Cut and Sew

Gender Expansion through Greer Lankton's Dolls

Cyle Metzger

Greer Lankton's studio was an operating room. There, she fused wood and wire into gangly skeletons and wrapped their frames in fleshy foam and pillow stuffing—Lankton built some of her dolls ultra-thin while birthing others to be voluptuously fat. She encased each of their bodies in skins made of nylon, t-shirts, and plaster, upon which she incised details that gave many of the dolls ambiguous genders. Lankton was a transgender woman. Her dolls enabled her to deploy, manipulate, and exaggerate the vestiges of womanhood freely without having to answer to challenges to her own gender. Their expressive faces and world-weary poses produce disorienting combinations of pathos, excess, detritus, and glamour that exemplify art in New York's East Village in the early 1980s and destabilize the very foundation of socially constructed and presumedly stable standards for what it means to be living in gendered human bodies.

More importantly, Lankton's dolls highlight the constant changes that all bodies undergo throughout their lifetimes. Lankton reminds us (often in gory detail) that we continually transform the existing fabric of our own flesh in many ways. Every day most people make decisions (consciously or unconsciously) about how to visibly identify as belonging or not belonging to their—our—genders. Trans and cisgender people alike apply makeup; we contour the shapes and hues of our faces to appear differently and select clothing to mold our bodies' appearance. When we exercise or diet, we alter our silhouettes, adding or removing curves. Plastic surgeons perform countless nose jobs, brow lifts, and numerous other procedures every year. Most of these alterations are made according to some image of human embodiment we've seen in others and strive to emulate in ourselves.

I think of such choices as similar to cutting and sewing, assembling and reassembling who we are relative to the worlds in which we live. In the fashion industry, "cut and sew" is a technical phrase, referring to the process by which manufacturers cut patterns from existing fabric and sew them together to make garments in a variety of sizes that can be reproduced easily for mass-market sales.[1] Cut and sew processes adapt existing materials, designs, and styles for a variety of possible purposes. Lankton developed her own cut and sew processes to make dolls in a variety of sizes, shapes, and personalities. She sliced and stitched existing materials together to create her dolls and even—at least once—performed the making of her figurative sculpture as if it were surgery. Thus, Lankton's dolls connect gender transition to other forms of bodily transformation that people enact every day: the dolls frame gender transition as only one of many corporeal changes the human body might undergo throughout a lifetime (frontispiece).

Greer Lankton, *Sissy* holding scissors and draped in yellow measuring tape, from "Composite of four photographs featuring *Sissy*," ca. 1980s. Photograph, 5 × 4 in. Photographs, 1980–1989 Artwork Documentation, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

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Preferring to operate in the grey area between artist and dollmaker and coming to embrace the space she occupied between male and female, neither Lankton's layered sense of herself nor the complex objects that she put into the aesthetic and material world, such as *Princess Pamela* and *Sissy*, the two objects I discuss in the greatest detail in this article, can be understood through binary terms. Lankton's work not only puts pressure on art history's disciplinary reliance on gender binaries, it also calls for a reevaluation of how art history uses fixed categorical language beyond gender, like art and craft as well as the sharp boundaries drawn between drawing, painting, sculpture, and installation, among others.

This article juggles art-historical interventions, Lankton's personal biography, cultural elements specific to the East Village in the 1980s, and Lankton's relationship to transgender history in the United States to highlight this understudied trans artist, whose practice of dollmaking is difficult to categorize, to bear on discourse on gender in art history. The primary objective of this performance of archival and analytical gymnastics is to examine Lankton's life and work in its early 1980s milieu through close readings of her archival materials as seen through the historical lens of gender politics. A neglected figure of radical transsexual identity, Lankton's punk–Grand Guignol aesthetic was at odds—quite confrontationally—with historical memories of the era's avant-garde of gay (White) male artists like Keith Haring and Robert Mapplethorpe. I offer close readings of works such as *Princess Pamela* and *Sissy*, among others, while weaving these into a broader excavation of the East Village art scene of the 1980s and situating the artist as both a short-lived insider and eventual outsider. In this sense, this essay works to move Lankton from the margins and into the purview of the field of American art as it is defined by the ever-expanding parameters of this journal.

However, my intent is not only to recover Lankton from marginal obscurity. This article also aims to encourage experimental approaches to gender in art history. I explore how *Princess Pamela* and *Sissy* evoke trans conditions of becoming to engender (pun intended) art historians to approach gender differently. Scholars have been trained by lived experiences and feminist art historians to take the definitions of men and women in art as obvious instead of approaching a human figure as a genderless body to which the label "man" or "woman" is applied within a given social context. Art historians have since begun to think and write critically about how race is constructed on the body but have yet to write an art history that engages with questions of how to assign the labels "male" and "female" to the visual and material world. It is essential to note that the standards of womanhood that Lankton engages are rooted in White, Christian, Eurocentric, and imperialist constructions that have historically denigrated, criminalized, and condemned displays of gender that escape their models. Even as she works to undermine the absurdity of these standards, Lankton aspires to meet them personally. The artist and her work present an incomplete, imperfect, yet useful landscape through which to begin asking how to bring more nuance to assignments and discussions of gender in art history.

Notes on Terminology

Scholars of pre-modern trans history Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska remark in the introduction to *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* that "one of the most challenging aspects of working on the history of gendered experience is that the vocabularies for describing that experience vary immensely over time and space, even within the same language."[2] As a result, there is much debate about how to refer to people who changed genders prior to the common use of the term "transgender." I am sensitive to the nuances of these debates; therefore, I prefer the term "trans" wherever

possible. Not only does it encompass histories of gender-variant people before "transgender" became a word, but the prefix "trans" has come to operate independently from the term "transgender." For scholar of trans and intersex studies Hil Malatino, "trans" describes people who wished to access medical technologies that transform the body in ways that made it perceived more as one gender than another.[3] Historian Susan Stryker, political science and gender studies scholar Paisley Currah, and medical sociologist Lisa Jean Moore argue in their 2008 *Women's Studies Quarterly* issue "Trans-" that the prefix alone promotes a more capacious sense of transformation and avoids the danger of siloing "transgender."[4] I follow these scholars in this article. "Transsexual" is usually avoided today because it conflates a person's gender with their sex. However, Lankton referred to herself as a transsexual often, references I retain as needed to respect and preserve her voice. Lankton also made up a term of her own: "creatures." While interviewing the artist, Sarah Rapper and Dean King asked, "Do you do mostly women dolls?" Lankton replied, "Yeah, usually. I just sort of don't look at them as women, I look at them as creatures. They're more drag queens than women."[5] Discussion of the deeper stakes of gender in Lankton's dolls runs throughout this article, but I note how she genders them here briefly at the outset to explain why I use the pronoun "she" when referring to most of Lankton's dolls, despite the ways in which her oeuvre upends gender binaries.

Lankton's Personal History (1958–81)

Lankton was an effeminate child who liked to make dolls out of hollyhock flowers and any other materials she could find (fig. 1). Her interest in dollmaking was born out of her dissatisfaction with store-bought toys. "I've always made dolls, even when I was little. I just started making them, because I didn't like the ones I had—I didn't like their hair, or they didn't move right." She had an eye for detail and an interest in artistry that ran in her family. Her father was a woodworker, and he made puppets when Lankton was little.[6] He was also a Presbyterian in Park Forest, Illinois. The community, constructed in 1948, was the first housing development in the United States specifically designed for GIs returning from World War II. By the time the Lanktons moved there in the early 1960s, it was a fully-fledged suburb of Chicago, populated mostly by White families and complete with a "child-safe curvilinear street system."[7] This protective topography never made Lankton feel secure, however (fig. 2). She was an outsider in the predominantly straight and cisgender culture of Park Forest, and recalls frequent harassment. In one humiliating experience, an adult forced her to stand on a box so other

1 Lynn Lankton, "Greer Lankton and Bill Lankton at home in Park Forest, IL, with Greer's dolls," ca. 1972. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1970–1979 Family and Travel, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

2 Greer Lankton, “Black and white self-portrait, Lankton holding a camera up to her [childhood] mirror [in her parent’s Park Forest home] surrounded by images of drag queens and other inspirations,” ca. 1975. Negative. Greer Lankton Collection, Slides and Negatives, 1975–1979 Studio and Domestic, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

children could vote on whether she was a boy or a girl; she recreated this experience in an early drawing.[8]

Looking for an escape from her life as a suburban misfit, Lankton spent the summer of 1975 studying studio art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. In an enthusiastic letter to her parents, Lankton wrote: “In Park Forest at school I’m always the strangest and I get so self-conscious + depressed. This place gives you a whole new attitude on life. When I’m here with these super bizarre people I don’t feel strange or different.”[9] Eager to continue her art education, in 1976, Lankton enrolled in the Fabrics Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), but by 1978 she had transferred to Pratt as a full-time student. She struggled to make ends meet, but she enjoyed her courses. Held at a New York City morgue, a course in anatomy was particularly formative for her later practice, allowing Lankton to expand beyond her own experiences when addressing the body in her work. In a letter to her family, she observed, “I went with my anatomy class to see cadavers. It was so strange actually putting your hand in a real body. We saw and touched 3 separate cadavers in varying states of being de-skinned and de-muscled. Also various heads and hands were being dissected. It was interesting. Gross but interesting.”[10] The course exposed Lankton to the human body as a layered object, as fleshy material built around a bony scaffolding. Other Pratt courses taught Lankton new production methods and afforded her critical guidance from faculty. On September 21, 1978, she wrote to her family proclaiming: “My puppet teacher Kermit Love was on TV the other night. He won an [E]mmy for the Muppet Show. He’s going to take us on a tour of Sesame St. soon.”[11]

3 Greer Lankton, "Installation view [*Art from the Umbilicus*]," 1981. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1981 "Art from the Umbilicus," Pratt Institute, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

The dolls Lankton made in her first years in New York were thus inspired by both corpses and life-sized puppets. Lankton was thinking, studying, and exploring not just the look of the human body, but its physical textures, its complex interiority, and the structures that give way to its outward appearance.

Lankton's thesis exhibition at Pratt—titled *Art from the Umbilicus*—was her first solo show in New York (fig. 3). It included a series of plaster casts of pink human navels encased in black frames and a six-foot floating plastic umbilicus that hovered in the gallery space like a giant donut made of human skin with a tail of tissue trailing behind it. Lankton also displayed sculptures of smaller umbilici, throats, and other glossy sphincters on pedestals around the room. Their lacquered surfaces reflected the gallery lights, giving the impression that they were wet and recently extracted from some unseen body. Each carefully crafted body part signaled a rawness and suggestion of recent surgery that characterized her working methods.

The Limits of Knowability

Headlines like "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Bronx Youth Is a Happy Woman After 2 Years, 6 Operations," which ran in the *New York Daily News* on December 1, 1952, have encouraged the general public to assume that the most important thing about trans people's lives is their surgical status.[12] In a foundational text for the field of transgender studies, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1991), artist and theorist Sandy Stone calls for the media—and trans people themselves—to stop defining trans people by their medical histories.[13] Much of the subsequent literature in transgender studies thus focuses on the social and cultural contingencies of gender, allowing trans scholars to theorize the instability of binary gender structures and reimagine Western conceptions of gender. Trans studies scholars Eric Plemons and Chris Straayer suggest that "downplaying and decentering" surgery and hormone treatments in trans scholarship

permits “deeper consideration of trans identities and lives” by resisting “voyeuristic concerns with dissected boy parts.” Yet Plemons and Straayer caution against overcorrections that exclude discussions of surgery in transgender discourse. They argue that leaving the matter of surgery “unsettled” denies the persistent desire that many transgender people have to change our bodies, and, further, forecloses conversations about how to make surgery less “problematic, reductive, exclusionary, and violent.”[14] In this article, I consider how Lankton’s dolls might help us reframe surgery as a form of corporeal creative production.

The 1960s saw the development of the first clinic serving people who wished to change their bodies in accord with their genders in the United States. In 1962, the University of California, Los Angeles established the Gender Identity Research Clinic, but it primarily operated as a discussion group for those studying minority genders and sexualities rather than a treatment center. The Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins University was the first clinic to offer medical services to patients. It grew out of clandestine efforts to develop treatment protocols for transsexual people by psychologist John Money and his colleagues starting as early as 1964, two years before it was made public. Dr. Harry Benjamin, one of the first practitioners of trans medicine in the United States, referred many of his patients to Johns Hopkins, and inspired over “1,500 [requests for treatment] over the following two years.”[15]

Stryker writes that trans surgery clinics were subsequently developed at the University of Minnesota, Stanford University, the University of Texas on Galveston Island’s medical campus, and elsewhere across the United States through the 1970s.[16] The primary aim of these clinics was to carry out complete transitions from male to female or female to male by eliminating physical and behavioral characteristics associated with one gender and using medicine and behavioral modifications to develop those of the other. Only people whom Benjamin characterized as “true transsexuals” were eligible for the procedures, and anyone interested in gaining access to surgeries and hormones had to prove they fit specific criteria.[17] Malatino explains that to “access [these] technologies of transition,” “trans folks … had to demonstrate their commitment to properly normative iterations of femininity or masculinity.” This meant that “they had to exhibit a staid, not-too-sexual brand of conservative gendering,” and, therefore, “to pass muster, many trans* folks fabricated desires for entirely conventional modes of gendered life — marriage, children, picket fences, vanilla sex on Sunday afternoons.”[18]

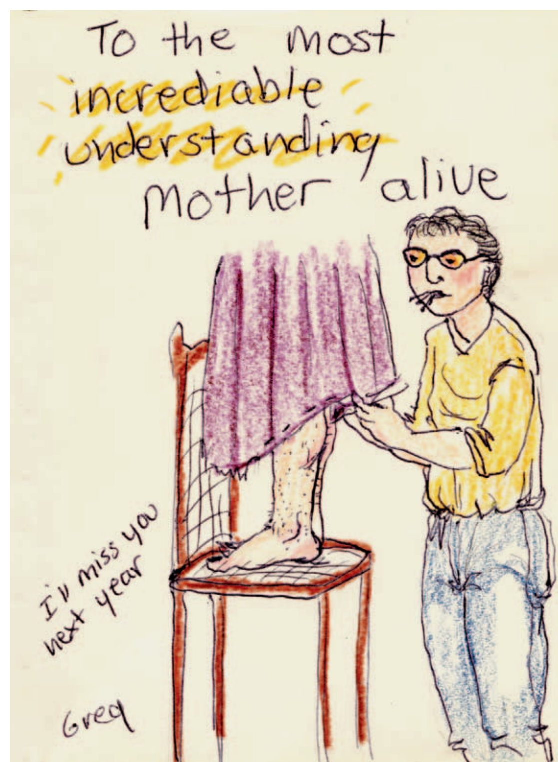
Having gained access to surgery, Lankton must have also traversed this obstacle course of social protocol. Because her testicles had been removed in 1979, she required regular doses of estrogen and progesterone to keep her adrenal system in balance. However, hormone replacement therapy worsened her existing periodic fainting spells, allergy attacks, and skin rashes. Prescription adjustments failed to improve her condition, and after starting and stopping hormone therapy multiple times, she finally discontinued the treatment altogether.[19] Trans people who are unable to take hormone replacement therapy after surgery can suffer from significant depression, mood swings, insomnia, and headaches or migraines; Lankton experienced all of them. In a letter to her parents from April 5, 1983, she noted that an ongoing infection of CMV (cytomegalovirus) — an incurable viral infection that left her with fatigue and painful, swollen lymph nodes — worsened these maladies.[20]

Lankton was not only physically distressed during this period — she was also heartbroken. In her 1996 *New York Times* obituary, Lankton’s close friend and photographer Nan Goldin recalled that “after the operation, her [then] boyfriend, a gay artist named Robert Vitale, rejected her,” which Goldin characterized as “a traumatic experience.” With her photograph of the couple, *Greer and Robert on the bed, NYC* (1982), Goldin later acknowledges that she had captured “a particularly poignant image of Greer,” showing the relationship’s failure and Lankton’s anguish: “he is turned away; she is grasping her skinny wrist, looking

inward, full of longing, thwarted desire and her essential loneliness." Lankton "often regretted the sex change," Goldin adds, because of the difficulties she had afterward from chronic illnesses.[21] Lankton's friend and gallerist Alan Barrows also remarked that Lankton occasionally lamented her surgery because of the romantic rejection and illness she experienced in its wake.[22]

Because she died in 1996, it is impossible to ask Lankton if she would reverse her decision to have surgery or how she came to make it in the first place. She shared with friends and lovers in the 1980s and 1990s that her parents were ultra-conservative and forced her to transition, using both the ideological weight and financial might of her father's Presbyterian congregation. She also reported that her mother, Lynn Lankton (hereafter L. Lankton) had subjected her to electroshock therapy, antipsychotic medication, and hospitalization when she was a child to eliminate her homosexuality and cross-gender tendencies.[23] Psychiatrists ordered such treatments to transform patients from homosexual to heterosexual people.[24] Lankton recounted that, when psychological treatments did not change her sexual or gendered proclivities, L. Lankton pushed her toward medical transition. "My mother really wanted me to have it," she said in a 1985 interview, because "it's much easier for parents to have a sex change than a drag queen. It's sort of more legitimate in their eyes."[25]

Lankton's archives suggest that her story is not entirely accurate, however. Anti-homosexual treatments are absent from the medical records included in the archival materials held by the Mattress Factory Museum in Pittsburgh. Her father's parishioners did indeed help cover her surgery's costs, yet Lankton's letters indicate that she self-identified as a "transsexual" by 1978.[26] She also wrote to her parents in a March 19, 1978, letter, "I feel very positive about my surgery. I'm not expecting it to make my life instantly happier but I do feel it will give me a chance to feel whole and comfortable about myself and that's important."[27] Records show that Lankton welcomed the procedure. Equally important, they reveal moments of mutual appreciation, especially between Lankton and L. Lankton. A Mother's Day card, which features her mother hemming a skirt as Lankton stood with unshaven legs, shows the artist's gratitude for her mother's support (fig. 4). Its message reads, "to the most incrediable understanding mother alive," and Lankton took extra care to highlight the words "incrediable" and "understanding." A couple of months later, when Lankton was profiled in an Illinois paper, her sister reported that their parents "aren't embarrassed" and "they've told their friends and relatives. Everyone is supportive."[28] On October 23, 1978, L. Lankton wrote in a letter to Lankton, "I really was glad to hear you feel so good about the endocrinologist. Hope all of your medications continue to go well." In March 1979, L. Lankton wrote reflectively to Lankton, "having you has helped me realize how



4 Greer Lankton, Mother's Day Card to Lynn Lankton, 1978. Mixed media on paper, 8½ × 6 in. 1978 Letters from Greer Lankton to Bill and Lynn Lankton, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

unimportant one's sex is—you are you—and will always be the same person that I've loved—and that doesn't change—just grows as the years go by. It's such a privilege to have you in our family. I feel so lucky." Six months later, just after surgery, Lankton reciprocated: "I don't think I ever actually came out and thanked you for all the help you gave me in my transformation. You both made the road a lot less bumpy than it normally is. And honestly having the operation makes all the difference. Thank you. Love, your daughter Greer."[29] It is reflective of trans history that Lankton's story of transition is tricky to tell. If researchers try to match her words with those of her friends and lovers or to the traces in her archive, they will find that competing stories form an inconsistent narrative of Lankton's transition and motivations. Most archives are partial. However, gaps in trans archives can lead to suspicion about trans subjects. Trans scholar Kit Heyam reflects that when considering trans subjects in history, "we look for evidence that their motivation for gender nonconformity was not external, but internal—ideally in the form of personal testimony."[30] These suspicions can grow into doubts about the authenticity of trans identity itself when the stories that trans people tell of their own lives contain inaccuracies, embellishments, and contradictions—as Lankton's does. Many people's—trans and cisgender—autobiographical narratives do. Therefore, inconsistent stories like Lankton's reveal the double standards to which trans people are often held, while also offering a methodologically accurate reflection of trans histories that have carried on through exaggeration, gossip, rumor, and other forms of creative retelling.

Lankton and the Early Years of the East Village (1981–84)

Lankton was an active and recognized participant in the early years of New York City's East Village art scene. Curator Diego Cortez included Lankton in the 1981 *New York/New Wave* show at PS1, now the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) satellite space: this massive exhibition was Lankton's first at a major museum. It included hundreds of works by artists like Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Curt Hoppe, and Lankton. Hoppe described how Cortez "brought uptown and downtown together, graffiti and downtown artists, and he hung it in an unusual way, splattering everything on the walls."[31] Lankton exhibited a doll she called *Raggs* (1979–81, Greer Lankton Archives and Museum), consisting of bulbous and bloody body parts.[32] Made of dirty, tightly bound cloth and stuffing, this doll looked like it had been stepped on and dragged. The matching black smudges on the doll's face give the impression that Lankton shoved the doll's face in paint rather than having carefully rendered its eyes. *Raggs* was a harbinger of the tortured aesthetic Lankton would develop.

After *New York/New Wave*, Lankton started showing her work in the East Village. Galleries and clubs—the Pyramid Club, Club 57, FUN Gallery, 51X, Gracie Mansion, Nature Morte, New Math, Piezo Electric, and Civilian Warfare—were the first generation of galleries in the neighborhood following the enthusiastic attention garnered by *New York/New Wave* and exhibitions including *The Times Square Show,* by the artist group Colab, and *Beyond Words*, a graffiti show curated by Fab 5 Freddy Braithwaite and Haring at the Mudd Club in 1980.[33] None of these galleries had any resources when they opened. FUN Gallery founders Patti Astor and Bill Stalling "were so broke" that they couldn't afford to frame artworks, so they hand-cut mats and shrink-wrapped them, then "turned on the boom box, did some daiquiris in the old Kenny Scharf Van Chrome blender, and sold all 20 drawings for $50 in one day. Which, $1,000 in 1981 wasn't too shabby."[34] The success of this inaugural event demonstrates that this DIY approach produced an aesthetic that came to define the East Village gallery scene.

In March 1982, art dealer Gracie Mansion opened her self-titled gallery at 432 East 9th Street, and just two months later Barrows opened Civilian Warfare with artist Dean Savard at 526 East 11th Street.[35] Dan Cameron, a critic who covered the East Village scene for *Arts Magazine*, described Civilian Warfare as "the gallery that most accurately projected the existentially overwrought aesthetic that would eventually come to identify the entire East Village movement."[36] Barrows and Savard transformed a former ice cream shop into a gallery to show the work of their artist friends whose work pushed the limits of saleable art in the early 1980s. Historian Liza Kirwin characterizes Barrows and Savard as having "capitalized on the notion of the avant-garde as a hazardous site that one could visit and at the same time acquire a souvenir of the adventure."[37] In interviews with Kirwin, Marisa Cardinale, Savard's assistant, recalled that every aspect of the gallery, from its curation to its location, was designed to create an alluring sense of risk. "Taxis didn't want to take you" to the gallery, Cardinale recounted, so visitors had to navigate burnt-out buildings, aimless pedestrians, and "junkies" who were lying on the sidewalks in a "frightening and devastated urban landscape."[38]

5 Greer Lankton, "*Alvira* (left) and *Missy* (right) on display at Civilian Warfare," ca. 1984. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1981–1984 Civilian Warfare, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Once visitors arrived at Civilian Warfare, however, they were rewarded with "dazzling, jewel-like, colorful paintings like Luis Frangella's torsos and David [Wojnarowicz]'s very confrontational visually assaulting kind of things, it was an *event*. We created sort of a theater." Cardinale added: "You've got to realize that the people who were buying this art were suburban ladies from Westchester." Kirwin observed that Savard and Barrows "understood the cachet of a danger zone for potential patrons."[39] Indeed, critic Jay Gorney wrote in the *Washington Post* that Civilian Warfare "drew collectors like flies."[40] As one of the first artists that Civilian Warfare represented, Lankton's work in the early 1980s helped establish and expand the East Village aesthetic of yearning and excess. Artist and critic Nicolas A. Moufarrege praised some of the works that Lankton showed at Civilian Warfare in 1982, specifically *Robert's Box*, *Missy in the Box*, and *Crucifix* (all 1979, locations unknown), as defying "stereotypical" notions of male and female gender in ways that were "tender" yet simultaneously "cruel" and "perturbing."[41] The bodies of these dolls appeared charred and stuffed into metal boxes, suggesting some ambivalence about her own body and the transformations she had recently undergone.

Lankton's first solo show with Civilian Warfare in 1983 featured dolls and drawings that all referenced her transformation and the personal struggles associated with it, and deliberately exaggerated both idealized and deviant forms of human embodiment. An assortment of portraits—drawings that illustrated her surgery and small figurative sculptures that seemed to have endured all forms of torture—hung salon-style on baby blue walls. Photographs of this untitled exhibition in the Mattress Factory Archives show a tall, charred figure on a pedestal standing among them. Lankton propped up the doll *Missy* (sans box) like a marionette using fishing line that descended from the ceiling (fig. 5). The doll surveyed the room, wearing a red tutu and crown of silk flowers. A

miniature doll called *Alvira* sat next to *Missy* while an extremely tall doll called *Drag Queen* with a cross carved into her chest slouched nearby; this doll was also called *Aunt Ruth* after an aunt who carved the same mark into her body sometime before committing suicide in 1979 (fig. 6).[42] Lankton played with scale as she manipulated gender and personality in her dolls.

Another very short and fat doll named *Cookie Puss* sat on a miniature pink dressing chair dressed in lingerie next to *Drag Queen*. Her plump arms extend from her shoulders as if she is dancing in her seat, while her slightly cocked head looks toward the gallery door with a sweet and inviting expression. Below her dimpled knees, the doll's legs taper to tiny feet encased in vintage dress shoes. Two nude dolls named *Freddie* and *Ellen* kick at each other nearby on a small red couch (fig. 7). *Ellen*'s blushed cheekbones hold up her bright eyes above her slight smile, reflecting her general attitude—Lankton once described her as "really sweet." Meanwhile, *Freddie*'s mouth falls open as if shouting at *Ellen*, which aligns with her "pretty mean … pretty bitchy" personality.[43] The vivid expressions of these dolls together evoke a mix of gentle lullabies, maniacal laughter, and moans of agony: a cacophony of feeling that reflected East Village life in the early 1980s.

Lankton had a second show at Civilian Warfare in 1984 (also untitled), and for this show Lankton began transforming *Missy* into *Sissy*, a process that would continue into 1985. A plump blue figure called *Princess Pamela* joined *Sissy* in this exhibition, standing in a purple thong and heels, heavy on her feet, and leaning against a crisp white wall (fig. 8).

6 Greer Lankton, "Greer Lankton's work on display at Civilian Warfare," ca. 1984. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1981–1984 Civilian Warfare, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

7 Greer Lankton, "Greer Lankton's work on display at Civilian Warfare," ca. 1984. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1981–1984 Civilian Warfare, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

8 Greer Lankton, "Greer Lankton and Lynn Lankton at Greer's exhibition at Civilian Warfare," ca. 1984. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1981–1984 Civilian Warfare, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Princess Pamela (flashback: ca. 1974–84)

The first iteration of *Princess Pamela* was a "lanky deadbeat" with a penis and a long seventies-style haircut that Lankton constructed out of t-shirts and acrylic paints when she was a teenager (see fig. 1). This doll had a carefully crafted face complete with a defined brow line, fleshy eyelids, deep dimples, long nose, plump nostrils, a mustache, and supple lips. In 1974, when Lankton was sixteen, she removed the stoner dude's mustache and genitals, gave the doll a belly, and fattened its arms and legs.[44] She also dressed the transformed figure in a cardigan, pencil skirt, and heels to create *Madame Eadie*. *Madame Eadie* had an opening in her back that was large enough for Lankton to crawl inside and wear as if its flesh were her own. Lankton donned the synthetic flesh of *Madame Eadie* for the opening of a 1976 exhibition of alumni work at SAIC (fig. 9). Reporter Bess Winakor of the *Chicago Sun Times* described *Madame Eadie* as "a grotesque, overweight woman with her belly button hanging out." Winakor also wrote that, while wearing *Madame Eadie*, Lankton mingled with the nearly 500 gallery-goers as if she was just another attendee. Lankton, she added, paused to observe the initial shock and the quick turn toward amusement attendees expressed when they realized *Madame Eadie* was part of the show.[45]

In 1979, Lankton began transforming *Madame Eadie* into *Dee Dee Lux*, a still-wearable and even more provocative figure. *Madame Eadie* had conservatively coiffed

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TAXI

Members of the Chicago art world turned out 500 strong Tuesday night for the opening of the Art Institute's new school building and an exhibit by its alumni. ABOVE: Jonna and William Wood-Prince Jr. checked out Red Grooms' "Taxi." RIGHT: Sculptor Fred Glaser and Katherine Phillips felt the tactile qualities of John Chamberlain's "Untitled" sculpture. FAR RIGHT: Art Institute student Greg Lankton came as "Madame Eadie," a wearable doll. (Sun-Times Photos by Jim Mescall)

Art Institute's alumni exhibit opening even has a living doll

By Bess Winakor

The art included everything from H. C. Westermann's "Little Egypt," a wooden door in a frame, to one of Robert Indiana's "Love" paintings.

But a living "wearable doll" attracted the most attention at the opening of the Art Institute's exhibit of works by alumni in the museum's new school building Tuesday night. It was the first event in the building, which is one of the first dividends of the Art Institute's $46.4-million centennial fund drive.

The living doll, one of about 500 people who crowded the school's gallery and every other available space, was really Art Institute student Greg Lankton, who weighs 120 pounds but dressed up as a grotesque, overweight woman with her belly button hanging out. Lankton named the doll Madame Eadie, claimed she was fashionable and came escorted by Peter Davis, a student in the school's fashion-design department.

They shocked a few people at first, but mostly amused them. Sherl Coleman told Madame Eadie she never looked better.

Otherwise, the group included Art Institute and Museum of Contemporary Art supporters, gallery owners, students and artists, in everything from velvet to blue jeans.

Their views of the art were mixed, as befits a collection with realistic and abstract works and some of indeterminate character. Art collector Will Hokin found the show "very nice," while a museum supporter found things a bit "porno." Patricia Murphy, approaching "Little Egypt," looked for a half-moon. William Wood-Prince Jr. wondered, "Shall I whistle?" for Red Grooms' "Taxi."

Altogether, a good time was had by all, despite the smoke-filled dining rooms (due to cooking steaks), a sloshy floor under the tent where some people ate (because of the rain water on the ground seeping through the Astroturf) and the lack of heat in the tent.

Many people returned to the exhibit after dinner for a closer look at the art without the crowds.

Good bets for Friday

SMALL SHIPS: The North Shore Deadeyes display hand-built models of historical ships that are sure to remind you of the Christian Radich's recent visit. Exhibition III runs through Sunday at Colby's in Northbrook.

ARTY ALUMNI: The School of the Art Institute opens its new gallery with a show of works by some of its outstanding alumni, including Red Grooms, Richard Hunt, Robert Indiana, Jim Nutt, Claes Oldenburg and Ed Paschke.

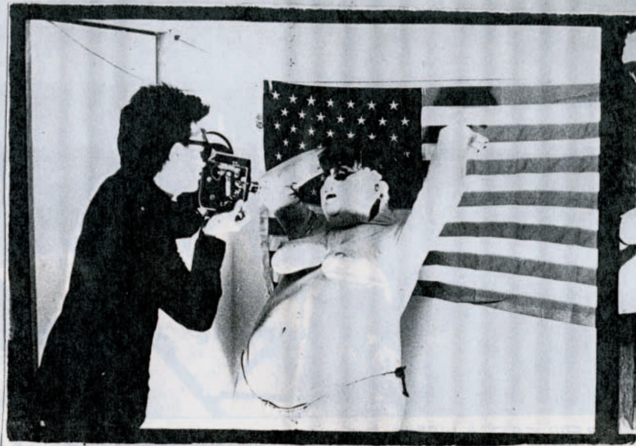
Country fair in the city
A preview Friday in Weekender

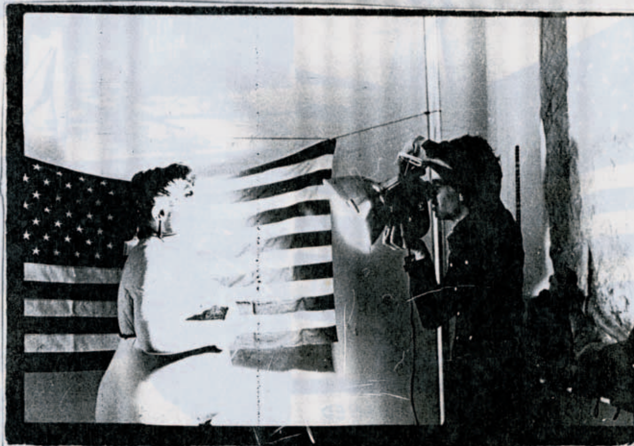
9 Greer Lankton in *Madame Eadie* doll, reproduced from Bess Winakor, "Art Institute's alumni exhibit opening even has a living doll," *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 7, 1976, 65. Periodicals, 1972–1989 Magazine, Newspaper and Periodical Articles, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

10 Greer Lankton wears her fat suit, transforming herself into *Dee Dee Lux*, ca. 1970s. Photograph, 7 × 5 in. Photographs, 1970–1979 Artwork Documentation, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

hair and was dressed as if she was on her way to church, but *Dee Dee Lux*, in her most provocative manifestation, sported a mohawk and little else. *Dee Dee Lux* was inspired by Divine — the drag queen of John Waters fame. Lankton produced a miniature doll of Divine later in her career.[46] Divine starred in many of Waters's famously gross and campy films, the first of which was *Mondo Trasho* in 1969. Divine recounted in an interview just before he died that "John wanted a very large woman because he wanted the exact opposite of what normally would be beautiful."[47] Like Divine, *Dee Dee Lux* was a voluptuous and hypersexualized feminine figure, just as likely to give you a lap dance as to burn you with her cigarette. In one photograph, which resembles Divine in the film *Pink Flamingos*, *Dee Dee Lux* wears a scarf over a curly blonde wig, a red crop top, knee-length shorts, striped crew socks, and brown leather Oxford shoes (fig. 10). Wearing the doll, Lankton sits cross-legged in a woven lawn chair, smoking a cigarette on a leisurely, sunny afternoon, shifting the demure persona of *Madame Eadie* toward an attitude of rebellious indulgence.

A 1980 shift stripped *Dee Dee Lux* down to a G-string and replaced her blonde hair with a tightly cropped punk-rock haircut and oversized diamond-shaped





11 Greer Lankton wearing *Dee Dee Lux* doll costume while filming *The Bogus Man* (1980). Reproduced from Orion Jeriko [Nick Zedd], "In Pursuit of Excrement: The Nick Zedd Story," *The Underground Film Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (August 1984). Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

earrings for an appearance in Nick Zedd's underground short film *The Bogus Man* (fig. 11). Zedd was a filmmaker who called himself a "human irritant" and a "hermetic explorer making underground films." He told an interviewer that he was an anarchist who tried "to avoid politics" because they are "the realm of human corruption"; nearly all his films are about overthrowing state power.[48] MoMA describes *The Bogus Man* as "an intentionally vulgar satire of American middle-class culture and beliefs." The central characters in this film are a "cult of 'death rock' terrorists" who clone the president of the United States as they "set about destroying life on earth." Actor David McDermott plays the masked narrator and "mastermind" of the presidential cloning plot, while *Dee Dee Lux* performs a "grotesque dance with an American flag" that MoMA describes as "showstopping and appropriately cynical."[49] In this scene, *Dee Dee Lux* exposed her puckered anus and the seams of her vagina in front of the flag. *Dee Dee Lux*'s punk-infused irreverence was an outgrowth of the gregarious denial of idealized body standards and binary genders that *Madame Eadie* exhibited as she mingled with gallerygoers in 1976.

Some of *Madam Eadie* and *Dee Dee Lux*'s personality carried on into *Princess Pamela*, a doll that Lankton crafted by installing a poseable skeleton inside the doll's plush figure, sealing her back, cinching her waist, coloring her pale skin a deep indigo, and giving her a wig of long black hair that tended to clump together (fig. 12). Her breasts were perky and supple. Her waist was narrow, and her belly bulged. Her thick thighs touched each other as she stood with her hips tilted so one side rose above the other. Her plump arms made right angles as her hands rested on her hips. Lankton always displayed *Princess Pamela* nude except for purple underwear and matching heels. With her pear-shaped figure and inhuman dermis, *Princess Pamela* fiercely defied normative standards of idealized, "ultra-slender" womanhood, as well as ideas that bodies stay the same shape over time.[50] Through this dramatic history of transformation, *Princess Pamela* suggests that to be alive is to change. The shape of our silhouettes morph as our bones grow and as fat and muscle increase, decrease, and move to different places. Transformations of all kinds are inevitable for each of us across our lifetimes.

12 Greer Lankton's *Princess Pamela* standing in the doorway of Civilian Warfare, 1984. 35 mm slide transparency. Slides and Negatives, 1980–1989 Artwork, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Princess Pamela also presents a method for imagining what is not yet realized in the body but remains nonetheless possible. Film scholar Cáel M. Keegan argues that "trans* ideation" is a "medium for expressing unrealized bodies," meaning that conceiving of transness through film, Keegan continues, "animate[s] what is latent, distilling from the world forms that have been present all along, if imperceptibly."[51] This likewise illuminates *Princess Pamela* as she stood in Civilian Warfare in 1984, and many of Lankton's dolls throughout her life and after. These synthetic figures demonstrate that multiple possible forms of human embodiment are present all at once in any body, plush or flesh. Not only do Lankton's dolls materialize forms that have been present all along, they also highlight the capacity that all bodies have for transformation across and within possibilities latent in our flesh.

Lankton, Transphobia, and the East Village Press (1984–85)

In the year between Lankton's first and second solo shows with Civilian Warfare, the East Village art scene had been flooded with money from buyers as well as competition from dozens of up-start galleries.[52] To appeal to new uptown buyers, they painted the walls of her second solo show white instead of blue (as in her first exhibition), and Lankton hung the photographs in a single line rather than salon-style.[53] Barrows and Savard took out a full-page ad in *Artforum* to promote her 1984 solo show to mainstream art audiences in New York and beyond. The ad consists of a photograph by Peter Hujar of Lankton with *Princess Pamela* and *Sissy* (fig. 13). Lankton's thin figure lays nude across the gallery's cold cement floor; her legs casually separate as she bends her knees. She props her head up with one arm while the other reaches back to drape over *Princess Pamela*'s leg. The doll is also nude and arranged to mirror Lankton's pose. She reclines, propped up on one of her blue, plump arms, letting her long dark hair fall to the floor. The doll's opposite elbow projects upward as she rests her hand on her hip. Kneeling behind *Princess Pamela*, *Sissy* sits upright and rests her emaciated limbs along *Princess Pamela*'s squarely bent arm. Lankton's arm falls casually on the bent legs of the indigo doll, as if the three were intimate friends languidly sharing company on an indulgent afternoon in their dingy New York loft apartment. This combination of intimacy, comfort, and repose in a stark and uncomfortable environment anticipated the simultaneous excess and starkness of the exhibition.

With limbs wrapped around each other, *Princess Pamela*, *Sissy*, and Lankton also created a scene that underscored polarities—male and female, fat and thin—the exhibition addressed. Hujar's photograph captures Lankton's consistent presentation of her dolls as enlivened beings, their poses extensions of their personalities. *Paper* magazine critic Brigitte Engler described an unnamed doll from Lankton's 1984 solo exhibition as "a young, bored wino" languidly masturbating in a chair.[54] Cookie Mueller, of John Waters fame, described Lankton's work in a 1985 exhibition at Civilian Warfare as including an elaborately staged birthday party for "a ninety-year-old woman of culture and taste" that had so much going on, it "had to be seen to be believed."[55]

However, a few critics questioned the authenticity of the type of womanhood her dolls represented. For instance, in a review of Lankton's 1983 solo exhibition at Civilian Warfare for the *East Village Eye*, critic Sylvia Falcon wrote:

Without ever having met Greer Lankton, my initial reaction to her life-sized, female dolls in painted fabric was that they were misogynistic. Her portrayal of women is extreme: bloated bodies or pathetically anorexic; sever [sic] faces garishly made up; literal freaks, like [conjoined]twins; hermaphroditic crotch shots; mutilated bodies. I was struck with the sense that this was a burlesque of femaleness, like the ventriloquist's dummy that apes a bitchy, old crone. Worst still, the burlesque seemed deliberate, the perfect act of sabotage—a pseudo-woman castigating her adopted sex.[56]

13 *Greer Lankton at Civilian Warfare* September 14–October 14, 1984. Exhibition advertisement for *Artforum* (September 1984). Photo: Peter Hujar. Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Falcon admitted her hostility toward trans women. She wrote, "transsexuality is a subject I approach with marked skepticism. The most well-known transsexuals are male to female, which always seems to me to represent a man's mind placed in a woman's body, rather than the female waiting to be freed." Remarkably, Lankton's work was powerful enough to change her mind. Despite her initial reservations, Falcon saw that Lankton was not just critiquing the subjugation of women, but also how the very idea of womanhood is constructed. She conceded, "'Misogynistic' is a common and easy mislabeling of Lankton's art. She explains the creepiness of her creations as a way of dealing with the psychological

trauma of her sex change." Falcon also recounted that she and Lankton "talked about the talk-show curiosities, Christine Jorgensen and Jan Morris, and the disservice they've done by presenting themselves as ludicrous, female stereotypes, images concocted in the minds of men—string of pearls, tight sweater, puffed hair, simpering mannerisms." Finally, Falcon reported that "by way of explanation Lankton says that the battery of psychological tests a sex change candidate must submit to is grueling and implants in the mind a parody of the sex one has chosen."[57]

Lankton herself recognized that the requirements associated with gender-assignment surgery were rooted in "ludicrous, female stereotypes … concocted in the minds of men," and her firsthand experience taught her that having passed the barrage of required tests did not guarantee her—or other trans women—social recognition as women.[58] She knew that only people who were born with physical characteristics typically attributed to women would be recognized as women in public or allowed to deploy the signifiers of womanhood freely. In a 1988 interview with artist Marc Lida, Lankton reflected that "women who are born women don't realize how much freedom they can have with their appearance. You don't realize that unless you've been a man. They take makeup and all that for granted. Like it's a chore they have to do, whereas I see it as a luxury."[59] No matter what she did, Lankton was rarely seen as a woman. Instead, she was continually reminded that makeup, women's clothes, jewelry, and even her slender figure were not enough for her to produce a version of womanhood, even White womanhood, that could withstand the male associations so often tethered to her physical characteristics.

14 Close-up photograph of *Sissy* shedding her torso, from "Composite of four photographs showing *Missy* and *Sissy* doll in process," ca. 1980s. Photograph, 5 × 4 in. Photographs, 1980–1989 Artwork Documentation, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

For instance, as a trans woman with a noticeably deep voice, Lankton had to endure the stress of constant scrutiny and discrimination by people she encountered. Lankton remarked to journalist Dylan Jones in 1985, "when I tried to be a waitress, I'd go up to the table and take their order and they couldn't get over the fact that I have such a deep voice."[60]

Lankton's dolls became sites for manipulating the indicators of womanhood outside of her own body. When Lankton donned the signifiers of feminine gender her body bore the brunt of transphobic consequences. Yet, when she made them manifest through her dolls, she used art to experiment with the defining strictures that organize the categories of male and female with far less risk to herself. Lankton exaggerated her dolls' genders and stretched them beyond the limits of permissible female embodiment in ways that signal that no matter how hard she — or anyone like her, regardless of ethnicity — worked, they would always stand out. She used her dolls to claim the right to use the signifiers that make women women, whatever the shape of their bodies.

Missy Becomes *Sissy* (1985)

In a 2015 article, Lankton's former husband, the designer Paul Monroe, commented that before she was *Sissy*, *Missy* was "a drag queen of the highest order."[61] In the 1980s, "drag queen" had a range of definitions that included a person who identified as male but dressed as a woman to perform on stage as well as a person who had a penis but identified as a woman and dressed as such in their day-to-day life.[62] Dressed in feminine attire and called a traditionally female name, *Missy* was inspired by both. Though her transformation had begun for Lankton's 1984 show at Civilian Warfare, Monroe recalled that the crescendo of *Missy*'s transformation into *Sissy* took place over many days in 1985. The dramatic high point of this event was a surgery in the storage room of Einsteins (Monroe's boutique), which Lankton used as her studio (fig. 14):

> *Lankton had just taken over the back rooms of Einsteins as a work studio. The studio had stark white brick walls and was completely empty, except for a Danish blonde-wood dining table. The original 1900s overhead ceiling fixture was circular and rather clinical — somewhat mimicking an operating lamp. Missy's surgery was scheduled for 3 pm. Lankton covered the table with a heavy plastic tarp, and a small side table was set up with tape, scissors, pliers, sandpaper and a few blades. Lankton spoke lovingly to Missy/Sissy and explained what she planned to do. Fully theatrical, a performance for one. Lankton placed a plastic cup over the doll's mouth to simulate ether sedation, stretched her "doll" out on the table and began hacking at the flaccid figure with a janky hacksaw.*[63]

No one was meant to see Lankton reenact the surgeries she underwent on the synthetic flesh that she so carefully laid out in front of her. During this private procedure, Lankton did not make *Sissy* look like a cisgender woman with soft cheeks and plump lips. Rather, she constructed a dramatic brow ridge and a pronounced jawline that looked like her own and like that of other trans women whose bone structures

15 “Sissy laying on a polka-dot sofa and talking on the telephone,” ca. 1980s. Photograph, 5 × 4 in. Photographs, 1980–1989 Artwork Documentation, Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, Pa.

were shaped by testosterone during their adolescence. She also removed the doll’s genitals to transform the plush member into a vaginal cavity. Lankton squared the doll’s jawline, carved out her cheekbones, and plumped up her lips throughout this labor of love and catharsis. Lankton’s choice to undergo surgery and take hormones (for a time) is a metaphorical handmade approach to transforming one’s body according to their own desires. Lankton also processed this experience through her hands, literally using them to make her dolls. Furthermore, Lankton made and remade *Sissy* and other dolls throughout their lifetimes. Performance studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro argues that “the labor of making transgender identity is handmade: collective — made with and across bodies, objects, and forces of power — a process, unfinished yet enough (process, *not* progress).”[64] Vaccaro’s analytic helps emphasize that Lankton’s dolls were as much about their physical bodies and genders as it was about their capacity for those both to change. Once *Sissy* was ready to leave the operating room, Lankton and Monroe “placed *Sissy* in the window. She reclined on a pile of silk pillows, naked and draped in jewels, and wearing a well-coifed blonde wig — moneyed. Lankton placed a handwritten note on a tray beside her that said: ‘Introducing — Sissy — you’re welcome.’”[65] Lankton never explained this placard. Yet, I can imagine, on one hand, “you’re welcome” as a posture of defiance to anyone who insists upon normative gender, while on the other, as an encouraging gesture toward other gender misfits.

After *Sissy*’s inaugural stint in the Einsteins window, Lankton photographed the doll in a variety of staged scenes. In one, *Sissy* is seated on a polka-dotted couch behind the flaccid tube of a vacuum cleaner while a magazine and a pack of Winston cigarettes lay open in front of her (fig. 15). A cigarette dangles from her ever-supple red lips, half-turned to ash. Dressed as a French maid in a blonde wig and holding the receiver of the black rotary phone up to her ear, she appears to be running up the bill on her employer’s telephone in a defiant reclamation of her time. In another instance, Lankton staged *Sissy* on the tiled entryway of Einsteins, again smoking, but now dressed in a collared, white, button-up blouse left open to reveal a gold Chanel necklace that matches the earrings flanking her square jaw bones and red lips. On the lap of her black pants sits a novelty purse shaped like a small potted cactus, tipped open so the prickly plant rests on her equally spiny hand.

Changing the doll’s name from *Missy* to *Sissy* reclaimed a common epithet for effeminate boys in the mid-twentieth-century United States in a way that prevented her past from completely disappearing. *Sissy* is also a common term used among sisters. *Sissy*’s name would always recall her past boyhood while her figure asserted her present womanhood. Therefore, *Sissy* disrupts fixed binary approaches to gender, manifesting Stryker’s broadest concerns for trans studies, which encompass:

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 subjectivity 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.[66]

By describing transgender studies as “making visible” the existence and stakes of sex and gender transgression, Stryker reminds readers that, for those who are sighted,

gender is largely visually constructed, and that it has very little to do with a fixed state of bodily morphology. Haircuts, clothes, makeup, shoes, and other bodily adornments communicate the degrees of masculinity and femininity that we each claim, and the body can be changed to align with a sense of masculinity or femininity. What *Sissy* demonstrates is that, though one's body might be shaped in a particular form either permanently or temporarily, it is possible to dress, shape, and manipulate flesh as if it were also a work of art. Just like art materials, we can cut and sew our flesh to make it look more flat or plump, round or rigid, convex or concave to enact temporary or more permanent changes that alter the gendered associations our appearances conjure. As with art objects, the meanings read into the shapes our bodies take are largely dependent upon our cultural contexts. We are free to play with and in the materials available to us—and to bring new materials into—those contexts to write new narratives of gender in art and life.

Lankton's Challenge to Art History

Critics in the mid-1980s not only noted how Lankton upended normative gendered embodiment and feminist ideas about womanhood, they also praised Lankton's skill and craftsmanship. In 1984, critic Carlo McCormick and artist Walter Robinson chronicled the explosive rise of the East Village art scene and praised Lankton's work as an "exquisitely crafted… lexicon of sordid female characterizations… [and] a cast of human aberrations that populate both real and fictional dramas and seem particularly at home in the circus of slum life."[67] Critic Gary Indiana lauded her work, writing, "Lankton excels in caricature and in the rudimentary tableaux she arranges around certain figures. Clothing and accessories are always perfect for the subject. The painting, especially on the faces, is brilliantly expressive, combining delicacy and gaudiness in the same visage."[68] Lankton also appeared in German and French art magazines, which featured her work as a defining example of Civilian Warfare's roster.[69]

This high praise and international recognition were auspicious for Lankton's future success. However, her gallery career stalled after 1985. By this time, Civilian Warfare and many of the galleries that brought uptown buyers and collectors to the downtown neighborhood were collapsing under the weight of financial mismanagement, drug addiction, and the AIDS crisis. With rosters full at the only remaining first-generation East Village galleries, Lankton struggled to find representation elsewhere. Lankton began displaying her dolls in the windows of Einsteins, which managed to retain the balance of grit and glamour that defined the early years of the neighborhood's art scene. Lankton and Monroe (who married in 1987) established a corner inside Einsteins for The Doll Club, from which Lankton sold celebrity-inspired dolls and other small sculptures and jewelry.[70] Returning to her childhood roots, Lankton began to refer to herself as more of a "dollmaker" than an artist. The title *dollmaker* centers craftsmanship and labor, and her decision to identify as a maker demonstrates a rejection of the elitism that persisted in the art world, even amidst the grit and grime of the East Village. "There is something about art that gets really pretentious, and with the dolls it doesn't get like that, because you can always end up playing with them," she said in 1985.[71]

As Lankton straddled arts and crafts, *Princess Pamela* and *Sissy* straddle gender binaries, refusing to be static objects. They also refuse to be categorized in ways that let us detach their material forms from the gendered associations Lankton applied to them. Thus, they invite us to abandon not just inherited binary approaches to gender, but also the material associations between sex and gender most of us were given before we knew that we could choose differently. The ways that Lankton cuts and re-cuts materials and sews them back together to create ever-mutable forms offer scholars the opportunity to experiment with dynamic approaches to gender in writing art's histories, and this article accepts that invitation. I also suggest here that the artworks need not overtly address ambiguous genders to benefit from dynamic art-historical approaches to gender.

Rather, I am suggesting that art historians disentangle gender from the shapes of bodies and embrace the temporal instability of gender as a new analytic for exploring its appearance in art. In other words, I am encouraging my fellow art historians and fellow viewers of art: When you see a body, don't assume to know its gender right away. Dig more deeply to find out how gender is being constructed on and around that body. How do the clothes a figure wears, the behaviors they perform, or the roles they serve align—or misalign—with the ways in which gender is constituted in the period and place the work was made? Use any discrepancies as sites for further investigation into the complexity of gender in art history. Also, remember that morphology is not gender, and—cis or trans—gender is not static. It changes according to its temporal, geographic, political, and otherwise ideological conditions. I encourage art historians to make space in our research for gender to change, not just throughout our discipline, but throughout the lifetimes of our subjects.

The stakes of this ask feel high. The images and objects we study, preserve, display, and teach chart this change. They create and reinforce the ideas about what it means to be a man, woman, or otherwise gendered subject in the world at all. We are part of making gender, any gender, possible. Therefore, embracing these ideas in art history is more than a progressive rhetorical move. It is an act that could change what is possible for trans, nonbinary, and otherwise gender-nonconforming people. Moreover, shifting how to approach gender in art feels consequential because trans people are not the only people whose genders are policed. Cis and trans people are policed by the same impossible rules of gender conformity, even if trans people are currently being punished the most publicly for breaking them. Paying closer attention to how we identify and discuss gender in art is in our collective best interest.

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Notes

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