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Trans visibility and trans viability: a Roundtable

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Abstract. This Roundtable is crafted from the online event held on Saturday 20 November 2021 on Trans Visual Cultures. That event was organized to celebrate the recently published themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* on new work in transgender art and visual cultures, guest edited by Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg, and suggested for the journal by Jill H Casid. The themed issue emerged from a session run at the College Art Association in New York, 2018, programmed by Metzger and Ringelberg. For the event in November 2021, some of the contributors to the journal's themed issue (Kara Carmack, Sascha Crasnow, Stamatina Gregory, Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg) were joined by interlocutor Jill Casid, and respondent Jack Halberstam to share their thoughts on trans visual culture/s now, and to consider what it is to write trans visual culture, as well as to live in relation to transness. The event happened to fall on Transgender Day of Remembrance. Given the fraught or ambivalent feelings that many have about such a day, the event was also taken as an occasion to talk about ways of untethering trans visibility from what is lethal to trans viability. After the event, the organizers solicited a few additional reflections on concerns that emerged – in particular around matters of the visual, trans visibility, and lived experience. These are brought together to act as a refractive prism for what happens when we center thinking seriously with the implications and potentials of trans art and visual culture for trans hopes and fears, kinship and community, lives and loves. The publication of this Roundtable takes the themed issue as a crucial springboard for critical, transversal trans* imaginings of the variant worlds to be unfolded by undoing the lock of the gender binary and its settler colonial and white supremacist violences, and to further the demand that thinking with trans alters substantially the ways we approach the visual.

Keywords. Trans bodies, abstraction, figuration, haptic, trans-relationality, shimmer

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Introductory remarks

Jill Casid (JC): Hello, welcome everyone. It's so great to see so many familiar faces, and folks tuning in from so many different places, in every sense of that word. And we really appreciate everyone making time on a Saturday, particularly after the news yesterday that Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of all charges brought against him. We've been protesting today, and pre-protesting yesterday; you'll remember Rittenhouse killed Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber, and wounded Gaige Grosskreutz during anti-racism protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin, following the police shooting in August 2020 of a Black man, Jacob S Blake, by a white Kenosha police officer.

So, hey, welcome. My name's Jill Casid. Pronouns, she/they. I am the granddaughter of Jewish refugees who refuses Zionism and insists on solidarity with Palestine in naming to dismantle the Apartheid regime of our time as a praxis of love. I'm gender confused and confounding, having been girled but not at home in the cis-hood to which I've been consigned. I am a Professor of Visual Studies in the Departments of Art History and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a land-grab institution which occupies the unceded territory of the Ho-Chunk nation. I want to thank Chi-ming Yang for the acknowledgement that Zoom is not outside settler colonial occupation. The Zoom corporate technology which brings us together virtually is headquartered in San Jose, CA on unceded Muwekma Ohlone land. We must remember that virtual space too has a material basis (and participates in the ongoing legacies of land theft).

We must also acknowledge the difficulty of this day. Transgender Day of Remembrance participates all too frequently in what Jasbir Puar, C Riley Snorton, Che Gossett, and Jin Haritaworn among others have called out as forces not just of transnormalization but also of trans necropolitics, the disposability and extraction by which Black trans afterlives figure so often as the raw material or props for the generation and incorporation of 'respectable' trans subjects.

Many of us are still reeling from the Kyle Rittenhouse jury decision in Wisconsin yesterday that re-enforced state-protected white supremacist extra-legal vigilantism. The violence of white supremacy as necropolitical structure is a machine of traumatic repetition. Undoing that necropolitical machine of anti-blackness is a trans issue. Acknowledgment without material consideration of Landback, reparations and abolition is not enough.

Prismatic views

JC: So thank you again for making time to be here in conversation with us to celebrate the *Journal of Visual Culture*'s 20th anniversary, and also and especially the journal's recent themed issue on new work in Transgender

Art and Visual Culture Studies, guest edited by Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg. Today's event takes that themed issue as a crucial springboard for critical trans-versal trans-imaginings of the variant world to be unfolded by undoing the lock of the gender binary and its settler colonial and white supremacist violences. We come here together, then, to share our thoughts on trans visual culture now, and consider what it is to write trans visual culture as well as live in relation to trans-ness. As this event happens to fall on Transgender Day of Remembrance, and given the fraught, ambivalent, difficult feelings that many of us have about such a day, we will also take the occasion of this gathering to talk about ways of untethering trans visibility from what is lethal to trans viability.

For the co-edited themed issue *New Work in Transgender Art and Visual Culture Studies*, Kirstin Ringelberg and Cyle Metzger framed their constellation of new work with an introduction that oriented us toward the as yet, catalyzing our reading of the journal as if a crystalline un/structure that opens trans onto altering ways of making and unmaking the very terms of visibility with 'Prismatic views: A look at the growing field of transgender art and visual culture studies'.

I hand you over to Kirstin and Cyle for a few brief remarks to reframe our consideration of 'Prismatic views'.

Kirstin Ringelberg (KR): Good morning, afternoon, evening, wherever you happen to be. I'm in a house called mine, but it is of course sitting on land stolen from the Sappony, Shakori, and Eno people. The Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation has its tribal grounds and office quite nearby and I'm going to drop the link to that in the Chat (https://obsn.org/) and I encourage you to show material support for them if you are able, or do the same for those whose land you are currently on, as we work towards land repatriation and tribal sovereignty. As a white person living in North Carolina, I'm also in a place where the land was of course worked for white profit by kidnapped enslaved West Africans and their descendants. I believe we all have a duty to enact real reparations for enslavement on the systemic level, by all the means available to us.

I feel a tremendous gratitude today to be in a community with so many wonderful people. People I know personally and love, but also people whose ideas, words, and art have generated transformative experiences for me, my students, and many others [chokes up]. Sorry, it's been an emotional time, as I'm sure it is for you too.

And obviously we wouldn't be talking today if we didn't have a wonderful set of contributors, all of whom wrote texts that were compelling and raised distinct issues for us to grapple with. As we said in the introduction to the issue, our goal was to show that the picture we presented was even greater than any individual contribution. Quoting Cyle and I, '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'. And I feel like that spirit needs to be brought into this space. Jill has already brought it into the space in important ways. And I hope that you'll join us in that spirit; thank you for being here.

JC: I had also wanted to emphasize that critical figure, the idea of the crystalline structure–unstructure of the prism, and speak of how in your Introduction you give it a particular trans-ing turn in order to frame not just how you understand *the contributions* to be working together, but also how you'd like *us* to not just read the issue but actually to *do* things with it; almost treating it as a means to open onto altering ways of making and unmaking the very terms of visibility. So, yes, the Introduction is called 'prismatic views', but that also seems to be not just a way of characterizing the contributions but also an *activation* that's asking us to do something particular with it.

Cyle Metzger (CM): You put it better than I could have, Jill. That is just what we were after with this issue. We wanted to cultivate a sense of what art objects do and what visual materials do in particular when addressing transness. We were thinking about the real visual stakes and the relationship between visibility and invisibility, but also materiality, bodily materiality that we are always forced to contend with. I think that makes the *Journal of Visual Culture* a particularly useful and important place to have these conversations because of these material and visual questions that we're always coming up against, both in our scholarship but also in our lived experiences of being gendered, however we identify or relate to that.

We wanted to make space for exploring visual and object-oriented work that raises new questions that expand the scope of trans studies in a visual sense but also in a broader cultural sense.

Thinking about the prismatic question, that extends I think beyond just the splitting of a visual space into the splitting of this material space and material existence that we have and thinking about what relationship the visual has to our own sense of embodiment and these cultural stakes of what it is we look like. What we look like is always a prismatic experience because we never look like one thing in one context or in multiple contexts. There's this variability of our appearance all the time.

The prism was Kirstin's idea, and I thought that was a totally apt object metaphor for resisting the often accidental framework of transness as a myopic or singular thing. I think that gave us an opportunity to make this issue and the questions that we bring to it much more capacious. It also let us think about these questions in synchronous and asynchronous relationship to one another because a number of the articles that are in this issue did have some differing positions and differing reads of trans-visuality and materiality. So I couldn't think of a better object to represent our aims.

JC: Well, I think it's beautiful the way the prism becomes for you a rather attractive figure for what could also be understood as a shattering, splitting, or cutting conflict. And then, even if it's not reparative per se, it nonetheless becomes a site that you can activate for some possibility besides just stuckness or wounding.

CM: Today is Transgender Day of Remembrance, which, at least in years past, has had a real somber memorial quality. This, of course, is warranted in many respects, but I'm seeing more and more of these community events be about celebrating trans life, and I think that's a really important turn. Your words about embracing the split that can come with the violence and the breaking of trans existence, I think it's a fantastic element of transness: you've pinpointed that there's this deliberate and invited splitting of the rhetorics that we're born into and socialized into. I think that's a really wonderful addition to the idea of prism in terms of trans existence more broadly.

KR: One of the things that I like about that metaphor, that visual image, is it's a visual image from a material thing. I also like the idea of all the ways that the refracted light can be everywhere in different ways, and does so without a focus on the center, without a focus on a normative structural system. Cáel Keegan was really influential on my thinking early on about Trans Visual Studies. There's a particular quote from Cáel that I think aligns with what Cyle was just saying:

> In the meantime, trans studies belongs exclusively to no one and nowhere, and perhaps this condition is the hidden advantage of *but*. To be *except*, *apart from*, *other than* is a condition of mourning only for those who value and expect arrival. (Keegan, 2020: 394).

I think connecting to that idea of the way that transness has always been capacious in not creating centers and avoiding those normative structures is what I hope Cyle and I maintain in our Introduction to the themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*.

CM: The invitation to participate in the *Journal of Visual Culture*'s 20th-anniversary programming with this Roundtable gave us the opportunity to expand this aim even further than we were able to in the issue itself. Kirstin, Jill, and I invited contributors to the issue to reflect on their aims for their articles, their thoughts on their piece and the journal as a whole, now that some time has passed since we finished it. We also welcomed anything else that came to mind as they considered our invitation to participate in the anniversary event. Kara Carmack and Sascha Crasnow started us off with presentations that recapped their articles. Stamatina Gregory began our reflective conversation on the issue with generously personal comments on writing about Patrick Staff's 'Weed Killer' which we have retained in their entirety as they extend well beyond what was published in the themed issue.

Stamatina Gregory (SG): From Lenapehoking, the ancestral territory of the Lenape and the Canarsee, I want to thank Kirstin, Cyle, and Jill. So, very briefly, my article in the issue discusses Patrick Staff's video, 'Weed Killer', which I first encountered when it was shown in 2017 at the New Museum exhibition entitled 'Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon' organized by Johanna Burton. I had such an emotional response to this video that I knew I needed to write about it; put very briefly, I posit the unruly bodies of 'Weed Killer' as refusing to uphold a falsely unassailable binary between the sick and the well, and between gender normativity and gender pathology.

In response to today's invitation to reflect on how one would extend this research, I might reflect more fully on whether cancer metaphors can even be read in productive relationship to my inquiry about misrecognition. In thinking about the constant deployment of both Susan Sontag's (1978) analysis of cancer metaphors in academia, and theory and metaphors about cancer in medical practice (which Siddhartha Mukherjee, 2010, has called 'the Emperor of All Metaphors'), I asked myself: could I even begin without an adequate taking down of the metaphor itself before entering into this idea of misrecognition?

I want to think about the lineage of thought that I engage in in this article, and thinking about how so many of those histories on illness and health, and on their intersections with transness have been written by white authors and white theorists. And one of the things that it is necessary to do is to further engage Black theorists, thinking about, for example, everything that Hortense Spillers (1987: 79) has written on the mis- and dis-gendering of Black women. One thing that I did not include in this text was my own illness narrative, which inevitably informs my analysis. And I really appreciated the question posed by JC, CM, and KR to discussants prior to the live event about the relationship of each contributor toward transness. I am a person who has undergone various forms of cancer treatment, multiple times in my life; lymphoma as a teenager, during which I was treated with the cocktail of chemotherapies, including the one for which 'Weed Killer' was named (the nickname for a drug called Adriamycin, also known as the Red Death) as well as levels of mantle radiation that I was told would probably give me breast cancer. And which, in fact, did give me breast cancer. Early on, I internalized and resisted what I felt able to resist: both cultural understandings of cancer and its causes as they relate to one's own emotional or spiritual constitution. Where does this come from? Where are you supposed to go afterward? Thinking about forms of resistance: resisting the pressure to perform gender as a compromise to the physical effects of cancer treatment, to appear to have hair, to not refuse breast reconstruction, to refuse prosthetics. Resisting the pressure to perform devastation at the loss of bodily signifiers that force one (and/or force those around them) to pay attention to how much gender is actually constructed.

Having experienced personally the extent to which patients are expected to adhere to prevailing medical standards of care, which really deeply reveals the medical establishment's intractable shaping by cisnormative and heteronormative narratives, I would have more clearly pointed to the fact that no current medical research addresses cancer treatment disparities specifically for LGBTQ+ populations, particularly for those who lack the privilege of appearing cisgender, heterosexual, able bodied, and white. And the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in cancer treatment and the impact of related knowledge seeking on communication and treatment practices has been not only profoundly understudied, but profoundly under practiced in the medical professions.

So my own relationship to transness has been shaped and complicated by these experiences. They have also productively disrupted my own notions of assimilation to the forms that transness takes, or is supposed to take – the medicalized narrative of endeavoring to match one's outside to one's inside. My relationship to transness is an evolving way of understanding my own physical transformations in recent years. For example, in asking how I can not only accept, but plan and undergo and delight in the alterations to my body that for some others, and for many of those within cancer communities, are seen as devastating. How I can reconcile that delight with an unrelenting proximity to a future of pain and mortality, and how to understand the complicated and fraught and sometimes harmful idea of healing, as never a return and always a transformation. I'll end there.

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JC: It is a joyful honor to introduce the force that is Jack Halberstam, the public intellectual whose restless and ongoingly provocative praxis has done so much to animate the critical possibilities of trans* bodies as an under-construction coalitional project and imaginative projection for undoing lethal forms of embodiment and relation, kin and kind. Halberstam does this by reformulating and resituating the question of representing trans bodies to make not just apprehensible or necessary but boldly desirable trans* as an art of bodily becoming in – to quote the phrase that opens out the end of his interventionist handbook for activating the haptics and handmade, the crafting, the somatechnics, the alter temporalities signaled and amplified by the as yet crucially unnameable and unknowable of the opening and connective and wilding asterixing of Trans*: the 'fleshly insistence of transitivity'. An advocate for what alternative histories can do in mapping the potentialities of bewilderment, Halberstam's *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020) bends us toward the feral, the incipient and the otherwise. For their magnificent essay, 'Unbuilding Gender: Trans* Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark, *Places Journal* awarded Halberstam its Arcus/Places Prize in 2018 for innovative public scholarship on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the built environment.

Halberstam is now finishing a second volume on wildness titled *Unworlding: An Aesthetics of Collapse.* Halberstam was recently the subject of a short film 'So We Moved' by Adam Pendleton (MoMA, 2022) and I hope we'll have a chance to speak to what it does to the museum institution as well as to Jack's inimitable ways of mobilizing the anarchitectures of undoing of gender as part of a means of blowing down the master's house. To quote Jack:

> We are living in an ideological bouncy house, where a few large white Americans jump for joy and at each bounce we lose more people down the edges of the whole grotesque, imploding structure. It is time to tear the bouncy house down, with or without the master's tools, and to turn to the language of unmaking, unbuilding, undoing, refusing capital's vertiginous techniques of litigious accusation and criminalization (Trans*Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark Places Journal, October 2018).

Jack Halberstam (JH): I just want to say some things about the way in which the transgender body and transgender experience over time have presented all kinds of problems for visual representation. And I'll start with Jill's provocation there by saying that finding myself the subject of visual representation in this film that Adam Pendleton made was a really terrifying and brutal experience. And it gave me just so much respect for the way in which so many trans people have allowed themselves to become subject to these cinematic inquiries in ways that are exposing, they lay you bare. And yet they're so necessary, just in terms of disrupting the protocols of representation that keep returning us to the gender binary. And so, just for an example, in this film, I undress in a changing room to get ready to go swimming and talk about my top surgery. And, that's the kind of thing, I don't know, probably 20 years ago, that would've been a nightmare for me to do, not at all something that I wanted. And I still don't think it's something that I wanted, but it gave me a different appreciation, if you like, of the terror of facing the camera as a gender nonconforming subject. So I'll just start with that.

But what I really appreciate in terms of what we've heard today from contributors to the themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* is just the broadness of this trans archive that people have brought to the table, and the refusal of the usual signposts and the usual tropes of trans representation in favor of this transnational and avant-garde set of representations. And, to just remind us again of this focus here on an in-betweenness that is also capturing the tension between Jewish and Palestinian identities, and the way in which land plays its role in that tension, as Sascha discusses.

It's amazing for all that material to emerge in that incredible, beautiful mermaid image by Saba Taj. The in-between figure lying on the sand, which made me think of the image that circulated of the Syrian child's body on the beach near the Turkish resort of Bodrum, that mobilized global sympathies

in a way that this figure cannot. And so that's one reminder here that the visual requires very particular figures in order to mobilize, let's say, global empathy, whereas to place a trans figure and a figure that is mythologically in between on the beach in Jafa to dramatize the occupation of land creates a set of contradictory moves that complicate both the way in which the Israel–Palestine complex is discussed, but also complicates how we talk about trans imagery. So that was really compelling to me, but also, and this is something that I've tried to talk about a lot, and I'm hoping we could maybe get into in the discussion: the relationship between ground and figure when it comes to the trans body.

And that image by Saba Taj was a very cool, a very beautiful dramatization of a question that comes from this, the complexities of this ground–figure relationship: are we looking at the body as a metaphor for land or the land as a metaphor for body? What is the relationship between figure and ground in an image like that?

I think Stamatina's presentation on that amazing combination of Patrick Staff's video and Catherine Lorde's memoir (*The Summer of Her Baldness*) is a really beautiful reminder of all the different conditions under which the body loses its relationship to coherent gender norms. There are many such conditions. Some have to do with transitioning, some have to do with illness, some have to do with aging, some have to do with context, some have to do with clothing, some have to do with failing. And I really appreciate the non-identitarian scope of this issue, this desire to map a trans cinematic, trans visuality that does not simply reside in coherently trans bodies. And that seems like a really important move to make right now. It is the move that I believe Eliza Steinbock's book *Shimmering Images* makes in which Steinbock directs our attention not simply to which figures make it into the film or how they are visualized in front of the camera, but how light plays across bodies.

And that's why the emphasis here is on shimmering, on the sparkling, as Roland Barthes et al. (2005) write about it in *The Neutral*, these particular relationships to light that maybe we can call trans, that don't simply require a trans body that is identifiable as such. And I know we're in danger there of then losing the specificity of the social position of the trans, but in a journal of visual culture, we have to take that risk in order to say something different about visuality and what becomes visible and what can never become visible. For example, when I was listening to Kara's presentation on Potassa, I was also thinking about that beautiful chapter in *Wayward Lives* (2019), by Saidiya Hartman on Gladys Bentley, where Hartman imagines a film by Oscar Micheaux that is never made, but a montage sequence in which Gladys Bentley appears. And then, by the end of Hartman's chapter, has disappeared again, back into womanhood.

And Hartman is very precise about calling Gladys Bentley 'he', throughout the chapter, even when she's talking about Bentley's reintegration into womanhood, and she notes the violence with which the visual recaptures the trans Black fugitive body. The Black trans body that has escaped this gender protocol and has also attempted to escape white surveillance regimes in the nightclub, and is able to do so. But back in the so-called real world of white supremacy has to retreat back into womanhood. I guess the questions that I want us to think about, then, are: how is the relationship between figure and ground addressed?

Undoing figure-ground

JH: I for one have been trying for the last 20 years to write about transness, separate from the figure. The early work on trans that was pioneered by Chris Straayer and Kara Keeling, and others, gave us the formal grammar for how trans bodies might come into visibility, but still focused upon the figure. I want to think about transing as a visual method that can also come apart from the figure. Can trans be abstract for example? This is something I asked way back in my book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), in which I had a kooky chapter on abstract representations of the trans body that then were taken up a little bit by David Getsy (Getsy, 2015), but I'm still asking that question in my new work on collapse (*Unworlding: An Aesthetics of Collapse*, in progress).

Can we think about queer and trans representation, separate from a parade by the charismatic transfeminine figures or beautiful embodied, almost cismasculine gay figures? Those are the figures that the camera loves because we live in a visual regime that has created those bodies as lovable. So what happens when we try to leave the body in order to get into some of that material around shimmering and sparkling light, playing on water to quote the title of Samuel Delany's autobiography (1988), to think differently about the relationship between landscape and figure, and think that maybe the figure is not the organizing principle of every damn visual representation. It's such a human-centric thing to make everything knowable to us, only through the figure.

So I think that leaves us nicely with this question, then, about the relations between ground and figure, the possibility of some formal strategies based in abstraction rather than figuration, and then, finally, I'd love to hear from people about this quite significant shift that has happened, I think, generationally, when considering the terms and conditions of production and reception in relationship to trans visual culture. What difference does it make that we are now 20, 30 years on from some of the early representations of contemporary trans visual culture? Those are my questions. Congratulations to everybody

who is involved in this issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*, and tonight's event, and thank you so much for inviting me to join you.

JC: Well, amazing all. I know that we at least have one person in the house who is writing on queer abstraction. Lex, are you interested in saying something?

Lex Morgan Lancaster (LML): Yes, my work is really committed to abstraction and non-representational strategies that refuse the visual regimes Jack Halberstam just discussed where the figure is always the central privileged figure of desire and gendered experience. For example, in my forthcoming book (*Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art*, 2022) I write about the hard edge that would seem to define a figure or form as a strategy of revolt against such containment, and that revolt happens especially through the work's unruly materiality. I often write about the excessive materiality of objects, and this relates to the trans experience of physical incoherence that exceeds predetermined codes – the risk of relating this to my trans experience is that my analysis may be (and has been) dismissed as mere personal projection.

Our images can never be detached from the danger of that visibility; we cannot control how our images are seen or used. But I don't think we all necessarily need to 'get away from' figuration and the body in trans studies; rather, our approaches are expanding such that a figure might not always signify so literally. The figure is not just a given, but a problem to wrestle with, and thinking the body as a possible site for liberation will continue to be important. We also can't ignore the trans artists for whom the figure and the body continue to be viable. At the same time, we can forge other possible approaches. Taking abstraction seriously does not mean universally abandoning the figure.

Expanding our inquiry toward the landscape, for example, we can investigate a trans orientation or way of being in the world (even as sexuality is the thing we consider an 'orientation'), that has to do with a certain malleability – a fluidity which is natural but attributed to bodies deemed unnatural. In addition to that trans attachment to the figure, there are also trans attachments to the land; to the tools of physical science and digital technologies; to science fiction and outer space; and yes, even to minimalist sculpture. We need all these tools at our disposal if we are to imagine, in order to create, a more just future.

JC: I was thinking too, Lex, about your article on Sadie Benning (Lancaster, 2017), and the startling move from autobiographical, auto theoretical video to abstract painting, and much of the way that you analyzed Benning's work, I think, touches on what you were doing with haptics in relation to the work of Jeanne Vaccaro, which has also been so important for many of the contributions to this issue. Maybe I'm especially thinking of Cole Rizki's essay, where haptics is also not just a mode of making, but a different relation

of the viewer. And I think that maybe that's also an aspect of the question: not just who shows up, but what disorientation, in terms of what we've so clumsily continued to call spectatorship, and that's assuming a particular sensory and corporeal appearing. And yet to think the other way that is not just about what architectures may do to shift embodiment and perception, but what installation and even tiny paintings can do in calling up a rather different mode of being in the space, that perception rather than any sort of given might be understood to be choreographed by the work.

KR: I just want to jump in to say that when you receive your copy of our issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*, you'll see that the first article after our Introduction is by Eliza [Steinbock]. And they talk explicitly about this notion that comes into play in shimmering images, as well as their idea of the wavering line of foreground and background. I think that also links to what Lex was saying, of ways to think about the way that trans figuration gets foregrounded in certain cases, backgrounded in other cases, always against something that it's going to be read as 'wrong' in comparison to something else, even if it's 'right'. That line not being a hard one, that line being wavering, I think is a really crucial part of Eliza's argument that I really appreciate. Cyle and I decided to start with that article as a reminder to think about the way that figuration was operating as you move through the following contributions as well. So thank you for raising that, and, yes, let's open up this question of moving beyond the figure, and figuration, and what is or may be lost, but also what is gained, of course . . .

SG: A couple of thoughts. First in relation to my article in the issue, I wanted to mention Staff's use of the heat camera, which even when it was deployed against the figure, it turned the figure into a kind of topography that did not differentiate between foreground and background. Also, he appears in the video as they dance as a tiny figure . . . and they're really dwarfed by this enormous cement mixer, which is also filmed with the heat camera, and so this idea that the figure is actually dwarfed by the built environment. This is the environment in which we live. We live in a world of human architecture, which is always going to shape our subjectivities. Also . . . and I appreciate, Lex, what you said about an important space for painting in terms of the disappearance between figure and ground to not-trans artists, but thinking about, for example, Cristina Coral's work, Leasho Johnson's work thinking about this inability to differentiate the figure or to disentangle one figure from another. And, also, thinking about a new acquisition by Leslie Lohman of Cassils' piece, *PISSED* (2017), which is a 400-gallon tank of the artist's urine collected over almost a year. It's a kind of glowing cube, which really belongs squarely in the history of abstract minimalism, deployed as a work of protest that is intimately connected to the body and to transness.

Kara Carmack (KC): Potassa offered me, for my research published in *Journal of Visual Culture*, and since, a case study that led me in hindsight to contemplate such a multistable approach. Like so many others, Potassa has

existed in history's 'ground', the hazy landscape taken for granted in histories of notable figures like Grace Jones and Andy Warhol, places like Studio 54, and cultural moments like the dazzling disco era. To write a history of a trans diasporic woman of color is to not simply move her from the background to the foreground, from the ground to the figure. Rather, it provides opportunities to rethink the relationship between the two in art historical and trans studies, to complicate and problematize the figure/ground dichotomy, and to craft a methodology that doesn't merely vacillate between the two, but that holds multitudinous possibilities at the same time.

Eliza Steinbock (ES): While I would not want to conflate background, landscape, and public, nor foreground, figure, and individual body, in whichever combination, their analysis enables the study of surface tension. A case demonstrating the artistic research of surface tension in crisis is the narrative writing and videographic works of Ada Marcia Patterson, whose aesthetics derive from their home island of Barbados, including its tidal pools, hurricanes, and sexual/gender discretion as a condition that Patterson says feels like 'bobbing up and down' just below the surface. The crisis of such surface tensions relates to turbulence in bodily, racial, and ecological modes then. Sections from their short speculative fiction essay 'Broken from the Colony' (https://grist.org/fix/imagine-2200-climate-fiction-broken-from-the-colony/) are used as spoken word in the 2min30sec video 'An Affirmation' that shares an experience of receiving gender-affirming care, by way of HRT, which is likened to the ability of breathing underwater, and never shows their body as a whole, erring on the opaque side of thing to avoid questions and scrutiny. Through underwater filming, looking up to the ceiling of water, we see the 'surface world' changing and rippling, forming a distorted looking glass and showing us that the world can change too. The work of Patterson that examines the surface tension between bodyscapes and worldscapes, expands our inquiry into the relationship of figure to (watery) ground.

Susan Stryker (SS): I second that emotion regarding the need to pay as much attention to landscape as to figure, and to attend to non-figural and non-representational dimensions of trans art. I was trying to do that in my article on El Kazovsky for the themed issue. As noted, much of his work is about enacting and documenting a repetitive process of elaborating identification and desire without landing on a particular idealized self-image. There is a reciprocal relationship in his paintings between the unstable symbolic figurations of psychodynamic processes and the landscapes on which these shifting figures cast their shadows, between the organization of space and the possibilities for psychical and physical movement and presence within it. At the end of the day, I take a pretty orthodox Deleuzoguattarian stance on 'dividuation' versus 'individuation', and see embodiment (and hence figuration) as a reconfigurable element within a given milieu. What counts as figure or foreground versus environment or background depends on how you slice and dice the arrangement of parts that are made to cohere into molar aggregates that become available as surfaces for identificatory attachment

through the operation of historically and culturally specific 'somatechnics', or materio-discursive practices of constituting embodied subjectivities. Part of what intrigues me about El Kazovsky is precisely that he obsessively stages and restages the reconfigurability of figure and ground, in an infinite loop of projecting desire onto an ever-shifting molecular substrate that returns to unsettle every provisional act of identification.

Sascha Crasnow (SC): Obviously in the context of Palestine, the ground, the land is of supreme importance! As a scholar of Palestine, the relationship to the landscape is paramount for many of the artists I discuss. In my contribution to the *Journal of Visual Culture* issue, I discuss the work of Raafat Hattab. As a Palestinian citizen of Israel, he is inherently in a state of 'inbetween-ness' with regard to his relationship to the land. He lives on the physical land of historic Palestine, but it is a land governed by Israel, and which continuously rejects and denies his ownership of and historic and intimate relationship to that land. An assertion of this connection to the land is embodied in the tattoo he receives (from a Jewish–Israeli tattooer) in the video, a marking of the landscape of his body with an assertion of his own ties to the physical landscape of Palestine. It's a transgressive space in both Jewish and Muslim religions, and the tattoo that he's getting says, 'Jaffa, Bride of Palestine', which is a character he plays. He dresses in drag in a bridal gown and plays Jaffa, Bride of Palestine, but is also a feminized name that is used to talk about the city of Jaffa. So, you have this infliction of pain on the body, but there're also, through this figural representation, a subversive assertion of Palestinian ownership of the land by an Israeli through the tattoo. And so, even when the land per se, is sort of the body, it nonetheless becomes the land. And so the difference between the two kind of blurs in a lot of ways as well, which I really appreciate.

I recently wrote about these possibilities that the lack of fixity put forward by a trans studies methodology might provide for diasporic or multiracial individuals whose ethnic, racial, and/or cultural identities are multitudinous and may be shifting from day to day, or one situation to another.

JH: I actually spent time in Jaffa as a kid and was really surprised as an adult to come back and find that that city was gone. It was no longer this Arab city. It had been completely taken over, and so that figure on the beach, I think it is doing an enormous amount of work visually and politically.

Visibility: traps, problems, and possibilities

JC: I'm just going to say really fast that I'm thinking, also, about where we started with the prism as a way of thinking within the site of what for so long has been talked about as the medium of photography and the medium of cinema, but of course now we're in a moment in which that's no longer the case, and compulsory visualization is the sea that we're swimming in and

the camera, of course, has an especially violent, but also adoring relationship to 'the body', but also, that spectacularization of the trans body and that particular foregrounding of it that we've heard about today.

We could also think about various artists working with camera-less photography as a way of taking the tools of photography and stealing them away from not just the Identitarian, but the force of identification and refusing image-making altogether. That becomes, I think, more striking, poignant, maybe even materially exciting when it's using the tools of the medium that is still so much about that capture of biodata and the body. So, one can think for instance about Joy Episalla's photograms that she calls foldtograms and which unfold what photochemicals can do when not conscripted to capture, much less fix, an image (Casid, 2020), but I'm thinking, especially for this conversation about Jonah Groeneboer's series called 'Diffractive Acts' that involve both camera-less prints and projections that make the kind of possibilities for that splitting that we were talking about earlier, the scene of a different kind of trans way of looking, which is about a capacity to not just live with, but even make something beautiful out of that sense of seeing in more than one direction and even the splitting of light.

Wiley Sharp (WS): Thank you all for that generative conversation. I'm a cultural geographer, and this has been such a beautiful counterpoint to my own line of research. Throughout the conversation, I kept coming back to this question about visuality and its privileged epistemic position, especially within the Academy. Jack mentioned that some things are able to be rendered visually, but others can never become visual. I was wondering about how, methodologically – I'm thinking about landscapes in particular – we can think the visual alongside and through the olfactory, the auditory, and the proprioperceptive in order to trouble that hierarchy and, perhaps, integrate these different multisensory experiences into our knowledge. Or to put it another way: if the prism focuses the world into these shimmers or beams of light, what does the shimmer feel like on the body? How can we comprehend that in dialogue with the visual?

CM: I'd like to jump in. I really love the attention to, the pointing towards sound as something that is perhaps in an incongruous or difficult relationship with the visual. And I've been thinking myself – and perhaps this is based on personal experience – but I'm not always clocked as trans until I open my mouth and my voice is heard. That makes me think about this incongruous relationship, or this difficulty, because when something is seen, the sound itself is not always present. Conversely, there's the sound of the voice that cannot ever be pictured or represented, despite the fact that is such a part of my own lived trans experience. So it leaves this question of how to account for that, how to engage with that. For me, that gives rise to tensions between picturing the figure and the abandonment or ignoring of the figure. Thus, as Wiley suggested, sound could perhaps be one of these places that troubles the relationship between the figure and ground because it is the body that

produces the sound that extends beyond the body and into the ground. The ground can also signify the absence of the body or the context that shapes how the body is understood. In either case, sound has a capacity to move away from or 'de-visualize', if we can use that term, the body in trans work. So I love your point, that was a long way of saying that!

SC: Just to build on that in terms of sound, especially in Raafat Hattab's work, so much of how that work's articulations are made manifest is through sound. So when he's lying on the beach, the only sounds you hear, except for occasionally his aunt's voice telling the narrative, which overlays a lot of the scenes, is the sound of the waves crashing, and there's an individual who's wrapped in a fishing net playing an old Arabic tune on the violin, this mournful traditional song. And so again, there's a reasserting of the Arab nature of this land through this song and the trapped-ness, and references to the Little Mermaid story, which was very much an inspiration for the work. And then in the scenes with the tattoo, the buzzing of the tattoo pen is the thing that carries on throughout, it's the only thing you hear. There's no conversation between the individuals, and so much of what's going on is purely activated through sound.

CM: Perhaps to have another counter question in relation to whether or not to end on abandoning the figure: I have been thinking about the artist, Nash Glynn; many of her paintings are all about the portrayal of a trans feminine body in its full capacity, as it is lived for Nash, who still has a penis and genitals and has breasts. I've been really struck by those paintings because they prize figuration in a way that I haven't seen before, in a way that speaks to histories of figuration in art that are far more traditional. It pulls on these strings of traditional art history, which are, in and of themselves, really, really troubling and really difficult. Nash's work presents us with an honorific opportunity to engage with such histories of art that have made issues of embodiment in a culture more broadly so fraught.

Jack Halberstam (JH): I really appreciate those works because they give us an opportunity to perhaps continue to build on Keeling's and Chris Straayer's work to think: what more is there to say about figuration? I think that the move to expand beyond figuration is incredibly important, however, for me, it feels like there's more to be said about figuration in order to continue to broaden the capacity of trans art and visual studies because trans bodies continue to be the sites of anti-trans violence.

Cole Rizki (CR): Linking together issues raised in both the previous section of the conversation and this one, the approach I take to thinking about the visual, figuration, and representation is necessarily inflected by geopolitics and the particular national, regional, and hemispheric histories that condition trans life and death beyond the confines of US liberal democracy. In writing trans visual culture and in elaborating trans studies, more broadly, what are the inherent assumptions structuring the theoretical frameworks we mobilize to sense and to interpret trans visual culture? Do we read trans

visual culture through the imperatives of trans studies? If so, trans studies has developed within the US academy and its critiques of state violence and power assume democratic state formation as the central organizing mode of governance through which sex, gender, racial, and class formations emerge and become knowable as such. This singular focus of trans studies on the liberal democratic state and, indeed, on US democracy itself does not adequately address democracy's absence or the forms of illiberal state violence and state formation that occur outside the US nation-state and that contour the relationship between trans visibility and politics. Indeed, in the absence of democracy, we might reconsider how the correspondence between trans visibility and trans viability has been theorized to account for illiberal structures of governance and power. In my contribution to this themed issue, as in my other published work and monograph in progress, I suggest that, rather than liberal bids for inclusion, in the context of illiberalism and its legacies, trans activists' negotiations of existing historical discourses through visual culture production are in fact history-making practices that actively reinterpret the aims and scope of illiberal and authoritarian modes of power, forms of governance, and national histories. Attention to geopolitics can reshape how we theorize the correlations (or lack thereof) between trans visibility and viability.

Marquis Bey(MB): Long have I been obsessed, truly, with figurative impossibility and the paraontological, which might be briefly (un)defined as a desedimentation of the very grapples that index distinction between subjects, or a critical relation to that which predicates distinctions between things. In short, I have long been obsessed with how and where we choose to find distinctions between things such that they are different things. Who decided on these things as important in distinguishing this from that; why not those things? Or, why anything at all? And this seems to me one of the things trans offers: a skepticism regarding the anatomy, literal and proverbial, of normativity and departures from normativity. Trans emerges, then, as not a specific figure; indeed, it might emerge as the name for, exactly, the impossibility of delimiting a figuration for a certain kind of subject, always attentive to that which had to be excluded in order for the limning of the figure to take place. Perhaps we might shift toward understanding trans as a quotidian practice of reading, of relating, of posturing (which is not a body), of dis/positioning, or of engendering (how lovely that there is a sonic resonance of the Spillersian ungendering here). Doing this, we could note trans through how things relate to one another and how things shift or topple and emerge; we emphasize practice and groove, movement and unfixing, rather than trying to find a proper figuration which necessarily deems certain figurations improper and invalid.

JH: In relation to trans experience and the position from which I write and make, I'd say that my own work doesn't so much write about the specificities of trans visual culture (though there is, of course, an element of it insofar as I write about transness in relation to visuality or being seen [and, though again,

there is a critique of this sentiment in all I write]). But what I do write about is what it might be to experience trans, both of these terms – experience and trans – under a kind of generative interrogation. So, I understand myself through nonbinariness, which is, in my estimation, not androgyny or falling visually in between 'man' and 'woman' but, more acutely and iconoclastically I think, the refusal of gender as an apparatus of subjectivation; nonbinariness as a modality of subjectivating oneself precisely outside of gender, such that gender is, and I mean this, abolished in its course. To write about that, that kind of transness, let's say, is to write, as I do, about the nega-experiential and the unrealistic because it is trying to move through experience's fractures – experiences that consistently say 'You are still perceived as a man; you still have male privilege even if you are nonbinary' or 'Nonbinariness is just an attempt to not acknowledge your privilege' – and find a way to exist in such a way that glimpses what life might be were it not for the violatory, circumscriptive regime of gender. To be sure, I am not dissing my trans kinfolk and their experiential livelihood. I wish only to suggest that 'trans' could be gifting us not simply the playing with and mixing and matching of gender but, further and more liberatory than this, gifting us what we could be were it not for gender.

JC: This conversation on 'Trans' is a challenge no less to the figural and representational norms of syntax – that is, not just an investment in the performativity or deformativity or dispositioning and engendering potentials of language but in the potentials of living in and by an almost subjectless language of verbs or doings becoming or taking the place of nouns and pronouns. For example, there's an I and a we here but also one that's performed or done as much by verbs becoming subject – an I or a we that doesn't just grapple with the potential for the abolition of the binary gender system but that refuses to cede any total power or final being to something like the law and, instead, portrays its incomplete, in-process effort or fight, its terms become grapples.

ES: My approach to the question of trans visibility has been to expand and redirect analytical focus from the body and its signposting of gender. I do this to avoid that the trans body becomes submitted to scrutiny and is found dangerous, deficient, or deviant compared to gender essentialist standards operative in the dominant 'visual essentialism' regime. Instead, I cast my investigative attention to the technologies of light ('visibilities' in Deleuze's vocabulary), which I have called the shimmer (Steinbock, 2019), to the conditions for the emergence of shimmerings, and how they create a particular relationship to the figured body that we can call trans. In my contribution to the themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*, I lay out a trans visual method that insists too on analyzing the cisnormative, ambient background as the schema that in fact presses out into the foreground a trans, conspicuous figure. Without losing sight of the figure's expressiveness that may exceed their shape, movement, mass, I would add that C Riley Snorton's (2017) method for reading 'countermythologies' of race and gender arrangements in a trans

figure's form created through the play of light and dark, in the shadow or in a silhouette, is vital for the analysis of the racial bias in technologies that cast light. I would advocate also for following Lieke Hettinga's (2021) doctoral research that shifts from a vocabulary of 'visibility' to one of 'appearing', which vexes the naturalness of visibility for doing politics, and emphasizes the coordinates for generating a space of appearance, and a public.

LML: Those of us who live out the real stakes of our work are usually required to choose one tone that is either general (the seemingly more objective and academically preferred) or personal (easily disregarded). I end up writing my experiences from a distance, in the more general language of something broadly shared, like what it means to 'feel abstract' as a non-binary person. There is an underlying understanding that trans scholars who produce work in trans studies are writing from personal experience, but the professional risk of claiming our lived expertise is often too great.

WS: I think that if trans visibility is indeed a trap, it is in no small part because the visual is fraught with uneven power relations. Western thought privileges sight over the other senses in what Donncha Kavanagh (2004: 447) calls an ocularcentric epistemology: the dialectic between 'the eyes on one's head . . . and the eye in one's mind'. It associates the distance of sight with the rational and the objective, in contradistinction to the proximity, ambiguity, and subjectivity of sound, smell, and touch. Trans visibility, then, is a trap insofar as it promises complete knowing while it delivers a partial, distanced apprehension at best – and a nullifying, violent objectification at worst.

JH: Ocularcentrism is totally embedded within the academy: our disciplines, methods, and even casual language reproduce the hegemony of the visual. Yet, as Wu Tsang and Fred Moten (2017: 344) note, we can still speak of a distinction between the visible and the communicable. So, I come back to the question: could asynaesthetic epistemology disarm the trap of visibility and engender other ways of understanding the being of trans? Or, as Eliza puts it, 'What if we skipped asking what trans looks like to consider what trans sounds like, or texturally feels like?' (Steinbock, 2020: 176). To do so would be – and I'm paraphrasing Susan here – to disrupt, denaturalize, and rearticulate the connections between our senses and our understanding. In short: I think turning toward these other senses could help us feel our way around the trap of visibility.

KJ Cerankowski (KJC): Thinking together about the realm of the visual, the role of lived experience, and the question about the limitations of the figure, I want to return to the phenomenological emphasis of my contribution to the themed issue of *Journal of Visual Culture*. Visual culture is not limited to the visual: the acts of seeing and looking are not limited to the eyes. The visual engagement is an embodied one. It can be haptic and affective. It is a relational orientation to the objects, spaces (including landscapes), figures, and temporalities we engage with and move through. Visual culture can be

experienced through a sensorium, a concert of image, sound, and touch – a synesthetic embrace. This approach demands an intimate and porous encounter with the image or archive object, an exchange that will necessarily be informed by lived experience and that will inform one's experiences.

JH: What could such a full-bodied technique mean for trans visual culture in particular? Trans visual culture goes beyond mere visibility; it invokes a sense of trans-relationality that is part of the embodied encounter. What I mean by trans-relationality is a way to see or feel through a sense of being trans or being in relation to trans – as identity or as prefixial, as flesh or as philosophy. Trans visual culture, then, is not exceptional but is differently inflected by trans ways of knowing, desiring, being, thinking, and feeling. It is to live in relation to the in-between, to live and move in the betweens, a way of life, a way to live in futures possible.

JC: What a beautiful way to bring our conversation to a close, even just for today. Thanks to everyone, and please take care of yourselves and each other. There's a lot to be in the streets for over the next few days. Deep thanks for making time on a Saturday, and we're all looking forward to continuing the conversation. And also deeply appreciative for the vulnerability and risks of those contributing today. These are hard questions that we asked you to think about, the ways in which your writing of trans visual culture relates to the ways in which you're living in varying relation to trans and, in fact, the ways that transing may be varying how you are living your lives. So, yes, very appreciative, and grateful.

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Susan Stryker is Professor Emerita of Gender and Women's Studies. Since retiring from UofA, she has been Presidential Fellow and Visiting Professor of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University (2019–2020) and Barbara Lee Distinguished Chair in Women's Leadership, Mills College (2020–2022). She continues to serve as Executive Editor of TSQ: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, and as co-editor of the Duke University Press book series ASTERISK: *gender, trans-, and all that comes after.* She is the author of *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution* (Seal Press, 2008, 2017), co-editor of the two-volume *Transgender Studies Reader* (Taylor & Francis, 2006, 2013) and *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix* (Routledge, 2022), as well as co-director of the Emmy-winning documentary film *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria* (2005). She is currently working to complete her book manuscript, *Changing Gender: A Trans History of North America from Colonization to the Present* (under contract to Farrar Straus Giroux), and is developing a variety of film and television projects.

Eliza Steinbock is Associate Professor of Gender and Diversity Studies within the Literature and Art Department at Maastricht University and specializes in the study of visuality and material culture, focusing on questions of transgender cultural production and the intersectional analysis of inclusion/exclusion mechanisms. Steinbock has published over 40 articles and book chapters on contemporary visual culture analyzing the intersecting dimensions of gender, sexuality, race, and ability. They authored the Society for Cinema and Media Studies awarded best first book, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment*, and the *Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019) and is Co-Editor of *Art and Activism in the Age of Systemic Crisis: Aesthetic Resilience* (Routledge, 2020). Their most recent edited volume is the June 2021 TSQ: *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 'Europa Issue' co-edited with Yv E Nay. Together with Susan Stryker and Jian Neo Chen, Eliza co-edits the new Duke book series for critical trans studies, ASTERISK: Gender, Trans-, and All That Comes After.

Wiley Sharp is an MA student in Geography at York University. Their research examines the place-making practices of queer youth in suburban Toronto, and their creative practice explores the relationship between memory, place, and image-making practices.