly displayed her genitals and breasts as though flaunting a trendy Giorgio di Sant' Angelo scarf at Studio 54. The extant photographs of these moments – many of which were taken by Warhol – capture her negotiating her difference with her body as she did at Warhol's studio. By conceiving of her body and all of its parts as another 'beautiful thing' – hence her avoidance of drugs ('terrible for the skin') – Potassa complicates an easy reading of her identity as one simply driven by capitalism. Her embellishments both *of* and *on* her body make her *person* legible, an identity grounded in an aesthetics of body and adornments that refuses to differentiate between the two.

As evidenced in Warhol's photographs, Potassa experiences nothing close to the shame that Montez suffered from Tavel's cruel ploy, nor do the images probe for a 'wrongness' in her gendered and racial presentation. Instead, they respond to Potassa's aesthetic embodiment and demonstrate an interest not rooted in her flesh nor her genitals, but in the all-over elements of her allure. Indeed, they suggest that Warhol too does not view her as a drag queen whose conflicting signs warrant the interrogation previously enacted upon his drag and trans subjects. Nor is her physical body fragmented and fetishized by the photographic edge as in his contemporaneous 'Torsos' (1976–1977) and 'Sex Parts' (1977–1978) series, for which models, scouted by Hugo in gay bars, baths, and sex clubs, would expose their genitals and buttocks (and sometimes perform various sex acts) for Warhol's camera. In these photographs and silkscreens, limbs and heads are severed by cropping, reducing bodies to their sexual carnality. Though Potassa's 'sex parts' are exposed in the contact sheet, Warhol's camera retains a cool, respectable distance, centering her within the frame without violent cropping.[7] With her professional and social connections, she was not a drag queen from the streets nor a hustler from the baths. Instead, she circulated in Warhol's glittering world of dinner parties and dance floors. In her stately poses, Potassa disavows marginalization and fetishization through an aesthete's identity, which differentiates Warhol's portrayal of her from his other drag, trans, and nude subjects.

Wyeth's attention to Potassa's style, dress, and accessories over that of her material and sexed body in his two portraits similarly underscores the

Figure 1. Jamie Wyeth. Sketchbook Comprised of Six Sketches, *In Drag: Drawing #1*, 1977. Pencil and charcoal on paper, 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine; Museum purchase, 2001. 30b. © Jamie Wyeth.

complexities of her identity and its contingence on elegance and beauty. In the first, she appears in three-quarter profile; her regally erect posture suggests a noble timelessness (Figure 1). Wyeth renders her face in light pencil, though his careful modelling of her left eye, eye lashes, and expertly applied eyeshadow draws the viewer's eye to hers. The sleeves and torso of her gown, delicately outlined while filled in with energetic, hectic lines, disclose little about the body beneath: the sleeves balloon away from her arms; the bodice resembles a firm chest plate. At the base of her torso, between her slender thighs, her hands frame her penis, exposed by the parting yards of fabric.

Figure 2. Jamie Wyeth. Sketchbook Comprised of Six Sketches, *In Drag: Drawing #2*, 1977. Pencil and charcoal on paper, 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine; Museum purchase, 2001. © Jamie Wyeth.

The second portrait is more frontal, with her gaze returning Wyeth's and the viewer's (Figure 2). Wyeth models Potassa's face and long neck, which Salvador Dalí praised as 'one of the most beautiful in the world', with light shading (Reynolds, 1977: 32). Her gown's dark sleeves and bodice contrast with the bottom portion of the drawing, which remains only faintly outlined. In this drawing, Potassa raises her skirt with two manicured hands and leans

backward in a pose reminiscent of a Moulin-Rouge can-can dancer. Her erect penis strains upward, as though an arrow self-reflexively pointing back at herself.

In both drawings, Potassa's billowing, conspicuous dress commands the most attention with dense, dark gestural lines filling in its volume. Wyeth takes care to detail her defining features – her dark hair, made-up eyes, and painted fingernails – that communicate a particular refinement. Her genitalia appear as an afterthought in both images. Beneath the dress, Wyeth's pencil lightens, particularly in the second image. Her legs, sex organs, and the underside of her evening gown are barely there – evanescent compared to the solid, immobile taffeta and velvet above. Wyeth's portraits capture Potassa's understanding of herself as an identity built upon beauty, rather than a sexed body. In a sense, her body matters only in so far as it is itself beautiful and can be attired, ornamented, displayed, and deployed as such.[8]

As she sat before the inquiring gazes of Warhol and Wyeth, Potassa wielded even more power that day at the Factory than is manifestly visible. Wyeth recalls what the visual record fails to capture – the dynamic between Potassa and Schwarzenegger:

> Victor is speaking Spanish to this woman, and she's talking away...and Arnold is pulling on his clothes from posing for me. And he said, "Where do you live? I would like to see you." And I'm drawing away, and Victor says something to her and she LIFTS the hem of her ball gown and of course Arnold yells and backs against the wall, realizing it's a man. (Stoner, 2006: 44)

Though we may never know the exact nature of the exchange Potassa and Hugo shared in their native Spanish, Wyeth's recounting suggests complicity between the two to undermine and challenge the bodybuilder's heteronormative masculinity. Raising her gown, Potassa responded to the bodybuilder's expression of desire for her not by passing, but through disclosure and delight in Mr. Olympia's surprise. Perhaps Schwarzenegger's evident shock led to the sly smirk that spread across Potassa's lips, as she claimed and defined the power dynamic and the narrative of the studio visit for herself.

Wyeth's anecdote chronicles Potassa's knowingness and manipulation of not only how she was read and rendered by the artists, but also how she was read by everyone else in the room – as she so often did at parties. Understanding her body as a discursive site upon which the four men and two cameras gazed, she joyfully weaponized her garments and her body to affect turmoil through a sequence of poses – a skill honed on the stages of drag clubs and couture catwalks. 'To strike a pose', writes cultural theorist Dick Hebdige (1982–1983:

85), 'is to pose a threat.' Potassa's poses launched an offensive, rather than a defensive, maneuver that fractured the matrix of gazes and desires in proclamation of an identity and body irreducible to a normalized ideology of gender. The consequent photographs and drawings that document her self-asserted power play thereby engender a perpetual *acting back* against the gaze of future spectators that may threaten to objectify, 'other', and fetishize her all over again.

In an era defined by the glitz and glamor of Halston and Studio 54, Potassa constructed an identity around all things beautiful. In conceptualizing the self as an aesthete rather than as a sexed or gendered body – and I would add a racialized body, as well – Potassa found strategies of managing her own representation, as her self-possessed agency and pleasure posing before Warhol, Wyeth, Hugo, and Schwarzenegger evidences. Such a position meant an ability to divert or, at the very least, manipulate the colonial, sexualized, and fetishized gazes directed toward her. By privileging her adornments and the beauty of her own body, Potassa reveled in and successfully defined the parameters of her difference, which she parlayed into a successful modeling career. Unfortunately, her reign as one of the first openly transgender models of color operating at the highest echelons of New York's fashion industry was short-lived. Her visit to the Factory and her subsequent interview published in *Interview* magazine shortly thereafter are some of the last remaining historical traces of her (Reynolds, 1977). Potassa's modeling career faded by the end of the decade as she further embedded herself in the city's disco scene – dancing the nights away with all eyes most certainly trained upon her.

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Notes

1. In her drag competitions, she eschewed what she viewed as drag's maximalism in favor of looks inspired by high fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. After winning her first drag contest, she was known as Potassa because it 'sounds more like Veruschka', a nod to the German supermodel (McEvoy, 1974).
2. Several designers refused to employ Potassa because of her gender identity. Her presence would 'be a bit off-putting for my clients', claimed Halston, a personal friend of Potassa's (McEvoy, 1974).
3. Threads of genderphobia appear in reporters' comments about Potassa. For example, Marian McEvoy (1974) describes her as 'a full-time transvestite who won't answer to male pronouns', yet proceeds to use 'he' throughout the article.

4. The contact sheet resides in the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts collection at Stanford University and can be viewed at: https://exhibits.stanford.edu/warhol/catalog/rx536sj2559
5. For an in-depth analysis of the film and Montez's shame, see Crimp (2012).
6. In this context, one could also consider Warhol's casting of 'three female impersonators' – Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, and Holly Woodlawn – in several of his films in lieu of 'real girls', who, 'couldn't seem to get excited about anything' (Warhol, 1975: 55).
7. A trio of color photographs taken by Warhol with another camera does include one close-up of Potassa's genitals.
8. Wyeth's and Warhol's treatment of Potassa's body contrasts starkly with their sketches and photographs, respectively, of Schwarzenegger's, which ruminate upon the bodybuilder's flexing musculature.

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

Trans men's stealth aesthetics: navigating penile prosthetics and 'gender fraud'

Chris Straayer

Abstract. This article examines trans commercial production of penile prosthetics, the efficacy of such products in personal and sex-segregated spaces, and their negative valence in the public sphere. Responding to his own experience of gender dysphoria, Transthetics founder Alex designs and produces products for the reparative and enabling embodiment of trans men. Penile prosthetics reflect the longstanding tension between aesthetics and function in the history of prosthetic limbs. The author posits 'stealth aesthetics' as a function-injected realism that pushes into reality via utilization of prosthetics in the performance of real life. For some trans men, the phenomenologically incorporated prosthetic is tantamount to a corporeal penis. Cisnormativity, however, outlaws this equivalence. Recent prosecutions of penile prosthetic embodiment as 'gender fraud' punitively restrict trans men's claim on reality, instead exposing their private bodies to public judgment, where genitals produce gender. By contrast, the author advocates the authorization of gender to produce genitals.

Keywords. disclosure • gender dysphoria • gender fraud • penile prosthetic • sexuality • stealth aesthetics • transgender • Transthetics

Introduction

This article justaposes two cultural occasions in which trans men use penile prosthetics for embodiment. The first is Transthetics, a private company owned by Alex, who draws on his own gender experience to design realistic prosthetics for trans men. The second is the 2018 conviction of Carlos Delacruz in one of 11 recent 'gender fraud' legal cases involving cisgender female plaintiffs and transgender/gender noncomforming defendants. Both Alex and Delacruz foreground private intentions for sexual prosthetics attended by significant challenges in the public realm. Despite contrasting scenarios and outcomes, their cases share issues about the trans male body's capacity and legitimacy. Alex's emphasis on the functionality of Transthetics prosthetics informs my conceptualization of 'stealth aesthetics', by which

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the functional realism of a prosthetic promotes trans male embodiment and draws an equivalence between prosthetic and penis. The trans man inhabits the prosthetic, incorporates it into his body, and brings it to life. By contrast, the discourse of gender fraud reduces a trans man to his prosthetic, which metaphorically insists that his gender is artificial. Delacruz's quest for a male place in life through stealth living, even in the private sphere of his relationship, broke down when his instantiation of stealth shifted from inhabiting to hiding.

Transthetics: a personal response to gender dysphoria

Transthetics is a private company that designs and produces 'innovative prosthetics for trans men et al'. It is owned and operated by Alex, who founded the company in October 2014 after beginning gender transition early that year. Transthetics grew quickly and maintains a healthy plateau. Its marketing is entirely through social media, and its distribution scope is primarily the US, followed by Europe and Canada. Alex estimates that approximately 70 percent of his market is trans men, 20 percent lesbians, and 10 percent heterosexual couples who like to 'switch things up' (Alex, 2018).

Transthetics is culturally situated within a small but flourishing industry of body products for trans men, which includes other independent companies such as GenderCat, Peecock Products, and Reelmagik. In their counterculture positioning, these businesses resemble past identity-based initiatives, such as gay bookstores and the feminist alternative press movement. Alex started Transthetics out of a personal need for products that would alleviate his gender dysphoria. He wanted compact and ergonomic products, and none of the prosthetics on the market suited him. For Alex, the success of Transthetics is intertwined with his personal trans health:

> Having gender dysphoria for a huge part of my life was probably my biggest challenge . . . Now the philosophical approach that I bring to Transthetics is to try to reframe anything that seems an adversity in order to see it as opportunity for growth. I found a way to karate-roll my life's biggest challenges into positives. (Alex, 2018)

Gender dysphoria does not define transgenderism. Many transgender people would better be described as euphoric (Rachlin, 2018: 229). Not all trans men want penises. Some who do want penises pursue surgery for metoidioplasty (meta) or phalloplasty. Some trans men want penises but not surgery. All this is to say that Transthetics and, to that extent, this article concern a subset of trans men. Further, my use of the words 'trans men' is not meant to signify or constitute a distinct or exclusive identity.

Transthetics products facilitate both social and private gender expression. They include the EZP* and EZP Junior* stand-to-pee (STP) packers, the Rod* meta extension and STP, the Hot Rod* play extension, the Joystick* play packer, the Lollipop* pump and suction toy, and Budgie Brief* packer-ready underwear and swimwear. Currently in development is the Bionic* all in one, to which I will return. Transthetics' penile prosthetics display a realistic aesthetics as to size, contour, and details, with 'cut' and 'natural' options and three color choices to approximate skin tones. Alex's aspiration and forte prioritize function.

> There is a primary focus on ergonomics and function that drives everything else. Rather than starting with the aesthetics of the penis, I first consider what a penis has to do and how I can make products to do that well. As in the Bauhaus tradition, form follows function. (Alex, 2018)

This contrasts with some other companies, notably Bad Dragons, which offers sexual prosthetics in expressionist figurations and colors.

The particular functions of penile prosthetics for trans men are gender and sexual performance and embodiment. Packers and STPs, like Transthetics' EZP* and Rod*, facilitate being read as male in public. In their study of young trans men's use of gender-signifying technology, Plis and Blackwood (2012: 188) report:

> They use technology to make it harder for those they interact with to think of them as anything other than men. Technology is used to help them 'do' gender confidently. In this case, gender performance means expressing coherence with normative gender.

In other words, Transthetics crafts 'a cultural penis' (p. 192). But, unlike the flat chest, facial hair, haircut, and clothing through which trans men also perform cultural gender, the penis is most often exposed in private and semi-private spaces, where function can be crucial. To confidently use a urinal, a trans man not only wants a visually realistic STP, but also one that is highly functional. The STP must be easily accessible from within pants and underwear, direct urine outward and downward, accommodate sufficient flow, minimize dripping, and elicit masculine body language and gestures. If the STP does not function well, the user may be read as trans and likely will experience incongruence.

Scholarly writing has given more attention to outer appearance and public gender performance than to genital performance in sex-segregated or personal realms. Nonetheless, incongruent identity and embodiment can negatively affect sexual experience, including erotic arousal and orgasmic ability (Doorduin and Van Berlo, 2014: 659–661). To counteract this discomfort,

some trans people seek better alignment through hormone intake and/or surgery. The physical effects of such medical interventions can positively effect what Schilt and Windsor (2014: 733) term 'sexual habitus to elucidate the relationship between embodiment, gender identity, erotic desires, and sexual repertoires and practices'. Throughout life, a person develops their own way of engaging in sexual activity, pleasure, and relations, and this is affected by bodily changes (p. 736). I contend that sexual prosthetics also can enact bodily changes that positively develop one's sexual habitus. For some trans men, this transformation of prosthetic into penis is as important to their sexual habitus as having a penis is to cis men's.

Improving trans men's sexual experience while offering an alternative to surgery was Alex's goal when designing Transthetics products like the Hot Rod*, Joystick*, and Lollipop*. Explaining his motivation to develop the Joystick* in terms of his own sexuality, Alex (2018) says:

> I have always found sexual intimacy very difficult in a female body. That triggers my dysphoria because it makes me so acutely aware of a body that I don't feel comfortable in. With the Joystick*, that discomfort goes away. I feel 100% myself in my body. I feel like I am a male in a male body that can have sex the way I want to. For me, as far as having really satisfying intimate relationships, the Joystick* was critical.

This quote makes evident a strong concurrence between Alex and Transthetics.

As an operational rule, Alex takes himself as Transthetics' first customer, by which he decides what products to develop. Alex is involved in all aspects of the company. His graphic design brands the company, primarily via its website, which includes his blog. And, in product demos, Alex is the 'face' of Transthetics. Alex is a private person, but he feels the company's mission will be received better if he appears in the product demos himself. 'It allows people to feel more comfortable when they need to ask me questions regarding the products. I think it engenders trust in my audience.' In videos that demonstrate bodily use of penile prosthetics, Alex is framed from neck down. For a trans man, such framing does not thoroughly obtain anonymity. Even if the image is not identifiable as Alex, it carries the markings of a trans body and, as such, lends authenticity to Transthetics marketing.

Cultural entrepreneurship and the inventive construction of commonality

This article appreciates Alex as a designer and his Transthetics business as art practice. Given the social and performative turns in contemporary art (Jackson, 2011), it is no longer feasible to strictly oppose art to business.

Transthetics is certainly a business that fits McCall and Houlihan's (2017: 148) definition of art: 'Our bluntest understanding of art is the making of things and the consequence of those things for human senses – what it may cause us to think, feel or perceive.'

Reflexive and innovative in response to a challenging situation, Alex is a cultural entrepreneur whose work is strongly tied to his identity.

> My initial motivations were quite selfish in that I just needed to solve my personal problem. Then I realized I could help others in the same way. That's when it started to well into a business. I didn't start out thinking I was an entrepreneur. (Alex, 2018)

The Transthetics website mixes product marketing with ongoing updates about prosthetics in development, customer reviews in the form of trans anecdotes, how-to tips for trans men, trans health information, and links to gender-related science articles. It constructs a dynamic experience via a plentitude of visuals and strong typography, a comradely address that assumes the viewers' interest in product design and technology, and a number of dialogic opportunities such as product launch give-a-ways and writing contests.

With its website, Transthetics hails its customers as interlocutors with shared aspirations, concerns, and dispositions. This is evident in blog topics such as 'Happy Transgender Day of Visibility', 'Yoga Tips for Trans* Men', and 'Driver's Licenses and Other Unnecessary Bureaucratic Nightmares'. Instead of a simple portal to prosthetic products, the website becomes part of Alex's inventive assuagement of gender discomfort by acknowledging a shared enthusiasm for Transthetics' ambitious endeavors.

Alex maintains a complicated identity that is interesting to consider in relation to his audience:

> I am not openly trans. Most people who know me day to day don't know I'm trans. If it becomes relevant, I will tell them. It is definitely not a secret, but neither is it something I publicize. It is something that I share with anyone who I consider to be a real friend. I do not identify as a trans man. I see being trans as a part of my physical reality and as part of my history. But I don't see myself as a trans man. I see myself as a man. Trans informs who I am. (Alex, 2018)

The products of Alex's company address his physical quandary, and a subtitle at the head of Transthetics' website reads, 'Trans owned and operated'. Alex does not consider himself part of a trans community, but rather as serving it. He sees his role as a 'helper' both with his products and his blog.

There are advantages to Alex's non-identification with a trans community. He avoids claiming representational status and insider knowledge, and thus he also avoids abstracting his trans customers. Indeed, Alex's artistic product discursively constitutes his customer base as 'community'. 'The one commonality that the trans men who utilize my products have is that they would in one way, shape or form, like to have a penis.' This is also the commonality that Alex has with his customers. Alex's pursuit of realist functional design intends for Transthetics' sexual prosthetics to provide his customers with positive life consequences. As McCall and Houlihan (2017: 158) state:

> Creative and cultural entrepreneurship isn't solely focused on the pure creation of aesthetic goods or services in a '*l'art pour l'art*' sake scenario, but is also about a contribution to society in which man produces objects and experiences which express him [sic].

Transthetics as functional aesthetics: the bionic*

The history of prosthetic limbs betrays a lasting tension between function and aesthetics. While functionality is integral, appearance informs and expresses identity. After World War I decimated Europe's workforce, prosthetic arms for amputated veterans consisted of metal rods to which a variety of tools could be attached. Only secondarily was a 'show hand' attachment produced in response to veterans' off-work social needs (Panchasi, 2009). Unlike a hand, the penis is generally not shown in public, but its relation to identity still demands aesthetic consideration.

Consider a trans man who is 'packing'. Not only does the bulge in his pants iconically suggest a penis by matching its location, approximate shape, and size, but it also indexes a bodily penis because 'cissexualism' assumes that a person's apparent gender aligns with their unseen body parts (Serano, 2007). Similarly, the fact that penises generally remain private supports a cultural aesthetics of size: 'dominant representations of phallic masculinity in our culture depend on keeping the male body and the genitals out of the critical spotlight' (Lehman, 1993: 28). Such is the case for both cis and trans men. The firmness of these representational operations, however, is currently under revision. Flowers et al. (2013) argue that mainstreaming of pornography, gendered surveillance, gender-reassignment surgeries, and queer masculinity have ushered in a new penile aesthetics. Further, biomedicalization has produced new pathologies in what used to be considered healthy penises (p. 125). With the introduction of Viagra, erections are being ranked in an increasingly public discourse that fuses function to visual aesthetics.

It is within this shifting tenor that Alex is designing Transthetics' most ambitious product to date: the Bionic* all-in-one super realistic prosthetic (see Figure 1). With engineering students at the Denver University (in 2018–2019),

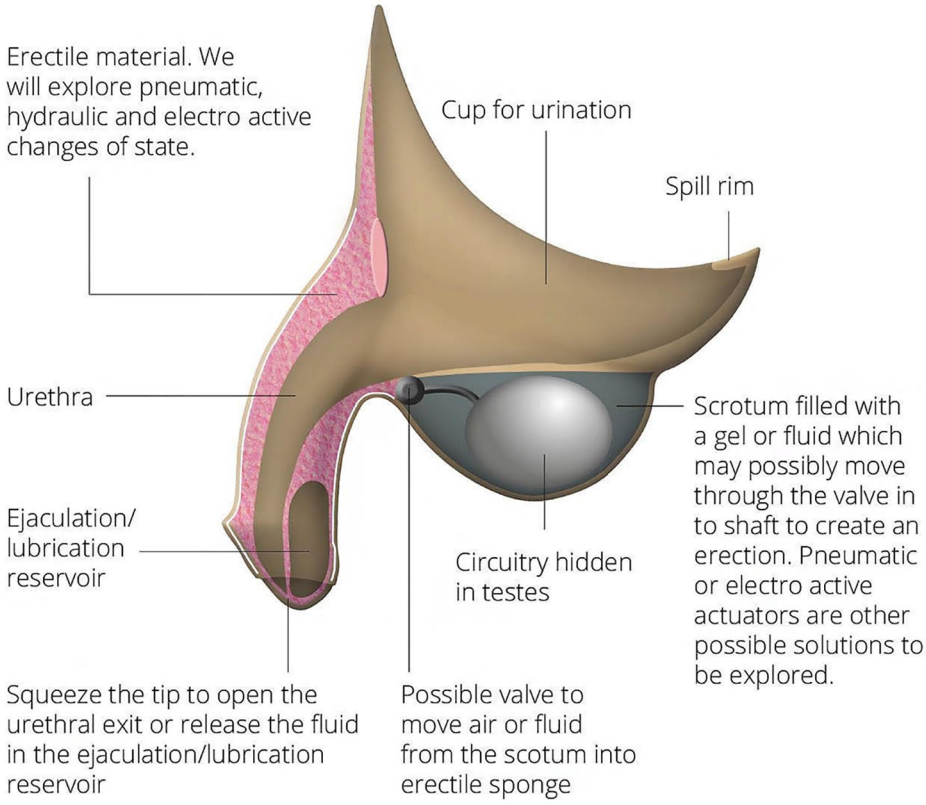

Figure 1. The Bionic* design as diagrammed on Transthetics.com (accessed 1 January 2020). Reproduced with permission.

Colorado University Boulder (in 2018), and Colorado School of Mines (in 2019), Alex resolved a prototype in December 2019. The Bionic* is designed to be a packer, an STP, and a sexually functional penis. It will be able to move between flaccid and erect states, stimulate the wearer's erogenous zone, and ejaculate. It will have a natural countenance, including skin that feels like human skin, registers touch to activate erection, and moves back from the glans during an erect state. Magnets on the device will align with magnets that are embedded in the wearer's skin (like embedded jewelry). Batteries located in the testes will fuel the device (Transthetics.com).

Transthetics' description of its ultimate sexual prosthetic is remarkable for its foregrounding of function. It is 'super realistic' because it 'mimics the natal male genitalia as closely as possible across four functions: pee, pack, pleasure and play – and over two states: flaccid and erect' (Transthetics.com). Function is no longer competing with aesthetics, as in earlier era prosthetics. Rather, function is aesthetics. Functionality obtains realism. Alex rightly assumes that his customers are intensely alert to the Bionic*'s sexual functionality. The functional ambitiousness of Alex's design is trans male-affirmative in itself.

The Bionic* design lays bare what I term 'stealth aesthetics'. Stealth aesthetics does not necessarily equate with living stealth. Rather, stealth aesthetics bolsters the aesthetic consequences of function for trans senses.

Stealth aesthetics in private and public practice

In sex-segregated spaces, trans people often pass as cisgender, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Charlap (2019: 23, 9), who has transitioned to a male appearance but understands and experiences himself as both male and non-male, has written about his extreme discomfort in the men's locker room. The reflective non binary mentality he maintains elsewhere collapses there.

> I head to the shower stalls. Any shower stall I enter needs to be equipped with curtains . . . I have also prepared for the after-swim ritual and what I will need to cover up and hide my 'dick-less' body when I exit these very same showers . . . In the harsh reality of locker rooms, a kind of essentialism takes the binary as bedrock and conformity as its definition. The 'hard' fact is that anatomy can feel like destiny with little left to the imagination.

I conceptualize 'stealth aesthetics' to assert a link between product design and real life consequence. Stealth aesthetics can be pivotal for trans people who must expose their private bodies and practices in public, semi-public, and even private places. In sex-segregated bathrooms, trans men expose body parts and conduct private acts under duress. Depending on accommodations, occupancy, and urgency, it might be advisable to appear indistinguishable from cis men. Self-consciously or instinctively, trans men would likely foreground masculine features and enact certain gestures and behaviors. And an STP that appeared and functioned realistically would be greatly valued.

In private spaces, stealth aesthetics serves other purposes. Penile prosthetics support sex identity, as one maneuvers one's naked and sexual body. Sensual interactions involve others in one's personal sensations, measures, and anxieties. Stealth aesthetics benefits competence by visually easing a wariness that stifles sexuality and functionally accessing erotic pleasure. Alex (2018) describes how the Joystick* that he designed for Transthetics passes his personal test: 'I can feel the Joystick* penetrating my partner, can experience an orgasm inside my partner, and when I look down, it looks like a penis.' Stealth aesthetics can capacitate trans men's phenomenological reality.

'Gender fraud': a cis-conceptual resistance to stealth aesthetics

Unfortunately, public curiosity about trans bodies can threaten trans capacity, invading even the most confident minds and bodies with media taunts and

threats that link to official powers. Recent cases of intimate 'gender fraud' provide a special example.

Fall 2018 saw another round of judicial inquiry into and media exposure of a trans man's genital status in the context of a 'gender fraud' case. In Scotland, two women charged Carlos Delacruz, age 35, with using an object for penetrative sex with them, without their knowing that it wasn't a penis. One woman, Lisa Evans, had sex with Delacruz 10 times over an 8-month relationship, and the other woman had sex with him every month or two over a period of 2 years and 7 months. Lisa Evans reported that Delacruz (falsely) stated that a severe burn during childhood had left him scarred, which is why he hid his body in the dark during sex. The second woman said that Delacruz used a condom, pretended to ejaculate, and blamed her for failing to become pregnant. Both women said they had experienced extreme pain during intercourse with Delacruz and still suffered traumatic effects. Delacruz was sentenced to three years in jail (a sentence that has since been quashed) and put on the sex offenders register (Her Majesty's Advocate v Carlos Delacruz, 2018; Laurie, 2018b; Warrander, 2018).

Delacruz's two long-term sexual partners described an egregious performance of 'gender fraud': Delacruz tendentiously and successfully convinced them that he was a man (which was a false claim within their common sense framework). They also asserted two specific sexual agressions: that Delacruz misrepresented an object as his penis, and that Delacruz caused them physical pain via penetrative sex. These two actions collapsed into each other under the (il)logic of 'gender fraud'. Although use of objects is neither unwonted nor necessarily painful among human sexual practices, and although penetration by a cis penis sometimes (intentionally or unintentionally) causes pain during sex, Delacruz's nondisclosure of transgender (object) status was taken to erase the women's consent to sex itself and therefore categorize that sex as sexual assault. The (il)logic of 'gender fraud' makes full use of two cisnormative presumptions: the *trans* sexual object *is* painful, and sexual pain from *trans* sexual penetration *is* rape. By insistently demarcating sexual prosthetic from penis, the (il)logic of 'gender fraud' secures a cause–effect link between trans male embodiment (as a false claim) and cis female trauma.

For many trans men, the incorporated prosthetic is inextricable from gender identity and bodily sex. Their disinclination to disclose their penis as a prosthetic derives from the dehumanization that such 'disclosure' would entail. Nevertheless, in sexual relations, the lived truth of trans male embodiment can clash with partner knowledge. This is not to discount that many partners of trans men agree with and participate in the knowledge of trans maleness. However, in 'gender fraud' cases, trans nondisclosure and partner consent seem situated in unresolvable conflict. The concept of 'gender fraud' insists on a distinction between prosthetic and penis, and hence emphasizes the

importance of a sexual partner's need to know in order to choose. For a partner who is not attuned to trans stealth aesthetics, trans nondisclosure can be a significant breach of confidence. How significant? As I will argue below, the common-sense answer to that question is ideologically tainted, hence the importance of also considering how the life possibilities of trans people are truncated by the concept of 'gender fraud'.

With regard to nondisclosure, the Delacruz case is not unique. Rather, it is mostly typical of at least 10 other cases of 'gender fraud' (1 other in Scotland, 5 in Britain, 2 in Israel, and 2 in the US), all involving cis female complainants and trans male or gender nonconforming (GNC) defendants. Many of the complainants and defendants are teenagers. In all cases, the complainants' assertion that the defendants had misrepresented themselves as male was validated by the court's interpretation. This negated the complainants' prior consent, which thereby redefined the prior sexual relations as rape or other criminal acts (Gross, 2009; Sharpe, 2018). Regarding the UK cases, Sharpe posits that uncritical perspectives in the courts consistently rendered the complainants as naïve and the defendants as predatory.

It is always important to seriously and carefully consider all accusations of personal assault. A strong allegiance to this ethical principle does not preclude either an obligation to scrutinize evidence or an ethical concern for defendant vulnerability (p. 130). Consenting to sexual relations depends upon relevant knowledge of both the proposed partner(s) and the proposed sexual act(s). Laws and opinion vary considerably as to what knowledge is relevant and what secrecy is fraudulent. It is not uncommon or frowned upon for a person to put on their best front for romantic and/or sexual interactions. Laws that protect against harmful deception routinely rely on common sense. The problem with this is that common sense often aligns with ideology. Common sense is not to be confused with independent thought. To our purpose, what broad agreement distinguishes trivial deception from deplorable deception? Might it be prejudice, naturalized as common sense? According to common sense, which of the following lies should put men in jail: a married man with children pretending to be unattached and inexperienced; a lower-middle class man claiming to be rich; a man compensating for erectile dysfunction with a internally hidden prosthetic pump; a man not wearing protection against STDs; or a trans man wearing a penile prosthetic and presenting himself as a man? Obviously scale of risk and harm would be taken into account when considering these examples, but the scales would be subjective. Deception alone, save for perjury, does not equal crime. That leaves us to ask: What are the given risk and harm in the case of 'gender fraud?' Might cisnormativity determine the scale of offence? What is the relevance of the withheld information?

'Gender fraud' cases rely on a slippage of focus from sexual actor to sexual act, from Carlos Delacruz to penetrative sex. A trans man's evasiveness with

his partner can limit their shared life, including their sexuality. Certain lies reduce his presence and, if discovered, lead a partner into rage or grief as they realize the truth and mourn the loss of a partner they thought they knew. To the court, however, the trans man's salient deception does not concern his gendered humanity or lack thereof, but rather his comportment in a sexual activity categorically impossible for him, because his penis is deemed an object. In the courtroom, the disqualified prosthetic is the trans man, and the trans man is his disqualifed prosthetic. Ironically, this judicial objectification of Delacruz stops short of positioning him as a deceptive female. Delacruz's stealth presentation was sufficient to protect him from enforced femaleness. We find evidence of this also when his ex-partners, the plaintiffs, continue to refer to him with male pronouns.

Judicial objectification forces the trans man to confess to the ultimate deception, the pretense of a functional penis. The trans man's penis can only be the inhuman(e) penis that rapes. The (il)logic of 'gender fraud' amplifies undisclosed transgender identity to catastrophic deception. It is off scale. It is a panic. It is its own lie. The cisnormative concept of 'gender fraud' empathizes with anyone who is shocked by the offensive trans body and accepts their outrage as justified. Without transphobia, transgender bodies would not warrant suspicion and gender nondisclosure would be measured with a different scale.

This is a stark reminder that it feels very different to be on the outside of trans experience than on the inside. It is all too easy for people outside the experience to invalidate trans people's lived authenticity as illusory and thus attribute nefarious deception. To challenge the truth of gender experience is the essence of transphobia. It is catastrophic to a trans person to have their gender denied. This is especially painful when the cis challenger was once an intimate, who affirmed the trans person's truth and authenticated their reality.

Stealth aesthetics enables trans men's claim on manhood. The bodily incorporation of prosthetics is a claim on manhood. Trans nondisclosure is a claim on manhood. This means that trans penises should be held to the same rules that cis penises are. Certainly, they should not be forced upon others with disregard for pain, preference, or permission. Neither should they be subjected to heightened surveillance.

Knowing that the trans panic defense for violence perpetrated against trans people also rides on attributions of deceit and unknowingness, it is important to consider how transphobia could have informed complainants' reactions to trans men in intimate relations that have led to 'gender fraud' cases. Within a cisnormative matrix, any sexual interaction with a trans person undermines one's own cis integrity. And here lies the primary motivation

for violence – not outrage at deception but rather at the very existence of trans people. In fact, voluntary disclosure does not necessarily protect trans people from transphobic violence. This reality contributes to trans people's hesitation to disclose.

In the 1991 British 'gender fraud' case R v Saunders, the judge issued this opinion, 'I suspect both those girls would rather have been actually raped by some young man than have happened to them what you did' (quoted in Gross, 2009). Compare this to an equally abhorrent 2018 YouTube video, in which two young cis men, Adamo and Joey, comment on the Delacruz case with incredulity and disgust. They disrespect Delacruz with sarcastic laughter, pronoun insults ('she . . . he . . . it'), and denigrating remarks such as, 'That dude's a chick! Not even a chick with a dick!' What is not expected, however, is that they also, with equal incredulity, take to task the complainants' unknowingness. 'How do you fake the funk? How could you not know' (The Real Tip, 2018)? On the Transthetics website, Alex strikes a very different tone in his three-part series entitled 'A Trans Man's Guide to Dating Straight Women', in which he discusses how and when he discloses his trans status during dating. In the experiences that he recounts, the women who discontinue dating him as a result of his disclosure, do so with friendly, honest, and calm responses that offer an important counter model to trans panic. These examples offer more than a contrast between nondisclosure and disclosure; they also contrast transphobia and respect.

Stealth living: claiming space vs hiding in place

When Delacruz's sexual partners brought legal charges against him, they relocated sexual practice from the private sphere to the public. Demonized for nondisclosure, Delacruz then became the target for unbridled ridicule via a forced outing. Through the reach of tabloid journalism, he was branded internationally as freak, pervert, and fiend. Although extreme examples, these descriptors occupy the same conceptual territory as other cissexual interpretations of trans bodies.

Vernon (2014: 121) argues that trans disclosure is 'an obligatory practice of truth alignment' with cissexual gender interpretation. Her focus is trans women, whom she describes as sharing a moral sense of honesty with cis people – but not their interpretation of honesty. Whereas a ciscentric moral position understands a transsexual person's true gender as their natal sex, a transcentric moral position understands their true gender as the gender they have always felt to be (p. 126). For trans people, then, to disclose natal sex is to renounce their gender identity. But not to do so, Vernon explains, is to risk a 'relational rupture' with the cis person (p. 132; for an inverse instance of this dilemma of disclosure, see Rachlin, 2018). While transsexual people want a right to privacy, a ciscentric morality claims a right to know. When faced with pressure to disclose, trans

people are faced with a dilemma: if they disclose, they are seen as a pretenders; if they do not disclose, they are seen as liars (p. 130).

For Carlos Delacruz, a cissexual right-to-know led the police to 'medically' examine his genitals, the interpretation of which was then believed by the court and utilized to proclaim his gender as female. Likely, the genital inspection served not only to confirm his natal assigned gender, but also to determine that he had not undergone genital reassignment surgery. Many legal systems still tend to accept a trans person's gender identity only if it is expressed surgically. This practice is problematic. 'It would be a mistake to view how [trans men without genital surgery] currently construct their bodies as merely a precarious stop on a course of progression toward full manhood' (Schilt and Windsor, 2014: 744–745).

Whereas declarations of gender identity may suffice in the social realm – indeed Delacruz had legally changed his birth certificate to denote male sex – genitals that normatively secure gender become requisite when courts hijack sexual intimacy from the bedroom. That the defendant omitted information about his bodily makeup to sexual partners was judged as active deception. Because Delacruz did not verbally disclose to his sexual partners, his genitals were exposed for the police to judge, and then that judgment was exposed to the public – where all could join in to calling out the freak. Except that some of us didn't.

I chose to focus on the Delacruz case because it is the most challenging of the 'gender fraud' cases to deconstruct. Delacruz's perpetual misleading and lying cruelly exploited his partners' relational ambitions and usurped their lives. Such behavior harmed the women involved. Nevertheless, it is still important to identify and reject the cisnormative concept of 'gender fraud'. A scene of nondisclosure usually contains more than one trauma. Many trans men regard the years during which they lived under an imposed gender as a historical trauma that is painful to revisit. Many wish that, after the difficult path of transition, they could now just live unquestioned, like other people. Despite the unfortunate outcome of the case, the reasons for and generative effects of Delacruz's stealth efforts should also be recognized.

Although trans men are regarded as men, they do not occupy that position categorically as do cis men. The equivalence of trans and cis maleness that Delacruz maintaned via nondisclosure was shattered in the courtroom of 'gender fraud'. The category of men was reconstituted as containing two different kinds of men: prequalified cis men and unqualified trans men. Hence the need for double consent in relationships between cis women and trans men. In order for sex with a trans man to be counted as consensual, his partner must not only consent to sex but also to his trans body. Is the tension between sexual consent and trans embodiment irresolvable? Until

trans men obtain status as men under the law, explicitly deactivating the valence of nondisclosure, their partners' right to consent will be burdened by displacements, inconsistencies, and lack of transparency. As long as trans men's self-understanding is taken as fraud, trans penis nondisclosure will be judged as rape, even when sex is consensual and pleasurable. This is also to say that, as long as disclosure of transness is precipitated, a potential partner does not have the right to consent to sexual relations with a trans man in the same way they can consent to sexual relations with a cis man.

Carlos Delacruz looks good in a suit. He was successful at living stealth. As such, he occupied the public space of cis men. This was more than tresspassing. He stepped out of his assigned place, and he laid claim to male space. Inhabiting it, using it, adopting it, he altered its nature: cis-male space became male space. His body instantiated this space, and it moved with him into the private sphere where he entered into romantic relationships. Sexual relations, however, required a different version of stealth – hiding. Specifically, he hid his penis in darkness, where his stealth functionality broke down. In the courtroom of 'gender fraud', Delacruz was reprimanded both for hiding and stepping out of line. The stealth he flaunted was diminished and the stealth he hid was laid bare. He was not shoved into womanhood, but he was expelled from manhood. He was cast into trans objecthood. If physical examination had catalogued phalloplasty, perhaps the law would have recognized him. Currently phalloplasty is the minimum requirement for penile status. Until the trans prosthetic is understood as embodied, it will serve evidence of gender fraud. The trans penile prosthetic must become a penis, under the law. Only then will the double consent required for sexual relations with trans men be judiciously displaced by categorical consent to sexual relations.

Challenging the court's cisnormative logic and recognizing the harm caused by undoing trans men's gender, Sharpe (2018: 119) insists that the defendants in cases like Delacruz's, of which Kyran Lee (Mason) provides another example, did not commit 'gender fraud':

> The complainant assumed Kyran to be a man and, given that he is a man (and we must insist on this point, despite the protestations . . .), no relevant mistake was made or fraud perpetrated. Rather, upon 'discovery' of [his] gender status, the complainant concluded that he was not a man. In this respect, she understood 'man' to mean, and to be exhausted by, the class of men we now refer to as cis-gender. She is, of course, entitled to act on such a view in the sexual relations she chooses to have. What she ought not to be entitled to do is mobilize the power of the state after having exercised agentic choice. To permit her to do so is to rub salt into the wounds of a prior ontological assault – the denial of gender identity. The fact that Kyran was prosecuted demonstrates that prosecutors adopted this problematic view that he was not a man.

Stealth aesthetics challenges the prominence of genital difference between trans and cis people and thus facilitates 'transing' as well as cultural transformation. Whereas passing often is interpreted as deception, transing proclaims 'becoming'. Instead of understanding trans men as passing in semi-public and private arenas, and such passing as assimilation, transing insists that cis people do not own and authorize a genitals-genders domain. Transing effects a decolonization of 'cis' sexuality.

Conclusion

Attention to 'gender fraud' cases has extended my consideration of trans discomfort from gender dysphoria to judicial prosecution and public humiliation. Transthetics' products can ameliorate gender dysphoria but, in a cis-defensive culture, they cannot guarantee against complaints of 'gender fraud'. However, I prefer a longer view that predicts the social inclusion of transgender embodiments of all aesthetic variations. After all, it took centuries to 'wear out' the prohibition against wearing clothes of the 'opposite' sex, which history now archives as a failed attempt to keep people in their assigned places. Considering the current rise in body fashioning and inclusive proliferation of prosthetics, the cisnormative perspective may soon come face to face with a moot point, making realism less imperative for trans living. Trans men's performative bodies, whether instantiated via prosthetics, surgery, or natal re-articulations, are already authorizing gender to produce genitals and no doubt will eventually invert the cisnormative imaginary of genitals producing gender.

Alex's passion drives him to substantiate trans men's bodies. Fueled by his experience of gender dysphoria, that passion then fuels his artistry. Transthetics' sexual prosthetics and those who use them are one of many initiatives affecting a cultural transition toward perceiving trans bodies as unexceptional, whether in public or private. I posit that stealth aesthetics, by prioritizing function, continually extends realism and pushes it into reality via trans men's real life actions. To affect the world, one has to engage it. Stealth aesthetics enables trans men's incorporation of prosthetic genitals and their participatory contributions to a trans friendly world.

So, do trans men have penises? Within only two pages, an article from the popular press associated Carlos Delacruz with a fake penis, an unknown object, a prosthetic penis that he considered to be part of himself, a penis believed in by his partners during sexual relations, and a flesh and blood penis (Laurie, 2018a). Several times, YouTube has flagged Transthetics' demos of the EZP* and the Rod*. Was this because their moderators saw penile prosthetics or because they saw penises? Stealth aesthetics breaks down this distinction. Alex often calls his prosthetic products 'willies'. He refers to the Joystick* as a

silicone penis. And his use of the word 'bionic' to name his upcoming 'all-in-one super realistic prosthetic' invigorates its stealth aesthetics as well as its promise for trans men's quest for self-authoring genitals.

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

On Jesse Darling

Heather Holmes

Abstract. Jesse Darling, a contemporary Berlin-based artist, produces sculptures, paintings, and drawings that animate material to depict a lived experience of queerness and disability. This article highlights a recent exhibition of Darling's as an entry point to their wide-ranging practice. Refracted through the lens of Sara Ahmed's concept of feminist 'willfulness', Darling's objects depict the body as unruly, unpredictable, and given to change, making them exciting candidates for both disability and trans studies. At a moment in contemporary art and cultural production more broadly when gender-nonconformity is signaled through an attempt to erase bodily markers of specificity, Darling insists on such specificity as the inescapability of the human experience.

Keywords. embodiment • Jesse Darling • queer • Sara Ahmed • sculpture • transgender

A 2017 exhibition by Jesse Darling at Galerie Sultana in Paris was populated by sprawling sculptures made of bent and welded steel rods to which were affixed small silicone, plaster, and plastic elements. *Armes Blanches*, it was called – and, as in English, the French *armes* may be translated alternately as the bodily limb or as weaponry. Darling's sculptural practice is full of rods, beams, pipes, wires. These appear always on the brink of collapse, bent, as they are, by the artist's hand; even when the rods are in a position of support, they seem to pitch the objects they hold up into precarity.

Arms and rods: much of Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* is rooted in the Grimm Brothers' tale of the willful child who falls ill, dies, is buried, and comes to haunt her mother by means of her arm, which springs up anew from the grave, no matter how much fresh dirt is piled on top. It is only when the child's mother beats the arm with a rod that the child 'comes to rest beneath the earth', finally leaving her living kin alone. Actually it is Ahmed who, through a feminist lens, reads the child as girl (Ahmed, 2014).[1] *Das Kind* in the original German: the child's gender cannot be determined from the text, which is another kind of willfulness, perhaps unwitting – the child poses a disturbance both within the text and outside of it.

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Figure 1. Jesse Darling, *Ass Priest* (2017). Welded steel, cast silicon, silk ribbon, jesmonite, 195 x 55 x 53 cm. Courtesy Galerie Sultana, Paris. © Aurélien Mole.

Jesse Darling's work might be productively understood as both the arm and the rod – literally and otherwise. Darling's rods are not quite the straightening devices of the Grimm tale's climax, but they do discipline, and the administrators and recipients of this discipline seem in constant, switchy flux across Darling's bodies of work. *Ass Priest* (2017, see Figure 1), for instance, a centerpiece of *Armes Blanches*, makes a play of the disciplinary powers of the rod.

The welded sculpture, one of Darling's more overtly representational deployments of steel, waits on all fours on the gallery's floor as if in anticipation of a flogging. The affect is so playful, though, so seemingly unconcerned; the wiry figure appears preoccupied not with the impending spank but instead with the small nonsteel elements that spring out of its frame, which look like mold spores that have multiplied and acquired partial sentience. One is, fittingly, a hand; another, placed where a hand might be, is a small pink crescent-moon-shaped object that looks as if it could morph into a different shape at any moment, wriggle away, or explode. This pink object in particular appears so full of potential energy that it could eat away at the sculpture's tough steel frame if it wished. The body marvels at its own strangeness. This is the kind of willfulness that animates Darling's sculptures – not the purpose-driven nevertheless-she-persisted tenacity that shapes Ahmed's text. Darling's willful strategies reside within the instability of the body itself, of nature, chance, and accident. Because many of Darling's sculptural gestures seem to

examine the body's unpredictability and tendency toward self-sabotage, it is difficult to pin down their work as always enacting a resistance in the way we might desire – i.e. against the state – though it does this too.

In *Support Level*, for instance, a 2018 installation at Chapter NY, Darling rendered mobility devices to appear enervated, weak; the medical–industrial complex's strategies for support were made to feel inadequate indeed. But, just as often, the resistant energy in Darling's work feels pointed toward itself. In Darling's practice, these directional pivots are always double-edged: if the materials in place to support the body are not capable of enacting that support, representing them as such both mounts an energizing critique of existing systems and serves as a depressing reminder of where things stand. If part of the body 'doesn't work', for instance, if it 'stops working', then the body becomes both debilitated and liberated, in whatever small way, from labor's constant pull. Sometimes the arm does not fling up from the ground because it cannot; sometimes the arm does not fling up from the ground because it would rather not.

Darling, who is transmasculine and disabled, has written and spoken about how this subject position informs their work, both theoretically and physically – including their inability 'to raise my right arm above my head unassisted' (Zamboni, 2019). From a trans, disabled perspective, Darling makes work that centers the body's unruliness – the body's flinging – as one of its organizing principles, resisting hegemonic notions of the body as neatly categorizable, as if the linear passage of time were the only condition under which the body morphs. As Darling says:

> As a parent and caregiver, I became fungible; as a failing body I joined the collective failure of all bodies, and from this position full of holes I stream out towards the holes in others and in this way, we might breathe one another, feed one another, flow through one another and sometimes fill up. (see Twerdy, 2018)

We might understand this description of the body – subject to change, given to fragmentation – as not only rooted in Darling's own experience of the world, but as one contemporary example of a trans aesthetic.

Darling's insistence on specificity – both of the body and otherwise – can render their work mildly allergic to integration within a discursive strain, which tends to search for overarching commonalities. But, one hopes, a discourse of transness (despite or because of its own 'holes') might still be able to retain and foreground the unruliness, flinging, and splintering inherent in inhabiting a body queerly, making Darling's eccentric practice a viable object of trans study, perhaps contextualized within existing literature concerning

the intersection of trans identities, abstraction, and sculptural material (Getsy, 2015).

A note on the impulse to sanitize, to flatten: in March 2019, 'a group of linguists, technologists, and sound designers' released the first public preview of their new digital voice called Q (Simon, 2019). Advertised as 'the world's first genderless voice assistant', Q was developed in response to a perceived market-based lacuna of so-called ungendered digital voices to power various assistive technologies. Though much has been written about the sexism that underwrites such technologies (especially the avatars given to them, like Alexa and Siri) by scholars like Katherine Cross, who approaches the intersections of AI, gaming, and gender politics from a transfeminist perspective, the literature on what might constitute a nonbinary aesthetic – or, in the case of Q, an utterance – lacks a root system (Cross, 2016).

In their aim toward some sense of the 'universal', initiatives like Q, or gender-neutral collections released by clothing brands like Zara, do not erase difference so much as they celebrate the mishmash of difference as if in the zeitgeist's Vitamix, resulting in some of the blandest finished products imaginable. This tendency to associate 'nonbinary' with 'unmarked' (if such a concept could exist) crosses over, too, into the realm of art: in 2018, artist Pia Camil presented an exhibition at Galerie Sultana, a year after Darling's *Armes Blanches* occupied the space. Camil's installation consisted, primarily, of a hammock made of blue jeans and a curtained wall of t-shirts in varying shades of beige.

These elements bore a striking resemblance to the constituent parts of Zara's Ungendered clothing line; the exhibition was called *They*. If we know neutrality to be a fiction tightly tethered to whiteness, to ability, to the ongoing legacy and persistence of colonialism, and indeed to gender itself, how can we fuck the binary and still maintain an insistence on specificity and aberrance? Through the body's flinging, perhaps. Rooted in their own experience of trans and disabled embodiment, Darling's work retains that specificity while it simultaneously branches out into other constellations of meaning: religion, mythology, mutual aid, the crisis of capitalism.

Darling's sculptural practice – highlighting, as it does, teetering, bent, collapsed objects that both are and are not bodies – understands the body as subject to the whims of pleasure and pain, to the constant labor of upkeep, existence, and survival. In tending both to the (queer, disabled) body's fungibility under capitalism and to its utter specificity (a joy, an irritant), Darling's sculptural practice charts one representational strategy within trans cultural production, and proceeds with an unruliness that makes its future iterations wonderfully difficult to predict.

Darling's trans aesthetic understands transness, and the body itself, as unclassifiable – subject to the whims of pleasure and pain, to the constant labor of upkeep, existence, and survival. In tending both to the (queer, disabled) body's fungibility under capitalism and to its utter specificity (a joy, an irritant), Darling's sculptural practice feels truly interdisciplinary. It proceeds with an unruliness that makes its future iterations wonderfully difficult to predict.

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Note

1. In a footnote to the book's introduction, Ahmed (2014: 205) notes that though translations of the child's gender differ across interpreters, 'I will address the willful child in this book as "she" because I would argue willfulness tends to be registered as a feminine attribute.'

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

Surviving in the shadow of the un/seen: on the paradoxical in/visibility of El Kazovsky

Susan Stryker

Abstract. This short, first-person essay describes and briefly evaluates the life and work of the Russian–Hungarian trans-identified artist El Kazovsky (1948–2008). It principally focuses the author's viewing of 'The Survivor's Shadow: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky' – a massive, 19-room retrospective exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery in 2015–2016. The author explores the paradox of El Kazovsky's visibility as a nationally celebrated artist in a moment of extreme state-sanctioned queer-phobia, and the illegibility of his transness. It ends by suggesting that the practice of 'surviving in shadow' is increasingly necessary given the continued worldwide drift toward reactionary ethno-nationalist politics that are hostile to trans lives.

Keywords. El Kazovsky • homoprotectionism • Hungary • non-binary • transgender • transsexual • visual arts

It was with a certain sense of cognitive dissonance, during a whirlwind visit to Budapest in February 2016 to introduce work at a film festival that I stepped into the Hungarian National Gallery, housed in the former palace that once was home to the rulers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I was there to see 'The Survivor's Shadow: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky' (see Figure 1): a massive, 19-room retrospective exhibition devoted to one of the most celebrated modern artists in Hungary, though one little known outside that country, who self-identified as trans, queer, and feminist (Rényi, 2015). It was cognitively dissonant because Hungary's government had been led since 2010 by the right-wing populist Viktor Orbán of Fidesz (aka the Hungarian Civic Alliance) who, as part of a broader reactionary ethno-nationalist platform that also included virulent anti-immigrant policies, had outlawed the teaching of gender studies at Hungarian universities. Combining anti-gender ideology with explicit antisemitism, Orbán characterized the concept of 'gender' itself as a Western plot spearheaded by the Jewish financier George Soros to undermine Hungarian society by

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promoting pernicious feminist, queer and trans ideas that would destroy the heteropatriarchal family (Redden, 2018). Ultimately, the Orbán government closed the Soros-supported Central European University in Budapest, and forced its relocation to Vienna.

El Kazovsky (1948–2008), who was ethnically Russian, was assigned female at birth in Leningrad (now St Petersburg); he was raised by his grandparent in western Siberia until the family moved to Budapest in 1964, where he ever afterward made his home. Even as a child, El Kazovsky had rebelled against a compulsory and unwanted femininity; he adopted an abbreviated version of his given first name and a masculinized version of his given surname as his preferred moniker while still quite young. Although he was never able to medically transition, El Kazovsky was adamant about his gender identity and its relationship to his artistic career. 'My case is quite special', the artist wrote, in that the life he made for himself was 'built around the fact that I am transsexual' (Rényi, 2015: 10). Contrasting his circumstances with that of trans women who enjoy a certain visibility 'because in our culture "womanhood' always makes a display of itself', El Kazovsky noted his own visual unintelligibility 'as a man living in what for me is a peculiar female body'. This situation was made even more complicated by the fact that he considered himself 'a homosexual man who is attracted to very girlish-looking young men, whom I in fact see as women, and whom I love as women'. These complexities of gender and desire are a central focus of El Kazovsky's work, which makes the mounting in Orbán's Hungary of such an exhaustive and high-profile exhibition as 'The Survivor's Shadow' seem all the more remarkable – it is hard to argue that transness is a subversive foreign conspiracy while celebrating a home-grown trans artist as a national treasure at the country's most prestigious museum.

El Kazovsky studied painting at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts from 1970 to 1977, and participated in various avant-garde Hungarian art collectives including the No. 1 Group, the Studio of Young Artists, and Fölöspéldány (Surplus Goods). US and British glitter, glam, and punk-rock pop aesthetics, with a healthy dose of fetish iconography and a gay camp sensibility, were constant sources of inspiration for a career that nevertheless garnered many of Hungary's top arts awards, including the Smohay Prize (for best fine artist under the age of 35), the Munkácsy Prize (named in honor of the most esteemed 19th-century Hungarian nationalist painter), and the Kossuth Prize (the most prestigious cultural award in Hungary). Each year from 1977 until 2001, El Kazovsky staged the *Dzhan Panopticon*, a Dionysian public performance spectacle that involved large casts of amateur performers engaged in complexly choreographed rituals, which revolved around the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of an idol that symbolized the artist's brief, intense infatuation with a young Turkish man. Over the years, in tandem with El Kazovsky's increasingly prominent career, the performance grew in scope and visibility; it started as an edgy underground art event for a

Figure 1. Poster for 'The Survivor's Shadow: The Life and Work of El Kazovsky' exhibition held at the Hungarian National Gallery in 2015–2016.

circle of friends and evolved into something that was televised nationally and came to be considered a red-letter event in the Hungarian cultural affairs calendar. By the time of his death, El Kazovsky had become an institution.

The *Dzhan Panopticon* is typical of El Kazovsky's style in that it repetitively reworks and expands seemingly mundane autobiographical subject matter (in this case, a love affair lasting only a few days) to the point that what one sees is not merely what is represented, but rather the process of elaborating the obsessions and compulsions and freewheeling fantasies that characterize the artist's inner life. The ostensible content is but a jumping-off point for the revelation and exploration of an immensely rich subjective realm that is the actual focus of El Kazovsky's art: as if the corporeal imperceptibility of his transness motivated and informed a unique manner of rendering himself visible through his work.

El Kazovsky's way of working is perhaps most obvious in his paintings, which are best seen in series. Individually, each one can appear as a simplistic Keith Haring-esque cartoon in which slender, androgynous figures cast long shadows across barren landscapes, sometimes in the act of elegantly dismembering, decapitating, or castrating themselves with bladelike appendages. Taken together, and viewed one after another like the frames of an animated film arranged on the gallery walls, they document the protean psychical tumult of a restless, searching soul externalizing interior experiments with a succession of imagined embodied forms. Watchful birds of prey and ambiguous dog-like creatures similarly populate El Kazovsky's paintings; he calls them 'mixed' or 'migratory' animals that function explicitly, in his hermetic symbology, as representations of a self that is always internally divided, multiple, other-than-human, on the move, and in process, with no solid place to land (Rényi, 2015: 15).

Although 'transsexual' is the word El Kazovsky used to describe himself, his own sense of disgendered placelessness anticipates a more contemporary non-binary sensibility. One 2003 painting consists of a two-headed version of his familiar dog-like totem animal standing on a road that is actually an infinite loop, its heads facing in opposite directions, its body inscribed with the words 'vágy-vágy' ('desire-desire'). In Hungarian, the inscription offers an obvious play on words: without the accent marks, 'vagy-vagy' is how one says 'either-or' (p. 11). This simultaneous staging and refusal of dichotomy, particularly with regard to the masculine/feminine binary that would script our desire and identities, is characteristic of El Kazovsky's work more generally.

The particularities of the Hungarian language in fact offer an insight into the paradoxical in/visibility of El Kazovsky as trans in an explicitly transphobic social context: its third-person singular pronoun is not gender-specific. While the English-language interpretive materials for 'The Survivor's Shadow' explicitly address their use of he/him pronouns in reference to El Kazovsky, the Hungarian-language materials utterly sidestep the question of naming his gender identity (Rényi, 2015: 1). His transness is there to be perceived by those with the desire to perceive it, while remaining ignorable by those who don't.

Hungarian grammar thus harbors a capacity for not-naming what is before its speakers' eyes that is reminiscent of a strategy of willful blindness brilliantly rendered in speculative fiction writer China Miéville's novel *The City and the City* (2009), in which residents of a formerly unified but now bitterly divided metropolis must train themselves to 'unsee' the inhabitants of the other side when moving through the contested border territories still shared and jointly occupied by the antagonistic cities, neither of which recognizes the legitimate presence of the other. It is reminiscent, too, of the central conceit of the Swedish film *The Square* (2017), in which the public installation of a square of fluorescent lights in the pavement outside a modern art museum is intended to demarcate a literal 'public square' in which all people can express their true needs and concerns, and share rights and obligations equally; the irony is that the vast injustices already readily perceivable on the street – homelessness, poverty, crime, addiction, racism, the refugee and migrant crises – become visible only when they are framed as art within The Square (Östlund, 2017). Similarly, El Kazovsky's transness remains socially invisible even while it remains aesthetically foregrounded in his work.

In asking my Hungarian hosts to help me better understand the socio-political dynamics of the un/seen dimensions of a retrospective exhibition over-determined as seeable given El Kazovsky's positioning within the National Gallery as a national hero, they described similar dynamic at work in Budapest's LGBTQ Pride Parade. Under the nominally pro-minority-rights neoliberal government that preceded Orbán's regime, they said, the annual Pride Parade was regularly targeted by homophobic ultranationalists who threatened violence, while the government, anxious not to appear complicit with queerness in the eyes of its most reactionary citizens, stood by ineffectually and provided little actual support or protection for its LGBT population. Under the explicitly reactionary Fidesz government, however, the Pride Parade has been able to proceed without molestation – because, in the name of safety, all the streets parallel to its route are cordoned off so that it is simultaneously present but unseen in public space, visible only to those who already know where, when, and how to see it (Háttér Society, 2016). A similar logic was at play in my own presence as in Budapest – I was told that a German bank had underwritten my travel as an 'international' transgender filmmaker to attend an LGBT film festival in Eastern Europe and thereby promote 'transgender visibility', with the proviso that their financial support remain anonymous, lest they be seen as Western foreigners intervening in Hungary to advocate for transgender rights.

The transnational queer/feminist theorist Cricket Keating has termed such maneuvers 'homoprotectionist', which she characterizes as an emergent, globally proliferating mode of governmentality in which dominant structures of state-sponsored homophobia – for example, the codification of sex/gender hierarchies in law – are flexibly paired with strategies for ostensibly

protecting LGBTQ people from domination and oppression, resulting in an expansion of the state's power to present itself as an impartial adjudicator of the respective interests of various segments of the population, while nevertheless perpetuating the very injustices it purported to seek to remedy (Keating, 2013: 246–253). The contemporary public im/perceptibility of El Kazovsky's transness – and, by extension, the im/perceptibility of trans, queer, and feminist subjects in contemporary Hungary – is conditioned by this homoprotectionist logic.

El Kazovsky's life and work simultaneously offer a strategy for moving agentially within contexts hostile to his own life. Given that Orbán was granted the power to rule by fiat during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, and in light of a continuing trend worldwide toward increasingly authoritarian forms of governance that are hostile to trans folks and other minoritized and marginalized people, 'surviving in shadows' is not so much a past that we have escaped through a (neo)liberal progress that brings us into the light, as it is a prescient mode of existence that merits greater attention for its aesthetic and political potentials than those it has yet received.

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'I do not want to pass': embodiment, metaphor, and world-making in Patrick Staff's *Weed Killer*

Stamatina Gregory

Abstract. Medicalized and often surveilled shifts of the cancerous and/or trans body intersect in generative ways: metaphorical and material, symbolic and systemic. This piece discusses Patrick Staff's (2017) video *Weed Killer* through an analysis of its source text, Catherine Lord's essay 'The Summer of Her Baldness' (2003) along with prior queer and feminist explorations of cancer, disease, and pain, to build a transfeminist analysis of how the experience of cancer treatment reveals the constructedness of femininity as well as the ablism underlying binary gender systems. Staff's work creates alignments and ruptures between sets of a potentially intersecting politics, which bear the weight of naturalized gender, pharmacological mediation, 'passing', and debility.

Keywords. cancer • contemporary art • disability studies • gender • transgender studies • video

Patrick Staff's (2017) video *Weed Killer* opens with an image of hair, viewed through an infrared camera (see Figure 1). The wisps and strands swing slightly, moving in and out of the frame, as if attached to a head that is off camera. A voiceover begins, 'Is it horrible, she asks?' 'I feel like shit, I say, face wet.' 'Of course. This is not quite right. The shit part. Not the hug part. I really don't feel like a turd. A turd is a leap I cannot make. Nor does it feel like the flu.' A pause. 'Something has broken into your body with murder on its mind.'

In the first few minutes of the video, the text of the voiceover (excerpted from Catherine Lord's, 2003, diaristic account *The Summer of Her Baldness*) immediately lays out two interconnected registers of struggle for the body under cancer treatment: the physical and the metaphorical. Over images of strands of hair – a primary gender signifier, the loss of which is perhaps the most visually recognizable sign of cancer treatment – she reaches to describe an extreme state of pain. An ordinary turn of phrase suddenly appears absurdly

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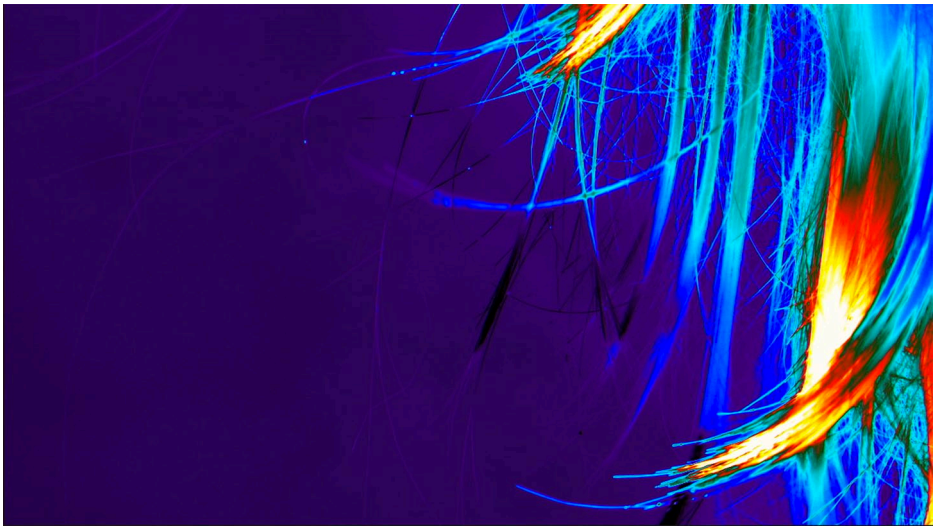

Figure 1. Digital still from Patrick Staff's *Weed Killer* (2017). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

inadequate: *this is a leap I cannot make.* Lord's closeness to mortality seems to raise the stakes of deploying metaphor. She shifts from first attempting to describe her own physical state in relatively casual terms, to characterizing the cancer itself: an intruder bent on destruction.

This switch between two inadequate semantic registers is framed within the aforementioned signifier of long hair, and this opening moment encapsulates the ways in which the work calls forth a number of shared critical issues. Among them are the contesting of normative formations of gender identity by bodies both sick and queer; our changing relationship to bodies engendered by a world of intentional and involuntary pharmacological and surgical mediation; the space of public interaction as constitutive of being; the stakes of the phenomenology of pain. Staff's piece creates alignments and ruptures between sets of a potentially intersecting politics, which bear the weight of naturalized gender, pharmacological mediation, 'passing', and debility. As I draw out these intersections throughout my text, I would like to clarify that it is not my intention to present the experience of cancer as a new metaphor for trans embodiment, but, rather, that the medicalized and often surveilled shifts of the cancerous and/or trans body intersect in generative ways: metaphorical and material, symbolic and systemic.

The cultural history of cancer in the West is besieged by metaphor, as well as by a historiography (a meta-history?) of metaphor. In narratives of the bodily experience of cancer and its treatments, there is a reliance on habitual turns of phrase: a resort to comparisons which significantly shape our personal and cultural perceptions of its causes and effects, and purport to reveal essential truths about those affected. Oncologist and author, Siddhartha

Mukherjee, notes that cancer is the emperor of all maladies, but also might reasonably hold the title of the emperor of metaphor (Mukherjee, 2012). In her anthropological study of the cultures, politics, and economics of cancer in North America, S Lochlann Jain acknowledged that metaphor is as much a part of cancer as any statistic (Jain, 2013). Cancer as metaphor was perhaps most boldly asserted by Susan Sontag in her (1978) book *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she compares its characterization in the mid-20th century – as mysterious, intractable, capricious, and deadly – with the ways in which tuberculosis existed in the 19th-century imaginary. She outlines the ways in which cancer is an expression of one's character and popularly correlated to the repression of one's emotions: to be diagnosed is to be complicit in one's own affliction. She writes:

> Now it is cancer's turn to be the disease that doesn't knock before it enters, cancer that fills the role of an illness experienced as a ruthless, secret invasion . . . until such a time as it is as treatable and demystified as TB. (p. 5)

Sontag wrote this in light of her own experience of treatment for stage IV breast cancer, anticipating an eventual shift in metaphorical depictions of the disease. However, this figuration of cancer as a violent intruder is echoed by Lord in 2004, and by Staff in 2017: it continues to resonate.

The narrator of Lord's text, portrayed in *Weed Killer* by trans actor Debra Soshoux, recites a slippage from the struggle to articulate private pain through metaphor to a metaphor that characterizes this pain from the outside in. Soshoux's words become an effort to articulate bodily experience outward amid a medicalized narrative that inevitably shapes one's private somatic experience. One need not have personally experienced diagnosis and treatment of cancer (or been proximate to the experience of another) to hear or repeat a lapse into military, even genocidal metaphor:

> cancer cells 'colonize' from the original tumor to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts, 'micro metastases' whose presence is assumed, though they cannot be detected. Rarely are the body's 'defenses' vigorous enough to obliterate a tumor that has established its own blood supply and consists of billions of destructive cells. (Sontag, 1978: 66)

Sontag also reminds us that to describe a phenomenon as a cancer is an incitement to violence; a justification of 'severe measures' (p. 84).

Weed Killer's title is itself a metaphor for the violence of treatment: referring to the chemotherapy drug Doxorubicin (Adriamycin) (National Institutes of Health Report on Carcinogens, 2019), colloquially known as the 'red death' for its chemical scorching of cardiovascular tissue and blistered mouth and

skin, in addition to the more commonly apprehended side effects of vomiting, nausea, and hair loss. Isolated from a microbial compound found in soil which was found to reduce tumors in mice while simultaneously destroying their hearts, the drug effectively acts as a bodily toxin. Lord/Soshoux compares its administration to mainlining a pesticide (like most chemical pesticides, the drug is, ironically, also a long-term carcinogen). The video's title also highlights a structural critique of cancer within a capitalist economy. In her essay, 'Cancer Butch', an unraveling of the paradoxical ways in which cancer treatment functions within US and Canadian economies and cultures, through the context of her own breast cancer, Jain (2007) notes that commercial pesticides are manufactured by the same corporations that 'sponsor pink ribbon walks while systematically poisoning us'. Highlighting their philanthropy while lobbying for the reduction and repeal of profit-encumbering environmental regulations, corporations also situate the discourse of breast cancer within an aggressively feminine and heterosexualized context. Reconstruction, prosthetics, and cosmetics are stressed and marketed as 'empowerment' for women in the face of struggle. This obfuscates the reach of the disease across sexes, genders, and sexualities, and upends the disease into an individual crisis of acceptable appearance: a deflection of possible demands that could include equal access to health care, sick and disability leave, and environmental justice.

Through the quotes from her text, Lord's perspectives on gender, sexuality, pain, and new forms of embodiment surface throughout *Weed Killer*. Delivered in a devastatingly straightforward deadpan by Soshoux, interpolated with a performance by Jamie Crewe, and structured within a visual language of abstracted thermal-camera images and recurring still frames, her text is opened up to a transfeminist perspective. *Summer* begins with the contestation of normative gender formations: the refusal to accept a prescription for a 'free cranial prosthesis, otherwise known as a wig' (Lord, 2004: 1). This refusal gives rise to the titular 'Her Baldness', Lord's avatar and alter-ego, and the attributed author of the diary entries and email missives Lord begins to send to her family and friends about her physical changes and new eating, sleeping, and socializing routines in the wake of her breast cancer diagnosis. Despite her refusal of a wig, Lord's gradual loss of her long hair figures into her diary entries – the number of hairs left in the tub, couch, and clothing, their proportion and texture, and her eventual haircut, which she describes as an 'outrageously mannish invert butchly LESBIAN haircut, the first one of my entire lesbian life'. Her joy at her affirming, 'fabulous' haircut was tempered by an eventual shaving of her head, in which she, upon confronting the vulnerability of the pale skin stretched over her skull, recognizes the total lack of hair as having an oblique relationship to gender. Instead, she realizes, that its relationship is to power, that hair is 'our ticket into existence in public, our permission, that hair is something the strong take off the weak, be they animals or women or boot camp recruits'. Even while alone at home, Lord feels observed, noting 'the mirror in a middle-aged woman's bathroom is not a private place. It is

irrevocably and inexorably a social setting' (p. 276). Though Lord is talking about not a public but private bathroom, her ruminations on the image of her bald head – patchy and stubbled under her hands, imperfectly hidden by a ski cap in public, exposed to her lover in private – constitute a psychic and interpersonal discourse even when she is alone. She privately rehearses her routine, errand-bound appearances in public. She eventually lands on the affirming reflection that hair is only one element of a performance of personhood – important, but not integral. Her lack of hair, she notes, requires excess compensation by her still-existing attributes, 'But my voice still works, along with my eyes, my humor, my stride. The performance performs the performer. If you don't let bald in, neither can other people. The performance will be thick enough to see me through.'

Lord's words 'thick enough to see me through' allude to a kind of passing, less as a 'biological woman' than as someone whose specific gender, once affirmed by her haircut and sense of physical capability, remains legible to others. Jain also discusses gender legibility in the context of cancer cultures and their heightened gender normativity, pointing out biological artifices, specifically wigs and prosthetic breasts, are not the stable gender markers that they purport to be. Instead, they are objects that trouble stable readings of identity, pointing out the explicit ways in which gender is read by others. As Jain (2007: 209) says, 'If the wellness could not be faked, the "femininity" could.' Within medicalized contexts that eschew queer contexts, wigs and prosthetics take the form of normalized gender: drag emerges as a performance of health itself.[1]

In the memoir, Lord (2004: 284) adamantly refuses this perversely feminized proffering of 'health drag', insisting that the 'wig stayed on the store shelves' replaced by 'curiosity about my bare skull'. In *Weed Killer*, notably, Soshoux's hair is long (understood either as a wig or as an atemporal reflection) as she narrates Lord's questions on hair, and its lack, as a central signifier of gender:

> Is hair as unnecessary a protrusion as a dick in most social circumstances? Conversely, is hair as much fun as a dick in most social circumstances? If a penis is between the legs and a phallus is between the ears, where is a lesbian's hair when it's not on her head?' Questions: How come men own not only dicks but baldness? In the year of the fabulous dude and fag, how can a dyke lay claim to baldness, out of her own home?

Lord's questions, delivered in a wry, yet resigned tone by Soshoux, poke at the ostensibly playful and malleable – but also seemingly unassailable – sexual, gendered, and psychoanalytic signifiers that govern our interactions with others. To lay a new claim to old codes, or to release the grip of tired metaphor, is both an internal and external, interactive, process. Jamie Crewe's performance in *Weed Killer* challenges this process, beginning as they ready

themselves to step in front of a crowd for a drag act. In segments that cut in and out of other scenes and images in the video, Crewe repeatedly touches and adjusts their wig, their face, intermittently running their hands down their outfit in a gesture of ritual or apprehension. In a brief, split-second interval, their mouth opens in a silent scream; they look into the camera and continue to adjust their hair and clothing, as if checking their armor, invoking a sense of deep internal preparation. They step into the space of the bar and begin an emotive lip-synch to a recording that repeats the chorus 'to be in love with you is everything.' Throughout their performance, the bar crowd is overwhelmingly indifferent, obliviously chatting with one another over drinks.

Crewe is speechless save for the words they mouth; their performance is a reminder that we constitute ourselves through performing existing paradigms of speech and behavior to others. Sociologist Ervin Goffman's dramatugical model of social interaction, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), posited that our self is continually co-constructed in the context of social interaction in the manner of performative theater, even categorizing our relationship to audiences and ourselves as having a 'front stage' and a 'back stage', each with roles and 'scripts' (p. 123). Performance contextualizes the subject in relation to the other, it

> helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him. (p. 120)

As cultural theorist Efrat Tseelon (1995) has pointed out, for Goffman, actual public performance (i.e. the practice of acting for stage or screen) was an existential metaphor for the quotidian process by which we continually negotiate a sense of self though various forms of relation: a subjectivity that is not communicated and represented, but is continually being realized. Sociologists Dennis Waskul and Philip Vannini (2007) propose an update to this model, suggesting an update of Goffman's term 'self' for 'body', which is always performed, staged, and represented corporeally. 'The body is wrought of action and interaction in situated social encounters . . . In communication action the "body" comes to be' (p. 7)

Crewe's 'script' of song lyrics, and its lack of reception, implies a failed transmission of desire and heartbreak, a private sensation of pain that, as such, retains an element of the incommunicable. Elaine Scarry, whose theories on pain and metaphor continue to resonate, memorably wrote, 'Medical contexts, like all other contexts of human experience, provide instances of the alarming phenomenon . . . to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt' (Scarry, 1987: 7). She says that pain

'does not simply resist language, but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.' First the world is unmade – a process of extreme deconstruction through pain – then the 'making of the world' – is made possible through the 'innate capacity for human beings to make up for the linguistic discontinuities pain imposes'.[2] Eva Hayward (2016: 262) has written on metaphors of pain, unmaking, and the linguistic break: writing on the feelings evoked by a set of song lyrics, she writes 'hurt is not a maschochistic element (or, at least, not this alone), but signals a breach in language and a tear in the traditional subject/object formation.' This process may be seen to unfold through Crewe's silent utterance, in which they open their mouth wordlessly before engaging in a kind of performative worldmaking through drag performance.

Pain comes with performative codes of legibility and intelligibility. Our expressions of pain can never be merely descriptive; as pain historian Johanna Bourke (2014) notes, 'they contain veiled instructions on how people should act.' In *Weed Killer*, both Soshoux and Crewe's performances critically point to their illegibility for others. This illegibility is consequential for those whose subjectivity falls outside sanctioned binaries. As Staff stated in a 2017 interview:

> I come back around to the social model of sickness or gender; a questioning of whether I'm only as much as you allow me to be, and what defines those terms. We are very much conditioned into dichotomies: sick or healthy, man or woman. (Sward, 2017)

Judith Butler (2009: 2) has pointed out that the Hegelian tradition finds the roots of desire in the search for legibility – for recognition – and that it is only through the experience of recognition that we are constituted as socially viable beings. For Butler, we negotiate these terms of recognition – particularly the recognition of gender – within a field that is ever-changing through social articulation and bound up with the power to confer or deny personhood.

Susan Stryker (2006) has powerfully analyzed this notion of the conferral of personhood (through the striking metaphor of Frankenstein's monster confronting his creator) as an encounter between a radicalized trans subjectivity and the normativizing drive of medical discourses. For the 'conditioning' that Butler notes and Staff recognizes in the negotiation of identity comes not only from social space, but from the normatizing drive of the diagnostic. In both cancer cultures and the diagnostic histories of trans and nonbinary bodies, the social other includes what Michel Foucault (1973) termed the 'medical gaze', referring to the construction of the body as an object of visual scrutiny within medical science (a term which other

scholars have acknowledged and elaborated upon). As bodies have become (quite literally) more transparent and open to analysis through the visual apparatuses of clinical practice, symptoms can be isolated and attached to specific organs and tissues, and patients come to see themselves as objects of medical investigation. And as the discourse of the clinic resonates, necessarily, through everyday life, disease is seen increasingly as an exclusively physical manifestation within a single individual – an individual charged with managing their own risk, in part through medical self-surveillance (Stacey, 1997: 101). Rhythmically interspersed through *Weed Killer* are images of Soshoux and Crewe rendered through a thermal imaging camera. These produce imagery that evokes medical diagnostics, particularly in moments in which abstracted masses come in and out of focus, calling to mind the fluorescent glow of ICG-dyed cancer cells when exposed to infrared light. But while diagnostic cameras point inward, mapping disease within individual bodies, or tracking the foreign 'intruder' of malignancy, Staff points the thermal camera outward, rendering images of people and objects compellingly strange. This implies an exploratory turn within the industrial and socioeconomic structures that govern bodies politically and alter them metabolically. Images of what appear to be industrial waste sites flash through the video, an acknowledgment of their omnipresent role in toxicity and involuntary endocrine disruption, and the environmental proliferation of cancer-causing substances. Thus, the camera, designed for surveillance and military use, presents us with whole bodies, rendered strange; a sensory element (heat) made topographic; a movement back and forth between the body as it is seen by the other, and the body as it is phenomenologically experienced.

In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser (1998) articulates embodiment as the central emphasis of trans experience. Written from a trans male perspective, he differentiates 'material body' from 'body image': the former is the body as it exists, the latter, the projected surface of the body as it is subjectively felt and tactilely experienced. Staff's use of the thermal camera renders the optic image of the body ('as it exists') through the lens of the haptic, a hint at the interplay between one's image to the other, and the always-untranslatable experience of somatic feeling – expressed through visual or textual metaphor. *Weed Killer* makes reference to the multiple textures of skin and surface: Crewe running their hands over the rich, netted exterior of their dress, which frames their chest hair; Soshoux's mention of the calculated surface area of skin used to determine chemotherapy doses. Together, this action and these words complicate both the medical gaze and the efforts, infinitely rich and infinitely incomplete, of expressing the somatic in the process of becoming.

Staff's video places this 'becoming' of the body in an always-unfolding struggle: within the metaphorical as well as the corporeal; between the subjective and the social; shaped perceptually by metaphor and physically by the medical

and the molecular. As Lord (2004) (and Soshoux) point out, this becoming unfolds *against* societal and categorical registers, against 'passing' as an easily assimilable subject within a biopolitical order, whether disabled or abled, healthy or sick, cis or trans. Near the end of the video, they state:

> I do not want to pass. I do not want to give back into the world of people who are tired of looking at someone whose chances of dying in the short term are better than theirs by a long shot. Or so they think.

Jasbir Puar (2017) has written forcefully on the relationship between biopolitical recognition of disability and new forms of gender normativity. She asserts that a set of alliances enfolds two kinds of subjects: transnormative persons with bodies 'endlessly available for hormonal and surgical manipulation . . . a body producing towards ablist norms' and disabled persons that 'exceptionalize the transgression and survivorship of that disability' within an ever-expanding imperialist project (p. 42).

To be easily read and recognized – to 'pass', in this case – is to embrace a normative, late capitalist sense of bodily fulfillment in which embodiment is piecemeal and strategic, and in which the available paths toward that embodiment are enforced through gender normativity or gender pathology, through a framework of capacity (Spade, 2006).[3] This kind of corporality emphasizes 'mobility, transformation, regeneration, flexibility, and the creative concocting of the body' to create a falsely unassailable binary between the sick and the well, between productivity and debility (Puar, 2017: 42). *Weed Killer*'s unruly bodies refuse.

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Notes

1. I want to acknowledge the wider field of inquiry aligned to this idea within disability studies: namely, that the ways in which disabled bodies are labeled and medicalized – specifically nonwhite bodies – are denied access to coherent gender identity. See Nirmala Erevelles' (2011: 38–39) work on Hortense Spillers and the disgendering of black female bodies.
2. Scarry's 'unmaking' thesis has come under fire for its simplicity and its ahistoricity, as well as for the somewhat troubling modernist notion implicit in her work which locates the body outside of language, and the subject as existing prior to language. For a literature review of the wide-ranging influences of and critiques of Scarry's influence, see Van Ommen et al. (2017).
3. While the policing of medical transition demonstrably rearticulates gender binaries, I do not wish to imply that the burden of this critique should be unduly laid onto trans people. Deen Spade's (2006) essay, 'Mutilating Gender', demonstrates that the gatekeeping standards for access to gender-affirming surgery are a disciplinary practice with myriad and far-reaching effects for both trans and cis people, and that those standards demand a narrative performance of binary transnormativity.

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19.2 JOURNAL OF VISUAL CULTURE

Chasing Charley, finding Reed: reaching toward the ghosts of the archive

KJ Cerankowski

Abstract. The archive consists of memories, documents, and images waiting to be curated into a story. In this article, the author collates archival object encounters into a transgender 'ghost story' that marks the impossibility of a straightforward history of the subject, relying instead on embodied encounters with archive objects, or the remnants (ghostly and tangible) of archival subjects. Following the materials of Charley Parkhurst and Reed Erickson, the author makes connections where none previously existed, asking: How do we put life back into the materials of the dead? What do the traces and memories of these ghosts offer the living? What do archive objects activate in the eyes that see them, the ears that listen, and the hearts that race or slow with each haptic encounter? Following these questions, this article pieces together a different kind of narrative history and transition story through the unexpected encounters with the archive and its ghosts.

Keywords. affect • archive • archive studies • hauntology • materiality • phenomenology • transgender • transmasculinity

> My desire is the idea of the archive. Or, more accurately, it is the idea of what the archive might have to offer. (Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 2018)

Tucked inside my desk drawer is a small gold-colored pen, sealed in its original plastic overwrap. As I write this, I remove the pen from the drawer, turn it over in my hands, and fight the urge to rip it from its wrapping. I imagine what it might feel like to run my thumb along the small black lettering that spells out 'Erickson Educational Foundation'. This pen is one of many similar pens that belonged to Reed Erickson, transgender philanthropist and activist. As I dream of curling my fingers around the pen's thin metal body and testing its ink, I imagine Erickson holding one of these pens in his own hands, scribbling his notes and marginalia, writing letters to Harry Benjamin and other confidantes. The pen was gifted to me upon my departure from the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria by Aaron Devor, founder

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of the archives. In this gift, I continue to carry a piece of Reed Erickson's life with me.

I first encountered Reed Erickson's papers at the Transgender Archives entirely by accident. I had arranged a short visit to the archives with the intention of looking at an issue of a newsletter that features a write-up on US gold rush legend Charley Parkhurst. After flipping through the newsletter, I decided to peruse the list of other holdings at the archive. Out of curiosity and with very little knowledge of who Reed Erickson was, I requested a couple of boxes from his collection. More than a year since my visit, I cannot stop thinking about Erickson and the archival objects that capture but snippets of his life. In particular, I remain fixated on a series of photographs I found tucked into an undated envelope labeled 'Erickson & family'. I click through my personal digital copies of the images with frequency, looking, listening, and wanting as I stare at his bared chest, the 'details' of each dip and divot of flesh conjuring desire, calling my body into alignment with the body I see before me in the glossy prints. To put it in Roland Barthes' (1980) words, something in these photographs 'pricked' me.[1]

The future archive and its ghosts

As I enter the archive, I think of it as a space into which I follow ghosts and, perhaps, am followed by them. In *Ghostly Matters* (2008), Avery Gordon engages a methodology of conjuring what appears to be otherwise absent, to imagine what it would mean to reckon with ghosts as a way of knowing and making knowledge. She writes, 'The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention' (p. xvi). Charley and Reed, in their own ways, appeared to me, demanded my attention, and beckoned me to follow. Derrida (1994, p. 10) asks, 'What does it mean to follow a ghost? And what if this came down to being followed by it, always, persecuted perhaps by the very chase we are leading?' Following and being followed; seeking and being sought: the ghost stories I am telling you – about Charley, about Reed – are not really about Charley and Reed. These stories are about me and the queer trans futures I want to imagine for you, for us.

I am not a historian; I am a storyteller. I cannot construct a narrative history out of a meticulous reordering of the facts and the gaps in the archive. I cannot tell you more about Charley Parkhurst or Reed Erickson than you yourself might uncover through some internet searches or reading the work of trans historians and scholars.[2] But I can tell you a story about the body and its encounter with the archive objects. I can fill in the absences with tales of longing, of reaching and wanting both something more and nothing more from the gaps. I can tell you about affective investments and haptic temporalities;

I can tell you about fixations and obsessions, hauntings about and by ghosts you never knew you would long to encounter.

I can tell you everything the image wants me to tell you and everything it wants me to keep silent and unknowable. José Esteban Muñoz (1996: 6) argues that the indeterminacy of the image is precisely what gives it a profoundly queer sense of possibility. It is this queer horizon of possibility that I have been reaching for in my visits to the archives as well as to the literal sites of death and haunting (the graveyard). In the archive, I flip through the pages of *Renaissance News*, the letters and photos of Reed Erickson, the pages of the FTM International newsletter, all the while searching for ghosts, for answers to . . . I don't know what – to myself, to something in the past, something ever present, something yet to come.

Tina M Campt (2017: 8) pushes us synesthetically to 'listen to images' and to engage a method of archival research that 'requires us to interrogate both the archival encounter, as well as the content of archival collections, in multiple tenses and multiple temporalities'. Meaning, we have to also account for ourselves and the possibility of our own being and becoming in the archive. I cannot help but think of Ann Cvetkovich's *Archive of Feelings* (2003), a way of imagining the production of affect through the everyday effects of trauma that become archived in our bodies. We hold the stories of others along with our own stories in our flesh, muscle, and tissue, in the aches and pains, the desires and longings, in the being and becoming what we were, are, or will be. In the archive, I am looking backward in order to look toward a future in which we must continue to live with and learn from our ghosts; I must let their presence arouse me or arouse something in me. The photograph arouses a presence; it piques me; it pricks me.

Which is to say: the photograph, especially, is haunted. Barthes (1980: 9) describes it as 'that terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. Following Barthes, Shawn Michelle Smith (2014: 37–38) describes the photograph as 'the past made present again – a haunting, a hallucination'. Here, I give you my haunted hallucinations that begin with my obsessions with the legends of Charley Parkhurst and continue through an uncanny (in its true Freudian sense) encounter with photographic images of Reed Erickson. This is a story of how these two figures have, in a sense, returned from the dead, come together as I chase my desire in the idea of the archive.

Chasing Charley

How and why did I begin chasing the ghost of Charley Parkhurst? The *how* I can tell you; the *why*, I am not so sure about. Several years ago, on my first trip

to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, I picked up a book called *Sierra Stories: True Tales of Tahoe* (1997) by Mark McLaughlin. Reading that book on the north shore of Lake Tahoe, I encountered the story of a heroic stagecoach driver named Charley Parkhurst, or 'One-eyed Charley'. According to McLaughlin, Charley was born in 1812 in Lebanon, NH and made his way out west to drive the whip during the gold rush, acquiring legendary status as he fought off thieves and raced across collapsing bridges. Charley later died of tongue cancer in 1879 at his home in Watsonville, CA. As McLaughlin ends the story, 'She became the first woman to vote in the United States, 52 years before the passing of the 19th amendment!' (p. 56). After reading that first story, I read everything about Charley I could get my hands on, including historical novels, websites, and old digitized news clippings, making it almost impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. Most of the stories trace his birth in New Hampshire to life in an orphanage from which he ran away, finding work on farms and in horse stables before heading west in the 1850s to capitalize on the California Gold Rush. Following his stage driving days, he retired to a cabin in Watsonville, CA where he died in 1879 (Arango, 2018; McLaughlin, 1997; Hill, 2008; Kondazian, 2012; Sams, 2014).[3]

Having taken in all these tales about Charley's life, I decided to follow Charley's path, beginning with his resting place. I took a trip to the Pioneer Cemetery in Watsonville, CA to visit his gravesite. The tombstone, adorned with an American flag and a tin can of fresh-picked wildflowers, bears a memorial plaque:

> Charley Darkey Parkhurst 1812–1879. Noted whip of the gold rush days drove stage over Mt. Madonna in early days of valley. Last run San Juan to Santa Cruz. Death in cabin near the 7 mile house. Revealed 'One Eyed Charlie' a woman, the first woman to vote in the US. Nov 3, 1868. Erected 1955 Pajaro Valley Historical Association.

There it was again, the declaration of Charley as the first woman to vote, complete with multiple spellings of his name (see Figure 1).

Beside the gravestone lay a bundle of papers, which I found to be notes from local schoolchildren. I sat there and read through each letter, all addressed to Charlotte. It appears as though the students had read about 'Charlotte' in a book called *Riding Freedom* (1998), a children's novel written by Pam Muñoz Ryan. The novel tells the story of Charlotte, 'a smart and determined' girl who 'figured out how to live her life the way she wanted'. In their letters, the children included drawings of 'One-Eyed Charley' and commended Charlotte for being a 'brave girl'. Only one student acknowledged that Charlotte 'pretended to be a boy'. These schoolchildren left behind their own narrative archive, and I have captured that material into photographs, further extending the archive of Charley's life and death (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Charley Parkhurst's memorial in Pioneer Cemetery, Watsonville, CA. © Photo: KJ Cerankowski.

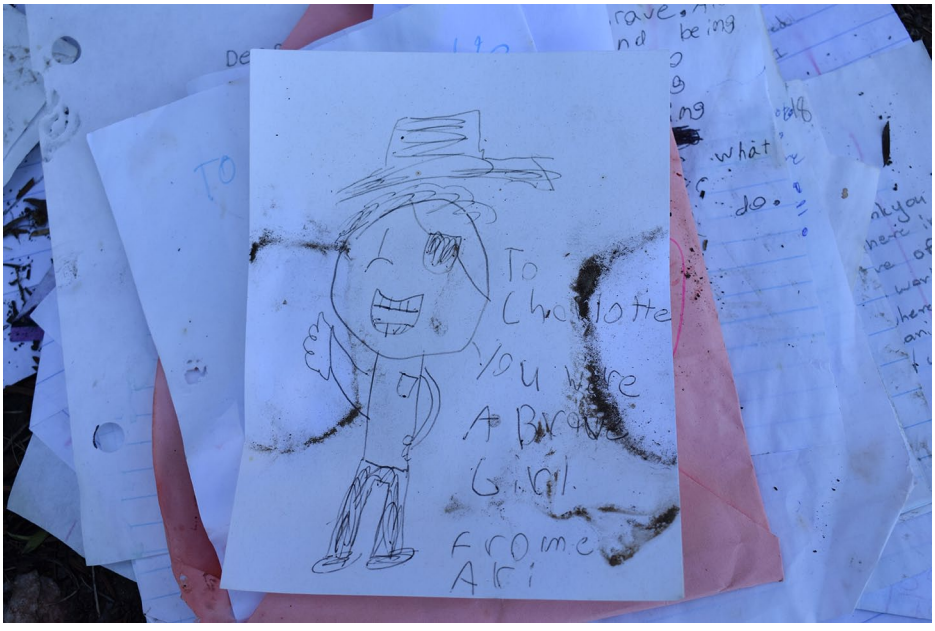

Figure 2. Collection of letters and drawings honoring Charley Parkhurst placed at the memorial site by local schoolchildren. © Photo: KJ Cerankowski.

The schoolchildren wanted Charley to be a 'brave girl'. The question that haunts me, though, is who do I want Charley to be? What am I searching for in the stories told, in the engraved granite plaque, in the dirt-covered letters and

drawings, and in the digital photos I keep of that memorial plaque and those letters? How does my collection of Charley move between the materiality of his resting place and the digital records of his story that I trace and store? It was in the Digital Transgender Archive that I found a holding on Charley Parkhurst at the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria: the physical copy of an issue of *Renaissance News*, a newsletter published by the Renaissance Education Association, an educational and support organization focused on gender and sexual identity. I could have read the excerpt of the issue online in the digital archive but, as long as I was journeying to Charley's burial site, I felt the urgency of interacting with the materiality of the components of Charley's ghost story. I needed to hold that newsletter in my hands. I needed to pair that experience in the archive with my experiences outside, by Charley's burial site, flipping through a different set of papers, scribbled with a number of narratives about his life. Perhaps I thought the papers between my fingers would bring me closer to Charley's ghost.

In the archive, as I turned through the clean, crisp, black and white pages of *Renaissance News* (1992), I found the small paragraph, a blurb of 'trivia' in the middle of the newsletter right next to an advertisement for the Toronto Crossdressers Club. The paragraph reads:

> Impress your friends with this bit of suffrage knowledge. The first woman to vote in a presidential election was a transvestite known as Charley Parkhurst. [Now that I've got your attention.] Charley was born in 1812 and while still a child ran away from an orphanage to involuntarily pursue a career in stable cleaning. When the Gold Rush of 1851 began, Charley thumbed it to California where his 'natural' talent with horses netted a career change to stage coach driver. Charley quickly gained homage as the Mario Andretti of the trade and was described as being a lush, tobacco chewing, foul mouth with a quick temper. Charley piloted his last wild ride in 1879, and when the undertaker was preparing Charley's body it was found that Charley's body parts didn't match Charley's body. [Hey, Dis is a broad!] Charlene had voted in every election from 1868 til 'his' demise in 1879 and, No, I didn't make this up or get it from Rocky & Bullwinkle.

Let us not forget the archive produces affect. Let me not forget to mention how angry I felt while reading this, how the pages of the newsletter almost burned in my hands. I was angry at the sheer inaccuracies: Charlene vs. Charlotte; Charley described as a lush, though he was known for his sober driving. At the same time, I also felt a tinge of sympathetic understanding, knowing that during this era of *Renaissance News*, the focus was on transvestites. This writer declared Charley a transvestite, eager to claim Charley as part of the crossdressing community. This inclusion and touch of historical recognition is what the author wanted, maybe needed, from Charley.

No matter the context or the storyteller, Charley always seems to become a sort of hero, whether the first suffragist, the baddest whip in the land, or a pioneer crossdresser. But who is Charley to me? What do I want from Charley? I am not even sure how I want to tell Charley's story, but here I am telling it, conjuring the ghost story as I go. I am still piecing this story together, stitching together my desires and feelings with what little knowledge I have. Though I entered the archive with the explicit goal of viewing a newsletter featuring Charley Parkhurst, I also went with an open curiosity toward whichever objects called to me, or pulled me in, or directed me elsewhere. Jamie A Lee (2016, p. 37) draws on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology: 'we are not only directed towards objects, but those objects also take us in a certain direction.' Sometimes we follow the ghosts, and sometimes they follow us. That day in the archive, I found all there was to find of Charley. I told all I can tell for now; my ghost story about Charley is ongoing, taking me next across the Sierra Nevada region in search of the routes Charley crossed, standing amongst the towering granite walls that Charley blazed past on a stagecoach. But there were other objects in the archive that day that pulled me, conjured perhaps by some ghost(s), bringing us forward in history to my encounter with Reed Erickson, born just over 100 years after Charley Parkhurst.

Finding Reed

After having flipped through several issues of *Renaissance News*, I found myself browsing boxes of Reed Erickson's files, including personal correspondence, tabloid clippings, letters to editors, drawings and scribblings, journal entries, and so on. I was drawn in for hours, reading every intricate bit of marginalia, but it wasn't until I opened the undated envelope labeled 'Erickson & family' that I became truly transfixed, 'pricked' by some desire awakened. Inside the envelope is a series of photographs in which Reed Erickson is wearing nothing but a pair of black briefs and a gold chain around his neck. In some, he is standing, looking at something outside the view of the camera lens. In others, he is performing some action, whether bent over looking at an object or standing with his arms on the shoulders of another person. In one – the one I come back to again and again – he is flexing, mouth open, looking down and off frame. There is something maniacal in this scene; I cannot put my finger on it, but it pricks. I run my eyes over his sculpted biceps, the stack of his rib cage, the cut of his hips to the curve of pelvic bone. There are so many questions I have. Why is he hanging out in his briefs; who is taking these photos; who is he posing for; why is he rarely looking at the camera; how old is he; where were these photos taken? Why can't I turn away? What do I want in these photos? What do I want from these photos? I do not know; I cannot piece together the story behind these photos; they haunt me (see Figure 3).

The brief story we know of Reed Erickson, born in El Paso, Texas, in 1917, is that he became a multi-millionaire when he inherited his family's lead smelting

Figure 3. Reed Erickson, photographic portrait (headshot), photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of University of Victoria Libraries, Transgender Archives collections, Reed Erickson fonds AR415.

business. He donated some of his fortune toward advancing transgender medical services and technologies, was a patient and friend to Harry Benjamin, was married four times, had two children and a pet leopard, and spent his last years in Mexico where he had fled to elude drug charges in the United States, dying in 1992 (Devor and Matte, 2004). Knowing that his life ends in addiction and fugitivity, I become overwhelmed with some sense of sadness or loss as I look at these photos. Erickson began his transition in 1963, around the age of 46. In these photos, he appears to be much older than that, perhaps already well into his years of drug use. I feel mournful admiration, perplexity, kinship. My heart skips a beat.

As I continue to flip through the photos, I come across a few that have been chopped up and/or glued back together. One clipping is a close-up of Reed's chest. I stare at his chest – the arc of his pectorals, a divot in the left breast, the roundness of his nipples, the way the gold anchor on his chain hangs between perfectly sculpted pectoral muscles. Who zoomed the lens in for this photograph? Who cut this close-up and what for? What am I searching for in these photos of Reed? Am I searching for the mark of his scars? Do I see my own chest in his? Who is this man? Who am I? What does this man have to do with me and who I am becoming?

Elizabeth Edwards (2012) writes on phenomenological engagement with photographs, insisting on 'a sense of the relationship between the body and the

photographic images, how users position themselves in relation to photographic images, how they view, handle, wear, and move with photographic images' (p. 228). I handle these photographs of Reed Erickson with my hands adorned in white cotton gloves. My skin never makes tactile contact with the prints. Their texture is unreachable, ungraspable beyond the fabric that wraps my fingers and protects the image from the touch of my body. Instead, my way of bringing my body's touch into the photograph is to imagine the overlay of our scars, the ways in which his body is so like mine and so unlike mine.

I think back to Jamie A Lee's (2016: 36) account of a student working in a queer archive and happening upon a photo of a man fellating another man. Lee writes, 'The eyes want to look again. The body responds and curiosity is piqued . . . The archival aphrodisiac tugs erotically at the body.' In my hands, I hold photographs presumably held at one time by Reed Erickson, the very subject of the photographs. I feel his presence. I want to know his body, so that I may somehow better know my own. I look and look away. I look away and look again. My eyes want. My body wants. The gaze is full of shame, desire, and envy as I look into these seemingly private moments caught on film. What knowledge of Reed does my body hold? How does my body reach into the archival body, blend together, and conjure ghosts to make and to *feel* knowledge?

Julietta Singh (2018: 111) writes of the 'erotic relay' in the archival encounter of the photograph:

> The photographer's erotic desire for his subject, which becomes the historian's erotic desire for her archived object, until finally the historian's relation to the images becomes the object of my own desiring mind. All this lust becoming the archive itself.

The lust and desire I have for knowing Reed's body has become my archive. I want Reed because I want to know Reed. I want to know Reed because I can feel him even as I cannot quite touch him. I want to feel Charley. I want to know Charley because I want to know myself. This desire for the body is not sexual; rather, it is an erotic of the uncanny encounter – that which is frightening, that which unhomes me, even as it calls me home.

Conclusion, or, making the body in the archive

In chasing the ghosts of Charley Parkhurst and Reed Erickson, people who lived and died over 100 years apart, I have undoubtedly invented their co-constituency in my life. I have stitched together and woven their bodies into mine; I have touched and felt them both through image and matter in order to make their lives matter for me, so that they might matter for others in a way yet unthought and unimagined. I have looked to their pasts in order to conjure the ghosts of future possibility. I have touched with my hands

so that I may affectively weave these ghost stories together. Jeanne Vaccaro (2014: 96) writes, 'The labor of making transgender identity is handmade: collective – made with and across bodies, objects, and forces of power . . . The handmade is a haptic, affective theorization of the transgender body.' In other words, I am touching the materiality of the memory of a body, handmade as I handmake my own body. Which is to say, a transgender history must be phenomenological, bodies pieced together, reaching toward, with, and across each other through time.

Photos touch us as we touch them, Campt (2017) reminds us. Objects, too, have a sensorial life. When we touch, we inevitably feel. When we see, seeing is a way of touching, and thus we feel. There are, after all, no strictly visual media (Mitchell, 2005). But the touch will never tell us everything. Mieke Bal (2003: 8) suggests, 'The "social life of things" cannot be grasped by grasping an object in your hands.' My hands press against the sun-warmed granite of Charley Parkhurst's headstone, but they grasp nothing. My hands never actually grasp the photos of Reed Erickson, as a cotton glove serves as a barrier between my skin and the delicate prints. What I grasp (or fail to grasp) is in the punctum, the thing that pricks my desire and the looming impossibility of ever truly knowing anything more than what I feel and touch. It is, after all, the indeterminacy and the not-knowing that inflect our image encounters with queer possibility, so profound, always on the horizon, just out of reach, but worth stretching and reaching toward in all our desire and depthless want.

I do not yet know what I am doing with these bits and pieces, these ghost stories; I have only just started collecting them and observing what they stir in me, affectively and somatically. I flip through my digital photos again and again; I hold tight to the small plastic-wrapped golden pen; I grip the objects of these ghosts, never truly grasping them with my hands, skin to matter. Taking a cue from Campt (2017) again, I attempt to listen to what I cannot touch. My eyes fixated on the shirtless, sinewy Reed Erickson, my ears open, I am overcome by the roar of wanting and wanting and wanting, both his and my own.

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Notes

1. Roland Barthes describes the thing that 'pricks' in the photograph, or the 'punctum', as the 'detail'. It is the 'detail' that attracts him: 'I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This "detail" is the *punctum*' (Barthes, 1980: 42,).
2. For a scholarly narrative of Reed Erickson's life, see Devor and Matte (2004), Lee (2016), and Lewis (2017).

3. In all the different tales, Charley is referred to as both 'he' and 'she'. I am not certain which pronouns I should use for Charley, but I choose 'he/him/his' because I know Charley lived his life as a man and concealed any 'she-ness' about himself through the day he died.

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Review

Dominic Johnson, *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. 217 pp., 34 illus. ISBN 978 1 5261 3551 3

Upon opening Dominic Johnson's *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s*, readers are confronted with the object of study at its limits, literally and symbolically embodied in performance: Johnson describes the meaningful destruction of a copy of his 2015 oral history of performance art, *The Art of Living*, in performances by Anne Bean and Ulay – two of the artists included in both books. Bean tied the book to a helium balloon while stripping its pages and Ulay soaked and froze it. Johnson writes that these performances are crucial counterintuitive responses to what artist–critics unbeholden to dominant methods and objects may seek in the 'use' of their work. Limitation, destruction, and the varied conceptual and physical harnessing of their attendant practices are at the core of how Johnson theorizes extremity. What he calls 'the performance of extremity' includes 'extraordinary actions that strain against the common knowledge of art's limits, specifically through performance' (p. 21).

In working with extremity as such, *Unlimited Action* moves against expectations that the forms it takes will primarily consist of bodies placed at extremes, often as material corpora of self-inflicted pain, damage, or injury that were predominant in performance art of the 1970s. This historical context of masochistic limit-texts by artists such as Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, and Chris Burden has been explored by Kathy O'Dell in her well-studied *Contract with the Skin* (1998). Even though *Unlimited Action* focuses its analyses on performance art of the same era, the critical acumen on display here significantly departs in scope and intervention. Johnson asks us to consider the possibilities of undoing and dispensing with the very categories of artmaking, preservation, documentation, and the figure of the artist. Known for his own involvement in the world of provocative performance art as much as for his scholarship in the field, he moves away from the impulse to canonize, or to have the artists he explores follow the trajectory of a classificatory logic, or to have their work neatly congeal as a collective set of practices. Hence *Unlimited Action* is invested in non-canonical, less-explored live creations that have a more than tenuous relationship with established notions of performance or

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whose transgressions have been under-examined because of how they move through varied modes of historical marginality and difficulty in being enacted.

As largely inassimilable, illegible, and unthinkable, the works Johnson foregrounds challenge both the creators and audiences who experience them 'in actions that smack of being *too much*, as well as *not enough*' (p. 11, original emphases) such as Kerry Trengrove's durational *An Eight Day Passage* (1977), which involved being sealed inside a cell and escaping by digging a tunnel underneath London's Acme Gallery. Despite the excessive physical–mental taxing involved and its concomitant rugged masculinity, *Passage* becomes unreadable as phallic spectacle because it 'recasts a kind of manual labour in order to elaborate the priority of experience . . . over art', with the artist's body emerging as a de-privileged site of gendered endurance (pp. 44, 31). Here, sheer excess ('too much') is bound up with its anti-climactic execution ('not enough'): it is an example of hard work that is irreducible to becoming a 'work', which thereby betrays the normative promises of productivity or denouement for artist as well as audience.

Just as Johnson invites readers to relish the physical destruction of one of his own books through performances that epitomize the larger stakes of *Unlimited Action* so too does his study ask us to put aside our assumptions about creative processes and what they might mean to reflect im/possibility in/as art-making. The borders between what is possible and impossible in the realm of the performed work take shape through another of his key concepts in the book: 'action'. Coextensive with, yet departing from Happenings in the 1960s, experiments in theatrical or movement-based art took hold in the 1970s as novel forms of creative process rather than in the production of art 'objects'. As Amelia Jones (1998: 14) writes in theorizing body art versus performance art, 'body art proposes the art "object" as a site where reception and production come together: a site of intersubjectivity.' Actions rather than performances, bodies as body-objects, the actions of Johnson's *Unlimited Action* name 'acts that endanger artists, institutions, or audiences' and have the effect of radically revising the expressive domains of the corporeal when tarrying with or dwelling in the types of aesthetically transformative risks undertaken in the book's case studies (p. 21).

For Johnson, the anti-aesthetics at the heart of the project aligns with anti-authoritarian guerrilla activities that function at the edges of acceptability and, in some cases, even witness-ability. The cover of the book bears a photograph of the Kipper Kids (Brian Routh and Martin von Haselberg) and the book is dedicated to the late Routh (Harry Kipper of the performance duo). The Kipper Kids are the subject of the book's fifth chapter but the 'slapstick violence' of their performances as modes of self-sabotage is presented as a way to think about all of the works included in the project (p. 157). Johnson describes the Kipper Kids' drunken uncontrollability as part of their actions

– called 'ceremonies' – manifesting in practices such as self-boxing routines and elaborate food fights. One part of the 'food ceremony' involved

> cover[ing] each other with industrial-sized cans of tinned spaghetti and tomato sauce, mushy peas and dustbins full of cranberry jelly followed by four buckets of paint that create fluorescent deluges. They fill each other's jockstraps with dried herbs . . . spray-paint their own armpits as though using deodorants and coat each other with glitter. (p. 156)

In other ceremonies, they ejected food and threw ink into the audience. Such performances call up comparisons with Paul McCarthy's food- and boxing-themed performances but, unlike McCarthy, the discomfiting admixture of ribald humor and puerile eroticism of the Kipper Kids was more akin to 'drawn-out professional suicide' and disinterest in their own reputations as artists rather than the formation of a new canon of transgression that would be historically welcomed by the museum (pp. 161, 176). The Kipper Kids exemplify how sabotage and recklessness – central terms in the book – revise notions about artists' desires for recognition and remembrance. Paradoxically, *Unlimited Action* performs the opposite as a textual object: it indelibly offers longevity to the creators in question. As Johnson asks, once recklessness moves out of the hands of authority into the hands of artists, 'might *reckless artists* demand a reckless kind of history, a stunt-like mode of theory or critical thought?' (p. 195). Examples being Anne Bean's refusal to document her performances or Kerry Trengrove requesting that his archive be destroyed after his death.

Fully conversant in anti-art, anti-performance, and anti-establishment characteristics, *Unlimited Action* takes care to incorporate the often overlooked but necessary connections with anti-music: experimental, noise, and sound art cultures and the heavily performative elements that come with them. In what is possibly some of the most comprehensive scholarly writing on COUM Transmissions in the context of performance, Johnson's chapter on the provocations of the group showcases how the scandals primarily surrounding *Mail Action* (1976) and *Prostitution* (1976) confront the limit/lessness and lawless potentials of what can be performed. COUM's members included Genesis Breyer P-Orridge (who died of leukemia in 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic), Cosey Fanni Tutti, and the late Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson, all of whom, with Chris Carter, became industrial music pioneers Throbbing Gristle. Like Throbbing Gristle's noisy re-purposing of musical instruments against their specifications and tape cut-ups inspired by William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *Mail Action* re-purposed the postal and legal systems via a radicalization of mail art. *Mail Action* encompassed P-Orridge's being charged with indecency for sending postcard collages of pornographic content and 'using the postal system's conventions for undeliverable mail . . . to extend the circulation of the artwork' (pp. 102–104).

Exploding the boundaries of promotion, documentation, and dissemination, P-Orridge sent invitations to the ensuing trial, which operated in the same scope with COUM's use of negative media coverage of their activities to document their work (p. 94).

In dialogue with what S Alexander Reed (2013: 76) has written of COUM as 'wander[ing] the territory of instinctual prurience, hoping to stumble upon some limit, to locate the unwritten, authoritarian laws of taste, decency, order, and humanity by exceeding them', COUM's investment in abject body exhibitionism and putatively extreme sexual display was primarily notable in *Prostitution* (1976) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and the subsequent performances that took place after it. Included in it were Tutti's *Magazine Actions*, pornographic magazine layouts from adult publications where she appeared, and P-Orridge's TAMPAX ROMANA mixed-media sculptures made from used tampons. Whatever sensory impressions that *Unlimited Action* leaves behind for readers to contemplate, its perspicacious theorizing of creative processes and eloquent descriptions makes field-changing imprints on our understandings of bodies and actions at the extremes of discernibility and margins of performance art history and, with Johnson's encyclopedic knowledge, the significance of experiencing them is brought into much-needed relief.

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Review

Joan Kee, *Models of Integrity: Art and Law in Post-Sixties America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 320 pp. 102 colour illus. ISBN 978 0 52029 938 2

Joan Kee's latest book *Models of Integrity: Art and Law in Post-Sixties America* may as well be considered the first foundational text in the field of art and law. Initially, this might appear as an overstatement given the sheer amount of literature on the intersection of the two fields over the past two decades. Indeed, excluding legal case books, one might recall titles ranging from Martha Buskirk's *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (2003) to the more recent anthology, Daniel McClean's *Artist, Authorship & Legacy: A Reader* (2018). These books dutifully address how the continued reconceptualization of art in the postwar era went hand in hand with changes in the conflicting copyright and authorship laws around the world. Yet, if the existing literature remains stubbornly confined to the work of art, Kee's book proffers a far more expansive approach by focusing on the contentions between art and law: namely, what unfolds when the two disparate fields are put in discomfortingly close proximity? What unexpected aspects might each field glean from the other?

In Kee's account, contemporary art's foray into the law is intimately linked to 'integrity'. While integrity connotes moral principles, her deployment of the word is more capacious. For her, 'integrity' signifies not only the values that galvanized artists to call for accountability 'in a tin age of political malfeasance', but also the 'self-determination' forged by relationships to property (p. 4). The 'right of integrity' might proscribe others from altering someone's work without authorization, but the 'law as integrity' embodies a belief that the law's responsibility is to secure equality and render community 'more genuine' (p. 5). Although never explicitly labeled as such, it merits noting that it is neoliberal society, with its ethos of market deregulation, that serves as the backdrop of Kee's work. She identifies the creation of a 'risk society' as one of the main consequences of neoliberalism's triumph, with a social order that takes the fear of liability and the asymmetries of power as its bedrock. As is well documented, the art world is also intricately embedded in these forces, from the expansion of the art market to the precarious 'condition for artistic production and display' (p. 33). But what has otherwise been missed, and what

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Kee foregrounds, is that the mantra of 'rational actors, efficiency, and cost-benefit analysis' has also swayed the legal analysis of art (p. 33). It is within these tensions that we meet the artists central to Kee's discussion, including Christo and Jean-Claude, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Tehching Hsieh, among others. In individual case studies, the book recounts how the artists turned to the law in their practice in order to 'spawn forms of consciousness' that might, in turn, put pressure on 'politics in need of accounting' (p. 37).

Given the stakes, it befits that the first half of the book attends to property, whereby artworks, artistic labor, and the right to ownership collide with notions of individual freedom. The book commences with Seth Siegelaub and Robert Projansky's 'The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement' (1971), a document that failed in its ambition to secure the rights of artists, but nevertheless sparked pivotal changes in the sociopolitical appreciation of the issue. Supplementing the litany of scholarship that has examined the document to a point of near exhaustion (see Alberro, 2003), Kee refocuses on the legal stakes of the project. For instance, we learn of *Crimi v. Rutgers Presbyterian Church* (1949), wherein the common law held that, in selling their works, artists transferred 'their copyright interests as well as title to the purchased works' to buyers (p. 51). In other words, the law privileged the consumers, entrusting them with rights that ranged from exclusively profiting from the artwork – their acquired 'property' – to destroying them. Had it come to fruition, Siegelaub and Projansky's initiative would have secured artists certain rights 'as the creators of copyrighted works', notwithstanding their actual possession.

In Kee's account, the fraught relationship between artist and property rights persists in numerous iterations thereafter. One such example is Christo and Jean-Claude's *Running Fence* (1976), which entailed a fabric fence spanning across 24.5 miles of private and public property in northern California. In executing the project over the course of four years, the duo would negotiate their 'right to creation' with different conceptions and regulations negotiating the relation between private and public property (p. 97). For Kee, Christo and Jean-Claude are figures deeply attuned to the social relations necessarily entailed in property rights, given that they would confer countless times with those ranging from a disgruntled neighbor to the North Central Coast Regional Commission. (The sociality within property rights will resurface again in the book with Gordon Matta-Clark, who interrogated how legal conceptions of property, reliant on the market, elided the performative aspects of property rights.)

The encounters staged between art and law thus far demand a brief recourse to the methodological implication at hand. That the artists would inveigh against a critical shortcoming or an absence in the legal system does not

come as a surprise. What is of interest, however, is how Kee puts the core epistemological disparity in the two systems – the art and the law – into high relief. If the judicial system seeks to maintain the status quo (think of judges leafing through gargantuan case books and citing previous rulings), the art, at least in the Western modernist tradition, is tasked with breaking with tradition (see Clark, 1982). This incompatibility might explicate why the friction between the two is so generative of complex social, ethical, and ontological problematics. The case studies affirm Kee's conceptual wager that any neat opposition between the two fields is no longer sustainable.

Following the considerations on art and property, the book expands into broader topics of contracts, obscenity, and privacy. Particularly in the chapter on Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* (1985–1995), integrity's ethical dimensions take on the baton, teetering between the objective and subjective poles. More than three decades later, Mann's photographs of her unclothed children are still accompanied by dogged questions of abuse, consent, and parental mores. From the onset, Kee makes evident that her intention is not to evaluate such debates. Instead, her aim is narrower: that Mann's refusal to participate in the legal system, even after the various controversies, can be read as 'a sustained questioning of viewing practices found in the law' (p. 165). Kee notes that, in the late 1970s, photography's role as the 'highest type of evidence' was so central that the courts were reticent to include photography in the legal category of art (p. 166). Mann's work precisely collapses that neat distinction between the artistic and the evidentiary insisted by the law. The artistic photographs of an ostensibly illicit subject and the artist's subsequent decision to stay disengaged from the scandals expose the contrivances behind the law's unquestioned espousal of photography as evidentiary (p. 179).

While deeply thoughtful, Kee's argument here enters an elliptical dilemma and loses its usual crispness. In the discussion, she spends considerable time establishing how the 'reasonable viewer' – riffing on the legal parlance for an objective person with 'ordinary observation' – is still subject to the sociopolitical conditioning of 'taste'. At the end, Kee offers 'close looking' as a corrective that might rescue viewers from their 'epistemic hubris' (p. 181). But how might that be differentiated from the 'capacity to discern certain features' that, according to Kee, judges have been deploying already (p. 179)? A more pertinent question may ask after what model of close looking draws attention to our own biases in looking. Staying with the 'flawed fiction' of the reasonable viewer, we might also consider other shortcomings in the legal system, such as the unequal enforcement of the law. Kee makes a compelling case about the law as a fluid body, inflected by concerns of race, gender, and cultural differences – not unlike aesthetic production. But when she discusses works such as Ann Messner's *Stealing* (1978), in which the artist unabashedly stole shirts at a German department store, the unequal enforcement of the law is

left unaddressed. Kee's explication that the surveillance cameras had perhaps relieved the bystanders of the 'duty of vigilance' raises the question about how reactions might have been different if the artist – a white woman – had otherwise been racially marked (p. 29). Similar questions of perception (and prosecution) recur throughout the book. Only in the discussion of Tehching Hsieh, an artist from Taiwan who entered the United States illegally, does the book tantalizingly approach the existence of such disparities.

But these points are minor hiccups in an otherwise exceptional and commanding work of scholarship. Despite the author's qualification that the book might fall short of the visual analysis expected in an art history text, Kee's book is vividly illustrative, and boldly leads the reader through the oft-fraught liminal space between art and law. The book's achievements extend far beyond effectively bearing legal concepts on art or narrating the logistical relations between art and law. To be exact, its real feats lie in its rumination on not only the plasticity of the law, but also on art as an extralegal machination that structures our society. In this way, Kee's work will serve as a model for future scholarship in this emerging interdisciplinary field.

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Review

Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 343 pp., 41 illus. ISBN: 978 0 520 30039 2

In their 2011 edited volume *Useful Cinema*, Charles R Acland and Haidee Wasson argue that the majority of cinema scholarship misses an important feature of the medium by focusing on commercial public films. The 20th century, they note, witnessed not only the rise of entertainment cinema but also the creation of a vast universe of what the authors term 'useful cinema': educational and instructional films created by schools, public agencies, and private businesses. Such films – played on the walls of classrooms, exhibition halls, and offices – projected a different, yet equally important, vision of cinema's place and purpose in modern life. Here, the medium was technology more than art: a tool for 'making, persuading, instructing, demonstrating' (Acland and Wasson, 2011: 6). To arrive at an accurate understanding of 20th-century film culture, they conclude, scholars must pivot away from theatrical releases and begin to consider film history's entanglement with institutional history, exploring how cinema was 'adapted to institutional directives, wielding influence outside of the multiplex and the art house' (p. 13).

Tom Rice deploys 'useful cinema' as a foundational concept in *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire*. The first in-depth study of the British Colonial Film Unit (CFU), it provides a meticulously researched survey of a cinema corps that has been largely neglected by historians of British film. In his choice of subject matter, Rice, who is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of St Andrews, heeds the advice of Acland and Wasson, joining a growing number of scholars focused on cinema's 20th-century institutionalization and diffusion beyond the movie theater. *Films for the Colonies* analyzes film's expediency to colonial administrators serving during the final years of the British Empire, 'its *usefulness* [to] an empire in decline' (p. 5). Rice showcases how film became a centerpiece of colonial administration, employed as an instrument of discipline and indoctrination; and he provocatively suggests that film's ability to manage colonial populations and market empire – first identified in the interwar period – was largely responsible for the development of British nonfiction cinema writ large.

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In Rice's account, the CFU led a brief but revealing life, offering a useful 'microcosm' of the British Empire in its twilight decades (p. 12). Created in 1939 under the British Ministry of Information (MOI), the unit produced and distributed films for colonial audiences, before shuttering in 1955 amid mass decolonization movements. The first half of the book argues that the CFU's activities during World War II formed a critical part of Britain's last-ditch efforts to 'foster imperialism and sustain' their declining empire (p. 1); while the second half argues that, in the postwar, the unit played an important role in imperial dissolution, helping to 'stage-manage' Britain's shift from a territorial empire to an agent of informal economic and cultural imperialism (p. 9).

The book's five chapters proceed roughly chronologically, with chapter one providing a brief prehistory of the CFU that situates colonial propaganda film within a larger interwar movement to mobilize nonfiction cinema in the service of empire. According to Rice, notable precursors of the CFU include the Empire Marketing Board's Film Unit (1926–1933), helmed by famed documentarian John Grierson, and British Instructional Films (1919–1932), a purveyor of pro-empire films aimed at English schoolchildren (p. 14). The creation of the CFU also arose out of colonial administrators' ad hoc experimentations with the medium, in particular those of Rice's protagonist, William Sellers. A sanitation inspector working in Nigeria, Sellers produced a number of disease-prevention movies for African audiences in the 1920s and 1930s – their popularity justified the necessity of a colonial-facing film unit, and landed Sellers the position of CFU director.

In revealing the shared heritage of documentary, educational, and colonial cinema, Rice makes one of the book's key interventions, challenging film scholarship that has placed documentaries atop the hierarchy of nonfiction cinema (p. 17). Rice instead gives equal weight to documentary and instructional film, and even proposes that early British prestige documentaries be classified as 'useful cinema' – viewing them as 'product[s] of interwar British imperial politics' as much as inheritors of the filmic avantgarde (p. 15). Grierson, the celebrated father of the British Documentary Movement, and Sellers, a forgotten amateur filmmaker-cum-sanitation worker, are figures of equal importance to Rice, and ones whose careers he believes 'run parallel' (p. 14).

Pointing toward the common roots of documentary, educational, and colonial films does not, however, mean that films manufactured for metropolitan and colonial markets were identical. Although some CFU films carried messages similar to their English counterparts – promoting the empire and rallying support for the war effort – others were more explicitly patronizing in subject matter, advising colonial viewers on personal hygiene and home management, and touting the virtues of English domestic and sexual mores. For example,

the popular 1940 CFU film *Mr. English at Home* centered on a typical English nuclear family, and issued, in the words of its director, a crucial 'lesson [on] order and a clean home' (p. 61).

Rice also explicates how CFU films were remarkably paternalistic in their style. Sellers thought colonial audiences too unintelligent and 'illiterate' to comprehend nuance and, as a result, he demanded that CFU productions be 'simple', that is, slow-paced and straightforwardly composed, with no abstraction or camera tricks (p. 65–66). Observing these dictates, Rice concludes that films made in the CFU's first decade functioned as propaganda for the British Empire through form as well as content. In underestimating the visual literacy of colonial audiences, CFU films 'assum[ed] British intellectual primacy' (p. 65) and supplied colonial administrators with extra validation for their paternalistic presence overseas: who would teach Asian, African, and West Indian populations to become model spectators if not the CFU?

The CFU's stance toward colonial subjects loosened after World War II, as the British Empire faced growing criticism from home and abroad, and as a new reformist Labour government assumed power. Rice concludes by demonstrating how the CFU shifted to decentralized and cooperative modes of filmmaking after 1946, setting up cinema units within Britain's remaining colonies that provided training in film production to locals (p. 152). In the words of one CFU leader, speaking of the unit's activities in Africa, the CFU would henceforth be '*for* Africans, *with* Africans, *by* Africans', an ethos memorialized in the meta-movie *A Film School in West Africa* from 1949, showing a kindly, attentive white teacher instructing African pupils in film technique (p. 149). In Rice's view, such films, which 'idealiz[e] a developing partnership between colonizer and colonized', are a large part of what made the CFU a critical player in the transition to independence (p. 185). Beyond launching filmmakers who would later lead postcolonial national cinemas – and thereby contributing to handover efforts – the unit worked to construct a flattering narrative of decolonization that established the peaceful transition of power as a defining achievement of the British Empire. With productions like *A Film School in West Africa*, the CFU preemptively whitewashed the violence and cruelty of the past decades, depicting British colonial rule as one that had been premised upon mutual aid and trust. 'The films preceding independence', Rice summarizes, 'sought to obfuscate what empire had been, to simplify the narrative of "handover" by emphasizing cooperation, "British-led development", and continued economic "partnership"' (p. 230). In its turn toward developmentalism and globalization, the CFU offers a fascinating exemplar of the late British Empire, and of decolonization more broadly.

Rice effectively advances the CFU as an object worthy of critical inquiry by boldly placing it at the heart of British nonfiction film history, making his book

a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of scholarship on nontheatrical cinema. But, although the story told here is excellent in its broad sweep, it falters a bit in its details – presenting at once too many and too few. Creating a work centered around 'useful cinema' requires Rice to balance the demands of institutional history and film history. Unfortunately, *Films for the Colonies* skews slightly toward the former, giving greater attention to ministers and ministries than to the movies cited in its title. Rice, for instance, devotes a large section of his third chapter to outlining skirmishes between the CFU and other film units housed in and around the MOI, but he dedicates frustratingly few pages to a thorough description of the competing films these bodies produced. While Rice provides a compelling overall hypothesis of how CFU films supported empire in both content and composition, his insights could be even more persuasive if better supported by evidence from the films themselves. Some films are mentioned by name only, and of those with comprehensive plot summaries, only a select portion receive satisfactory visual analysis. Beyond 'simplicity', one wonders, were there any other qualities of CFU films – unwitting or intentional – that marked them as inherently 'colonial'? It would be helpful if Rice reflected more upon such topics. Adopting the framework of 'useful cinema' need not mean deemphasizing questions of form or neglecting art historical methodologies; and the book would be enriched with more close readings of scenes or frames from titles characteristic of CFU cinema. Nevertheless, *Films for the Colonies* provides a sturdy foundation for future studies of the CFU, one that scholars can build upon to shed further light on the unit's rich, underexplored body of surviving films.

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Review

Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019. 232 pp. ISBN: 978 1 61219 749 4

Artist Jenny Odell joins a growing conversation about art and social reproduction with her widely circulated (2019) book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. This text offers an exciting popular effort to articulate the politics of non-instrumental aesthetics as a kind of critical revitalization. As she writes it, there is 'revolutionary potential' in 'taking back our attention' and 'protect[ing] our spaces and our time for non-instrumental, noncommercial activity and thought, for maintenance, for care, for conviviality' (pp. xxiii, 28). The primary wager of Odell's book is that 'doing nothing [is] an act of political resistance to the attention economy' (p. xi). 'Doing nothing' is the name Odell gives to the practice of 'disengaging' from those frenetic, instrumental, or self-branding styles of attention that are encouraged by social media and our late capitalist world. Odell's interest in the anxious and overstimulated subject that is produced by such dominant modes of attention may thus be contextualized within a larger body of critical writing on neoliberal affect and human capital subject formation. Read this way, *How to Do Nothing* issues a timely call for the cultivation of non-instrumental aesthetic practices that might enable us to build ourselves into different subjects (and subsequently also, create different shared life-worlds) than those disciplined by our competitive, algorithmic work society.

Odell provides a vision of 'doing nothing' that is conceived as a practice of attending to nature, art, strangers, our own indeterminacy, and the history of place. Much like the gendered labor of reproduction, such activities are skilled and effortful; they only appear like nothing to the extent that they fall outside of what is immediately viewed as surplus-value-producing work. *How to Do Nothing* claims such apparent uselessness as a mode of refusal and resistance (p. xv). What is important about Odell's proposal here is her intuitive insistence that any call to refuse the total subsumption of life into privatized value today requires not only that we not show up to work (a model of the strike, paramount to industrial capitalism, which reclaims our time and laboring activity), but also that we not become data by going online when we stay home (a revised model of the strike, perhaps needed for algorithmic-surveillance finance capitalism, which reclaims our attention and vitalist

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energy). In this way, doing nothing for Odell requires not only 'wrest[ing] our focus from the attention economy', but also 'replant[ing our attention] in the public, physical realm' in which we may deepen our enmeshment in, awareness of, and curiosity toward the 'bioregional context' of place (p. xii). Because public spaces of appearance or non-commercial encounter are also under the threat of total privatization in late capitalism, the stakes of this project are both expansive and pragmatic. In Odell's words: 'It is important for me to link my critique of the attention economy to the promise of bioregional awareness because I believe that capitalism, colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance toward the environment all coproduce one another' (p. xviii). 'This is why', she continues, in an effort to address the uneven distribution of access to non-productive attention and noncommercial space, 'it is even more important for anyone who does have a margin – even the tiniest one – to put it to use in opening up margins further down the line' by fighting against the development that turns public parks and gardens into private real estate (pp. 94, 181).

Odell's framework for 'doing nothing' is advanced across six chapters. In chapter one, Odell narrates a number of personal reflections about sitting in a rose garden, experiencing the 2016 presidential election, bird watching, working in the marketing department of a large clothing brand, and making found-object art. These stories sketch the principles that orient her call for solitude, granular attention, deep listening, indetermination, and maintenance over production. Chapter two moves from this overview into a survey of historical efforts to disengage from dominant culture. Odell's examples range from the garden school of Epicurus to 1970s anarchist communes and contemporary tech-libertarian post-nation dystopias. The strongest of all the chapters, this introduction to the practice of intentional communities and the idea of prefigurative politics, provides the reader with some relief from what Mark Fisher has famously called the problem of capitalist realism (which is to say, the challenge of imagining alternatives to a capitalist world order). It is here also that we get a glimpse of what I see as a theory of art *as* utopia, conceived not as a fully formed alternative world so much as a moment 'where you can see what [you] were aiming for, even if [you] couldn't hold onto it for long' (p. 54).

A chapter that offers a similar foundational entry into the concept of the attention economy or the history of behavioral science and digital attention design would be well placed at this point. Instead, Odell pursues an unexpected yet lively theory of what political practice might entail at the level of attention. Chapter three proceeds by invoking an array of performance artworks, the performative life of the cynic Diogenes, the often cited 'Bartleby the Scrivener', and a 1930s labor strike – all of which are meant to explain why individual 'refusal-in-place' is needed for collective challenges to the social order. Chapter four lands the reader most directly in a series of reflections

about the connection between art and nature as two domains in which to practice engaging our attention otherwise, while chapter five turns back to the human world to present noncommercial attention as a way of enriching one's understanding of both the self and the social. Finally, chapter six culminates in a call for context, against what Odell refers to as the 'context collapse' of information circulation on social media. It is here that she argues most directly that 'doing nothing', or disengaging from the attention economy, is needed because it helps us work against the de-contextualizing and de-historicizing operations of late capitalism. Ironically, it is by this point as well that one may begin to wonder how to read this book if not as a text decontextualized from those theoretical fields where questions of prefigurative world making (e.g. utopian studies and anarchism), refusal (e.g. Marxism and black studies), non-sovereign subjectivity (e.g. post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, affect theory, disability studies, posthumanism), the political–economic erasure of history (e.g. cultural studies, post-colonial studies, indigenous studies) and mechanism versus indeterminism (e.g. philosophical ontology and media studies) have long been attended to?

Indeed, *How to Do Nothing* may be read in several ways, some more satisfying than others. As an object (with an enviable title and a pleasing cover design) produced by an artist, put out into the world, and accompanied by various book talks on NPR, at Google, and in other art-tech forums, the book admirably carves out space in popular discourse for post-work musings that affirm our nascent post-work desires. As 'an activist book disguised as a self-help book' – a categorization Odell herself offers in the introduction – *How to Do Nothing* operates as a minor weapon of subversive intervention into the entrepreneurial–libertarian self-made work ethic of the neoliberal tech-art ('creative class') spheres in which the book and Ted-talk style book tour have been embraced (p. xxii). As an extended artist talk (the book project was, in fact, solicited as a result of a 2016 artist talk that Odell includes in its original state as the first chapter), the text curates a creative array of influences that span relevant artists and artworks, theoretical citations from antiquity to contemporary critical theory, social media cultural phenomena, and personal anecdotes. This breadth-over-depth citational practice constitutes a common convention in the artist talk genre that often gives such oral presentations their thought-provoking charm. Reading *How to Do Nothing* through any of these three approaches would, I think, appropriately treat Odell's text as a hybrid book/art-object that both represents a set of pressing ideas in narrative form, and calls into being potential post-work counterpublics through circulation, hailing, and the solicitation of a clearing for expressly anti-instrumental contemplative time.

If read as a work of scholarly writing, however, *How to Do Nothing* leaves much to be desired. Extended over 200+ pages, the intellectual and political force of Odell's claims is often diluted by the unclear structure of each chapter. It

is hard not to notice the way that Odell's paragraphs tend to be organized around described objects rather than argumentative claims, as this writerly problem results in a feeling that the chapters consist of a list of examples rather than intentionally selected, analyzed, and mobilized evidence in support of her arguments. Frustration may additionally result for the reader who appreciates the clarity of Odell's prose and is aligned with most if not all of the book's major ideas, yet finds the omissions of expected citations indicative of a larger lack of field context. While a popular press book need not perform the field knowledge and citational practice that is expected of a scholarly text, the lack of context that characterizes Odell's at times haphazard citational practice risks irritating readers familiar with any of the topics she includes, from neoliberal subject formation to bioregionalism, anarchist intentional communities, Arendtian political theory, philosophical approaches to non-sovereign subjectivity, feminist approaches to reproductive labor, bird watching, indigenous land stewardship, the refusal to work, and so on. As a sympathetic yet informed reader, this risk of irritation is unfortunately only heightened by the book's own explicit call for attention to context, against, as Odell puts it, a contemporary tendency in popular media to 'throw' information at the reader 'in no particular order' (p. 175). The writerly problems presented by *How to Do Nothing* do not deplete the timely importance of Odell's ideas, or warrant a dismissal of the book. Yet they do raise a serious question for me, as an interested reader and scholar who co-inhabits this unusually particular intersection of fields, about whom the audience is that this book best serves?

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