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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**TRANS SELF-REPRESENTATIONS: NON-BINARY VISUAL
THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

VISUAL STUDIES

by

Ace Lehner

June 2020

The Dissertation of Ace Lehner is approved:

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Abstract
Trans Self-Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary
Photography
Ace Lehner

Trans Self-Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography, is an interdisciplinary trans visual studies approach to contemporary lens-based self-representations produced by trans and non-binary people. This project is committed to rigorous interdisciplinarity that actively works to undo the partitioning of various identity-based discourses from one another. The project establishes a much-needed field and method of trans visual studies at the intersection of trans studies and visual studies and their methods.

Each of the four chapters of my projects focuses on a particular trans self-representation milestone and sub-genre of trans/ non-binary self-representations and each chapter takes a distinct approach to thinking through the cultural and visual significance of each discrete intervention. Overall the interdisciplinary research brings together trans studies, queer theory, photography theory, critical race studies, cultural studies, media studies and postcolonial theory. The chapters of this project are dedicated to looking at trans self-representations and critically addressing the ways trans self-image photographs have the potential to offer a space wherein makers can interrogate the ways their own changing corporealities engage identity, representation, intervene in the trans visual field, how “matrixes of intelligibility” and “racializing assemblages” The photos tranifest – or bring

into being new trans and non-binary identities, forwarding them via performative self-portraiture.

My research reveals that trans and non-binary self-representations are reshaping identity categories and challenging and augmenting contemporary theory and imaging practice. In establishing the field of Trans Visual Studies I also work to establish trans visual studies methods that are non-binary and de-essentialized methods for apprehending contemporary visual culture. This project argues that trans visual culture is a shifting field with diverse representational approaches and corporealities. I also argue that we need increased scholarship in this area and a more in-depth investigation into trans visual culture. To consider the current moment of unprecedented amount of trans visual culture without engaging in trans visual studies analysis of the phenomenon is to conduct critical error and run the risk of missing the significant impact that trans visual culture is having on visual culture, art, identity constituencies, theories of representations and imaging practices.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to professor Derek Conrad Murray, Ph.D., for his ongoing inspiration, mentorship and support. Not only has he made this project possible, but he has genuinely changed my life.

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I am continually thankful for the extensive community of scholars, artists, mentors, and amazing students I have been fortunate to engage with along the way, at California College of the Arts, the University of California at Santa Cruz and Berkeley, The Dia Foundation, The Museum of Modern Art, Parsons School of Design, and the Wassaic Project, and. My most profound gratitude goes out to the following for your intellectual camaraderie, and support over the years of

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INTRODUCTION
TRANS VISUAL CULTURE
AND THE FARCE OF THE VISIBLE

“Often trans experiences begin with an affective claim to futurity that rejects the truth of the visible.”¹

– micha cárdenas

In studying the proliferation of trans self-representations in the recent past, in the United States (primarily), a galvanizing field of trans visual culture emerges, which has not yet been adequately studied. In order to begin to turn scholarly attention to this growing field of visual culture, I will focus my analysis on one subset of trans visual culture, trans self-representations, with the aim of staking out a field of trans visual studies and forwarding a methodology of trans visual studies co-informed by the self-images I discuss in my chapters. While also suggesting that much more work needs to be done. My research illuminates that many of the self-images produced by trans image-makers are in and of themselves praxis. In bringing themselves into being the image-makers discussed in this project establish new

¹ micha cárdenas, “Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 161-181, 170.

identities as well as new methods of image-making, and facilitate and inform the creation of new intersectional methods for attending to their nuances and complexities. *Trans Representations: Non-binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* proposes that trans visual culture be viewed as a field of study, praxis, and method.

My intervention is centered on trans studies' limited attention to visual analysis of trans visual culture, and art history and visual studies' lack of scholarship focused on trans visibilities.² By failing to attend to the visibility of trans culture and specific aesthetics, practices and praxis transpiring in trans culture, trans studies and visual studies are missing crucial aspects of contemporary visual culture, as well as neglecting current and future innovations regarding this emergent field and method. Trans visual studies offers a method of de-essentializing assumptions that may be based on a visual assessment of a surface – that the surface of a photo or a person necessarily relates to some inner truth in any essentialist way. Trans studies scholar C. Riley Snorton has argued that “reality is sutured to the privileging of sight,”³ which is well documented in photography discourse and visual studies debates (both of which can be traced back to origins in feminist and post-structuralist scholarly

² Trap Door particularly makes this clear as it is ostensibly about visibility, but it becomes clear that it is about politics around this moment of heightened awareness of trans people in mainstream culture. Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable in Conversation “Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

³ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 140.

interventions and feminist and postmodern artistic practices). Trans as an identity and as a methodology undoes this ideologically constructed pseudologic, or belief, in the privileging of sight, while offering a way out of thinking via binaries and essentialisms. Bringing together visual studies and trans studies offers a powerful new method through which to rethink many aspects of visual culture. In developing this new methodology, I look at trans self-representations that model new ways of thinking, which are co-constitutive of the methodologies I forward in this project. My aim with this project is not to trace a history of trans people or a historiography of trans scholarship. Instead, I am interested in looking in depth at the current moment in trans visual culture, a moment that is full of political and social unrest wherein trans visual culture plays a crucial role in the negotiation of trans identities.

In this project I am committed to methods that propose inclusivity, flexibility, augmentations, specificity, intersectionality, and complexity. These commitments are mainly inspired by methods and projects that open up identity categories in visual studies and art historical scholarship.⁴ My project considers how trans and non-binary

⁴ The interventions of feminist visual theory have significantly influenced such methods. Feminist Visual Theory as an interdisciplinary and ever-shifting methodology is committed to intersectionality, anti-hierarchical approaches, seeing its own blind spots and changing approaches when necessary to remedy shortsightedness and myopia. Made up of various theoretical approaches all of which remain invested in self-determination, Feminist Visual Theory is foundational to the project at hand. Feminist art history influenced by postmodernism and French post-structuralism (especially Foucault and Derrida) embraced a skepticism about absolutes and universal claims. These intellectual interventions lead to a critique of traditional art history, which also greatly impacted art practice. Feminists building on post-structuralist theories held that the notion of any supposed neutrality or objectivity in academia was impossible which subsequently lead art historians to question the ideological construction of their own discourse. In the early 1980s, the adoption of feminist thought into art history had a great impact, bringing self-reflection to the discourse and successively the investigation of women's oppression within the art world and culture at large. This ethos of a rigorous commitment to interrogating one's own disciplinary blind spots and remaining committed to

self-representations are in dynamic constitution across media. The works I discuss demonstrate the importance of attending to the interconnectedness of gender and racialization as they relate to corporeality, representation, and systems of identity regulation. Building on feminist theories of the visual and art historical methods and theories of photography, this project proposes a new method of apprehending representations. I also propose that identities and representations are never indexical but instead always contingent, and that corporealities exist in relation to visual matrixes of gender and racializing assemblages.⁵

I argue that trans visual culture is a rapidly shifting and contested and complex arena wherein ways of being trans in the world are actively proposed, contested, and negotiated.⁶ My commitment to this approach follows the lineage of Mieke Bal, and in particular her essay “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” in which she compellingly articulated founding tenets of visual studies; that

intellectual growth is a deeply informative to my project. A critique of ideology is also a consistent and shared concern of many feminists since the 1970s and still today. Which similarly is deeply enmeshed with ethos of the work at hand. see: Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, eds., *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Is a collection of key texts on feminist thought from a variety of key scholars of the time working with feminist ideas.

⁵ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 3. Tagg discusses the indexicality of the photograph arguing, “the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign-is therefor highly complex, irreversible and can guarantee nothing on the level of meaning.”

⁶ I am borrowing heavily from Stuart Hall here and his formulation of visual culture as an arena in which ways of being in the world are proposed, contested, and negotiated. Hall was looking specifically at racialization and ethnicity—not trans visibility. My methodological intervention here is to bring Hall’s formulation of visual culture as an arena in which identities are battled over to a discussion of trans visual culture. See: Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices: Culture, Media, and Identities* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997); Stuart Hall, “Signification, Representation and Ideology” in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2 (London: Routledge, 1985), 91-114.

visual studies projects should actively interrogate binaries of high and low culture, and that the object of analysis must co-constitute the method of analysis.⁷ This project surveys a variety of trans self-representations across the visual field and each chapter engages different methodologies as co-constituted by the work central to that chapter.⁸

This project is also indebted to the legacy of black feminist thought and actively interrogates intersectionality as it impacts trans and non-binary lives. My work specifically builds on black queer studies methods, which push Kimberlé W. Crenshaw's scholarship on intersectionality to consider interconnectedness as it specifically relates to trans bodies and racialization.⁹ In particular, I build on what E.

⁷ Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 22.

⁸ This methodology is also in discourse with what Jack Halberstam has articulated in the *Art of Queer Failure*. My project surveys work across the visual field, working to undo hierarchies of high and low culture while also discussing work that intentionally fails to replicate normativity. See Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁹ The term "intersectionality" is historically linked to the work of black feminist scholars. The term itself can be traced to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which specifically deals with the study of how different power structures interact in the lives of minorities, specifically black women. For more information see: Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality* (Malden, England: Blackwell, 2003), 175–200. To hear Crenshaw speaking and to contextualize the critical emergence of intersectionality that comes out of the application of black feminism to antidiscrimination law see: Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Justice Rising: Moving Intersectionally in the Age of Post-Everything," at The London School of Economics, 26 March 2014, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=2360>. For more on intersectionality and its roots in black feminist thought see Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also: Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2016); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2015).

Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson observe: that identity politics have historically often reinforced hegemonic power structures and that homosexuality has been disavowed in black scholarship, while race has not been attended to in queer theory. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson also posit that gender is expressed and performed differently in different class, racialized, and ethnic locations and that black studies and queer studies are rooted in political intentions and motivations, arguing that to ignore the way that multiple subject positions interconnect is theoretically naïve and politically dangerous. Johnson and Henderson urge scholars to consider intersectionality and to engage in the cross-pollination of theories in order to reflect upon the ways in which relying on reductive binary oppositions (for example, heterosexuality versus homosexuality) prevents scholars from critically examining the politics of representation.¹⁰ Such binary oppositions, it must be noted, also reify essentialist ideas about such categorical exclusion, reducing identities so that they fit into said categories and erasing all those who do not. Johnson and Henderson's methods are exemplary for this project, and I hope to extend their critical interventions into trans visual theories of representation.

In his text *Imagining Transgender*, David Valentine articulated some of the key tenets of trans methods. He argues for the need for trans methods to be wary of a myopic constitution of the discourse around transgender as Eurocentric, and reinvesting in modernist ideas and ideologies. Valentine postulated that transgender

¹⁰ Patrick E. Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

necessarily must include all gender variant practices and identities and, in doing so, must also be critically aware of colonial histories of knowledge production that have systematically worked to eradicate various forms of difference, especially regarding sex and gender. The influence of feminist scholarship can be clearly heard through what he articulates as both feminism and trans studies continuing to grow and mutually inform one another, both remaining vigilant about working for liberation while remaining wary of inadvertently reinscribing racist, classist, and other biases. Such methods are deeply influential to my project, whose lineage the project of trans discourse builds on.¹¹ However, I am also interested herein not in policing boundaries and making distinctions between trans constituencies and trans methodologies and discourses: to do so seems entirely against the ethos of trans. It is essential to understand all trans identities, constituencies, and methods as related, relational, and as discourse. For my purposes here, it is methodologically more compelling to trace the places where trans works as an intervention offering us new methods and understandings of visual culture and identity, rather than where it is coopted by mainstream culture and produced to reflect dominant ideologies and norms. To situate my intervention, I will briefly discuss the state of trans visual culture in the contemporary moment.

¹¹ David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). Also see Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

The “Trans Tipping Point”

In June of 2014 trans actress and star of *Orange Is the New Black* Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time* magazine, for the article that coined our current moment as the “The Transgender Tipping Point: America’s Next Civil Rights Frontier.” (See Figure 1). Authored by Katy Steinmetz, photographed by Gillian Laub, the cover story positioned America as being “in transition” and argued that one year after gay marriage was legalized, we had moved on to the next civil rights battle. The first, and oldest, weekly news magazine published in the United States, *Time* holds significant cultural weight as a medium of transmission of culture. Early on in the story, Cox is quoted as saying, “more of us are living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly. So people can say, ‘Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.’”¹² The takeaway is that culturally we have arrived at a critical juncture on the brink of acceptance of trans folks. The evidence rests on the inaccurate and unfounded belief that an increase in representation of trans characters and a handful of trans celebrities in mainstream culture equals political and social progress. The problematic

¹² Katy Steinmetz, “The Trans Gender Tipping Point: America’s Next Civil Rights Frontier,” in *Time* magazine, June 9, 2014, 40. In June of 2014, trans actress and trans rights activist Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time* magazine, standing tall and poised, in a form fitting sleeveless dress against a an off white background hands gracefully at her sides, Cox’s now iconic likeness looks out of the frame meeting our gaze accompanied by the title of the cover story “The Transgender Tipping Point – America’s next civil rights frontier.” Photographed by Gillian Laub for an article Authored by Katy Steinmetz Cox’s Cover story positioned America as being “in transition” and argued that one year after gay marriage was legalized we’d moved on to the next civil right battle. Early on in the story Cox talks about how it is now more prevalent than ever for trans people to live “visibly” and “pursue our dreams visibly.” Cox suggests that because of this increased “visibility” more people can now say, ‘Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.’ For Cox, this means that people now have points of reference that are “humanizing, that demystifies difference.”

conceptualization behind this move—forwarding the belief that visibility equals progressive or radical social change—is not only superficial and misleading, but trans representations are far more complex than they may seem, and the proliferation of trans representations require attention so their impact and significance may be understood.

Visual analysis is critical to understanding trans visual culture. Cox’s mobilization as the face of the “trans tipping point” can be read as Cox embodying all that mainstream culture requires of trans folks if they are to reach a point when they are accepted (a tipping point on a personal level so to speak).¹³ The image suggests that the trans tipping point is contingent on each trans individual’s ability to replicate as closely as possible what Cox has achieved. Set against an off-white background, standing with one foot crossed in front of the other, wearing a form-fitting indigo dress, small black shoes, and long dirty blonde hair. Laverne Cox has been lit from above so that her face and golden hair are well illuminated and our attention directed toward her large brown eyes, blue-gray eye shadow, and slightly parted lips. Her chin is turned up, ever so slightly, so that she is looking down the bridge of her nose at us. Her right-hand makes a gesture that feels contrived and graceful at the same time, a gesture that one might associate with tropes of womanhood viewed in film noir or classic cinema; it is both feminine and performative.

¹³ I am using “accepted” intentionally here to highlight the way that mainstream language around identity politics particularly when addressing LGBTQ constituencies is often about acceptance --a term which in and of itself indicates only a marginal modicum of respect and in no way reflects what is perhaps the end goal of any identity rights movement which would be a celebration of difference.



Figure 1: *Time* magazine cover, June 9, 2014, featuring Laverne Cox.

One useful way to begin to think through the significance of Cox's mobilization as the cover girl of the "transgender tipping point" is through the methods of Judith Butler, who writes,

The question of how to embody the norm is thus very often linked to the question of survival, of whether life itself will be possible. I think we should not underestimate what the thought of the possible does for those who experience survival itself as a burning issue.¹⁴

Butler's insistence on survival as dictating how people behave is key to understanding the implications of forwarding trans women like Cox, particularly as a trans African American woman. For as Butler has further argued, and others like CeCe McDonald and Miss Majors Griffith-Gracey have observed, trans people and queers are subjected to "pathologizing and violence that is, once again heightened in the case of trans persons from communities of color."¹⁵ Forwarding Cox as the icon of trans femininity demonstrates which aesthetics of trans femininity will be incorporated into dominant culture. Specifically, it suggests that trans femmes of color must mobilize a particular visuality in order to be incorporated.

Butler furthers that to live outside of the norms of culture is to "court death" or, in other words, that existing outside of prescribed and socially "acceptable" transgender embodiments may result in real life consequences.¹⁶ Cox's portrait on the

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

cover of *Time* is sutured to the notion of a trans tipping point. It outlines the parameters into which trans-femmes must fit in order to be viewed by society as incorporable. As the face associated with the “Trans Tipping Point,” Cox’s likeness is tied to what it means to look like a successful trans person. To imagine that one may have a successful life as a trans person means striving to be and appear as normative as Laverne Cox.¹⁷ This is not to say that I take issue with trans people who strive to embody and perform gender that reflects normative stereotypes about gender within binary structure of maleness and femaleness.¹⁸ In fact, I believe that these too are interventions into gender, the complexities of which will be discussed in the chapter dedicated to *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*. My interest here lies in thinking through how trans representations are enmeshed with identity and understandings of visualities and constituencies. In other words, defined by what is transpiring in the trans visual field and how is it impacting visual culture and culture understandings of trans visualities and expectations of trans lives. For example, how is the forwarding of Laverne Cox as the iconic image of the “trans tipping point” building on and intervening in legacies of representation, spectacularization,

¹⁷ Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, Perverse Modernities (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). See Ochoa’s discussion throughout the text on sanitary citizenship. Also see: Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Reprint. (Detroit, MI: Black & Red [u.a.], 2010). Debord argues that the Spectacle is inseparable from the modern state it’s invested in class domination and managing the conditions of existence. It is also an expression of what is permissible socially and is such that it is capital to such a degree that it becomes image. Debord furthers that the spectacle aims to equate goods with satisfaction.

¹⁸ For compelling discussion on complexity of reframing arguments around transitioning, see: “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Re-Thinking trans oppression and resistance,” *Signs* 39, no. 2 (2014): 43–65.

objectification, and identity formations? How do we culturally understand the aesthetics of this moment? What impacts might this image have? And how can we push our methods for understanding representation informed by trans visualities?

In a visual lineage traceable to Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s, trans aesthetics have forwarded trans as trans femmes who strive to replicate normative tropes of femininity. Transfeminist activist Julia Serano has described the forwarding of trans femmes as the poster girls of the trans movement as “transmisogyny”; she sees this working as the simultaneous misogyny directed at women and transphobia directed at trans people. For Serano, transmisogyny is what prompts mainstream culture to depict “the trans revolution in lipstick and heels.”¹⁹ The objectification and spectacularization that mainstream media directs at transfeminine people, along with the erasure of transmasculine people that transmisogyny prompts, reflects a visual culture and type of viewership rooted in art historical and visual culture training that Western subjects are steeped in, i.e., a cultural training to look at and objectify feminine bodies. This includes the way Cox is both objectified as feminine and viewed as spectacular in her transness, or, as Sara Ahmed has observed of the way trans femmes are viewed, via the gaze of transmisogyny, a gaze that frames trans femmes as a “monstrous parody of femininity.”²⁰ It is precisely the viewing perspective of transmisogyny that frames the encounter of trans people in dominant

¹⁹ Julia Serano, *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism & Trans Feminism* (Oakland, CA: Switch Hitter Press, 2016), 70.

²⁰ Sara Ahmed, “An Affinity of Hammers” in *Tourmaline*, 228.

culture that positions trans identities in ways that reinforce dominant cultural ideologies objectifying trans femmes as spectacles of edgy femininity. In turning to the proliferation of trans self-imaging, what is revealed is that one should not view dominant cultural representations of trans folks in opposition to self-representations of trans folks, but rather that all gender identities are produced and negotiated in the visual field.

The iconizing of Cox has created a template against which other trans people are compared; and failure to closely replicate Cox's aesthetics puts one in danger.²¹ Micha cárdenas has observed visibility for some trans folks comes at the expense of others.²² Cece McDonald and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, the two black trans femme activists, discuss how the hypervisibility of Laverne Cox has in many ways led to increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of color. McDonald and Griffin-Gracy suggest that because Cox is presumably unreachable, racist transphobic would-be aggressors of Cox turn their acts of violence against those who come into their proximity.²³ Griffin-Gracy suggests that femme people, in general, are subjected

²¹ Nicole Archer makes a similar observation about how currently identities are outlined by mainstream culture. See: Nicole Archer "Dynamic Static," in *Tourmaline*, 298.

²² cárdenas "Dark Shimmers," 161-181.

²³ Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and CeceMcDonald in Conversation with Toshio Meronick, "Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation," in *Tourmaline*, 29. McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on CeCe McDonald see: Sabrina Rubin Erdely, "The Transgender Crucible," in *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2014. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-transgender-crucible-114095/>; Dee Lockett, "The Traumatic Reality of Getting Sent to Solitary Confinement for Being Trans That Orange Is The New Black Can't Show" *Vulture* June 28, 2016. <https://www.vulture.com/2016/06/cece-mcdonald-as-told-to-orange-is-the-new-black.html>) accessed July 19, 2019. Also see: CecE McDonald, "I Use My love to Guide Me Through Those Fears," in *BCRW*, <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/fellows/cece-mcdonald/>; also see Selena Qian "Activist CeCe

to heightened social regulation.²⁴ She notes that to be feminine folks need to fit into highly regimented molds reflecting rigidly predetermined physical traits, voice parameters, and overall aesthetics.²⁵ Griffin-Gracy's observation about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetails with cárdenas's argument that "the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable"; ". . . now more than ever," cárdenas writes, "it is evident that visibility is a trap."²⁶ In other words much of what trans scholars are observing today about trans visual culture is how stereotypic representations promote certain "acceptable" ways of appearing as trans in the world, while sanctioning acts of aggression toward those who fail to replicate stereotypic representation or passable versions of binary gender identities.

In writing about contemporary U.S. culture and the increasing inclusion of queerness in mainstream media, Jasbir Puar observes, "these fleeting invitations into nationalism indicate that U.S. nation-state formations, historically reliant on heteronormative ideologies, are now accompanied by—to use Lisa Duggan's term—homonormative ideologies that replicate narrow racial, class, and gender national ideals."²⁷ Forwarding Cox as well as Caitlyn Jenner and Janet Mock as the literal

McDonald takes allies to task in public talk," *Chronicle*, Dune University, November 11, 2017, <https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2017/11/171129-qian-cece-mcdonald>.

²⁴ cárdenas "Dark Shimmers," 161-181. She discusses how heightened imaging of trans people has impacted other trans folks (170-173).

²⁵ Griffin-Gracy and McDonald, in *Tourmaline*, 32.

²⁶ cárdenas "Dark Shimmers," 170.

²⁷ Jasbir K Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xxv.

faces of the trans movement reflects what cárdenas has suggested is neoliberalism incorporating trans folks who uphold late capitalist agendas and ideologies, while keeping other trans folks out of public view.²⁸

Rather than facilitating social progress, as the term “trans tipping point” fictively suggests, the appearance of trans icons in mainstream culture seems to be motivated not by any interest in effecting political or social change but by an apolitical commitment to capitalism.²⁹ Again cárdenas has raised the critique that trans people are a new object of dominant cultural fascination, mobilized to “sell magazines.”³⁰ In the recently published book *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Jack Halberstam pointedly remarks that, in the current moment of trans proliferations, mainstream culture is attempting to co-op trans representations.³¹

²⁸ cárdenas “Dark Shimmers,” 173. While Cox is African American and trans, the image seems to suggest that she is incorporated despite her African Americanness and transness rather than in celebration of or even identifying with these facets of herself. I leave the notion of “what Cox has achieved” somewhat open as the cover image and story does not make explicit what has really reached the tipping point is it the US or is it Cox? I suggest that the amorphousness of the ideologies behind the cover story and image creates a perhaps unarticulated impulse on the part of trans viewers to strive toward achieving the aesthetics Cox embodies as well as the life she has obtained as well. Cox’s image on the cover of *TIME* is not a negative stereotype. She is a positive stereotype mobilized to literally sell magazines. Cox, as one of the faces of trans femininity, is part and parcel of a new mainstream cultural fascination, a new spectacle of femininity (a point I will discuss further in chapter 4). Cox’s likeness does not reflect the transphobic characteristics often associated with trans femmes as gender deceivers, pathetic, doomed, engaged in illegal activities, etc. but instead her likeness is attaching an iconic image of trans femininity to the notions of accepted transness, the image of Cox fixes expectations about what trans femininity is and what trans acceptance looks like.

²⁹ Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, *Perverse Modernities / a Series Edited by Judith Halberstam and Lisa Lowe* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2014). Ochoa has written extensively about the complexities of fitting in to nationally and medically recognizable embodiments of gender. Ochoa observes, “the capacity to submit (or not) to medical authority defines the boundary between “sanitary citizens” and “unsanitary subjects.”

³⁰ cárdenas “Dark Shimmers,” 173.

³¹ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 53.

Similarly, trans artist Juliana Huxtable has suggested that a more fitting term for what is transpiring might be “neoliberal spotlight,”³² underscoring the theatricality and fleetingness of the phenomenon. Morgan M. Page suggests that these cycles of violence, following or concurrent with periods of increased visibility of trans people, may be due to the lack of agency trans folks have regarding trans representations.³³ Page’s perspective is useful in its suggestion that trans folks—when imaged by dominant culture—are often produced as stereotypes, which suggests that it is in visual culture that ways of being in the world are negotiated. Considering the stakes for trans people and representation in this way follows Stuart Hall, who has observed,

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.³⁴

Hall’s observations about popular culture and mainstream media ring true of contemporary trans representations, for it is in the visual field at large that trans subjectivities and identities are being negotiated. While the current moment of increased trans representations has been popularly embraced as the “trans tipping point,”³⁵ this is not only a misnomer but politically dangerous.

³² Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable in Conversation “Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility,” in *Tourmaline*, 42.

³³ Morgan M. Page, “One From the Vaults: Gossip, Access, and Trans History-Telling,” in *Tourmaline*, 135-146.

³⁴ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in R. Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 466.

³⁵ Katy Steinmetz, 40.

As there is no necessary correlation between representation and politics or social progress, and the increased visibility of trans people need not equate to increased understanding or awareness of trans folks by society at large, to consider the current moment a tipping point is inaccurate. Moreover, in the last several years, there has been an unprecedented increase in representations of trans icons in visual culture, and thus a more apropos term is *trans visual culture proliferation*. I use this phrase to more adequately reflect what is occurring in mainstream culture as I interrogate the complexities of this moment in this project.

Overall the current moment is certainly not one wherein representations can be equated with social progress, but instead is one that necessitates unpacking the misleading, often-held belief in “representation as remedy.”³⁶ Recent trans scholarship attending to trans visual culture suggests that visibility is not an answer but instead highlights the need for scholarly investigation of the social, cultural, and political ramifications of the increased visibility of trans folks.³⁷

Scholars have investigated the stakes of trans visibilities and visualities most extensively in recent scholarship in the anthology *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*.³⁸ The collection of essays reflects a variety

³⁶ Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), xii–xvi.

³⁷ Ibid., xvii.

³⁸ Ibid. This can also be described through what Slavoj Žižek has dubbed the “acculturation of politics,” which expresses the depoliticizing of politics while forwarding a veneer of “tolerance” in place of political action, which often occurs in visual culture with the mobilization of icons of marginality just as in the case of Cox. these representations potentially have the adverse effect of confusing the mainstream public into thinking that things are “fine for trans people” and allowing them

of interdisciplinary approaches to issues arising regarding increased representations of trans people, and the unprecedented awareness of trans folks. Essays in the volume focus on the implications of what the editors describe as the pitfalls and opportunities of the current moment of trans visual culture proliferation.

The editors of *Trap Door* argue that representations can “make new futures possible,”³⁹ and the included texts contribute to trans discourse, forwarding insightful observations regarding contemporary trans issues. But even in *Trap Door*—an anthology ostensibly about trans visual culture—does little by way of attending to visual culture. While arguing for the importance of bringing new visualities and aesthetics into view and offering much needed insight, most of the authors in *Trap Door* fail to engage with any specific aspect of trans visual culture.⁴⁰ Like most trans scholarship *Trap Door* fails to address the nuances and particulars of the visual or deploy art historical or visual studies methods.

to remain complacent rather than effect any political or social change for trans people on the ground—or to secure legal rights. Indeed, precisely because it creates a veneer of acceptance, the increased appearance of trans people in some instances provokes a cultural backlash from less liberal audiences who engage in hate crimes. See Slavoj Žižek, “Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 2007), available online at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-inquiry.html>. Recent backlash against trans people in the legislative arena can be seen here: Sunnivic Brydum, “Federal Judge Sides With Texas. Block’s Obama’s Trans Student Guidance,” *The Advocate*, August 22, 2016. <http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/8/22/federal-judge-sides-texas-blocks-obamas-trans-student-guidance>.

³⁹ Tourmaline, xviii.

⁴⁰ Throughout *Trap Door* authors repeatedly speak about visibility and yet fail to attend to the visual. The neglecting of actually attending to trans visualities or the visual at all is a problem across trans studies generally. There are of course exceptions and some very salient work has been done regarding trans visual culture I am thinking epically of Nicole Archer, J. Halberstam, and C. Riley Snorton.

Formulating Trans Visual Studies

In her highly influential text, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” visual studies pioneer Mieke Bal insightfully outlined several vital tenets of visual studies methods, to which this study is indebted and onto which trans visual studies methods build. To begin, Bal was instrumental in outlining that dialogue is created between viewers and objects under analysis. She also proposed that scholars begin analysis from their current position as situated in a current moment in time. Bal also urged that methods of analysis should be co-constructed by the object of visual studies at hand. Indeed, for this project, I will begin with objects of trans visual culture in the contemporary moment, and, as Bal suggests, allow each instantiation of trans self-representation I study to co-inform the methods of analysis. I will also engage in a praxis that is open about the dialogic process of meaning-making, keeping my insights transparent and situated.⁴¹

Recent methods in visual studies, queer studies, and trans studies have pushed feminist methodologies of situating the intersectional self in the text into modes of embodying scholarship via affective and situated spectatorship/scholarship. This framing of an active and creative way of apprehending visual culture resonates with this project. Some of the terms and methods to which I am referring are Alpesh Kantilal Patel’s and José Esteban Muñoz’s deployment of *cruisy* methods, Halberstam’s discussion of a “quirky theory of self, other, home, world, body,

⁴¹ Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2, no. 1 (April 2003), 32.

identity, touching, feeling, knowing, being, becoming, and moving,”⁴² and Snorton’s discussion of trans as being about movement without origin or point of arrival.⁴³ These scholarly approaches seem to reflect an urge to move beyond simply situating ourselves in our texts, to a more affective and dynamic self-articulation regarding authorship. This project builds on these self-reflective methods and deploys an embodied curiosity as a strategy of approaching trans visual culture. This strategy is one that reflects on my own changing trans gender-non-conforming body as an artist and maker, and reflects this in my particular open and curious approach to consider the work of these trans self-image-makers. Forwarding a methodology of trans visual studies and embracing curiosity and openness, I aim to model methods and insight of trans visual culture.

Writing about the works at hand is a revelatory process in which I begin not with a set agenda, but look, open to perceiving what the work is about and situating it in the context of the current moment and attending to it as fully as possible. As Bal has urged,

Objects are active participants in the performance of analysis in that they enable reflection and speculation, and they can contradict projections and wrong-headed interpretations (if the analyst lets them!) and thus constitute a theoretical object with philosophical relevance.⁴⁴

⁴² J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*, 110.

⁴³ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 2.

⁴⁴ Bal, “Visual Essentialism,” 24.

I will emulate an approach that considers the object of analysis and as co-informant in establishing the methods and field of Trans Visual Studies, for the examples of trans visual culture I will discuss in the following chapters are very much praxis in and of themselves.

This project could not exist without the work of feminist visual theory.

Today's feminist theories of the visual are indebted to the work of feminist scholars and artists of previous eras and continue to take on more nuanced and complex interrogations of social inequities as they relate to the visual arena, while actively working to attend to the blind spots and limits of earlier feminist discourse.⁴⁵ Of particular interest to my research, and investigated in *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*, by Amelia Jones, is the cultural belief in the ability to infer something from how someone looks—a culturally pervasive, and deeply flawed conviction. One of the central questions in Jones's text is how we negotiate belonging, and how we gain membership to particular groups based, at least initially, on how we look and are perceived. The major flaw in such beliefs, as Jones articulates it, is that no necessary correlation lies between how we look and what we believe in. As Jones demonstrates, the physical does not necessarily correlate to any particular interiority, ideology, or political or social allegiances.

Jones's thinking on de-binarizing scholarly methods and de-essentializing thinking about identity has also been invaluable to this project. I uphold Jones's argument that

⁴⁵ Jennifer Doyle, and Amelia Jones, "Introduction: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture," *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 607-15. doi:10.1086/499288.

binary thinking is no longer a sufficient model for apprehending what is transpiring in culture, particularly when it comes to representations and identifications. She urges scholars to be careful so as not to position ourselves in binary opposition with scholars that came before us, but instead to recognize our indebtedness to the artistic and scholarly practices that laid the groundwork for the interventions we may propose in the contemporary moment.⁴⁶ Thinking through the complex relationship between how trans people look and perform for pictures offers a new way of thinking about photographs, as there is an innate tension between the surface of the trans person and the notion of self.⁴⁷

Following from Jones's point of situating ourselves in a lineage of scholarship, I position this project in the tradition of scholars who have been invested in intersectionality, and feminist and queer of color methods that forward issues of identity and representation. Particularly significant to my project is the legacy and lineage of scholarly interventions prompted by Kimberlé Crenshaw, in particular, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." Crenshaw used intersectionality to drive home how identities and the reception of them impact people's daily lives.⁴⁸ Her work has had a far-reaching impact on various disciplines especially feminist visual theory, cultural studies, and

⁴⁶ Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York: Routledge, 2012), 6.

⁴⁷ Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*, 96.

⁴⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299. doi:10.2307/1229039.

queer theory.⁴⁹ Building on theories of intersectionality coming out of black feminist theory in particular, Crenshaw's conception of intersectionality is furthered by queer of color scholars Patel, Snorton, and E. Patrick Johnson, and in transfeminist intersectionality by the likes of micha cárdenas. The model of ideology established by Deleuze and Guattari, and forwarded by Crenshaw and later Puar and cárdenas, notes that trans femmes of color experience the incorporation of many axes of oppression that change over time.⁵⁰ Taking this as a foundational tenet I build on and nuance this operation of intersectionality in my chapters.

My work is also particularly indebted to the methods forwarded by Derek Murray, whose insightful, rigorous, and forward-moving methods on theorizing blackness have served as a model regarding how to approach thinking about trans identity. Murray's *Queering Post-Black Art* is instructive in the ways it works to reimagine how we discursively frame identity and representation. Murray's scholarship is invaluable in the ways that he de-essentializes, complicates, and queers notions of blackness, exploring blackness as identity, aesthetic, and analytic. Murray also reconfigures how we think of identity and identity discourses as not necessarily fixed to essentialist ideas about what it means to be black, but blackness as an unfixed and shifting and slippery signifier, which is necessarily already intersecting with other identitarian regimes and continually made and remade. Murray's forwarding of queer

⁴⁹ Adrien Katherine Wing, ed., *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

⁵⁰ cárdenas "Dark Shimmers," 164.

in this text is also invaluable to my project for the ways it is modeled as an aesthetic, a facet of identity, and also a scholarly method.⁵¹ I forward trans in a similar vein, as an identity and an analytic, both of which are fluid, porous and intersectional.

At the heart of the work is a desire to call attention to how we each exist in a mobile intersectional zone at the crux of various identity categories and ideologies. Patel's commitment to transparent, intersectional, hybrid, adaptable, self-reflexive, critically engaged methods models much-needed interventions into art history, visual studies, and discourses around identity that this project emulates. The ethos of trans as an idea and method, and the scholarly contributions mentioned above, are absolutely critical to my project, particularly in forwarding Trans Visual Studies as a field with necessary trans visual studies methods to attend to exclusions that may emerge. For the ideological frameworks in which we are always enmeshed push upon all of us, urging us and our practices to fit ourselves, our work, and our scholarship into these hierarchical and reductive frameworks (those rooted in modernist ideals that have historically sought to oppress many of us). Part of the promise of an intersectional trans approach to visual culture is to remain invested in and dismantling

⁵¹ These interventions are in the lineage of scholars committed to anti-discriminatory practices and the critical foregrounding of identity politics in visual studies and art history discourses. This project specifically builds upon the urgings of Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, as articulated in their 2006 essay, "Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity," wherein they describe their project as being about making "direct effort to promote critical practices that consider identity and subjectivity within dominant discourses—while at the same time moving beyond outmoded binaries of high and low culture." They argue that the continued relevance of art history depends on the inclusion of the study of sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, and class identities. Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, "Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity," *Art Journal* 65 (Spring 2006): 22-39, 24.

the intellectual, cultural and artistic biases that have historically shaped scholarship on art and visual culture.

I want to add that all trans folks experience multiple intersections of various identitarian regimes and identity regulation based on visual morphologies and phenotypic judgment.⁵² How these intersecting matrixes impact identities, is contingent on aesthetics, time and place, and viewers' perspectives. Each of us is unique, and every interaction is always situated. Trans visibility is an impossibility on two levels: first, there can be no singular iconic representation encapsulating the diversity of trans experiences; second, the notion that there could be a fixed iconic representation of even one trans person is impossible in that trans is predicated on the disjuncture of the outward physical appearance of self and an invisible interior feeling of self that ostensibly in a person's understanding will be something achieved in the future.⁵³ Trans self-imaging cannot be viewed as static; it is always intersectional, including its contingency on time and place, and offers a sophisticated understanding of surface and interior, index and referent.

To fall into the trap of visibility as a method of liberation or even part of the struggles for rights is not only to be over-simplistic, but also to reinvest in binary structures and essentialism. Trans visibility as a premise or a desire can never begin to forward the trans cause for trans identities, as they in and of themselves undermine

⁵² For discussion of morphologies, see J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*, 58. For a discussion of phenotypic judgment, see Mel Chen, "Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet," in *Tourmaline*, 149.

⁵³ cárdenas "Dark Shimmers," 164.

the very notion of visibility. In other words, trans visualities make ideas of visibility much more complicated, revealing the farce of the visible, so to have a movement based on obtaining visibility in service of liberation is ironic and unconsidered. It works against our very struggle for recognition, as the struggle that desires to be recognized for something not beholden to how people interpret our surface corporality through dominant cultural paradigms of gender. On the politics of trans visibility, Cárdenas has written eloquently that,

For trans visibility to be a reality, there would have to be an essential trans identity to make visible, but there is not. How could one make visible an identity that begins with the claim: “I am not what I appear to be; I know this because of a feeling that I have; I am my vision of my future self.”⁵⁴

I forward that this is necessary to view each instantiation or object of study as intersectional, rooted in time and place, and informed by viewing perspective. I argue for the establishment of trans visual studies as a self-reflective and intersectional methodology, as well as an emerging field that is a subset of Visual Studies and Trans Studies.⁵⁵ In establishing a field and a methodology it is critical to remain wary of producing exclusionary practices and it is imperative not to fall into traps of notions

⁵⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

It is important to note that the trans scholars, queer scholars, and feminist discourse I am in dialogue with are those who trace a lineage via Gloria Anzaldúa and the origin of queer as necessarily intersectional and always in relation to racialization and other facets of identity. These folks trace a lineage to Crenshaw and those who are interested in Quare traditions, traditions that situate knowledge as always intersectional and always striving to de-essentialist scholarship.

of authenticity, rather to view trans as necessarily porous, malleable, always contingent and intersectional.⁵⁶

Trans Photography and Self-Imaging as Praxis

This project argues trans and non-binary self-representations are in discourse with art historical practices, using photographs to bring into being and forward new methods and discourses of self-imaging while intervening in constructions of the ontology of the photograph. At the crux of this project is visual studies scholarship directed at the emergent visual field of trans self-representations. Trans self-representations across the trans visual field (from what has traditionally been considered high culture, through to various vernacular instantiations) currently challenge historical conceptualizations of photographic representations in the West and as such require a methodological intervention to apprehend them. The praxis of

⁵⁶ Informed by E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). Johnson's text is invested in the significant ways that performance theory can trouble the line between "authentic" blackness and blackness as "figured through performance." He is also wary of placing too much weight on performance as a methodology and sees that, like any critical methodology, performance is vulnerable to being blinded by its own terms and methods. He argues that "blackness" does not belong to any one or any group, but rather is a "complex and nuanced racial signifier," which is appropriated. Johnson argues that "blackness" is contingent on time and place, and as a concept has no essence; "black authenticity" is a trope that is manipulated for cultural capital. He sees blackness as being produced and authenticated in various ways, depending on context and the authorizing subjects. However, he is not interested in taking down authenticity for he sees it as a key move for disenfranchised folks to deploy in order to counter oppressive representations of themselves. Johnson also articulates that historically when black voices have engaged with notions of the authentic this move has often excluded more than included. The author argues that "some sites of cross-cultural appropriation provide fertile ground on which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other," calling performance a "trope" he argues that it is critical to his discussion and uses it to understand black culture while also using black culture to understand performance.

trans self-imaging, as this project engages it, works to undo the reductive, fixed, and binary ways of conceptualizing identity and photography in the Euro/American context. Creating photographic methods and frameworks for apprehending photography outside of and challenging Western photographic traditions is tantamount to this project and crucial lest scholars continue to fall into the same intellectually flawed frameworks. Therefore, to try and categorize trans too rigidly and rest on any fixed and definitive definition is undesirable, reductive, and limiting. This project is invested in rethinking conceptualizations of identity and photography, relations to essentialism, authenticity, and fixity. My work builds on the methods of other scholars committed to intersectional approaches to identity in contemporary ways, which push identity discourses to rework essentialist ideas that uphold problematic and outmoded binaries and exclusions. I will briefly discuss some of the key scholars and methods whose work and approaches influence my thinking and set the foundation for the methods I construct in this project.

There are no as-of-yet trans methods of thinking photography, but there are pictures and methods about photography in postcolonial locations, which are similarly invested in reworking portrait photographs and decolonizing photography discourse. A circumstance, not readily recognizable but nevertheless critical to understanding photographic practices and discourse, is that trans photography, while not necessarily practiced in locations that at first glance appear to be postcolonial geographically, may be in postcolonial locations ideologically. As the binary gender system was set up along with the colonial project, and thus bound up with practices of

executing oppression of one group by another via binary oppositions, the trans self-representations I study in this project are ideologically working in postcolonial locations. The image makers discussed herein are invested in self-imaging as a project of inserting self into visual discourse. They are also invested in showcasing embodiments in between gender and reworking ontological understandings of photography. All of this work breaks open ideologies inherited from the colonial project, including de-essentializing identity, undoing binary gender as the norm, mobilizing photography as not indexical, and undoing binary oppositions as a necessary and natural ways of conceiving of things. To begin to formulate a methodology of looking at photographs, and in particular trans self-images, it becomes clear that methodological standards of art history are insufficient.

Photographic Discourse

The significance of the deployment of trans icons in visual culture is bound up with the construction and maintenance of trans stereotypes, achieved in large part due to the conceptualization of photography in Western art historical traditions. The discursive framing of portrait photographs in locations descended from colonial project by and large maintains the ideological apparatus that outlines the ontology of photographs, in such a way that enables a social belief in the images' ability to transmit "truth" about the subject.⁵⁷ This ideologically constructed and upheld belief

⁵⁷ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986); also see: John Tagg, *Burden of Representation*; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography At The Dock: Essay on Photographic History*,

has been sutured to photography since its inception in the Western context and has facilitated photography's deployment as an apparatus of cultural ideology.⁵⁸ The conceptual flattening of the space between the image and the referent is a crucial facet in upholding colonial ideologies. The very conception of photographs at the inception of the media in the mid-1800s was deeply tangled with that period's dominant ideologies, invested in the colonial project and hinged upon upholding the binary opposition that positioned Caucasian masculinities as the pinnacle of humanity.⁵⁹ Halberstam has observed that in the colonial project binary oppositions were established precisely to facilitate the demarcation of others as knowable and visible in order to degrade and dehumanize them.⁶⁰

The complex relation between representations and the depicted subject can be traced back to cultural conceptions of representation originating in the Renaissance, when the belief in the artist's ability to render truth and insight into a subject through representational likeness was established. Joanna Woodall writes,

Institution, and Practices (Minneapolis: Regents of University of Minnesota Press, 1991); John Berger and Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a Photograph*, 1st ed. (New York: Aperture, 2013); John Berger, ed., *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*, Repr. ed. (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1990); and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, 2001).

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999. See Chapter 2 for discussion of emergence of photography as rooted in western modernist ideologies. Also see: J. Halbrstam *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*; Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Critical Introductions to Art (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1997); Solomon-Godeau, *Photography At The Dock*.

⁵⁹ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*. See Chapter 2 for discussion of emergence of photography as rooted in western modernist ideologies. Also see Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ J. Halbrstam *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*, 6-7.

An understanding of portraits as direct substitutes for their sitters meant that the circulation of portraits could mirror and expand the system of personal patronage whereby power, privilege, and wealth were distributed. Their uses included arranging dynastic marital alliances, disseminating the image of sovereign power, commemorating and characterizing different events and stages of a reign, eliciting love and reverence due to one's lord, ancestor or relative. Because of these crucial functions, portraiture had to be theorized as unmediated realism. Yet although explicit invention or idealization was problematic, the *raison d'être* of these images was actually to represent sitters as worthy of love, honor, respect, and authority. It was not just that the real was confused with the ideal, but that divine virtue was the ultimate, permanent reality.⁶¹

During the Renaissance, the conflation of portraits and self-portraits for the sitters, via a belief in the image as “unmediated realism,” coupled with the circulation of the images of the privileged and the wealthy, endowed the sitter, via the image, with attributes such as being worthy of love, honor, respect, and authority.⁶² In the mid-nineteenth century a shift occurred in portraiture traditions when artists began inserting themselves into the canon of illustrious portraits via the production of self-portraits. Modern artists began to be viewed as geniuses, taking on the aura of the greatness previously reserved for the wealthy and those in positions of power.⁶³ Via this history and the continuation of this tradition a fundamental component of portraiture in the Western context is the assigning of particular attributes and identities to a face or body. This discursive framing reflects what Deleuze and

⁶¹ Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016). Also see James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, 2015.

Guattari have referred to as the “faciality” of Western culture, or the obsessive interest in the face as a signifier, which in turn is bound up with the belief in the importance of individual subjectivity.⁶⁴

The conflation of likeness and the subject of a portrait, prevalent in Western concepts of representation, exemplified by the belief in the impulse and ability to ascribe assumptions about people to them based on their surface appearance, was exacerbated with the inception of photography in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Early photo theorist and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce was influential in framing the cultural conception of photography in modernist ideologies. He argued that nonphotographic images operate symbolically while photographs are “effects of the radiations from the object.”⁶⁶ Pierce also argued that because photographs are made in some sense mechanically, they are not influenced by subjectivity. This position is also sometimes discussed as the “aura of machine objectivity,” or “indexicality,” which originates with the mechanical production via the camera.⁶⁷ Since its inception, photography has been framed discursively as an objective recorder of the world. However, as has been pointed out by many photography scholars, perhaps most

⁶⁴ Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

⁶⁵ Significantly, the inception of photography occurred during the known as the Enlightenment also at the height of colonialism and during a time when binary oppositions were in vogue and established in their service of setting up and maintaining hierarchies that privileged Caucasian, Western European, wealthy men.

⁶⁶ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 55. Charles Saunders Peirce was an American philosopher, theorist, mathematician, and scientist. 1839-1914. He was influential in developing philosophies about photography.

⁶⁷ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

extensively John Tagg, photography is highly subjective. As Tagg has argued, even the most ostensibly objective photographs are highly specific. As he argued, photographs record the many choices that go into making an image—in other words, the numerous sequential choices of the image-maker. The ideological construction of photography in the Western context has attached notions of indexicality, evidence, and authenticity to pictures, while in fact photographs are always about power differentials, highly fabricated, and situational. The construction of photographs via discursive framing sets up a belief about their ontology that perpetuates what can be referred to as the photograph's "regime of truth."⁶⁸ Because of the cultural ideological commitment to the unmediated truth of photographs, these objects have helped construct the collective reality of the West since the photograph's emergence.⁶⁹

The belief that photographs capture, render, and transmit accurate information about the subject is bound up with systems of assigning values to people based on how they look, and thus theoretically and methodologically flawed and limiting. Photographs may be mechanically made, but they are subjective representations. Allan Sekula poignantly contends that while pictures are not objective representations of the lived world, the cultural belief in the truth value of photography leads most people to consider camera-based representations "congruent with knowledge in

⁶⁸ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 188-9.

⁶⁹ For more on the discussion of photographs being part and parcel of constructing reality, see Sontag, *On Photography*; Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 55. Also see, Solomon-Godeau *Photography at the Dock*.

general.”⁷⁰ Along with the inception of photography in the mid-nineteenth century came the establishment of Enlightenment thinking, including beliefs about binary gender structures, whose deeply entrenched history with photography is tied to the latter, “signal[ing] a crucial stage in the production of the new sexual subject and its visual truth.”⁷¹ Tagg has also observed that photography developed alongside science, criminology, psychiatry, and other systems inextricably tied to the regulation of identities and sustaining power differentials in society.⁷² Tagg furthered that because photographs picture things in the world—that is already laden with meaning and existing in social structure use values and meanings—they necessarily replicate these systems. In this way, for Tagg, photographs do not transmit truth so much as uphold norms and values already in place.⁷³

Particularly significant to this current project is the way photographs have been deployed to cement ideas and expectations about gender. Trans studies scholar B. Preciado has observed that the discursive framing of photography as indexical, and the suturing of beliefs about photography’s “technical production,” endowed it with “the merit of visual realism,”⁷⁴ which in turn has tied photography to a significant stage in the production of a gender via the belief in visual truth. Preciado writes, “The truth of sex takes on the nature of visual discourse, a process in which photography

⁷⁰ Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 56.

⁷¹ Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 111.

⁷² Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 188-9.

⁷⁴ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 111.

participates like an ontological catalyst, making explicit a reality that would not be able to emerge any other way.”⁷⁵ Photographs of people not only prompt a reading of the picture for clues about the person, but they also inform the normative structures by which we live. As binary-gendered people circulate prolifically at the expense of gender non-conforming and non-binary people, the belief in binary gender as “the only way to be gendered” is reified.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau has worked to explain the function of photographs in relation to gender formations. She writes that “. . . photography, a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth and naturalism have been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender.”⁷⁶ In failing to view photographs as highly fabricated and ideologically instructive, one is wont to mischaracterize what is contained in the frame as a given rather than view it as a suggestion of one possible reality. To view the portrait photographs circulating in mainstream culture as a given, reinforces established ideologies and aesthetic standards.

In studying portrait photographs we must consider how the project of creating visibility itself reinforces and further legitimizes the cultural weight invested in looking, otherwise a practice buttressing the maintenance of current power structures. Distilling vibrant debates that have been engaged by feminist theorists regarding the politics of representation, Solomon-Godeau concisely argues that the problem of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁶ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 257

engaging with binary oppositions of negative visibility countered by positive visibility is “uncomplicated,” grounded in “unexamined essentialism,” and relies on a “positivist model that is both limiting and ultimately deceptive.”⁷⁷ It is significant that scholars do not engage in reductive thinking about portraits being synonymous with knowledge, nor should scholarship position one type of image-making in opposition to another, but instead, methodologically it is necessary to attend to the specificity of each new visual instantiation on its terms via interdisciplinary approaches that attend most fully to the image’s specificity.

Feminist visual theorist Jessica Evans has written extensively on contemporary media culture and photography. In her essay titled merely “Photography” Evans argues that as scholars of photography we must be wary of claims to “truthiness,” as they often are deployed to equate “appearances” with “reality.”⁷⁸ To conflate what can be known and what is visually observable is to potentially fall into compliance with problematic ideological frameworks without thinking critically about the ideological structures that shape the way knowledge is constructed and perceived via the visual encounter.⁷⁹ Significantly, Evans also

⁷⁷ Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 258. See David Company, “Preface: Art and Photography,” in *Art and Photography* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003), 11-43. Company stresses that feminist brought about demand that art address historically and culturally specific locations of images. For more on debates in photography about shifts in postmodernism and feminism, see Philip Gafter, “The Staged Document,” *Photography After Frank*, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2009), 50-51. Discussions of document in Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd, rev. and expanded ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

⁷⁸ Jessica Evans, “Photography,” in Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds., *Feminist Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 106-107.

⁷⁹ Jessica Evans, “Photography,” in Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds., *Feminist Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 106-107.

articulates that “the study of photography means that photographs other than those identifiable by an individual, named photographer must necessarily be studied.”⁸⁰

In the digital age, we are increasingly aware that images are fabrications. There is still a complicated relationship between the surface of the photo and its relation to that which it indexes.⁸¹ In media-saturated contemporary image culture, it becomes essential to study the specificity of different types of photographic images, their circulation, aesthetics, and impacts, as well as to interrogate the approaches deployed and insights revealed by the works of artists engaged in pulling apart, and intervening in, the space between the surface of the photograph and the subject.⁸²

Unfixing Photographs

Significantly, photography practiced in locations not invested in upholding Western art historical conceptions of the medium reflect profoundly different practices, aesthetics, and conceptions—often mobilizing photographs to drastically different ends than those of Western photographers and Western theories of photography. In “Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism,” Christopher Pinney traces how photography practiced in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 106-107.

⁸¹ For more on debates regarding contemporary photography and the shifting discourse around its presumed veracity see: Bright, “Introduction,” *Art Photography Now*, 7-16. See also: Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, “The Big Picture: On the Politics of Contemporary Photography,” *Third Text* 23, no. 5 (September 2009): 551–556; Company, “Preface: Art and Photography,” 11-43; Bright, “Document,” *Art Photography Now*, 157-159.

⁸² Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 2-5, 13-14.

postcolonial locations engages a different relationship between the surface of the picture and the conceptual relation to the imaged subject or object. Offering a vastly different notion of the photograph, these images challenge what we have come to take for granted about pictures in the West—that is to say, the ideologically constructed, “indexical” relationship between the surface of the picture and the thing itself. Pinney argues that in postcolonial locations, as colonized communities seek to reaffirm their agency and self-fashion their constituencies, the use of photographs intentionally refuses the depth of the image in favor of calling attention to the surface of the photograph. Pinney observes that, in these postcolonial photographic practices, calling attention to the surface is done precisely to refuse “depth.”⁸³ These methods work to decolonize the gaze and to intervene in debates about the veracity of the photograph. (See Figure 2).

Not only do Pinney’s observations about the concepts of surface and interiority refer to the surface of the picture and the notion of the truth of the index linked to the subject within the frame, but these photographic methods exist in such contexts precisely to fight objectification and disenfranchisement. Pinney describes what he sees as the “colonial schematic,” a visual culture apparatus using images to create fixed categories from which colonized subjects remain immobilized, thus positioned people as objects via visual discourses. Pinney sees postcolonial

⁸³ Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography’s Other Histories*, Objects/histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

photographic practices bringing focus to the surface to keep a subject's likeness on the surface of the picture, resulting in subjects that are less ideologically fixed.⁸⁴

Many of the visual strategies and visual rhetorics of “surfacist practices,” which Pinney observes being deployed by postcolonial photographers to achieve what he has referred to as “surfacism,” include creating mise-en-scene, bright and patterned backdrops, and “post-exposure manipulation.” For Pinney, postcolonial photographers’ “surfacist practices” depend on a rejection of earlier ideologically constructed practices that positioned colonial Europeans as arbiters of truth and rational thought, and deployed photographic practices that aided in the colonial project.⁸⁵ Pinney cites Michel de Certeau’s writing about “ground-dwelling pedestrians” longing to “be a viewpoint,” and how colonial practices that hinged on the belief in the depth of the photograph prevented colonial subjects from articulating their viewpoint. This argument highlights consideration of the conceptual frameworks operating around cultural assessment of photographs when looking at and making pictures. The notion of a photograph being a window into a world, for example, an idea central to Western conceptions of photography, was created by colonial “rationality.” Thus, focusing on the opacity of the picture plane via surfacist practices refuses to engage in the legacy of colonization of peoples and their likenesses.⁸⁶ What Pinney’s text reveals most poignantly is how the cultural framing around

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

understanding of the photograph impacts both making and interpreting images. When looking at and making pictures, interpretations need to consider the conceptual frameworks operating around production and assessment of photographs.

No one has been more articulate and influential when it comes to understanding the nuanced issues around Western photography theory, and the blind spots resulting from its foundation in Western ideologies, than Okwui Enwezor. Enwezor's assessment is in part formed by his critical engagement with a generation of art historians trained in methods outside the Western canon, who (along with Enwezor) are responsible for major changes in contemporary art discourse. In *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, Enwezor observes how globalization has revealed the shortcomings of Western art historical methods, particularly regarding African Photography. Enwezor observes that African photography deploys pedagogical and aesthetic issues, which demand different methods of assessment. Hence African artists, like their counterparts in other postcolonial contexts, engage in practices of political and national identity formation as well as developing new aesthetic and cultural forms (See Figure 2): "To understand contemporary African art's resistance to a monolithic contextual framework is to place it at the crux of the postcolonial" where "cultural plurality" and "multiplicity of identity" are tantamount and identities are conceptualized as unfixed and not limited by ethnicity."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Okwui Enwezor, International Center of Photography, and Exhibition Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography, eds., *Snap Judgments: New Positions in*

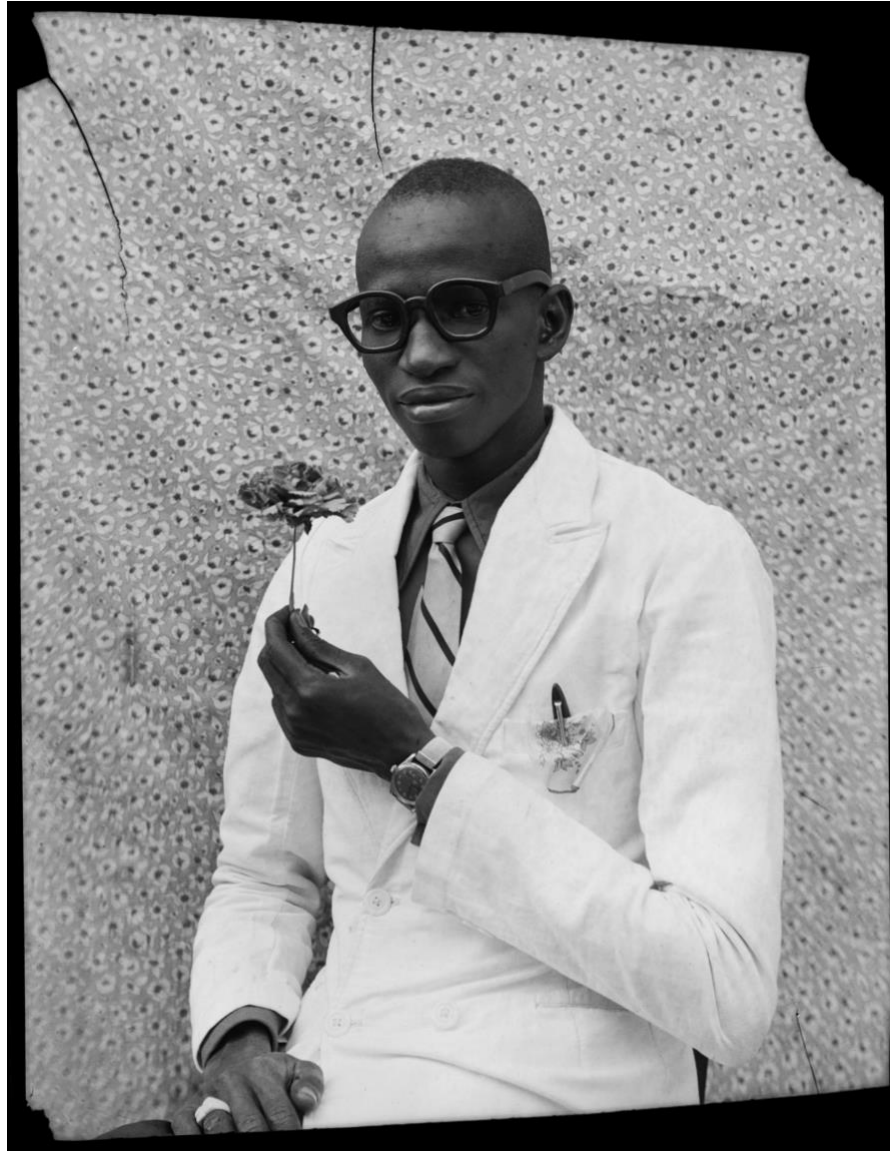


Figure 2. Seydou Keïta, Seydou Keïta, *Untitled*, from *Bamako*, 1949-1964.

Contemporary African Photography ; [in Conjunction with the Exhibition "Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography" Organized by the International Center of Photography, New York ... March 10 through May 28, 2006], 1. ed (Göttingen: Steidl [u.a.], 2006), p. 5.

In the recent past, contemporary African photography has moved away from modern African photography, rejecting binary opposition of colonizer and colonized, seeking out and creating a fruitful cultural exchange via a dialectical process. Enwezors's observations about Seidu Keita's photographs are particularly revealing. Enwezor's study of these works debunks what many scholars have assumed to be the sitters' longing to be included in Western modernity, and hence their deployment of what he refers to as "fetish objects" or Western props, such as cars, motorcycles, radios, and telephones. Enwezor argues that in making this assumption such scholars are reinvesting in colonial ideologies that position the West as the desired cultural location and reflecting their ideological formulation of the image, a situation they fail to recognize. They thus ignore the discursive practices sitters engage in and the exchange between African aesthetics and Islamic modernity. Enwezors's observations underscore how reductive scholarly methods problematically frame the photographs at hand and narrow the scope of possible analysis, resulting in reductive and inaccurate assessment.⁸⁸

From 1948 to 1962, Keita and his camera were instrumental in visualizing resistance and empowering subjects to "enunciat[e] aesthetic values of African beauty previously denied them by the primitivising apparatus of colonial ethnography." Keita's portraits of the inhabitants of the city of Bamako bear witness to the "near disappearance of colonial subjectivity." (See Figure 3). Enwezors's argument about

⁸⁸ Okwui Enwezor, International Center of Photography, and Exhibition *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, 5.



Figure 3. Seydou Keita, *Untitled*, from *Bamako*, 1949-1964.

contemporary African photography after Keita includes artists such as Fani-Kayode, Tracey Rose, and Berni Searle—all of whom he describes as investigating the self and transforming photography. In particular, he observes the way they mobilize the

self-portrait as a tool for a discursive method of probing identities. What Enwezor's text reveals most profoundly is how Western traditions and methods of apprehending photographic images are rooted in colonial modernity, which has led to short-sighted, Eurocentric, and limiting assessments of photographs. As Enwezor has written, the "apparatus and its supporting systems of production, distribution, dissemination, and mythology exist as part of the institutions of colonial modernity."⁸⁹

Some of Enwezor's key observations about photographic work coming out of postcolonial Africa can be observed in the work of trans and non-binary contemporary self-image-makers in the U.S. today. Trans self-representations engaged in similar praxis as those observed by Enwezor work to decolonize photography theory and practices forwarding new aesthetics, methods, and identities, making identity pluralistic, multiple, unfixed, and malleable, while also decentering what constitutes the default position from which to create and to view. Enwezor suggests that, as scholars, we need to decolonize our thinking about photography and in particular portrait photography in a way that decenters colonial Modernity's discursive conception of photographs. In doing so, we can arrive at new methods and insights about how photographs operate and what portrait pictures do. I want to suggest that it is necessary to de-essentialize scholarship on photography and decolonize the conceptual framing that we have in some respect taken as a given in Western art historical traditions. To do so is not only politically necessary, it also

⁸⁹ Ibid.

opens up new ways of understanding photography and portraiture. Hence, not only is it essential for scholars in the Western art history to decenter Western modernity, but we must remain wary of centering or privileging any tradition or form. I propose that we address each case study or concern from the framework of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality, and continually remain vigilant regarding our own near-sightedness.⁹⁰

Moving beyond even what Enwezor has observed as challenging conceptions of photography, and intervening in discourses of photography and representation, trans self-imaging adds another facet of complexity to artistic praxis of self-imaging and understandings of portraiture. Trans in ethos is a repudiation of the veracity of the visual.⁹¹ Rejecting the truth of the photograph intervenes in the culturally held belief that we can believe what we see. Turning this norm inside out and breaking with how we understand the photo, to view that the understanding is discursive, not ontological, is at the crux of this project, and trans as a method helps to do so.

On Trans

Trans is a field of study, a movement, a diverse and flexible identity category, a new form of visual culture, and a method for a new way of thinking. Across these arenas trans signals expansive thinking, intentionally amorphousness, malleability,

⁹⁰ Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2. ed., reprinted (twice), In Sight (London [u.a]: Routledge, 2010).

⁹¹ Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*, 96. As discussed above Snorton has observed, “reality is sutured to the privileging of sight.” Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 140

commitments to being unfixed and critical reflection on what may seem to be given or normative. Trans and non-binary identities and constituencies have existed as long as there have been people and continue to exist around the globe. The concepts, terminology, and aesthetics of trans continually shift and are always contingent on temporal and geopolitical locations and on any number of other cultural and subcultural factors. Since being formally established in the 1990s, trans studies and trans methodologies in the so-called “West” have continually drawn from and been informed by trans experiences and embodiments. In order to understand the contemporary moment of trans visual culture proliferation, and unpack the significance of this turn, it is critical to reflect on the way that trans as an identity has shifted in the recent past and to follow the methodological trajectory of trans studies. Doing so also makes clear the need for the establishment of trans visual studies as a field and a method.

Trans, as a gender identity, is often used as an umbrella term to unify various constituencies.⁹² Within the past decade, the shift in popular discourse from the use of transsexual to transgender (or the even more colloquially used and broadly applying,

⁹² Jack Halberstam offers a concise and thorough explanation of trans as understood currently, articulating that trans is about expansive forms of difference, haptic relations to knowing, disaggregation of identity” (4-5) trans is open (52) trans is a new relation to seeing and being seen.” Trans is a “capacious fluid category rather than a diagnosis.” See Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018), 4-5, 52, 85, 88. Also, see C. Riley Snorton, in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 8. Snorton forwards that trans is elusive, slippery, and amorphous.

trans) has come largely from within the trans community.⁹³ The now largely outmoded term transsexual generally refers to someone who was assigned a gender at birth that they did not identify as and had gender reassignment surgery and used hormones to transition medically into the gender they most identify with. The term transsexual refers specifically to the reassignment of one's biological sex. Thus, to be a transsexual, one needs to have physically changed their sex organs. This identification also entails a long and arduous process, often encompassing living as the gender one identified as before receiving any medical treatment (including hormone therapies or gender-affirming surgeries). The term has fallen into decline due to its investment in binary gender structures and biological sex as being the most determining factor in a trans person's identity.⁹⁴ Transsexual as a term reinvests in the necessity of a trans person to have sex reassignment surgery, whereas transgender

⁹³ The term "trans" refers to a person who identifies with a gender that is different than the one assigned at birth. Trans, as it is used in this project, includes binary and non-binary trans identities. This formulation of trans is also a move toward coalition-building within trans binary, non-binary, and queer communities. It is also a way of erasing distinctions between transsexual and transgender. This move is made to ensure we include rather than exclude people who may self-identify with the term trans and thus to view the identity category as having porous and malleable boundaries. This definition of the term comes from lived experiences and also feeds into a methodological understanding of the concept of trans as being committed to undoing essentialism and binaries and working to establish a field and methods that reflect an identity, and visual culture ontologically based in transformation, liminality, intersectionality, and that is de-essentialist. For more info on the terms transgender and transsexual see: Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman, eds., *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Nicholas M. Teich, *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁹⁴ For more discussion, see especially Introduction to Stryker, *Transgender History*.

takes the emphasis off of a person's genitals as related to their gender, relying more on a person's self-identification. I use the term transsexual only where the authors I cite use it; I am largely disinterested in this concept as it is methodologically limiting and reinforces normative binary gender and sex essentialism and inaccurate conflation of biological sex and gender identity.

As an identity trans (without the distinction of gender or biological sex as deployed with the use of transgender or transsexual), is mobilized as a way to build community across transsexual- and transgender-identifying people, and to move away from the forced disclosure of one's physical relationship to reassignment surgeries, by having to articulate via self-identification one's corporeal relation to biological binary sex. The shift in terminology to "trans" as identity marker is critical precisely because this shift divests from physicality in favor of valuing self-identification.⁹⁵ It also moves the conceptualization of identity into new territory. Trans as an identity category at its very ontology marks a significant departure from how we have heretofore thought about identity. That is to say it is not assigned to us by how we look but rather is something we self-proclaim.⁹⁶

Trans as an identity constituency is made up of people with diverse gender identifications, all of whom have unique and discrete relations to geographic location,

⁹⁵ There is much more that can be unpacked here in terms of intersex people, sex confirming surgeries at birth, and movements for intersex rights. This is not the focus of this project, but this is a very under-researched territory that certainly warrants rigorous scholarship and social intervention.

⁹⁶ It is documented that 1.4 million trans people live in the US. Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018), 18. It is also contested that any such numeric projections are deeply flawed and likely under-assessed.

historical time periods, subcultural identification, class, and ethnicity (as well as other identifications). Trans identities highlight gender identities in ways that avoid the fixed, the linear, and the bordered, promoting genders that can change and fluctuate over the course of a lifetime, or even over the course of a day. Gender identity can even change depending on whom we're interacting with, where we are, and how we feel. Trans is often deployed by subjects as a means of articulating a lack of interest in existing and performing within the binary gender structure. It is also often used as a way of refusing to transition into a binary gender presentation. Trans can also be understood as creating a third gendered space that is diverse and maintaining a place of stasis and/or ongoing potentiality.⁹⁷

Developing a trans method based in this contemporary conception of trans identities, trans methods today often deploy concepts of transience, unfixity, and liminality, while also challenging preexisting barriers and categories. Generally speaking, trans as a method offers scholarship new ways to theorizing categories, identities, and representation. Trans methods open up ways of being and thinking that undo the belief in a correlation between apprehensions of surfaces and the assumption

⁹⁷ Trans as described by open unfixing and transgressive transversing, continual becoming and disruption of static norms. It's not about authenticity but reveals how bodily feeling and desire are constituted socially and spatially. Political, affective and social register produce trans bodies. See Eva Hayward "Spiderwoman" in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 255-273.

Jay Prosser, "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgenderism, and the transubstantiation of Sex," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, Routledge Literature Readers (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 32-59.

that they correlate to some necessary given truth. Trans as a method invests in concepts that privilege self-articulation over the visual interpretation of aesthetics.

To more fully comprehend the relationship between trans identities, trans methods and the discourses into which my project intervenes and on which trans methods this project builds, it is necessary to trace a lineage of trans discourses and debates. Over the next pages I'll sketch out the establishment of trans as a field of study, highlighting debates pertinent to this project and demonstrating why the establishment of a field of trans visual studies and its attending methods are necessary today.

Establishing Trans

Influential trans historian and scholar Susan Stryker became known in the 1990s for her work in developing the field of trans studies.⁹⁸ Stryker has noted that she was profoundly influenced and informed by San Francisco queer culture in the 1990s, a time replete with queer radical potentialities, and full of active re-thinking of gender and sexuality, which mobilized “queer” as a political term and identity formation to undo binary, essentialist, and fixed identities in favor of expansive, intersection and non-sanctioned identities. It was also a time when the importance of

⁹⁸ Stryker's work attending to trans culture, histories, and politics has been instrumental in the development of trans studies. Her documentary, *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*, San Francisco, CA: Frameline; 2005. Focuses on the 1966 uprising at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco; her co-edited anthology the *Transgender Studies Reader*; her work as the director at the LGBTQ Historical society in San Francisco, CA from 1999–2003; and her numerous texts and cultural work in the field of trans studies have been invaluable. See *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*. For access to view, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-WASW9dRBU>.

trans identities and trans studies began to be recognized more broadly (or at least more widely in the queer community).⁹⁹ In the Introduction to the *Transgender Studies Reader* Stryker attributed the emergence of the “transgender phenomena” to the convergence of several key cultural and social events that enabled the galvanizing of transgender as an identity category and a movement. She highlights the “new political allegiances forged during the AIDS crisis”; new gendered identities in a new relation to the pharmaceutical industry; shifting perspectives on gender emerging at the time; poststructuralist and performance theories gaining traction in academia; and the establishment of new technologies, as all adding to the emergence of transgender as a phenomena.¹⁰⁰

During the 1990s, with a rise of transgender activism came the proliferation of queer, trans, non-binary and genderqueer scholarship from folks including, for example, Kate Bornstein, Lou Sullivan, Renee Richards, Sandy Stone, Leslie Feinberg, David Harrison, Susan Stryker, Rikki Wilchins, and David Valentine. The approaches were varied and ranged from the excavation of trans histories and personal narratives to the study of trans street youth. The 1990s saw the publication of *Pomosexuals: Challenging Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality*, which included a preface by Kate Bornstein, and others like it, including essays on trans and

⁹⁹ Stryker, *Transgender History*. Also see Stryker and Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. It is worth mentioning that throughout time and globally there have been and continue to be countless iterations of non-binary gender systems and individuals. Trans as it emerges in the context of the United States as an identity, and field of study in the 1990s can also be attributed to the fact that there is a binary gender system in place that is continually being critiqued and unmoored.

gender-non-conforming identity politics from an array of authors including Carol Queen, Dorothy Allison, and Lawrence Schimel. The collection of texts demonstrated the sexual and gender politics of the time, both of which were radically subversive and expansive. The authors astutely drew a comparison between postmodernity and pomosexualities, and fostered political allegiances invested in undoing existing power structures. The shifts occurring in LGBTQ communities in the 1990s challenged binary thinking and fixed identities, which paved the way for today's trans and gender-non-conforming constituencies and laid the foundation for the type of trans scholarship on which my project builds.¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, as trans identities were gaining increased recognition and trans studies was formalized as an area of study, a considerable backlash was underway against trans constituencies, and essentialist ideas about identity categories and their boundaries were strongly articulated from feminists, queer theorists, and trans scholars alike. The central claims made to malign trans people, and reductive arguments about trans as an identity and a method were fixed to ideas about identity essentialism, binary oppositions, and reductive and limiting thinking. Feminists who sought to marginalize trans constituencies did so on the basis of reinforcing gender binaries and essentialist attitudes about gender and biological sex. Discourse within trans studies, in some cases in claiming space as trans constituencies and trans methodologies, rigidly defined trans in ways that left no room for malleable identities,

¹⁰¹ Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel, eds., *PoMoSEXUALS: Challenging Assumptions About Gender and Sexuality*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 1997).

porous boundaries, and elastic conceptualizations of trans as an identity or an analytic.¹⁰²

One of the most noted and hottest contestations of trans femininity and conservative feminist backlash directed at trans femmes was Janice Raymond's (1979) book, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Sandy Stone took on Raymond's critique of trans people in "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1987).¹⁰³ Stone writes, "I read Raymond to be claiming that transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallographic empire and were designed to invade women's spaces and appropriate women's power."¹⁰⁴ Stone rethinks Raymond's polemic that "transsexuals divide women," arguing that we view trans people not as a distinct and separate "third gender," but as a "genre" or a "set of

¹⁰² Trans scholars, including Sandy Stone, Julia Serano, Kate Bornstein, Talia Mae Bettcher, and J. Halberstam, have discussed and debunked reactionary feminist rhetoric aimed at and maligning trans femmes and transfeminism, pointing out that this criticism was rooted in essentialist and reductive ideas about identity, those invested in erecting and maintaining rigid distinctions that marked transwomen and transmen as constituting discrete identity categories distinct from queer identities, as well as separate from cis identities. For more on the debates around feminism, trans femininity, and trans feminism, see: Talia Mae Bettcher, "Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues"; Paisley Currah, "General Editor's Introduction," and Susan K. Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, "Introduction: Trans/Feminisms," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (May 2016), special issue on "Trans/Feminisms," 1-4, and 5-14; Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018). Feminism has erased and marginalized trans experiences and histories in erasing trans narratives from history in the service of claiming historical figures as lesbians, for example as shown in Eliane K. Ginsberg's erasure of the transness Billie Tipton, in claiming Tipton as butch—as discussed in Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 13.

¹⁰³ Sandy Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1987), <https://sandystone.com/empire-strikes-back.pdf>. Stone's text offers numerous polemics and critiques – too many to take on here – and is often updated as a living Pdf. Particularly significant to the work at hand is how she moves beyond the issue of identity-policing to view trans as an expansive methodology.

¹⁰⁴ Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 4. Also see Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Beacon Press, 1979).

embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.”¹⁰⁵ Stone’s mobilization of trans as an embodied methodology with the potential to rework and rupture various structures is shared by other trans scholars and is key to how trans as method will be mobilized in this project. Similarly, other trans feminist theorists including the likes of Talia Mae Bettcher, Kate Bornstein, and Julia Serano, have forwarded trans feminist methods that have pushed feminism to be more inclusive, more methodologically dangerous; as such, they have been able to attend more fully to how misogyny and heteropatriarchy shape and impact all lives, their work, and innovative scholarship has impacted scholarship and culture irrevocably. As brief examples of their innovations, Talia Mae Bettcher has worked to debunk the pervasive “trapped in the wrong body” narrative of trans lives, while also showcasing how stereotypes of trans people as deceivers reinvest in dominant modes of gender.¹⁰⁶ Kate Bornstein has been an author and activist, gender pirate, and innovator for three decades.¹⁰⁷ As a self-identified non-binary person, Bornstein has been instrumental in forwarding non-binary, trans identities via scholarship, activism, personal narratives, and more.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back.” Also see Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Re-thinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Signs* 39, no. 2 (2014): 43–65.

¹⁰⁷ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994). See Kate Bornstein’s website: <http://katebornstein.com>, and Kate Bornstein, *Kate Bornstein: My Gender? Oh, It’s Nothing*, in *The New York Times*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/us/kate-bornstein-gender-reflection.html>.

¹⁰⁸ See: Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*. Also see Kate Bornstein, *My New Gender Workbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Achieving World Peace through Gender Anarchy and Sex Positivity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Julia Serano’s work has been particularly insightful in noting the ways in which the framing of trans identities have been deeply bound up with heteropatriarchy, and misogyny and transphobia. She has crucially noted that transmisogyny has resulted in the “Sensationalization,” “demonization,” and “construction” of trans feminine people in mainstream media.¹⁰⁹

New directions in trans feminism are emerging; for example, trans feminist scholarship can now be observed as attending to technology and pornography, as observable in the work of scholars Lucía Egaña and Miriam Solá, who wield transfeminist approaches to consider artistic activism, postporn, and queer theories of transfeminist art practices in Barcelona.¹¹⁰ Moreover, micha cárdenas analyzes trans porn as constitutive of articulating and formulating transqueer identities and desires, noting that sexuality and gender are often enmeshed, and via queer, trans porn, trans and queer folks often learn not only about their own desires but also about how to produce the desired self.¹¹¹

It is important to trace how reductive thinking around trans identities and trans methodologies may result in limited notions about trans constituencies and limiting methodological precepts. Such pitfalls can be observed in claims forwarded by trans scholar Jay Prosser, in staking out the space of trans masculinity and trans theory as

¹⁰⁹ Julia Serano, *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism & Trans Feminism* (Oakland, CA: Switch Hitter Press, 2016), 71.

¹¹⁰ Lucía Egaña and Miriam Solá, “Hacking the Body: A Transfeminist War Machine,” trans. by Michael Brasher, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 1-2 (May 2016): 74–80, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334223>.

¹¹¹ micha cárdenas, *Trans Desire* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010).

distinct from queer theory and gender studies. In his 1998 text, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Prosser provides a framework through which to consider transsexuality. Beginning with a personal account, Prosser traces embodied, autobiographical accounts by several trans people, to rework our understandings of the connections between sexuality and gender. He mobilizes several methodological approaches to consider the “transsexual,” from somatic, to narrative, and from historical and discursive to political and personal. Prosser begins by thinking through the ways in which queer studies has made the trans subject a trope based on the trans subjects’ ability to challenge the binary structures of sex and gender. He nods to the significance of queer theory, writing that his project would not be possible if not for queer theory, but also quickly points out that the shortcomings of queer theory make his project necessary. Significantly, regarding his critique of queer theory and the investment in gender performativity, Prosser argues gender studies scholars and queer theorists have repeatedly deployed butch women, transvestites, and drag queens, as illustrations of binary gender disruption within queer discourse; he observes these instantiations as disruptions of gender and not of sex. Prosser argues that queer theories’ investment in the trans subject is due to the way transness can be mobilized to loosen fixity on gender identities enough so that gay men and lesbians can find some affinity.¹¹² Prosser’s text also criticizes Judith Butler for deploying the trope of transness within queer theory while ignoring trans embodiment in her theorizing. He

¹¹² Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

contends that it is necessary to implement changes to theoretical frameworks to include corporeality and lived experiences.

A primary method of Prosser's text is to foreground transsexual narratives wherein the body is articulated, and a discussion of bodily gender-crossing appears. In articulating transsexual identity as distinct from queer identity, and in formulating trans methods as different than those of queer theory, Prosser argues that transsexual narratives reinvest in embodiment within the theory and that transitioning is a physical, social, and psychic transformation, which is "the ontological condition of transsexuality."¹¹³ For Prosser, trans is bound up with the journey through space from one location to another, arguing that transsexuals do not move away from embodiment but, on the contrary, move further *into* embodiment.¹¹⁴

Prosser's formulation of trans methods as bound up with trans narratives moves away from viewing trans experiences as performative, and so radically away from formulations of queer identities and gender as performative that it reduces and coalesces trans into a reductive and distilled version of trans identities and trans methods. By inadvertently reifying essentialist ideas about sex and gender in his discussion of transsexuality he upholds the medical model of trans identities and binary gender structures, while also investing in visibility as a significant component of trans identities.

¹¹³ Prosser, *Second Skins*.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In a text contemporary to Prosser's, and engaged in asking similar questions about the boundary between transmasculinity and queer identities, J. Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* sought to think through the intersection of queerness and transness. Centered on an identity category that Halberstam calls "transgender-but," the text's categories of trans and butch integrate a discursive "border war" that is keeping them distinctly separate.¹¹⁵ Halberstam describes the policing of boundaries, which occurred between lesbian communities and transmasculine people, as a "strange struggle between FTMs and lesbian butches who accuse each other of gender normativity."¹¹⁶ Similar to Prosser, Halberstam discussed and critiqued how transness was often mobilized in relation to postmodernist ideas about transgression and liberation of identities and methodologies. Halberstam rejected the idea of this immense burden being "forced on the transsexual body."¹¹⁷ However, rather than explore this pressure, his aim was to attend to how the spectrum of transmasculinity could be more deeply understood. In exploring the connections, similarities, and nuances of queer women and trans men, Halberstam developed the following diagram, one that speaks to the methodological and conceptual innovations that might result from intersectional thinking between queer theory, gender studies, and trans studies:

¹¹⁵ For more on the discussion of border wars between trans masculinity and butch, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 165-175. Also see Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

¹¹⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 143.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

Androgyny-----Soft Butch-----Butch-----Stone Butch-----Transgender Butch-----FTM
Not Masculine -----Very Masculine

Halberstam’s diagram of masculinity, across lesbian to FTM, was a significant intervention at the time, and enabled an understanding and conceptualization of identities as on a continuum rather than as bounded and distinct. This perspective, in retrospect, can be viewed as laying the groundwork for understandings of gender and trans identities today. For example, Halberstam proposed that butch people be viewed as non-operated trans masculine folks.¹¹⁸ And, argues that transgender is a new identity category, like transsexual but wherein people stop short of surgery.¹¹⁹

Looking back at queer and trans debates in 1990s, it strikes me that, while in one sense it was necessary to stake out the space of transsexuality and trans theory in ways that articulate both as distinctive from other methods and identities, doing so too rigidly runs the risk of reifying binary oppositions and identity essentialism. Aiming to keep trans methods linked to trans experiences and distinctive from queer identities

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 148.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 161. There remains a complex and nuanced discourse around the borders of female masculinities and trans masculinities, as evidenced for example in K. Alison Hammer’s recent article, which turns to the writings of Willa Cather to consider Cather’s work from the perspective of being both lesbian and trans. Such moves reflect an ethos that proves a productive place of viewing identity categories as malleable, porous, and overlapping, shifting rather than rigidly bounded. Hammer forwards “transmasculinity” as an umbrella term under which one might find “stone butch” as well as other identities that are masculine along a gender spectrum. See K. Allison Hammer, “Epic Stone Butch,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 77–98, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7914528>.

and methods, Prosser adamantly argued that trans identities are *not* performative, which, even though important in the sense that trans identities should not be written off, overdetermines trans identities and methods, problematically committing them to notions of authenticity, fixity, and “realness.” Prosser sutures trans identities to the linear “transsexual narrative,” with a set starting point and an anticipated location of arrival, occluding the complexity of trans experiences and reducing trans identity and trans methods to binary structures, linear unidirectional movement and essentialized forms. The linear trans narrative continues to alienate many non-binary trans people, gender non-conforming folks and others who do not identify with this model of transness.¹²⁰ Prosser’s over-determination of trans as an identity was also limiting methodologically.

Similar to Prosser’s above-discussed text, Halberstam’s views on female masculinity aimed to articulate categories of gender, albeit along a spectrum of masculinities also over-constricted notions of identity and concepts for thinking about gender. Looking back, the text now makes plain how unstable such categories are, and how temporally they are shifted by our movement and transformation of gender over time. Halberstam’s diagram is not inaccurate per se, so much as it is incomplete.

¹²⁰ The field of trans identity is shifting, more people are comfortable identifying with trans in ways that do not fit Prosser’s definition See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994). See Kate Bornstein’s website: <http://katebornstein.com>, and Kate Bornstein, *Kate Bornstein: My Gender? Oh, It’s Nothing*, in *The New York Times*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/us/kate-bornstein-gender-reflection.html>. Also see Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*. Also see Kate Bornstein, *My New Gender Workbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Achieving World Peace through Gender Anarchy and Sex Positivity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013). Also see Jacob Tobia, *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2019).

It was perhaps a necessary conceptual step in undoing the understanding of the complexity of gender, but it also remains very much rooted in linear conceptions of gender, and misses the opportunity of articulating the complexity of how class and racialization, ethnicity, cultural affiliation, location, and other salient features intersect with and inform gender. In not being specific, in not attending to the visuality of examples, Halberstam misses the specificity of bodies, something that might lead the author to make observations about gender relating to its implication and intersection with other aspects of one's identity. For example, in (chapter one) in my discussion of the project *Female to "Male,"* by artist Wynne, one might observe his work in many ways making visible what Halberstam has articulated, and in considering Neilly's praxis, and in conversation with my analysis, we might observe the intervention and complication to Halberstam's formulation and understanding of gender. In tying a theory of gender to a visuality, an expansive and specific understanding of gender and representation emerge. Deploying a trans visual studies method one is able to view the work as highly situated at the intersection of numerous fields including gender, racialization, temporal location, the praxis of the artists, and the interpretation of the viewer (among others); from this angle one is better able to understand trans, identity, representations, visual culture and art history.

Trans and Gender

Who fits under the identity trans is fully up to the individual identifying as such. Gender is self-articulated. Notably, gender categories are changed contingent on

place and time. Trans identities often reveal the ways that biology and biological sex of a given body are distinctly different and unattached to gender. Trans people fundamentally challenge binary and fixed ideological structures that govern gender in locations descended from the colonial project. Gender as a field comprises multiple embodiments and performances, but dominant “Western” cultural logic works to maintain that gender is a binary comprised of two discrete categories, male and female. Furthermore, binary gender logic seeks to maintain that these two categories correlate precisely to one’s assigned sex at birth, under the guise that these structures are “given” and “natural.” Yet, because all of this is ideologically constructed, it must be maintained. Such maintenance occurs in large part through visual culture and legislation. Binary gender must be (anxiously) repeated, (rigidly) defined, and reified in order to be.¹²¹

The pressure to fit into binary gender structures is often deeply psychologically troubling to individuals who are trans, gender non-conforming and non-binary. The real-life disruption of the binary gender structure has troubling consequences ranging from what is commonly described and pathologized as dysphoria to violent acts of aggression perpetrated against transgressors of gender norms.¹²² Judith Butler has addressed the issue of gender disruption and the political,

¹²¹ For more on stereotypes see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) and Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹²² Dysphoria is a state of being physically and psychologically uncomfortable in ones assigned gender. It is currently pathologized in the DSM as gender dysphoria. There has been debate about how the pathologizing of gender dysphoria is actually implicit in perpetuating binary gender systems as it

legal, psychiatric, and the medicalization of gender. In *Undoing Gender* she observes the pathologizing impulse of the dominant transgender narrative and gender identity disorder, writing that:

(u)phold(ing) the gender norms of the world as it is currently constituted and tend(ing) to pathologize any effort to produce gender in ways that fail to conform to existing norms . . . it is a diagnosis that has effectively broken the will of many people, especially queer and trans youth.¹²³

For Preciado, “*Male and female* are two terms without empirical content beyond the technologies that produce them.”¹²⁴ And gender itself is dependent on visual recognition and tied to photography, as Preciado argues that photography marked a significant stage in the production of a new sexual subject and its “visual truth.”¹²⁵ Preciado traces a brief history of the evolution of early sex and gender studies, citing the emergence of gender as a term and concept in 1957, with John Money.¹²⁶ And in a move that encapsulates one vein of the radical ethos of their interest in trans liberation Preciado writes, “I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual

effectively demeans genders other than male and female. For more see: Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, op cit, pp 18-19, 263, 275, 500, 515-16, 645 and 647. Discussion of an example of a violent act of aggression and real-life implications of transgressing of gender binary boundaries appears in the appendix as a brief discussion of the case of CeCe McDonald.

¹²³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 77.

¹²⁴ Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 101.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Preciado notes that trans* people, up until the 1980s, were still considered “mentally ill.” (I would argue many still regard trans* as such in some circles, and thus the notion’s legacy remains robust in the U.S.) The author argues for two distinct sexes, but with a plethora of genetic, hormonal, chromosomal, genital, configurations.” Preciado seems to ignore otherly sexed bodies for the sake of their argument.

medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it."¹²⁷

Susan Stryker has been invaluable in understanding the complexity of gender, its imbrication in identity formation, and interconnection with sex and sexuality. Stryker has observed that not only are “gendering practices” “inextricably enmeshed with sexuality,”¹²⁸ but also that “the identity of the desiring subject and that of the object of desire are characterized by gender.”¹²⁹ Stryker’s discussion includes the biopower of gender as regulatory regime, in this project Stryker’s writing on biopower in relation to the formation of trans identities is invaluable in discussing trans representations. Building on the methods of Foucault, she contends that gender functions as a bio-political apparatus; she considers the ways in which gender regulates our entire lives through bureaucracy, state issues, and state-sanctioned identification. For Stryker, gender identifying in this way is a means of power enacted in a particular area, over groups of people via administrative and bureaucratic structures. Biopower “surveils” transgender as a “category” in order to subdivide the

¹²⁷ I am using they as they as the alternative pronoun to he or she. This is a tactic that is most commonly deployed in trans and queer communities to use language outside of the gender binary. Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 138.

¹²⁸ Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 39.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

category into areas of acceptable trans gender people and normativity, thus bestowing citizenship and humanity vs. “consigning others to decreased chances for life.”¹³⁰

Writing about the tenuous relationship between trans folks and ideas of passing, Stryker and Currah note that “genital-altering transsexuals” have been considered to “really” have changed sex, while everyone else has been framed as “just dressing up and playing around.”¹³¹ This look back at how trans people have been outlined by discursive framing, rooted in the medicalization of trans people and control of gender and biological sex of trans bodies, reveals that in the last few decades substantive shifts have occurred in understanding trans identity, which in turn has produced interventions in trans methodologies.

Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual Manifesto” (2005) discusses how transgender discourse moves away from transgender; beginning in the 1990s we move away from the authority of surgery to define who we are as trans people and toward an era where people having all types of surgeries previously associated with transsexuality are any number of folks, with wide varieties of gender identifications including cis. In other

¹³⁰ Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies,” in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, 1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 41.

¹³¹ Stryker and Currah, “General Editors’ Introduction,” 161. Stryker and Currah write, “In reading the early medical history of transsexuality, it’s striking that sex change did not at first refer to the surgical transformation of genitalia in order for one typical genital morphology to come to resemble another. It referred specifically to reproductive capacity and function, and it was imagined in purely negative and subtractive terms. A person’s “sex” was “changed” when they could no longer contribute to procreation.” They also write, “In reading the early medical history of transsexuality, it’s striking that sex change did not at first refer to the surgical transformation of genitalia in order for one typical genital morphology to come to resemble another. It referred specifically to reproductive capacity and function, and it was imagined in purely negative and subtractive terms. A person’s “sex” was “changed” when they could no longer contribute to procreation.”

words, today's understanding of gender and biological sex in the trans world situates gender in the area of self-proclamation, not via the transformation of flesh. Stryker and Currah write, ". . . it seems increasingly impossible to make a sharp, clean incision between what is trans and what is not when it comes to the question of surgery and sex."¹³² Stryker also notes that, for her, transgender is fluid and indeterminate: "it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place*—rather than any particular destination or mode of transition" (emphasis in the original).¹³³

Sidney Cunningham makes some compelling conceptual moves concerning understanding gender. Building on the work of Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, Cunningham articulates the complex relation of gender as something "attributed" to a "displayer" by an "attributor"; in Cunningham's argument the way that gender is understood by the attributor can only match what the displayer is displaying if there is shared understanding of gender between them. Cunningham notes that, in the nearly four decades since the Kessler and McKenna text, understanding of gender has shifted so much that we now view gender as something "declared." Recalling perceptions of gender from prior decades, Cunningham importantly points to such understandings as based on the belief that using "visual

¹³² Stryker and Currah, "General Editors' Introduction," 162.

¹³³ Stryker, *Transgender History*, 1. Stryker argues that the 1960s were "the era of 'transgender liberation,'" due to the increased visibility of a range of gender/sex identifications during this period in the US; see chapter 3, "Transgender Liberation," 59-89.

traits” was the most prominent feature of perceived gender.¹³⁴ Cunningham argues that trans studies models of gender avoid “purely social constructivist” modes of gender, or “purely biological essentialist models of gender.”¹³⁵

For Cunningham, in the current moment, understandings of gender are more readily recognized as being about identification and articulation of how one identifies, and yet he is interested—as an I—in thinking through how representations still have a place in our negotiations of gender identity. As Cunningham asks, “. . . if we move away from the passing model and toward a purely identity-based model, do recognition and belonging become empty?”¹³⁶ It is a compelling question, and one I linger on. If one considers that trans identities are explained broadly today as those whose gender identity does not match the gender assigned, the discourse around trans identities becomes quite expansive, and ensuing trans methodologies may reflect models of porousness. For example, framing trans as a broad and ever-shifting category, under which multiple shifting and more precise terms may coalesce, trans then may be viewed as intentionally a somewhat amorphous identity term that enables people to galvanize and procure social rights under its expanse, while also including people across a variety of economic social, ethnic, and geographic and subcultural communities, thus should not be conflated or collapsed.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Sidney Cunningham, “How the ‘Non-Duped’ Pass,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4291520>, 51-51.

¹³⁵ Cunningham, “How the ‘Non-Duped’ Pass,” 65.

¹³⁶ Cunningham, “How the ‘Non-Duped’ Pass,” 54.

¹³⁷ Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Minter, eds., *Transgender Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). For more info on the terms transgender and transsexual, see:

In articulating trans identities and trans methodologies, it is critical to allow trans to remain open and porous while simultaneously attending to the specificity of each given trans identity or analytic. This is particularly well demonstrated by C. Riley Snorton, in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*.¹³⁸ Snorton's text is adept at forwarding interdisciplinary and intersectional methods of attending to specific visualities, and rooting case studies in contextual framings, temporalities, and geopolitics. Building on the work of scholars including bell hooks, Franz Fanon, Sylvia Wynters, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, Snorton's text engages in rigorous analysis of the racial and gendered implications of representing trans people in visual culture. He looks at the interrelation between blackness and transness in a moment of "ongoing black and trans death and against the backdrop of the rapid institutionalization of trans studies."¹³⁹

Snorton turns to history to better understand the present and argues that the ways in which trans bodies are deployed often seem to reflect shifting cultural values.¹⁴⁰ He is not only interested in seeing intersections of transness and blackness, but also in investigating places and moments of erasure that have been intentionally

Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman, eds., *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Stryker, *Transgender History*, Stryker and Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*; Stryker and Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader*; Nicholas M. Teich, *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹³⁸ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

ignored to create specific and limited narratives.¹⁴¹ Snorton shifts the discursive framing around “transition” away from signaling a linear, uni-directional narrative of transness to suggest instead a means of articulating a “flashpoint,” or signaling a moment of rupture, which is then analyzed.¹⁴² Examining transition moments in visual culture where “racialized gender” is visible, Snorton interrogates how racialized and gender-disrupting bodies are frequently positioned as less than human and mobilized to maintain norms and shifting values of human.¹⁴³ As for case studies of Betty Brown, Ave Betty Brown, Lucy Hick’s Anderson, James Harris, Snorton suggests that these instances of racialized gender transgression may be understood as mobilizing a “decolonial, understanding of the body.”¹⁴⁴ Significantly, the impactful insights Snorton makes in his study are that trans people, in and of being trans, create a “crisis of visibility,” raising questions about where the “truth” of a body is located . . . on the “surface” or in “essence,” highlighting ultimately the way “‘reality’ is sutured to the privileging of sight.”¹⁴⁵ Tracing shifts in the understanding of gender via transgender embodiment and the ensuing interventions in trans methods is crucial

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴² Ibid., 9.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 8-13.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 162. Snorton also discusses the case of Jorgenson and argues that she set a precedent for trans identity as the “good transsexual,” an appellation tied to her being Caucasian. This besides her investment in fitting as entirely as possible into binary gender and biological sex expectations, including having anatomical biology consistent with assumptions about biological womanhood in the most limited sense, the discourse of “authenticity” and a “testament to (the) magnitude of modern science” (140-141). Jorgenson’s narrative also attached notions of individual freedom to the idea of trans identities (160). Snorton notes that trans subjects whose genders were less binary were often linked to darker complexions, collapsing lower class, darker skin, and less passable gender iterations as viewed less than human (140-143).

¹⁴⁵ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 140.

to understanding trans studies today. It is also pertinent to staking out why establishing trans visual studies as a field and method is necessary in the current moment.

What Art History Offers Trans

None of the methodological interventions discussed above adequately attend to the visibility of trans embodiment, trans aesthetics, or trans visual culture. While many of the above-mentioned scholars and texts seem to agree on the importance of trans methods being informed by the trans body, and that trans identities are enmeshed with visibility, to theorize trans identities without explicitly attending to the visibility of the body misses potential insight. Many methodological blind spots of the past have resulted from ignoring the specificity of visibility.

Even as applying visual studies or art historical methods to a trans object of study will lend insight, it also reveals methodological limitations of substituting one method for another without intervening in the methodological approach. In applying art historical methods to a photograph of a turn of the century trans femme Rebekah Edwards' discussion of a 1917 photograph of Geraldine Portica, engages the image (a picture that today one might describe as a trans glamor shot) in visual analysis and socio-political contextualization. The photograph was discovered in the possession of San Francisco police chief Jesse Brown Cook.¹⁴⁶ Thus, Edwards discusses how the

¹⁴⁶ The debates around how and why will not be discussed at length here, as this does not reflect the aim of this project but is worth mentioning.

photograph and the scenario in which it was found pose critical and nuanced questions about why the police chief was in possession of the image (for example, did the police use it as documentation of Geraldine Portica? Was the image collected as an I.D. in conjunction with her arrest for gender transgression?) While compelling, the particulars of these questions fall outside the photograph at hand.

Edwards' discussion of the photograph positions it in the legacy of gender policing and discursive and legislative identity regulation, with special attention paid to how photography has factored into such regimes. Key here is how Edwards applies photo theory to a piece of trans visual culture as object of study. Leaning on the work of photo theorists, Allan Sekula, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Shawn Michelle Smith, and Alan Trachtenberg, Edwards' writes, "One way photographic indexicality is produced is through viewing practices that shift awareness away from the photograph's materiality and toward its content: this move naturalizes a way of seeing that obscures the photographer's positionality."¹⁴⁷ Building on this understanding of photographs, Edwards considers the time period in which the photograph circulated: "During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, categories of social identity became increasingly essentialized and dependent upon an underlying epistemology of normalcy/deviancy."¹⁴⁸ She explains,

Concurrently with this escalation of identity classification, an intense national anxiety about fraud developed. Sensational newspaper narratives had a

¹⁴⁷ Rebekah Edwards, "'This Is Not a Girl': A Trans* Archival Reading," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (November 2015): 650–65, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3151574>, 656.

¹⁴⁸ Edwards, "'This Is Not a Girl,'" 657.

considerable interest in issues of embodied authenticity, and racial, gender, and class “passing” was increasingly treated as an issue of urgent concern.¹⁴⁹

Edwards also notes that medical and legal systems, as well as popular culture, were also increasingly bound up with notions of authenticity, knowledge production, and categorization. Photography during this time was bound to ideas of documentation and surveillance, but also increasingly used to visually interrogate bodies that troubled categorizations.¹⁵⁰ Her key methodological point lies in reiterating John Tagg’s argument regarding photographic objectivity, wherein he notes that photographs are enmeshed with ideology due to the discursive framing of them being indexical, objective and thus related to truth, she writes, “Scientific rationalism asserts that through objective observation “truth” may be discovered.”¹⁵¹ Edwards uses Tagg to uphold her argument about cultural ideologies being upheld via the photograph of Geraldine Portica. Without bringing trans studies into discourse with trans visualities and failing to be open to the image as interlocuter, Edwards prevents the transness of the image to influence her perception. In simply applying photo theory to an archival image of a trans subject, the resulting assumptions about the work reflect the methods applied. While I agree with how Edwards applies critical engagement with photo theory to the photograph, her methods fail to deploy trans theory to the image, which could lead to a more complicated and nuanced

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 657.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 657.

¹⁵¹ Edwards, ““This Is Not a Girl,”” 656.

understanding of the photograph. Trans identities have complex relationships to
visuality; in considering trans representations one must rework conceptions or beliefs
around seeing equated with knowledge, particularly regarding visual encounters with
human subjects and their likenesses.

What Trans Offers Art History

Trans methods of viewing art history re-think the surface and aesthetics of
what is viewed, suggesting that the surface of artworks may be façades that direct
assumptions away from what or whom is being represented in service of producing
narratives and aesthetics that reflect dominant ideologies. For example, this can be
observed in Robert Mills’ writing on St. Eugenia of Rome. The early Christian
Roman martyr has been depicted numerous times and to diverse ends throughout art
history, imaged as various genders, depending on location, time period, cultural
values, and the individual artist’s rendering of Eugenia. Mills is interested primarily
in the ways that various artists have circumscribed the story of the gender
transgressive saint throughout art history.¹⁵²

Reviewing numerous medieval artists’ treatment, Mills deploys a trans look at
art history, enabling the reframing and questioning of what we may have taken for
granted, opening up possibilities in how figures are viewed—revealing identities and

¹⁵² Robert Mills, “Visibly Trans?,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018):
540–64, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7090017>. The author writes: see, e.g., Gutt 2018; Karras
and Linkinen 2016; Mills 2015; Raskolnikov 2010; Weisl 2009, 555.

representations that may have been overlooked. Applying trans methods to art history, Mills deftly analyzes several visual examples of representations of Eugenia, engages in visual analysis, historical contextualization, and approaches questions about gender, and art history, overall sketching out the complexity of visual art and representations of icons, and the negotiation of gender art historically. He notes that gender is situated historically and ever-shifting.¹⁵³ He also points out that recently other scholars have turned to earlier periods to look at art historical accounts of gender variability to find iterations of representations that resonate with what we currently might label trans. Building on Judith Butler's work, he argues that in attending to the visual analysis of Eugenia he seeks a better understanding of the complexity of gender that has existed all along. To look at art history via a trans lens, then, has potentially innovative observational possibilities, but offers only a somewhat limited methodological intervention.

Studying Trans Visual Culture

The tenuous relationship between trans people and visibility is a crucial tenet of why trans self-imaging praxis proposes interventions that disrupt assumptions about identity, portraiture, and representation—a point I refer to throughout this project. Studying trans-representations is critical to forwarding methods of trans visual studies as trans methods are rooted in trans experiences. As we have seen, there

¹⁵³ Robert Mills, "Visibly Trans?," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 540–64, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7090017>, 541.

has been and continues to be methodological shortcomings when it comes to understanding trans visualities. An early account of trans scholars attending to the relationship between trans identities and representations appeared in Jay Prosser's epilogue of *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, wherein the author discusses photographs and their relationship to trans identities.¹⁵⁴ Citing Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Prosser writes:

According to *Camera Lucida* the photograph doesn't simply authenticate the referent in the most unmediated fashion; the photograph is in fact "never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately or generally* distinguished from its referent."¹⁵⁵

Prosser builds on Barthes' ontology of photographs as a conflation of the object before the lens and that which appears in the picture. Prosser also traces Barthes' argument that photography seems tautological, that is to say, the "sign" "appears to disappear," or in other words, as Prosser writes, "in photography, the medium becomes invisible, and only 'the referent adheres.'"¹⁵⁶ At one point Prosser considers how viewing perspectives shape interpretation, but he never interrogates this point; instead, he spends much more time thinking through "realness" as understood as the gendered embodiment of "passing" as a "nontranssexual."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ For more on transsexual see Introduction to Stryker, *Transgender History*.

¹⁵⁵ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 210. Emphasis in Prosser.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 223, 226. For a compelling discussion of the problematics around the framing of trans folks as necessarily needing to follow the medical model, and the impact this had and continues to have on trans lives, see Snorton's discussion of Christeen Jorgenson in *Black on Both Sides*, 171, 140-145. This is also discussed further in my appendix.

Prosser believes that “the aim of transsexual reassignment is to erase the visible markers of transsexuality from the body.”¹⁵⁸ Certainly, some trans folks are intent on embodying a “passing” gender presentations, but this is not the end goal of all trans people, nor necessary for someone to identify as trans. There are many aims and objectives of folks identifying as trans, some of which are not invested at all in any notion of transitioning. The ideas that Prosser proposes about the relationship between photographic representations and trans identities are rooted in his assumption of transness being about moving from one gender into the presumed “other” gender. This conception of the linear, and binary, transition might have been more usefully complicated if Prosser had attended to the visuality of transitioning subjects. In myopically pushing to situate trans as a discrete category, Prosser argues that in autobiography, photographs are mobilized as proof of the trans person fitting into the gender they identify with: “autobiographical photographs serve to embody the subject of the narrative. This is the real body of the autobiographer.”¹⁵⁹ Prosser’s commitment to notions of realness and gender passing circumscribes his thinking so rigidly that he limits his scholarly capacities. Prosser notices a complication to his theory of transsexuality and its relationship with visuality and photographs, wherein he writes,

. . . photographs of transsexuals are situated on a tension between revealing and concealing transsexuality. Their primary function is to expose the

¹⁵⁸ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 209.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

transsexual body, yet how to achieve this when transsexuality on the body is that which, by definition, is to be concealed?¹⁶⁰

In the past decades, since Prosser's writing, there have been notable and considerable shifts with regard to trans visual culture and trans scholarship. Some key features include the reworking of trans identities, largely through discourse. The result has been the exponential increase in information and trans-community-building globally, in large part because of social media.¹⁶¹ Periodically some attention has been given to trans visual culture in more in-depth ways, for example in 2014, when *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)* ran an issue dedicated to trans cultural production. The editors, Julian B. Carter, David J. Getsy, and Trish Salah, were interested in bringing together a range of scholars and artists to ask questions around trans aesthetics, sensibilities, and representations. The aim was to interrogate issues around how creativity and embodied trans experiences were bound up with the contemporary world. A point of particular interest to the editors was, in the Western Anglo context, how self-creation has been a fixture of modern thought and creative production. The editors noted a compulsion in trans creative production to prove the existence of transness via "positive" iterations of trans narratives and experiences.¹⁶² They cite trans discourse of the recent decades as forwarding trans narratives in

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 209.

¹⁶¹ The advent of social media and the ensuing proliferation of transmission of trans culture production on sites like *trans bucket*, YouTube Instagram, and many others, has irrevocably impacted trans and visual cultures.

¹⁶² J. B. Carter, D. J. Getsy, and T. Salah, "Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (January 1, 2014): 469–81, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815183>, 470.

literature and photography, in ways that reflect the larger cultural tenets of individualism, self-determination, and autobiography as part and parcel of staking an individuals' validity. The editors Julian B. Carter, David J. Getsy, and Trish Salah view such tendencies as due to Western culture's entrenchment in traditions dating back to the Enlightenment.¹⁶³ They contend that cultural production is how a given society "represent(s) itself to itself," supporting and circumscribing the limits of possibility.¹⁶⁴ In addressing the complexity of trans identities and visualities, particularly photographic representations, the editor's note, "Photography's indexical function places the trans body in a double bind: it must declare its visibility, but in doing so, it initiates the diagnostic gaze that demands that the temporal process of transition be legible on the body."¹⁶⁵

Let us recall for a moment that the notion of transition as tied to ideas Prosser forwarded in 1998, which reduced trans folks to fitting into binary categories and reflected a linear narrative of gender traversing, Prosser's methodological insights are limited not just by this thinking; his definition also too rigidly defines what trans is and can be. But this conception is also tied to the discursive framing of photography in the Western context, which purports that the photograph produces "truth" and reveals authenticity. This photographic discourse is culturally specific and methodologically inaccurate; photographs are fictions that image a fraction of time

¹⁶³ Carter, Getsy, and Salah, "Introduction," 471.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, " 472.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, " 471.

and reframe a performance that occurred precisely for the camera. Trans representations problematize the assumptions we continue to make about photographs in the Western context and begin to denaturalize such discursive framings about photographs.

In “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality,” L. Horak writes about the popular genre of transition videos on YouTube. Horak discusses what he observes to be the most popular form of Trans YouTube Vlogging: the transition video, wherein youth experts create a sense of vulnerability and intimacy with their viewers while showcasing their transness and gender identity via a compression of time, which speeds through their gender non-conforming selves, and maintaining the point of transition completion as most significant.¹⁶⁶ Horak states, “For the first time, media created by trans people is being produced, distributed, and consumed on a mass scale. [. . .] trans YouTube videos succeed because their formal strategies exploit the platform’s penchant for the personal and the spectacular.”¹⁶⁷ The author notes that this linear binary tendency of transition videos has also resulted in much criticism, based on their problematic linkage to binary gender structures and a linear

¹⁶⁶ Horak also cites the popularity of these transition videos and attributes their popularity due to the ability to be both spectacular and personal. “On August 2, 2014, a search for the word transgender on YouTube yielded more than six hundred thousand hits. More specific search terms bring up videos that are almost exclusively made by trans people themselves. On YouTube, there are more than 240,000 videos labeled “ftm,” more than 209,000 labeled “mtf,” and almost 21,000 labeled “genderqueer.” The predominant form is first-person, direct-address videos, referred to as vlogs (a term that combines video and blog). Though trans people also use platforms like Vimeo and Tumblr, YouTube has almost single-handedly transformed the trans mediascape.” Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 572.

¹⁶⁷ L. Horak, “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (January 1, 2014): 572–85, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815255>, 572.

“goal-oriented” process. The author notes that such criticism also often articulates such investments as being bound up with the long history of medicalization as necessary for the so-called legitimacy of trans people.¹⁶⁸ Throughout the text Horak also shows race and ethnicity as factoring into vlog popularity—noting that the most-watched YouTube vlogs are posted by and feature white people.

Citing J. Carter and J. Halberstam, Horak also argues that transitions need not follow a linear and one-way narrative, that transitioning is often a movement in multiple directions, often forward and backward, and often in ways that disrupt temporality altogether. Without explicitly stating it, the author suggests that such linear narratives—invested in sensationalizing the trans narrative from beginning to arrival—reinvest in “straight” temporality and overshadow the multiple, various and spatial conceptions of trans narratives.¹⁶⁹ In studying trans visual culture on YouTube, Horak observes the complexity of narratives and trajectories—often even stasis of trans identities—debunk the previously held belief that trans is necessarily bound to a unidirectional, linear narrative and invested in upholding binary, essentialist gender categories.

Writing about trans femmes in photographs via “oral history inquiry and critical compositional analysis,”¹⁷⁰ Jun Zubillaga-Pow focuses on prioritizing creative

¹⁶⁸ Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 574.

¹⁶⁹ Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 580-581.

¹⁷⁰ Jun Zubillaga-Pow, “In the Raw,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (August 1, 2018): 445. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-6900809>.

production over the visibility agenda,”¹⁷¹ in order to examine “the aesthetic agency of photography and photographs of and for trans* women.”¹⁷² Jun Zubillaga-Pow notes that, through posing, dress, and “fierce” attitude, trans femmes are able to create a “defiant” sense of self-using “trans*aesthetics.”¹⁷³ The author traces the aesthetics of positions deployed in such images (such as hands-on-hips, or heads and hips thrust to the side) primarily to American movie stars and old Hollywood, noting that the aesthetics in the trans femmes pictures reference particular tropes in order to connote femininity. One could argue that this constitutes a performativity of gender, thereby complicating the belief that trans people are not invested in the performativity. In a final intervention useful for theorizing trans visualities, Zubillaga-Pow articulates trans aesthetics as “a creative tactic that attempts to subvert the neoliberal infiltration of globalization and standardization. Trans*aesthetics is essentially trans*-centric and intersects with the principles of trans*-feminist and decolonial thinking.”¹⁷⁴ This point fits quite nicely with trans self-imaging as a praxis both invested in bringing into being (or tranifesting, which will be discussed shortly), and in moving to forward otherwise marginalized aesthetics and identities for oneself and one’s community, reflecting a post-feminist ethic of image-making (discussed further in chapters [3 and 4,] on *Original Plumbing* and to the work of Alok Vaid-Menon).

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 444.

¹⁷² Ibid., 444.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 443–55.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 444.

In closing, Zubillaga-Pow advocates for our consideration of trans women in photography, and the deployment of trans aesthetics working against “hegemonic standards” and “imperialism.”¹⁷⁵ I reiterate their point here to substantiate my claim that little attention has been paid to the visuality of trans visual culture production. In fact, even in Zubillaga-Pow’s paper only one photograph appears (a reproduction), and the author fails to engage in visual analysis.

Writing about the photographic praxis of self-identified genderqueer, intersex artist, activist, and educator Del LaGrace Volcano, and in particular their series *Herm Body* (2011–), E. A. Steinbock, notes:

Cumulatively, Volcano’s images offer a catalog of gender variant incarnations: leather lesbian, hermaphrodyke, drag personae, and transgender. These divergent photographic versions of the artist share an arresting gaze, a high or low camera angle, and a mixture of masculine and feminine costume.¹⁷⁶

Steinbock’s astute observations about the work come from a method that combines visual studies, art history, and trans studies. They are interested in how the series *Herm Body* as a praxis intervenes in an “ontological understanding of the image that challenges simplistic notions of photographic indexicality or reference to a

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 453.

¹⁷⁶ E. Steinbock, “Generative Negatives: Del LaGrace Volcano’s Herm Body Photographs,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (January 1, 2014): 539–51, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815228>, 539. For more on Del LaGrace Volcano see: *DEL LaGRACE VOLCANO: A Mid-Career Retrospective*, curated by Jonathan David Katz and Julia Haas at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art <https://www.leslielohman.org/project/del-lagrace-volcano>; and Curtis M. Wong, “‘Del LaGrace Volcano: A Mid-Career Retrospective,’ Is Gender-Variant Photographer’s First U.S. Exhibition,” in *Huffpost*, September 18, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/del-lagrace-volcano-gender-variant-photographer-exhibition-new-york_n_1891863.

true self.”¹⁷⁷ Steinbock describes the images as Volcano’s “performance for the camera,” made “in a manner that references ‘nineteenth-century medical photography of intersex individuals.’”¹⁷⁸ Engaging in visual analysis and thinking through the work of scholars including Richard Meyer, Thomas Waugh, and Preciado, Steinbock considers how Volcanos’ triptych *Del LaGrace Volcano, INTER*ME I, BREAST BACK BREAST*, Orebro, 2011, plays with art history, medical photography, and porn tropes, while also interrogating the ways in which photography is enmeshed with ascribing gender to bodies.¹⁷⁹

Questioning trans identities and their interconnection with photography, Steinbock notes that trans people pose problems to portraiture, particularly when establishing a “continuity of gender” in trans portraits. Steinbock argues that, typically, trans photographic portraits either provide evidence that the subject has always existed in a particular gender, or they are used to show the incoherence between pre- and post-transition. Steinbock proposes that Volcano’s self-portraits offer a new method for viewing and understanding portraits of trans people, writing that they move beyond the positive affirmation or the negative denouncement of a

¹⁷⁷ Steinbock, “Generative Negatives,” 541-543. Steinbock references a passage by Jay Prosser on photography, wherein Prosser writes, “. . . the photograph appears co-natural with the body, and may even begin as more referential to the self than the body. Inasmuch as the immediate purpose of transsexuality is to make real the subject’s true gender on the body, the visual media are highly valued, for they promise (like transition itself) to make visible that which begins as imperceptible—there but underexposed, we might say” (2011: 211). Also see Prosser, *Second Skins*, 211.

¹⁷⁸ Prosser, *Second Skins*, 211.

¹⁷⁹ Steinbock, “Generative Negatives,” 540.

“pre-/post- transition self, with its essentialist tendency.”¹⁸⁰ For Steinbock, Volcano’s “likeness might be evidentiary of another experience of temporality that assumes the continuity of identity along a life trajectory more akin to one ‘that still is.’”¹⁸¹

Steinbock’s approach to viewing Volcano’s images, with attention to the photograph’s materiality, its visual analysis, and the lens of trans art history, reveals not only perceptive insights, but also models a commendable method of trans visual studies. In attending to the visualities and histories of trans visual culture, Steinbock arrives at an innovative take on trans photography as co-informed by the artwork. These methodological interventions and the resulting observations are in the same oeuvre as those that I will model in my coming chapters and fall under a method of trans visual studies.

Trans Visual Studies Methods and Intersectionality

Mieke Bal has substantively argued for the urgency of visual studies practitioners to create adaptive, interdisciplinary, and hybrid methods of attending to objects of analysis, rather than merely supplanting the type of objects studied under a rubric of creating a new field and method of study. Heeding the importance of this urging, I forward trans visual studies as an original intersectional, flexible method rather than applying art-historical methods to trans visualities, or trans methods to

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 543.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 543.

trans visual culture.¹⁸² The pitfalls of applying trans methods to art history or art historical Methods to trans objects of study can be observed above. Bal has also made the insightful point that it is necessary to allow the object under analysis to co-inform the analysis method.¹⁸³ As I articulate trans visual studies as a field and a method, I take to heart these insightful tenets outlined by Bal while bringing in the most salient aspects of trans methodologies today and as co-informed by the objects at hand.

A trans visual studies method offers the ability to understand art history, visual culture, and trans studies more fully, while also offering interdisciplinary insights that can be applied elsewhere. Trans visual studies as I propose it here views creative praxis as theory and intervention in and of itself. Trans visual studies as a field is invested in remaining shifting, mobile, de-essentialized, and unfixed, while also viewing points of study and intervention as always highlighting ways of thinking as situated and specific. Trans visual studies is inherently invested in de-seating things taken as essential and normative. A trans visual studies method supports asking questions about anything taken as a given and encourages flexible, adaptive, intersectional, and expansive methods, co-informed by the object under analysis. It offers a way to do so while remaining open to being changed in the process, and to reflect critically on one's observations situating them intersectionally. As a method trans visual studies views definitions and identities as never complete and always in

¹⁸² See Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2, April 2003: 5-32.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

flux, finding new formats for conceptualizing ideas that are not binary, linear, or unidirectional. Trans visual studies views the object of analysis as historically situated and ever-shifting identity formations or potential methodological interventions. Trans visual studies methods propose that practitioners think critically about places where boundaries are erecting and how such distinctions may be permeable, transgressed, or dissolved—this while also creating and holding space for new constituencies and theories to challenge preexisting barriers, categories, and methods. Trans, as a method, offers scholarship new methods for theorizing categories, identities, and representation. While also attending to the specificity of location, be it temporal, geopolitical, or otherwise attending to unique and discrete relations to geographic location, historical period, subcultural identification, class, and ethnicity, for example.

This project observes and articulates the complex multidimensional matrix in which corporealities are assigned identities and values, based on the visual encounter. Trans representations underscore how the visual encounter of racialization and gender are written onto bodies, and how both are ideologically constructed and regulated.¹⁸⁴ The project also considers the multiple, intersectional features of regulatory regimes that impact the meaning made in the visual encounter; these include subcultural

¹⁸⁴ For more on processes of racialization building on the lineage founded by Crenshaw and her coining of intersectionality, see Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Roderick Ferguson and E. Patrick Johnson's Quare theory maintains that gender and queerness and, additionally, transness are always intersecting with racialization. Also, E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). See especially Kara Keeling's included work, a critique of the regime of visibility. She argues that, to interrogate the regime, we can consider what is hidden to make certain groups visible, and that we need to reconstruct the "we" of who is inside various identity-based groups.

affiliations, temporality, location, viewing perspective, as informed by the point in which the intersection occurs.

A trans visual studies method reveals that the way we ascribe the status of human (or not) is not simply based in visual encounters, but is ever-shifting, contingent on time and place, includes the ideology of the viewer, familiarity with the subject, and the subject's performance. This project proposes that we assess each new visual encounter as its own discrete, discursive zone, in matrixes of racializing assemblages, gender, time, location, or performativity of a subject, and that we consider how our situatedness impacts our visual and corporeal interpretations.

People exist not at a fixed point on any matrix, but in an ever-changing zone of possibilities on multiple dimensional matrixes. Trans visual studies uses this zonal matrix to intervene in trans studies, and visual studies and to make clear, for example, that dysphoria is not an internal psychological condition, but a social pressure attached to visual encounters and aimed at corporealities outside of the matrix of gender legibility, and compounded when the subject is also visually marked via discourses of racialization.¹⁸⁵ This dimensional, shifting, contingent, matrix-based zone, in which people exist and are assessed via visual encounters, is applicable not only to trans corporealities and representations but to everyone.

¹⁸⁵ Gender dysphoria is a state of being physically and psychologically uncomfortable in ones assigned gender. It is currently pathologize in the DSM as gender dysphoria. There has been debate about how the pathologizing of gender dysphoria is actually implicit in perpetuating binary gender systems as it effectively demeans genders other than male and female. For more see: Stryker and Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, op cit, 18-19, 263, 275, 500, 515-16, 645, and 647.

Trans Representations

In the contemporary moment trans visual culture proliferates at an unprecedented pace. Across the visual field, from mainstream media to social media, in galleries, films, TV, and magazines, trans representations are seen as never before. In some places, reductive images seem to be locking down and reiterating stereotypic representations, while in other locations trans images are radically shifting representations and posing complex iterations of identities. Across the trans visual field one can observe rapid shifts transpiring. At no other time in art history has there been such contention, and such diverse and numerous explosions of trans imagining. Types of imaging are rapidly changing and shifting, creating new visual culture vocabularies and aesthetics, which impact not only trans identities but all identities, all visual culture, and discourses of representation. Applying a trans visual studies method to praxi of tranifesting, the methodological innovations, and resulting analysis regarding trans identities, visual culture, representations are impacted exponentially. The projects I attend to in the ensuing chapters are all engage in discrete practices of tranifesting across the visual field and are each reflective of various types of practices of trans-self-imaging popular today.

I am interested in beginning to push for more scholarly attention on emerging forms of self-portraiture—in an expanded sense in visual studies. This particular study takes trans self-imaging as a central focus because trans self-imaging practices reside at the forefront of self-imaging practices today. Trans self-imaging works

across media and strategies in ways both bring subjectivities into being and challenge the ways we have come to understand representations and photography.

Trans as an identity and a method poses a compelling challenge to discourses of representation. Trans, as a rejection of the assigned sex/gender, is a rejection of what was assigned to us based on our physical attributes, an assumption based on surface aesthetics. Trans rejects the physical surface in favor of living our lives based on our internal feeling—something not visible but rather *manifested visually*, in a way that plays with the aesthetics and expectations of gender.¹⁸⁶ To make a photograph of a trans person is to make a picture of a surface idea that rejects the necessary or essentialized correlation to any overdetermined idea of a surface being about authenticity or truth. Trans, as an analytic, offers a method to view representations not only as distinct and distant from the subject rendered, but in tension with it. Trans as a method prompts a rethinking of surfaces concerning essence, identity, authenticity, and fixity, unfixing the surface from the subject.

At the crux of the debates around trans representation is not a desire or need to have positive visibility, but to be understood *outside of* visual interpretation.

Nevertheless, as we live in a location ideologically invested in the idea that seeing is knowing, photographs as performed manipulations (mainly when deployed by image-makers with personal embodied and intellectual commitments to challenge the belief

¹⁸⁶ cárdenas writes, as seen in the epigraph, “Often trans experiences begin with an affective claim to futurity that rejects the truth of the visible.” micha cárdenas, “Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media,” 170. Also see J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 96. Halberstam observes that trans rejects the veracity of the visual.

that seeing leads to knowing) create a compelling shift in understanding representations and visual encounters.

Because identities are negotiated in the visual field, it is necessary to engage in visual culture to challenge the assumptions about how we understand portraits and people that have been made for centuries in the Western art historical context. In this project, I aim to attend to the visualities of trans and gender non-conforming bodies, to understand what is at stake for trans and gender non-conforming people but also for visual culture. How does looking at, and thinking through trans and self-performances specifically for photographic media intervene in discourses of visual apprehension?

Trans people identifying with a gender other than that assigned, disrupt various ideological structures and deeply entrenched cultural beliefs, which makes trans existences profoundly challenging to ideological systems.¹⁸⁷ These connections can be tested in the visual encounter because of the complicated relationship between the visual encounter and cultural ideologies. Via self-imaging in photography, trans-self-image-makers intervene in the visual encounter, often inserting their likeness into discourse and challenging the ontological framing of photographs and representation. In the visual field, trans and gender-non-conforming self-image makers can also

¹⁸⁷ This, in turn, often provokes aggression against us perpetrated by folks who, when confronted with disruptions of ideological systems and physical manifestations challenging the truths, they take for granted, are too provoked to suspend their disbelief and unpack the ideological frameworks that govern their conceptions of reality. This is precisely why a project like this and the work discussed herein is so essential.

contemplate their corporeality as constituting a viable and human subjectivity without putting their physical body in danger.

The trans self-image-makers discussed in the chapters engage in sophisticated, multifaceted self-imaging aesthetic practices. The trans self-representations I discuss across the visual field reveal the limits of photographic scholarship and the biases implicit in how scholars have come to conceptualize and research photography, up to and including the present. It is only through rigorous interdisciplinary analysis and interrogation that we begin to understand trans image producers' self-portraits as disrupting art histories, artistic projects, identities, representations, and matrixes of intelligibility. Innovative praxis deployed by image-makers push open conceptions of identity-based categories and discourses of representation, establishing a porous expansive field—one that eludes the essentialisms and over-determination key to the formation of stereotypes.

Tranifesting as Visual Praxis

Representation is not remedy, but a place where the negotiation of shared cultural reality is taking place. Tranifesting as visual praxis somewhat intent on articulating a “positive” visibility, but more significantly works to reimagine how we understand representation. Trans self-image makers discussed in the following chapters are invested in challenging how we have come to view and conceptualize representation and photography in the so-called “West.” The projects discussing each in their discrete ways unfix the photograph breaking open the space of looking at a

surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. The projects collectively call attention to the surface of the picture plane in efforts to highlight that apprehension of a photograph can only result in seeing surface aesthetics. Such projects do not view surface aesthetics as insignificant but rather see them as about communicating, identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic discourses including, gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations. Identity, gender, and performing of self are all much more complicated than has been understood, and performative photographs are bound with these discourses of identity and representation. Hence, pictures also become complex locations to intervene. As such, trans-image-makers also intervene in discourses around the ontology of portraiture and representation.

Trans self-representations are often a praxis of bringing into being and forwarding diverse methods along with often otherwise marginalized identities. Such work can be described through “tranifesting,”¹⁸⁸ a term borrowed from Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison. The term was coined to encapsulate a “transformative manifesting,” and developed in relation to what they view as the process of creating a flexible community across differences, and facilitating healing and mobilization. For Green and Ellison, the term is used to

¹⁸⁸ Tranifesting is discussed in *TSQ* by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison who trace it’s origin to a conference in Durham North Carolina where the term was deployed as art of an “experimental lexicon” as they refer to it used in effort to create community across differences in June of 2011 at a conference called Indigo Days. See Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, “Tranifest,” in Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 222-225, 223.

. . . enact resistance to the political and epistemic operations that would [...] capitalize for others the fruits of our labor. It is a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing.¹⁸⁹

Green and Ellison situate the term in the lineage of black feminism; they push for intersectional approaches between black feminist thought and trans studies to generate transformative politics. For, as they observe, both areas challenge essentialist identity categories and make the limits of Caucasian feminism more pliable.¹⁹⁰ Pushing the idea of tranifesting further, I mobilize tranifest to articulate the bringing in to being of trans identities via self-representations in conversation with intersectional transfeminist and queer of color discourse. This is done across differences as a form of visual culture production that is radical, political and intellectual and praxis of creating alternative methods, aesthetics, communities and identities. In this respect, the word tranifest can be used to describe singular processes of trans people bringing themselves into being and can be applied to more widely viewable instances when trans people with larger platforms not only make themselves in their own image but push the boundaries of what trans lives are possible by intervening in visual culture.

Tranifesting can be understood as “bringing into being” for oneself and one’s community, while simultaneously unfixing the surface from ideas of indexicality and

¹⁸⁹ Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, “Tranifest,” in Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 222-225, 223.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

authenticity. Tranifesting in the context of this project concerns trans visual culture as a creative movement, thus corporeal, and methodological intervention. Creative trans visual culture praxis is not invested in creating positive representations, but instead challenges the discursive conceptualization of the ontology of the visual encounter, especially via photographs. Tranifesting via photographic praxis divests from notions of realness, authenticity, and fixity in favor of creating a complex relationship that includes the authentic and performative simultaneously. Moreover, in doing so, such work complicates the discursive framing of the ontology of photographic representation.

Tranifest is discussed throughout this project as an act of visual culture production that bring into being trans identities. In making these identities realities through their visual enactment trans image-makers insert their likenesses and praxis into discourse with intersectional transfeminist and queer of color discourse. This is done as a means of mobilizing trans across differences as a form of visual culture production that is radical, political, intellectual, and praxis of proposing alternatives. In this respect, the word tranifest can be used to describe processes of trans people bringing themselves into being; the process actively pushes the boundaries of what trans lives are possible by intervening in visual culture and Contemporary Art.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 222-225.

In thinking about the complexity of tranifesting see interview with trans artist and prolific selfie maker Vivek Shraya wherein she discusses her self-imaging praxis as challenging racialized and trans misogynist anxiety that arise in response to her." See Nicole Erin Morse, "The Transfeminine Futurity in Knowing Where to Look," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (November 1, 2019): 659–66, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7771810>, 659.

Bringing tranifesting into conversation with visual studies methods, it becomes clear that trans visual culture projects tranifest or bring into being radical instantiations of identity. Remaining invested in the amorphousness and anti-essentialism at the core of the term tranifest, as I deploy it, I argue that the word can also help undo fixed, binary and essentialist thinking about identity and outmoded methods of scholarship which I work to push beyond. The projects I study in my chapters each in a unique way tranifest via performative self-portraiture.

Practices of tranifesting are similar to those of performative self-portraiture and often engage in practices of critical self-interrogation and self-performance, in relation to discourses around identity formation. Current photographic practices often engage in performative self-portraiture, intervening in the legacies of self-portraiture. What comes into view with self-portraits also engaged in tranifesting is the constructed and contradictory way they are discursively framed, which enables the leveraging of arguments about portraits, depending on who is imaging them and who is critiquing them. Practices of photographic tranifesting intervene in the way photography functions, calling attention to the ontological constructedness of pictures and expanding the discourse around the complex relation between photographers, performativity and the picture's indexicality.¹⁹²

¹⁹² For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations see: Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004). Also see Susan Bright, "Portrait," *Art Photography Now* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2005). See also: Filippo Maggia, 'Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Long Live Art! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!,' in *Yasumasa Morimura*, Palazzo Casati Stampa, Milano 2008; Liz Wells, "Image and Identity," in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge Press, 2003); David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, "The Vertigo of Displacement," in *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge Press, 2003), op cit.; Samantha Noel,

Writing about the emergence of new (albeit written) language used in describing trans people and trans experiences, Halberstam proposes that with emerging terms comes the signaling of an end of a period of medical and psychiatric control, and thus a paradigmatic shift regarding trans constituencies coming in to being.¹⁹³ Halberstam's understanding of the significance of self-naming is akin to self-imaging, as both bring trans subjectivities into existence on their own terms.¹⁹⁴ Art historian, critic, and researcher of self-portraiture James Hall has noted that moments of cultural and social significance are often accompanied by substantial increases in the production of self-portraiture.¹⁹⁵ Scholars have observed that historically, performative self-portraits have often been used to undo the Modernist assumption that the photograph can deliver "truth" about a subject.¹⁹⁶ Dovetailing with this observation and informing the study at hand is Hall's observation that self-portraiture is often intertwined with moments of cultural significance and mobilized to influence society and ideas about identity.¹⁹⁷

"Putting on a Bold-Face: How Renee Cox and Sonia Boyce Pull Ethnographic Art Apart," *Third Text* 28, no. 2 (2014): 163-176; Larry Qualls, "Performance/Photography," in *Performing Arts Journal* 17, no. 1 (January 1995): 26-34.

¹⁹³ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky*, 10-11.

¹⁹⁴ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account*.

¹⁹⁵ James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

¹⁹⁶ For more on contemporary photographic discourse and practices on performative self-portraiture see: Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," in *Signs* (2002). Bright, "Portrait," *Art Photography Now*, 19-21. See: Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. World of Art (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004). Also see: Wells, "Image and Identity," 375-379.

¹⁹⁷ James Hall, *The Self-Portrait*.

The projects discussed in each of my chapters engage in their own distinctive aesthetics, methods, and inquiries and—although these four examples can only begin to scratch the surface of the contemporary trans visual field—taken in conversation with one another they reveal that, across the field, trans self-representations are engaging in practices that push portrait photography in diverse directions. My project proposes a shift in the definition of portrait photography to disregard material hierarchies in favor of assessing identitarian, representations, discursive, aesthetic, and cultural contributions. I propose a definition of self-portrait as an image representing oneself made by oneself, engaged in a critical practice reflecting on and expanding established definitions of identity categories. In redefining self-portraiture in this way, I aim to emphasize critical engagement with representational politics and to avoid judgment rooted in the hierarchy of equipment used to produce images. Thus, one need not have access to various privileges, from education to expensive media, in order to make significant visual culture interventions. As will be seen across the chapters of this project, images made on medium format film and exhibited in museums produced by image-makers with MFAs can be assessed as equally insignificant as selfies circulating on social media by image-makers without art world training. I make such inclusions and consider self-images produced across media by a variety of media-makers in order to reveal a greater diversity of methodological innovations, interpretation, and to broaden understanding of self-imaging theories and praxis by trans image-makers today. To that end, the central project analyzed in each

chapter co-informs a method that is anti-essentialist, works to undo binary thinking, and forwards new ways of understanding portrait photography and representation.

Trans-self-representations discussed in the following chapters offer diverse ways out of assigning value based in the visual assessment of surface aesthetics, working to undo essentialist ideas about people, and making sense of the world via binary concepts. The tranifesting occurring in the projects I discuss in the chapters demonstrates that pictures are not windows into a world but, instead, that portrait and self-portrait photographs exist at a great temporal and physical distance from the subject and the gap between the image and the subject offers an immense space in which image-makers play, offer critiques, perform, and intervene in various visually-based structures. The image-makers discussed in the chapters are each invested in their unique ways of problematizing how in the visual encounter meanings are sutured to bodies via ideologically informed viewing practices. Discussions of trans visual culture, trans representations and tranifesting are significant in that the methods necessary and ideas forwarded by unpacking the work discussed in these chapters unfold in various directions and potentially influence scholarship in numerous fields. By bringing trans studies into conversation with theories of representation and photography, I argue that trans visual culture is a visual field in which ways of being are “tranifested,”¹⁹⁸ establishing a new field, and facilitating new praxis of imaging, and necessitating new methods of apprehension.

¹⁹⁸ Tranifest will be defined later in the preface and will be discussed further in the introduction.

When applying a trans visual studies approach to aspects of trans visual culture, the intersecting praxis and resulting understandings reveal that this new intersection of scholarly methods of apprehending contemporary photographic projects, produced by and about trans representations, demonstrate new insight into visual studies, trans studies, photography, and theories of identity broadly.

The Chapters

Chapter 1: Unfixing the Photograph: Disidentifying with Masculinity in Wynne Neilly's Female to "Male"

Wynne Neilly is a queer-identified trans artist and photographer who often works in portraiture and frequently deals with the complexities of queer and trans subjectivities. He is particularly well-known for his ongoing photographic installation project, *Female to "Male,"* the focus of the first chapter. Neilly began *Female to "Male"* when he started taking testosterone in 2013 and documenting his transition via a Polaroid photograph, taken once a week on the day he administered his testosterone injection.¹⁹⁹ *Female to "Male"* aesthetically and conceptually resembles similar practices of trans self-documentation popular on social media, including Instagram and YouTube.²⁰⁰ I argue that, in its most radical reception, Neilly's *Female*

¹⁹⁹ Wynne Neilly, personal interview, October 2015. Neilly's continued commitment to exploring trans/queer identities is also evidenced by his personal website: <http://www.wynneneilly.com/>.

²⁰⁰ For more on trans self-imaging practices on YouTube and social Media, see: L. Horak, "Trans on YouTube, 572–85, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815255>; Nicole Erin Morse, "The

to “*Male*” urges viewers to remain critical about how conceptions of photography in Western contexts often lead to false assumptions about omniscience. The work points toward how images can never actually represent the subject; they are only ever a representation—and the path to the referred is never a set relation. The chapter argues Neilly’s project can be unpacked via Amelia Jones’s argument that since the advent of digital technology the perceived indexicality of the photograph has eroded. Jones argues, however, that this is not due to the photo’s now endless mutability; rather, it has occurred via the change in the way we understand the space between the subject and the image.²⁰¹

Chapter 2: Intimate Durationality: Trans-Queer Photography as Praxis

Exhibited at the Whitney Biennial in 2014, Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst’s *Relationship* is a collaborative photographic installation project that documents the artists as they fall in love and both transition. The work is about emotion and shifting embodiments of gender. In this chapter, I discuss the ways this project demonstrates sex, gender, and sexuality as not necessarily correlative. This complex portrait of falling in love raises nuanced arguments about self-portraiture and demonstrates the ways in which Caucasian privilege is embedded in art world exclusions. I argue that

Transfeminine Futurity in Knowing Where to Look,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (November 1, 2019): 659–66, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7771810>.

²⁰¹ Amelia Jones, *Self/ Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 19-23. Also see: Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation*, 15-64.

the inclusion of this work in the 2014 Whitney Biennial reflects a significant cultural shift: one in which culture at large has become fascinated with images of trans people. Through close visual analysis I read the work via Butler’s formulation of the “matrix of intelligibility.”²⁰² I argue that the work, while narrative, is not arranged chronologically, hence the images do not move from pre-hormone replacement therapy to post-hormone replacement therapy. Instead, the project presents multiple embodiments of gender disruption throughout the photo installation. *Relationship* provides a plethora of images wherein binary gender is disrupted and an affectual connection between the subjects lures us in to intimate images of gender-non-conforming bodies pictured as desirable and desired.

*Chapter 3: Galvanizing Aesthetics in the Trans Male Field: Original Plumbing |
Trans Male Quarterly*

While dominant culture has fetishized and sexualized and marginalized trans women, trans men have largely been absent from visual culture.²⁰³ As a cultural intervention, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly* posits trans men as complex, nuanced, and diverse—while often imaging them as desirable without exploiting this

²⁰² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²⁰³ For writing discussing the erasure of trans men from visual culture and their lack of representation, see: Aaron H. Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007); Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

view. Taking *Original Plumbing* as its central focus, in this chapter I discuss the visual impact of *O.P.*, as it is colloquially known, as was the first magazine in the U.S. dedicated to trans men. I argue that the publication raises issues about how transitioning is implicated in the structures of gender and racialization. This chapter fully considers both the broader issues of visually galvanizing constituencies, and the pressures to self-actualize into particular visual forms. Founded by trans men Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos in 2009, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly* is a lifestyle and culture magazine produced by trans men for trans men to specifically address their lack of representation in visual culture.²⁰⁴ *Original Plumbing* can be considered an archive in the making, which points to the ways in which exclusions must necessarily be made to accommodate any inclusion.

Chapter 4: A Multi-Dimensional Matrix of Visual Apprehension: The Gender-Nonconforming Selfies of Alok Vaid-Menon

Via a close reading of performance artist and prolific selfie-maker Alok Vaid-Menon's gender-nonconforming selfies, I will argue that such images posit multiple ways of embodying gender, often reflecting a commitment to coalition building across binary and non-binary trans communities. The act of imaging oneself in a highly controlled manner is a way of producing the self that the image-maker wants.

²⁰⁴ The title comes from a euphemism made popular by craigslist sexual partner solicitations and refers to trans people who have the genitals they were born with, as opposed to having had sexual reassignment surgeries on their genitals.

Imaging one's ideal self and posting the picture on social media allows the trans subject to live vicariously through the self in the picture. When experiencing dysphoria about one's body, picturing oneself as one wants to be seen is a huge accomplishment.²⁰⁵ It also becomes critical that the non-binary and/or dysphoric selfie producer can find support from others via social media, to become emboldened in their disruption of gender norms. Although the discourse around selfies is changing, it is critical to reflect that much of the initial maligning of selfies deployed pathologizing language. A *Huffington Post* article from January of 2015, written by senior writer Carolyn Gregoire, encapsulates much of the derision. Her "Study Links Selfies to Narcissism and Psychopathy" discussed recent scientific studies that demonstrated individuals becoming victims of narcissism due to the ubiquity of selfies, and argued the result of this as an ultimate increase in self-objectification across the board. Numerous similar articles have appeared in the mainstream press that link selfies to narcissism and low self-esteem.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Stryker and Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 18-19, 263, 275, 500, 515-16, 645, 647.
²⁰⁶ Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (November 2, 2015): 490–516, doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967. A counter-read of selfies has emerged, exemplified by Murray's essay cited above, wherein he convincingly argues that "taken en masse," selfies of young women feel "like a revolutionary political moment—like a radical [...] reclaiming of the female body. Even if there is no overt political intent" on the whole these selfies present "radical forms of community building—and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation." (1-2). For more examples of articles deriding selfies, see: Carolyn Gregoire, "Selfies To Narcissism and Psychopathy," in *The Huffington Post*, January 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/12/selfies-narcissism-psychopathy_n_6429358.html, (accessed March 21, 2016); Gwendolyn Seidman, "What is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?" in *Psychology Today*, August 6, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201508/what-is-the-real-link-between-selfies-and-narcissism>;

Each of the foci of the above chapters represents an integral iteration of trans visual culture, as a fixture in the emerging field, and as praxis of tranifesting in and of themselves. They collectively suggest the diversity of aesthetics and strategies of trans self-representations, and they demonstrate the field trans visual studies and methods as fluid, malleable, and amorphous.

Fiona Keating, "Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction and Mental Illness, Say Scientists," in *International Business Times*, March 23, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/selfies-linked-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness-say-scientists-1441480>.

CHAPTER ONE

UNFIXING THE PHOTOGRAPH AND DISIDENTIFYING WITH MASCULINITY IN WYNNE NEILLY'S *FEMALE TO "MALE"*

“European-based cultures conceive of representation as both collapsing and maintaining the gap between subject and object.”¹

- Amelia Jones

Self-identified, trans-masculine, queer artist Wynne Neilly began the project *Female to "Male"* when he started taking testosterone in 2013. By his own account, the impetus for the work was for the artist to have a record of his changing corporeality. Knowing he would be undergoing physical changes as he masculinized his body with the use of self-injected testosterone, he began self-imaging weekly with the intent of having access to a visual representation of the physical changes his body would undergo.² The resulting work is the preeminent visual art project about one trans person's experience of medically transitioning. The work is instrumental in opening up discussion about trans self-representations, the significance of trans identities to visual culture, how we understand gender and, in this case,

¹ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 13.

² Neilly, Wynne. Personal Interview. 11 October 2015.

specifically how masculinity is constructed and understood visually. Beyond this, the work (and other trans image-makers dealing with representation) is changing the aesthetics of gender, contemporary art and intervening in critical debates and issues in photography. Steeped in the growing photographic trend in Contemporary Art of interrogating the limits and advantages of working in self-portraiture and expanding the methods by which image-makers deploy photographic self-portraits, Neilly depicts a continually shifting corporeality encouraging a rethinking of understanding the photograph as an index, and demonstrating that the constantly morphing subject is always beyond the imaging ability of the photograph.

The Myths of Portraiture and Photography

Ideologically, the portrait in the Western European and North American context is bound up with a cultural belief that through a masterful representation, one can transmit the essence of the person depicted. In his text *Portraiture*, art historian Richard Brilliant observed that “There is a great difficulty in thinking about pictures, even portraits by great artists, as art and not thinking about them primarily as something else, the person represented.”³ Brilliant argues by equating portraits to semiotics, the portrait becomes the word, the person becomes the referent and the portrait itself a

³ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 23.

complex relationship in which meaning is created.⁴ Even when we know that the image has been craftily rendered, highly fabricated, and intentionally produced we tend to view the image *not* as an image but as the *person* depicted. The culturally constructed belief in the ability of a portrait to convey something about the identity of the subject, *beyond* their surface aesthetics, is a cultural construction that is bound up with dominant cultures exercising of regulatory systems via visual culture.⁵

The belief in the “truth value” of photographs is both longstanding and socially and intellectually problematic. While photographs are in some sense “indexical” and thus facilitate a belief in their ability to transmit information about that which is pictured is deeply woven into the mythology of our cultural conception of looking in general in the North American context. Early photo theorist and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce was influential in framing our cultural conception of photography in modernist ideologies. He argued that non-photographic images operate creatively while photographs are “effects of the radiations from the object.”⁶ Peirce was arguing that because photographs are made in some sense mechanically, they are not influenced by subjectivity. This is also sometimes discussed as the

⁴ Ibid., 26-31.

⁵ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994). For his Discussion of stereotype.

⁶ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 55.

Charles Saunders Peirce was an American philosopher, theorist, mathematician, and scientist. 1839-1914. He was influential in developing philosophies about photography.

“aura of machine objectivity,” which originates with the mechanical production via the camera.⁷

The logic of this is rooted in the discourse around the emergence of photography in the mid-1800s and the scientific and cultural innovations that led to photography. Since its inception, photography has been discursively framed as being objective recorder of the world. But as has been pointed out by many photography scholars, perhaps most extensively John Tagg, photography is highly subjective. As Tagg has argued even the most ostensibly objective photographs are highly specific, pictures record the many choices that go in to making an image. The ideological construction for photography in the Western context has sutured ideas of indexicality, evidence, and authenticity to pictures, while in fact, they are always about power differentials, highly fabricated and situational. The discursive construction of photographs via this framing sets up a belief about their ontology that perpetuates what has been referred to as the photographic “regime of truth.”⁸ In other words photographs are part and parcel of constructing our collective reality, since the inception of the media they have

⁷ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

⁸ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

been mobilized as instructive tools of disseminating cultural ideology often believed to be information.⁹

Even at the very chemical level and in the scientific discourse of photography, pictures have been framed in a way that uphold colonial agendas. Photography historian Shawn Michelle Smith traces the early technological developments in photography noting their deep entanglement with white supremacist ideologies. Looking to early photographic scholarship forwarded by John Fox Talbot in 1844 in the *Pencil of Nature*, Smith traces how since its inception photography privileged light colored objects, ostensibly because they reflected light more and worked better with the technologies of photography that were developing at the time. Building on the scholarship of Richard Dyer, Shawn Michelle Smith argues photographic film and lighting practices were created in ways that privileged Caucasian-ness. Smith notes that this technological bias lead to Caucasian subjects being the sought-after objects of “the new technology.”¹⁰ The cultural belief in the “truth value” of photography becomes particularly powerful when dealing with images of people. Elaborating on this issue, Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes that “photography, a medium which by

⁹ For more on the discussion of photographs being part and parcel of constructing reality see: Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *October* 39 (1986): 3-64. doi:10.2307/778312. Also see: Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Linda Nochlin, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices*, 5. print, *Media & Society* 4 (Minneapolis, Minn: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 14-15.

virtue of its supposed transparency, truth and naturalism have been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology— particularly the ideology of gender.”¹¹ Making photographs and looking at photographs are both active processes deeply enmeshed with and informed by ideology. During both of these acts our naturalized—and thus often unbeknownst to us— cultural ideologies, are deployed in the process of making images and in making assumptions about who or what we are looking at.¹²

Susan Bright has articulated that the photographic self-portrait is also assumed to encapsulate the outward manifestation of inner workings.¹³

Sherer West has noted that “the assigning of a specific identity to a represented face and body” is a specifically “Western phenomenon. Deluze and Guattari’s reference to ‘faciality’ of Western culture signifies the obsessive concern of the West as the face as signifier, but also what they see as the Western illusion of individual subjectivity.”¹⁴ Joanna Woodall writes:

An understanding of portraits as direct substitutes for their sitters meant that the circulation of portraits could mirror and expand the system of personal patronage whereby power, privilege, and wealth were distributed. Their uses included arranging dynastic marital alliances, disseminating the image of sovereign power, commemorating and characterizing different events and stages of a

¹¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography At The Dock: Essay on Photographic History, Institution, and Practices* (Minneapolis: Regents of University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 257

¹² for more in the way looking is ideologically saturated See: Sturken Marita and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹³ Susan Bright, *Auto Focus: The Self-Portrait in Contemporary Photography*, 1st American ed (New York: Monacelli Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

reign, eliciting love and reverence due to one's lord, ancestor or relative. Because of these crucial functions, portraiture had to be theorized as unmediated realism. Yet although explicit invention or idealization was problematic, the *raison d'être* of these images was actually to represent sitters as worthy of love, honor, respect, and authority. It was not just that the real was confused with the ideal, but that divine virtue was the ultimate, permanent reality.¹⁵

Suffice it to say, it has been observed by scholars that portraits and self-portraits in the West are culturally believed to grant access to the sitters soul, while simultaneously being bound up with the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy.¹⁶ It is precisely these ideas that undergird the logic of how stereotypes function in visual culture. Homi K. Bhabha argues that stereotypes operate by playing on the above outlined cultural assumptions and mobilizing marginalized represented constituents of minority identity categories as “a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible.”¹⁷ Bhabha also describes the operation of the stereotype as relying on an anxious repetition of the fixed image. According to Bhabha, stereotypes are produced in frameworks in which the marginalized subject is an arrested and fixed representation in efforts to keep the constituencies they represent marginalized. He goes on to describe the stereotype as “not a simplification because it is a false representation of a

¹⁵ Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject, Critical Introductions to Art* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997), 3.

¹⁶ James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1991, p 23.

given reality.” He argues instead that the stereotype is “a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation of the Other permits), constitutes a problem of the representation of the subject in signification of psychic and social relations.”¹⁸ The construction of the stereotype in visual culture is not necessarily tied to the negative stereotype as Bhabha articulates a stereotype flattens ideas about a person or an identity constituency to a fixed, essentialized icon of said group. This conception is actually applicable to the entire way that photographs have been conceptualized discursively in western art contexts. To more fully apprehend stereotypes and representations it is instructive to turn to a brief discussion of portraiture and self-portraiture.

Portrait photographs are products of the people who make them, discursively framed and understood via the highly situated perspective of the viewer. Portraits are always enmeshed with the ideologies of the image-maker and the viewer. Photographic self-portraits in particular are deeply bound with the cultural belief that the image reveals some inner workings of the subject.¹⁹ Via the conception of photography as indexical and ascribing knowledge to images, dominant cultural groups can assign themselves higher

¹⁸ Ibid, 27.

¹⁹ Susan Bright notes that photographic self-portraiture is often interpreted as ‘outward expression of inner workings’ see Susan Bright, *Auto Focus: The Self-Portrait in Contemporary Photography*, 1st American ed (New York: Monacelli Press, 2010).

value than those that look different from them, and they would like to oppress them.²⁰ By constructing stereotypes cultures who believe in the veracity of the photograph create images to set up and perpetuate beliefs about constituencies by collapsing representations and constructed beliefs about particular groups. By propagating discourse about specific constituencies and fixing representations, stereotypes about groups can be established and maintained.²¹ The problem of collapsing the photographic image and a meaning that is taken as a truth runs the risk of creating a false belief about that which is depicted in the photograph. In other words, we should remain wary of the complex relationship between the icon and that which it represents. And always consider any portrait as a fabrication with significant political motives whether consciously intended by the image-maker or not.²²

It has been observed that photographs are part of the means that construct our reality and are often bound up with maintaining systems and

²⁰ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 6-7. Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon [England]; New York: Routledge, 2012) Jones makes similar argument about the bounding of art and artist to colonial exploits, and euro enlightenment.

²¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) Bhabha makes a compelling discussion of how stereotypes function which I argue is bound to the conception of photo as conceptualized as indexical.

²² John Storey, ed., “Notes on Deconstructing “the Popular””, in: *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader - Stuart Hall*,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 455–66, <https://contentstore.cla.co.uk/secure/link?id=4ff282bc-267b-e611-80c6-005056af4099>. For further information on understanding the complexities of images and relationship to ideological construction and meaning making.

norms as they are. As interventions in poststructuralist and feminist discourse and art have intervened, the direction of photographic discourse, theory, and imaging practices has shifted. Directions in photography theory and practice since the postmodern and feminist turns, have pushed debate and creative interventions in directions that interrogate the social, aesthetic and conceptual functions of pictures, toward exploring the complex relation between the image and subject as well as the surrounding discourses, genres and debates into which photographs circulate and intervene.

Post-structuralism, postmodern photography, and feminist debates all helped to shift the discourse around photography and conception of photographic images being indexical, objective, and having veracity. Feminism brought a demand that art addresses the historicity and culturally specific functions of images.²³ Feminist discourse also articulated the problem of the tendency to theorize in ways that centered and privileged Caucasian masculinity.²⁴ Shifts in discourse at large were also brought forward due to feminist critique and scholarship promoting methods that reworked perspectives of representations, the gaze, oppositional readings, and attention to intersectionality amongst others.²⁵ The 1980s saw

²³ David Company, "Preface: Art and Photography," in *Art and Photography*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003) p 11-43.

²⁴ Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/postmodernism*, Thinking Gender (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed, Language, Discourse, Society (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Also see: Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2. ed., reprinted

poststructuralist thought, and cultural studies forwarding concerns with representation and the construction of race. Postmodern photographers began to question the function of photographic images as is observable in *Evidence* by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel.²⁶ Feminist post-modern artists Like Cindy Sherman and Adrian Piper engaged in practices that called to attention the constructed-ness of pictures as well as the ways in which they are intertwined with ideologies about people and the constitution of identities.²⁷

Abigail Solomon-Godeau along with other postmodern photography scholars including John Tagg, John Berger, and Susan Sontag have sought to attend to photography's relation to cultural ideologies and power structures.²⁸ Their scholarship has challenged the naturalized belief that through informed and astute looking we can come to know something about the person pictured. Photographer and visual culture theorist Allan Sekula traces several ways bodies have not only been symbolically but physically possessed as well. He traces some of the histories of photography through the trajectory of

(twice), *In Sight* (London [u.a]: Routledge, 2010). Also see: Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299. doi:10.2307/1229039.

²⁶ Larry Sultan et al., eds., *Evidence* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc, 2018). Also see Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd, rev. and expanded ed (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), particularly the chapter devoted to document.

Gefter, Philip, "The Staged Document," *Photography After Frank*, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2009) p 50-51

²⁷ Bailey David A. and Stuart Hall. 'The Vertigo of Displacement,' in *The Photography Reader*, Routledge Press, London, 2003. Also see: Mercer, Kobena, ed. *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers. Annotating Art's Histories*. London; Cambridge, Mass: Iniva, Institute of International Visual Arts; MIT Press, 2008.

²⁸ For postmodern scholarship on photography and its relation to power dynamics and ideology see 1972 John Berger *Ways of Seeing*, 1977 *On Photography*, Susan Sontag

physiognomy and phrenology and police use of photography to reinforce racial and class hierarchies.²⁹ Sekula writes: “the archive [of police photographs] could provide a standard physiognomic gauge of the criminal, could assign each criminal body a relative and quantitative position within a larger ensemble.”³⁰ Sekula also contends that the racist classification or physiognomy is an impulse in photography that is difficult to repress.³¹

Thanks to the above mentioned and other interventions today, conceptions of photography have become more nuanced and complicated, and scholars build on insights of previous eras to arrive at further interventions. For example, Jack Halberstam has observed that the conception of photography as indexical, that persists today is rooted in a colonial project to set up visual distinctions between oppressed and oppressor.³² Susan Bright has observed that while photographic portraiture today conceptually engages the complexity of the veracity of the picture, it still often reifies the photograph’s ability to convey some sort of “inner

²⁹ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 10-11. Discusses Eugenics on pages 51-56. Physiognomy is generally understood as the assessment of a person's character or personality from their outer appearance, especially one's face. Sekula describes at length the racist underpinnings and evolutionist tendencies of this assessment. Phrenology is generally described, as what is known understood to be a racist pseudoscience that once believed a person's skull could determine their character.

³⁰ Ibid. 17.

³¹ Ibid. 62.

³² J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018). In this text Halberstam traces how photography is linked to the colonial project. This also relates to Bhabha's discussion of how the stereotype functions in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

workings” of the subject.³³ The complexity manifests in a variety of complex methods deployed by contemporary photo-based artists creating self-representations that intervene in said discourses. Current photographic practices often engage in performative self-portraiture intervening in the legacies of self-portraiture we have inherited in the Western art historical context. This often brings into view the constructed and contradictory way self-portraits are discursively framed, which enables the leveraging of various arguments about portraits depending on who is imaging them and who is viewing them. Such works often challenge the way photography functions, calling to attention the very ontological contradictoriness of pictures and pointing out the complex relation between photographs, performativity and indexicality.³⁴ Such practices engage a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming “truth value” of the

³³ Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd, rev. and expanded ed (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

³⁴ For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations see: Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Thames & Hudson, London and New York, 2004). Also see Susan Bright, “Portrait,” *Art Photography Now*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2005. See also: Fillipo Maggia, ‘Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Long Live Art! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!’ in *Yasumasa Morimura*, Palazzo Casati Stampa, Milano 2008. See also: Liz Wells, ‘Image and Identity,’ in *The Photography Reader*, Routledge Press, London, 2003. See also: David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, ‘The Vertigo of Displacement,’ in *The Photography Reader*, op cit. See also: Smantha Noel, ‘Putting on a Bold-Face: How Renee Cox and Sonia Boyce Pull Ethnic Art Apart,’ *Third Text*, 2014 Vol. 28, no. 2, pp 163-176 See also: Larry Qualls, ‘Performance/Photography,’ in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Jan, 1995, pp 26-34. Photography scholar Susan Bright has observed, “the deliberately ambiguous strategy of ‘performed’ portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions. See Photography scholar Susan Bright has observed, “the deliberately ambiguous strategy of ‘performed’ portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions.

photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects. And to challenge the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

Trans self-imaging practices provide visual studies a methodology that moves beyond binary structures, de-essentializes how we think about photography and identity, and encourages continually malleable, self-reflexive, methods. Trans visual praxis intervene in methods of photography and its complex relationship to truth, revealing that the indexicality we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification. Underscoring how visual encounters are enmeshed in ideology, and only ever partially revelatory trans self-representations like those of Wynne Neilly are exponentially malleable and self-introspective. The study of contemporary trans self-representations across the trans visual field reveals that these depictions intervene in photography, gender, identity and discourses of representation.

Female to "Male" highlights the way that the surface of the photograph cannot indicate the interior of the person imaged and in doing so, undoes certain conceptions of photography. Beyond being an intervention into photography theory, the project intersects with visual conceptions of gender, and taking *Female to "Male"* in concert with Judith Butler's theory of gender as a matrix the work materializes and pushes Butler's observations,

underscoring gender as always contingent on embodiment (which is always intercessional). Rooting a theory of gender to a body (something Butler neglects) demonstrates how gender and racialization are always interrelated. Thus, it becomes clear that it is via the visual encounter where meaning is made about gender and racialization, and value is assigned to bodies based on viewers' assessment of the subject's physical appearance.

Wynne Neilly and *Female to "Male"*

Wynne Neilly earned a BFA in Image Arts from Ryerson University in Toronto in 2012 and has had solo exhibitions of *Female to "Male"* at the International Center of Photography, New York; Joseph Gross Gallery, Tucson, Arizona; and Toronto Image Works Gallery, Toronto, Neilly has been in solo and group exhibitions throughout the U.S. and Canada and his work has been featured in *Aperture*, *Vision Magazine*, *Unbound* and *Flash Forward* among others. The artist primarily produces portraits and editorial work and is invested in creating work about trans and queer experiences.³⁵ Committed to documenting his transition and adding it to the growing corpus of trans projects, as the artist states, "What I am really trying to do is to add my one story and identity to a larger conversation about trans people and trans rights and issues. That's what I hope people are seeing when they look

³⁵ See artist's website and CV at <http://www.wynneneilly.com/cv>

at my work.”³⁶ Deploying art world aesthetics to elevate otherwise vernacular objects commonly associated with transitioning and normally given significance on a personal level, *Female to “Male”* inserts trans banality to venerated objects displayed in museums and galleries. (See Figure 4).

The artist set out on his photographic journey by making a Polaroid of himself, shirtless from the waist up, once every week on the day he gave himself his testosterone injection.³⁷ The project has grown to encompass more than the Polaroid self-images; it now consists of ephemera and sculptural elements as well as nearly 50 consumer-grade Polaroid photographs. (See Figure 5). Today *Female to “Male”* is a multimedia installation project consisting of 48 consumer-grade Polaroid photographs hung at standard hang level along the bulk of one long wall of the gallery, a vitrine half-filled with used syringes from self-administering testosterone, various ephemera, a large photo, and an audio recording. (See Figure 4). The visible transformation the artist is undergoing has slowed in recent years, so he has reduced the pace at which he images himself. The cubic vitrine filled with syringes was produced from the needles the artist used to self-administer shots of testosterone, and the video focuses on documenting the audio recordings tracking his voice as the testosterone changed the physical

³⁶ Neilly, Wynne. Personal Interview. 11 October 2015.

³⁷ Ibid.

structure of his vocal folds, causing his voice to deepen over time. The ephemera exhibited consists of testosterone bottles and paper documents associated with his transition. He continues to make work about his queer, trans identity and the broader community of queer and trans people.³⁸

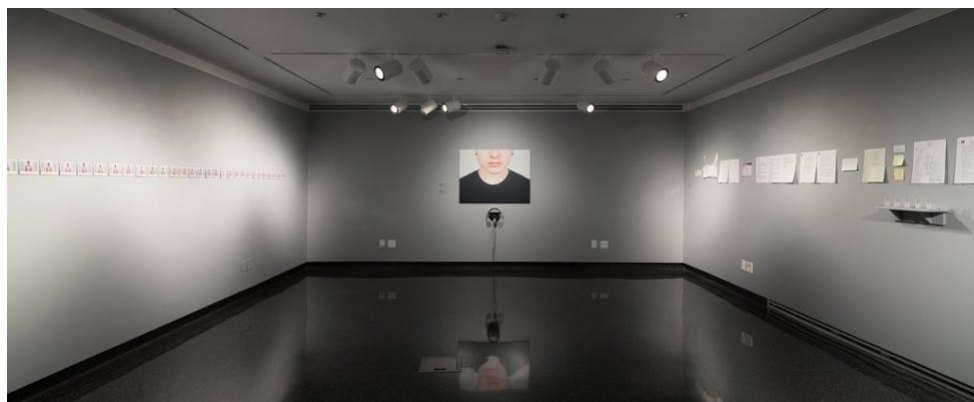


Figure 4. Installation view of Wynne Neilly, *Female to “Male,”* dimensions variable, 2013-ongoing

³⁸ Ibid. Neilly’s continued commitment to exploring trans/queer identities is also evidenced by his personal website: <http://www.wynneneilly.com/>.

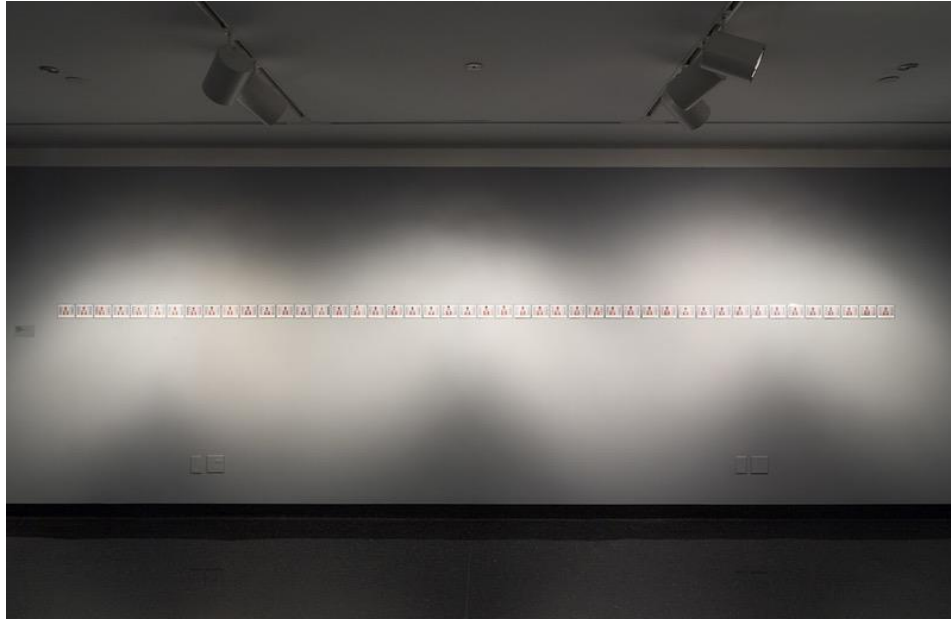


Figure 5. Installation view row of Polaroid photographs, Wynne Neilly, *Female to “Male,”* dimensions variable, 2013-ongoing

Part of the burgeoning field of trans visual culture and trans discourse that is pushing open multiple gender options, the project complicates the way we typically think of transitioning across the gender spectrum, and opens up how we conceptualize masculinity. The work does not adhere to the trapped-in-the-wrong-body narrative but rather images a process of becoming a person whose gender is outside of the binary system. In the artist’s words:

I very strongly identify with being trans. My trans identity is not binary in the ways that society probably expects it to be. When heteronormative or mainstream society imagines a female-born body transiting to a body that is perceived as masculine, there is an automatic reading of that person as being "female to male" or FTM.

This FTM experience might be very relatable and true for many trans people, but it is also completely wrong for others.³⁹

Overall the title itself reflects the medical terminology used to denote the type of transitioning that Neilly falls under, but in putting the word *male* in quotation marks, the artist calls into question the category of male writ large. Putting “*Male*” in the title, Neilly suggests that male is an unstable and malleable category that should not be taken as a given. In this case the title of the project highlights the way the artist articulates that he once identified as female, but via the photographic project he is moving toward a version of masculinity that does not fit into essentialized, binary masculinity in its simplest form, nor does it take this category as reductive and unproblematic.

Self-Representations in Trans Male Visual Culture Today

Female to “Male” is informed by and in conversation with contemporary art and photography theory and is the first self-documentation of transitioning to circulate in the art world. The images reflect the impulse and aesthetics of other trans self-documenting projects during transition, which have become popular on social media, such practices can be observed primarily on YouTube and Instagram. A quick search for the word “transition” across various social media platforms yields countless results. *Female to “Male”* may be viewed as part of the emerging tradition and

³⁹ Neilly, Wynne. Personal Interview. 11 October 2015.

popular method of trans folks documenting themselves over the course of the first part of their medical transition. But Neilly's work bridges the vernacular aesthetics of such practices found on social media with art world aesthetics.⁴⁰ Circulating in the art world as an intervention *Female to "Male"* inserts trans subjectivities, trans aesthetics, and vernacular trans imaging practices into art discourse. To more fully understand the significance of this maneuver it's helpful to turn attention to pedestrian practices of trans self-imaging.

Perhaps the most widely circulating and popularized self-representation of a trans man's self-documentation on social media in the

⁴⁰ There are noteworthy art world projects that engage in practices of self-imaging over time, documenting bodily transformations that are in conversation with ideas of gender and deploy aesthetics that may be viewed as similar to those of Neilly's *Female to "Male."* One could potentially make a comparison between Neilly's project other artworks. However, rather than study the relationship between Neilly's work and other artistic interventions, it is more fruitful to think through how art world aesthetics offer something different than the popular media projects I compare Neilly's work to. See for example Cassils' *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* 2011-2014), E. Hella Tsaconas, "Bad Math: Calculating Bodily Capacity in Cassils's *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26, no. 2-3 (September 2016): 197–207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2016.1232881>. Also see Julia Steinmetz, "Material Enactments," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (May 1, 2018): 268–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4348696>. Also see Eliza Steinbock, "Photographic Flashes: On Imaging Trans Violence in Heather Cassils' Durational Art," *Photography and Culture* 7, no. 3 (November 2014): 253–68, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175145214X14153800234775>. One could also make a comparison to Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) as Cassil's work is in conversation with Antin's project. See Emily L. Newman, *Female Body Image in Contemporary Art: Dieting, Eating Disorders, Self-Harm, and Fatness*, Routledge Research in Gender and Art (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018). A comparative analysis might also be made to Adrian Piper's *Food For The Spirit* (1971), See John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham [NC: Duke University Press, 2011), also see "Food for the Spirit: Transcendence and Desire," in *Adrian Piper*, by John P. Bowles (Duke University Press, 2011), 205–28, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/1529/chapter/172648/food-for-the-spirittranscendence-and-desire>. Also see Adrian Piper, Cornelia H. Butler, and David Platzker, *Adrian Piper: A Reader* (New York, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018). Also see Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996).

recent past is that of Jaime Raines. Initially posted on YouTube, Rayne's self-imaging of his transition was subsequently picked up by numerous media outlets. The project garnered a good deal of mainstream attention and was reposted on various media sites, including the *Daily Mail*, *Teen Vogue*, *Independent*, and *Buzz Feed*.⁴¹ Beginning at the age of 17, just prior to starting his medical transition from female to male (FTM), Jaime Raines began making selfies. He made a self-image every day for the next three years in efforts to document his physical transformation (due to the use of testosterone and surgery) while medically transitioning. (See Figure 6). Raines notes, "I just wanted something for me to document my transition. I thought I'd take a photo every day so when I strung it all together you could see the changes."⁴² Similar in intention to *Female to "Male,"* Raines's project is aesthetically and conceptually different. At the end of three years Raines edited all of the more than 1,400 images together into what results in a stop action video that fast-forwards and compresses the three-year span of self-images into a roughly 25 seconds. The backgrounds of the images change but are predominantly intimate interior spaces, such as messy

⁴¹ Raines also appeared in a documentary *From Girls to Men*, 2011 production of Channel 4 UK literally uses the phrase "born in the wrong body" for the subtitle of the series, a move that reflects the cultural perpetuation of the binary gender system and the cultural belief that gender is rooted in physical attributes. See: <https://topdocumentaryfilms.com/from-girls-to-men/>.

⁴² Rose Troup Buchanan, "Trans man takes a selfie every day for almost 3 years to document transition," *Independent*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/man-takes-a-selfie-everyday-to-document-his-transition-a6685906.html> (accessed November 2015).

bedrooms personalized with laundry piles, and kittens, Raines consistently holds the self-facing camera with the same arm, so it continuously appears in the lower right corner as we view the stop motion array of self-images. His face remains in a relatively central location throughout the video and our focus remains on his eyes, facial features and upper body as his neck thickens, his face squares and sharpens, and he begins to grow facial hair. In the video, Raines transforms from an awkward teen into a confident and happy looking man with a beard before our very eyes. (See Figure 6).

Raines' short film is visually arresting in the way that he changes so quickly from an awkward and perhaps unhappy looking, gender non-conforming youth into a confident and content appearing masculine man. By highlighting before and after images that contrast his awkward, more feminine appearance as a teen with his happier, more confident masculine appearance as a 21-year-old man, and by forwarding rhetoric that focuses on how Raines knew he was male from a young age, the narrative and images that circulate in popular culture crystalize Raines' masculinity in part by rejecting femininity.⁴³ Such maneuvers aesthetically and ideologically, uphold binary gender structures and inequities.

⁴³ Annabel Fenwick Elliott, "Transgender students takes a selfie EVERY DAY for three years to document his transition from a girl to a man," *Daily Mail*, October 8, 2015. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3264587/Transgender-teenager-takes-selfie-DAY-three-years-document-transition.html>.

Also see: Peter Cary, "This transgender man documents his amazing journey on YouTube for over five years," *Independent*, Sunday 11 November 2018

Raines' project works to erase non-binary gender presentations by quickly moving through all his versions of non-binary corporeality literally rendering his non-binary physicality blurry, almost illegible and at most an unarticulated blur between his seemingly uncomfortable feminine/gender ambiguous physicality and his desired, masculine corporeality. I would like to suggest that this has played a major role in why this project was met with a favorable popular reception; that and a recent obsession in mainstream culture with trans people.⁴⁴ Raines' project and its popularity highlight two things. One, that it is much more palatable for mainstream media, entrenched

<https://www.independent.ie/world-news/and-finally/this-transgender-man-documented-his-amazing-journey-on-youtube-for-over-five-years-35908441.html>.

Also see James Michael Nichols, "This Trans Guy Gets Personal in Powerful Letter to His Pre-Transition Self," *Huffpost*, 2/15/2017 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trans-guy-letter-pre-transition_us_58a22125e4b03df370d92861.

Also see Julie Pennell, "How One Trans Guy Documented His Transformation in 1,400 Selfies," *TeenVogue*, October 7, 2015 (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/trans-guy-selfie-every-day-three-years>). Also see Chris Roney, "Trans Teen Snaps 1,400 Selfies to Document His Transition," in *Passport blogs*, October 7, 2015.

(<http://www.passportmagazine.com/blog/archives/45378-trans-teen-snaps-1400-selfies-to-document-his-transition/>). Also see: "Girls to Men: Jamie's Transgender Transmission Time-lapse," Channel 4, October 8, 2015.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93Tqo6tAPJg&feature=youtu.be>).

Also see Patrick Strudwick, "This Trans Guy Took A Selfie Every Day for Three Years to Show How His Face Changed," *BuzzFeed*, October 7, 2015.

(https://www.buzzfeed.com/patrickstrudwick/this-trans-guy-took-a-selfie-every-day-for-3-years-to-show-h?utm_term=.fugO4G1K0#.pbx5nv1kl).

Another very similar and less widely published project documenting another Caucasian trans man's transition with a selfie every day is viewable here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1g9GmHG4kS4> published by UppercaseCHASE1 on YouTube documenting himself daily from June 15, 2010 to June 16, 2019. The phenomenon is widely observable over North America, as is evidenced by a similar project based in Mexico. Viewable on the YouTube channel of John Rzeznik, "FTM Transition: Four Years, Four Años," August 22, 2017, YouTube,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VJhXKk9M5g>

⁴⁴ See Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 140-143, 162. Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*. Also see Kate Bornstein, *My New Gender Workbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Achieving World Peace through Gender Anarchy and Sex Positivity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

in binary ideologies, to celebrate trans people who aspire to not upset binary gender; and two, the erasure of visual traces of gender disruption and ambiguity is in many ways entrenched within trans culture or at least historically it has seemed advantageous for trans folks to move as quickly as possible through non-normative and non-binary gender representations.⁴⁵

As the representations of and Raines and his narrative circulate publicly, they reinforce the notion that to be trans one should feel trapped in the wrong body and desire to move as quickly as possible into the “right” body or the “opposite” gender. To be clear here, I am not critiquing Raines’ life choices or his project. Rather, I want to highlight precisely which types of trans representations are forwarded in mainstream visual culture and which trans narratives are upheld by dominant culture and to what ends. While arresting in its commitment to a practice of daily self-imaging, Raines’ stop-action, animation-style selfie video also visually reinforces binary gender structures. It also demonstrates that to be a trans man one should desire to reject all femininity and embrace binary normative masculinity and to move as quickly as possible through any period or corporeality that could be described as non-binary or gender-non-conforming. The trans narrative that dominant culture rewards is one that reflects subjects who self-define as

⁴⁵ Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Re-thinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Signs* 39, no. 2 (2014): 43–65.

having been “trapped in the wrong body” and who are invested in transitioning within a binary structure rather than disrupting it.

The history of medicalization of trans people casts a long shadow over the lives of trans and non-binary people today. That is to say that in imagining one’s possible future, trans people may feel a deep compulsion to perform within binary structures. Precisely because up until very recently and still in most places, the only way for trans people to gain access to transition services is to convince medical practitioners of one’s feelings of being born in the wrong one of two genders and in one’s need to fit into a gender other than the one assigned at birth. Judith Butler has observed that how we are socially constituted as people relates to how we are gendered. And how we are gendered is done vis a vis “socially instituted and maintained norms and intelligibility.”⁴⁶ Butler observes that gender is a matrix observing that it is regulatory and it is also something that we all co-create by referencing aesthetics already at play. She notes that it is within the matrix that gender becomes intelligible and that certain genders necessarily will be marked as outside of the domain of the matrix, that these genders threaten to expose the

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23. One could also cite Stryker’s discussion of biopower of gender as regulatory regime but here I am more interested in visual manifestation of gender regulation. This will be take up further in chapter two See Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies,” in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, 1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 41.

limits of the matrix and may possibly expand the matrix.⁴⁷ Butler has also articulated that gender is highly governed by visibility and there is a point when certain gendered subjects fail to fit into culturally sanctioned gender performances.⁴⁸ It is these outliers that she argues are most at risk.

In the recent text, *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* Jack Halberstam argues that our current moment of trans visual culture proliferation should be viewed as “neoliberal incorporation.”⁴⁹ Halberstam argues that this incorporation of particular trans subjectivities and constituencies resemble historical precedents of who has been culturally accepted as queers. Halberstam argues that mainstream culture always seems to uphold those who are wealthy and Caucasian as exemplary queer citizens.⁵⁰ Taking up Butler, and Halberstam, along side Raines’ short film and his story it becomes clear that Raines’ narrative is embraced by

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23-4.

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2004), 69.

⁴⁹ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 53.

⁵⁰ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 30. Halberstam observes that dominant culture repeatedly includes and circulates images of those who most fully reproduce the dominant cultural ideologies, an argument similarly made by Mieke Bal as following “the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow, and it is barely an exaggeration to say this interest is visible in the cult of portraiture.” Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 5-32, 22. Cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, as well as visual studies scholar Richard Dyer, among others, have observed that it is in the visual field that identity constituencies and livable subjectivities are negotiated. See Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular.’” R. Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). Or as Mieke Bal has written, “the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow.” Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 5-32, 22.

mainstream culture because his embodiment and commitments are in line with dominant cultural ideologies; that is to say, he is invested in passing as a cis male and living a normative heterosexual lifestyle. He is socially upwardly mobile as a graduate student and reflects rather than disrupts normative dominant culture values. By only forwarding representations of transmen that are Caucasian, cis, hetero, capitalist-invested dominant culture, demonstrates which trans male subjectivities are culturally valued. These representations of trans men in this case showcase which types of trans lives are permissible. As dominant culture controls the majority of representations that are popularly produced, it reinforces which bodies and lifestyles are valued and valid and creates stereotypic, reductive, often demeaning and at other times dehumanizing representations of trans and non-binary people. When it comes to representations of trans masculine people, the representations are particularly slim and often stifflingly tragic.

Raines' work almost erases, and certainly undermines the significance of the pictures in which his morphology defies binary gender norms -- by rushing through such images hurriedly and circulating the now binarily masculine looking Raines prominently. Often in a side-by-side comparison photograph of Raines pre and post several years on testosterone. In quickly moving through the images where Raines' disrupts binary gender, the space between genders is only experienced for a fraction of a moment. The aesthetics of the work reify binary gender and binary gender aesthetics

by not showing non-binary gendered aesthetics side by side or for any sustained duration. Without having the ability to observe the nuances of numerous non-binary gender options next to one another and only seeing before T and “passing male” as the iconic images we are free to peruse at length the images of Raines that circulate facilitating a compare and contrast scenario in which we are visually trained to pick up on subtle visual cues that we are taught to read as female and male. The circulation of Raines’ personal story, his short, film, and his pre and post-transition photos work to create and maintain a stereotype about the type of trans masculinity that is embraced by mainstream culture. The forwarding of Raines (at the erasure of other kinds of trans masculinity, suggests that to be trans masculine subjects should reject their femininity, become as visibly male as possible as soon as possible, be invested in cis aesthetics of masculinity, be Caucasian and aspire to be heterosexual and upwardly mobile.







Figure 6. Stills from Jaime Raines' transition video, courtesy of the author viewable at: <https://people.com/celebrity/jamie-raines-transgender-transition-time-lapse-video/>

Both Neilly and Raines are moved by the impulse to document their transitions and do so by regularly self-imaging at sustained intervals over time. Both image-makers are interested in documenting visual changes and both image-makers use repetitive framing throughout their respective

projects. *Female to “Male”* is aesthetically and conceptually in conversation with vernacular traditions of self-imaging transitions popular on social media, including Instagram and YouTube where in trans communities widely practice acts of self-introspection like documenting one’s body (and often, one’s voice) over the course of time during which one undergoes hormone replacement therapies.⁵¹ But Neilly’s work also transcends this popular culture practice and inserts these conversations and practices into art world contexts. Where in the work of trans self-imaging begins to have impact on contemporary art and photographic theory.

More on Wynne Neilly’s *Female to “Male”*

On the left-hand wall of the gallery, at standard hang height running the length of the room, there is a row of nearly 50 Polaroid⁵² photographs tacked to the gallery wall, evenly spaced a few inches from one another in a

⁵¹ Trans self-image makers share not only the documentation of their physical transformations via social media, but also their experiences and knowledge gained during the process. Such acts build community through creating representations that counter the stereotypical images of trans people depicted in mainstream media.

⁵² A Polaroid photograph is an analog photographic image-making process that results in rapid positive image development after a few seconds. Polaroid as an instant photographic imaging brand was founded by Edwin Land in 1937, and the Polaroid one step image processing instant photograph was revealed to the world by Land in 1947. In 1965 the first consumer-priced Polaroid Swinger camera hit the market in a collaboration with Julia Child. Polaroid launches an education program and the camera becomes extremely popular with youth culture. In 1972 Land revolutionizes photography by introducing the Polaroid SX-70, which is a fully self-developing photo, and Land and the camera are featured on the cover of *Life Magazine* that year. In 1977 the inexpensive Polaroid OneStep is issued and becomes the best-selling camera in the United States. See: <https://www.polaroid.com/history>. Although there are much larger Polaroid processes and possible ways of working in Polaroid, the styles of Polaroid photographs discussed herein are hand-sized color images. The cameras and processes used here are vernacular, consumer products and imaging practices.

horizontal line. (See Figure 5). The number of photographs taken together enables a hand-held, intimate, almost flimsy and certainly vernacular viewing experience to take on the visual and spatial impact of grand proportion, elevating the intimate moment of a Polaroid snap to that of a work running nearly the length of an entire gallery wall. The length of the row of Polaroid photographs demands an embodied and temporal experience of viewing them; one cannot take in both the large scale of the work as one installed piece and the details of each picture simultaneously. Thus, viewers must walk the length of the wall, taking in the images as a linear whole and perusing each picture individually. From afar the images seem to resemble one another or to be the same image taken repeatedly - a nude Caucasian torso in front of a white wall, hung in landscape orientation. The figure, shirtless from the waist up, consistently takes up the middle third of the picture, with small negative space above their head. Each image has a date written underneath it in the white plastic border of the picture. Reading the dates reveals the images are arranged chronologically in order from left to right. And on close inspection nuances in corporal aesthesis are revealed.

Read sequentially, the long row of Polaroids seems at first to illustrate the subject's transition almost like a stop-motion animation of his physical appearance over a series of weeks. The figures in the images on opposite ends of the wall look drastically different from one another. The image on the left embodies more youthful, softer features and a slighter physique, while

the figure on the far right looks broader, has more defined musculature, and looks more mature. In this way the work is similar to that of Raines. (See Figure 5 and Figure 6). But on closer reflection, the pictures exist as a sampling of variations of gender presentations. While the image on the far left seems slightly softer, more youthful and lacks facial hair (attributes we tend to associate with femaleness or femininity) and the figure on the far right appears broader, with more defined musculature and a bit more facial hair (visual cues that we have been trained to associate with masculinity and maleness), these images en masse provide the viewer a moment to reflect on how visual cues come to make meaning and how and why we associate any of them with any gender at all. (See Figure 4). Furthermore, while the linearity and sequencing of the pictures does imply a type of narrative, in actuality the images do not depict a simple shift from one gender to the second of two genders as the prevalent trans narrative suggests. Instead, the self-portraits begin at an ambiguous point in the gender matrix and end at one that is also somewhat ambiguous albeit more masculine.

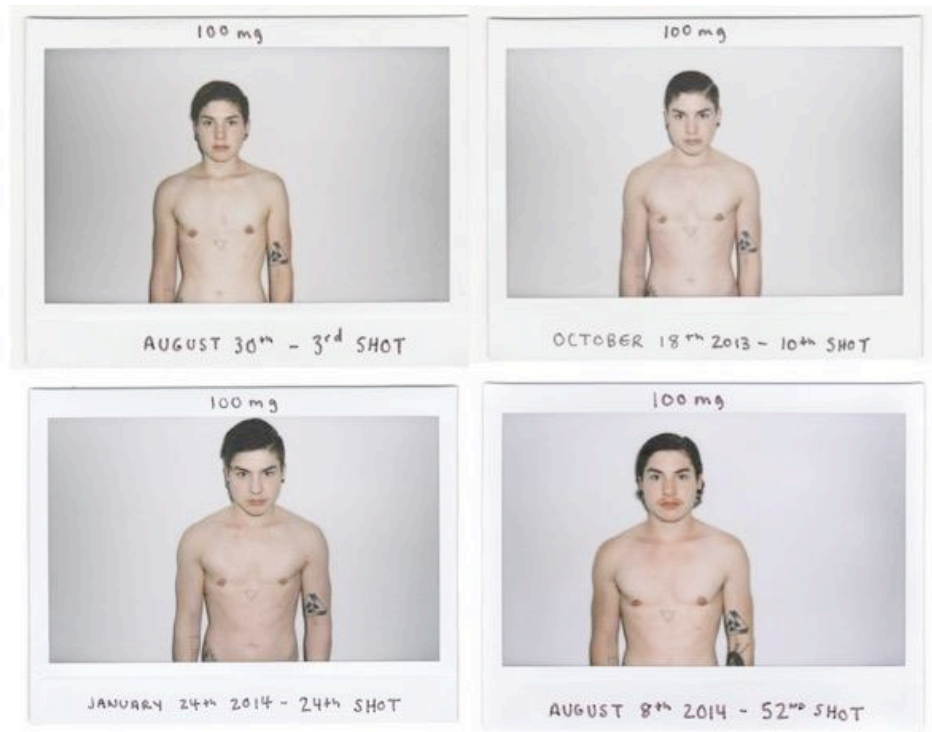


Figure 7. Polaroids from Wynne Neilly, *Female to “Male,”* dimensions variable, 2013-ongoing



Figure 8. Wynne Neilly, “August 8th, 2014,” Polaroid, from *Female to “Male,”* 2014

These pictures shift through subtle aesthetic performances that point to how we visually read surfaces of bodies to arrive at a connoted interpretation. By including gaps of time between when the images were taken and space on the wall between pictures, the project suggests that there is a failure of the photograph and the photographic process to ever capture a subject in their entirety.

Standing in front of a white background photographed in the harsh frontal light of a flash is a young Caucasian man, whose skin is ruddy and

freckled. He is topless in front of a white wall. With shoulders squared and parallel to the wall behind him and the picture plane, he faces us. The contours of his silhouette are athletic and muscular without being too bulky or overly-defined. (See Figure 8). Subtle shadows cascade onto the wall behind him while his thick brown eyebrows slant slightly down toward the bridge of his nose. His right eyebrow arches slightly more than the left while he looks directly at us beneath long lashes. His expression is emotionless. The frame cuts across his torso just below the indentation between his ribcage and his hips and just below his elbows. There is a small amount of space above his head, and his arms nearly touch the sides of the frame. He sports black plugs in his stretched ears, a septum piercing, a spare mustache, shaggy, chin length hair tucked behind his ears, and four visible tattoos. One sits just below his sternum, and it depicts a thin line of an equilateral triangle with the central apex pointing downward. Another triangle on his left bicep seems to be twisting in on itself like a three-dimensional Mobius strip or an M.C. Escher drawing. Other lines of tattoos peek out from just below his right armpit and curve slightly around his ribcage, while another extends just below the triangle on his left arm only to be cut off by the bottom edge of the picture. The subject is, forward-facing, arms in resting position, relaxed and looking directly into the camera. The empty space extends on either side of the figure, who is slightly off center to our left. "100mg" is written in brown marker on the thin white plastic of the Polaroid frame, above his head, and on

the frame beneath the image are the words “AUGUST 8th, 2014 – 52nd SHOT”. In this image the subject looks decidedly masculine, but next to that is another image. It is nearly identically composed, framed, staged and lit, but the subject has a slighter build, smaller shoulders, shorter hair, a slightly thinner neck, and no mustache. It is certainly the same subject, but overall the gender is far more ambiguous; a non-binary corporeality.

On Neilly’s Photographic Praxis

Neilly’s ongoing self-imaging both undoes the belief in the indexicality of the picture and plays with the complex space between the image and the subject. Imaging himself repeatedly over time, using a consistent framing, lighting and composition, mobilizes the photograph as a tool of observing in detail the changing surface of his body.⁵³ (See Figure 5 and Figure 8). The interest in the photograph as a method of self-perusal and observation, relies on its ability to render surfaces in detail. The sequence of Polaroids invites viewers to peruse the imaged surface of the figure’s body as his physicality undergoes transformation at an accelerated pace during the first year of his transition. The images prompt the viewer to peruse his pale,

⁵³ The sentiment and the aesthetics recall the work of Richard Avedon and, in fact, Neilly cites Avedon as an influence. I am particularly reminded of how Avedon stated that his images were “readings of the surface. I have great faith in surfaces. A good one is full of clues.” Neilly’s work not only reflects Avedon’s aesthetic but the shared aesthetic is also shared intentionality, for like Avedon Neilly’s project, it is all about a surface reading. Richard Avedon Foundation Website: http://www.richardavedon.com/data/web/richard_avedon_chronology.pdf

freckled, and tattooed physique across multiple pictures as his body changes slightly from one Polaroid to the next. Paying attention to the surface of the subject's body on the surface of the photograph conceptually and in practice counteracts the cultural belief in the photograph's ability to be a "window into a world," instead the flatness and the tactility of the polaroid repeatedly reminds us of the materiality of the pictures, their thinness, how the surface relates to the subject's physicality. Attempting to replicate the same image repeatedly, the sequence of Polaroids calls the veracity of the photograph into question; visually demonstrating the failure of photographs to be able to capture and render visual "truth." The serial portrait disrupts the notion of a static identity and opens up the space of the relationship between the surface of the picture and its relation to the imaged subject.

Centrally located in the picture frame, cut off just above the waist, shoulders squares, front-facing and emotionless, a nude torso with arms hanging loosely at his sides, the subject is positioned in nearly identical poses and compositions in each of the forty-eight Polaroid photographs. Looking directly at the camera in each image and standing in front of a spare white wall, the images are minimal, devoid of extraneous detail, yet full of nuance. In each image there is one shadow cast behind him, indicating a shallow pictorial space and a singular light source, the picture is pared down to emphasize the conceptual underpinnings of the work. While a friend has depressed the shutter for each image, Neilly is the orchestrator of the project

as well as the subject; he is both producing and perusing his own likeness. This enables him, and the viewer by extension, to interrogate the surface of his physiology, which is discreetly changing from one frame to the next. Essentially making the same image over and over, the series of self-images allow for the visual recognition of slight changes in the physical appearance of the subject from one image to the next. By extension the subtle differences in composition, heighten one's awareness of the subject's morphing physicality. The imaging strategy heightens the ability to recognize changes in his corporeality with each passing week.

The lack of extraneous detail directs attention at the subject and invites a perusing gaze. This practice reflects a trend in recent photography and resonates with Susan Bright's observation that "much of contemporary photographic portraiture sees a removal of clues and contexts and a highly formal, almost scientific and clinical approach which leaves the sitters with nothing to hide behind.⁵⁴ Choosing to photograph himself with a scarcity of extraneous detail the work reflects what Bright suggests further that in deploying a clinical aesthetic in contemporary photography the strength of these works lies in the uncertainty, as it is not only the 'who' that fascinates us but the 'why.' In other words, minimalist aesthetic practices in contemporary photography invite the viewer to ask questions as to the

⁵⁴ Susan Bright, "Portrait," *Art Photography Now* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2005), 19-21.

conceptual underpinnings of such photographic projects. “Why would a person allow such interrogation—not only by the photographer but also by the audience?”⁵⁵ Perusing the images singularly, we find a significant amount of visual information and a removal of superfluous details. Producing sequential self-images of his transitioning corporeality over a sustained period of time and at recurring intervals of one week, the Polaroid images depict a changing physiological form with heightened attention to subtle aesthetic nuances. We are invited to bear witness to the subject’s subtle shifting likeness as they insert their transitioning body into the cannon of self-portraiture.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ It is worth mentioning that there have been other artists who have created significant Polaroid photographic self-portraiture projects that could be compared to Neilly’s work, for example, Lucas Samaras, Robert Mapplethorpe, Adrian Piper, and Andy Warhol. In aiming to analyze what Neilly’s Art World intervention offers I find it to be more productive to compare it projects like that of Jaime Raines’ rather than other works also circulating in museum and gallery spaces. However, for example of other Polaroid-based self-imaging projects dealing with representation and gender see Peter Coeln et al., eds., *From Polaroid to impossible: masterpieces of instant photography; the Westlicht Collectio*; [... anlässlich der Ausstellung “Polaroid (Im)possible. The Westlicht Collection”]; WestLicht, Schauplatz für Fotografie, Wien, 17. Juni - 21. August 2011; NRW-Forum, Düsseldorf, 26. Mai - 5. August 2011; Suomen Valokuvataiteen Museo, Helsinki, 18. August - 2. Dezember 2012], 2. Auflage (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012). Brigid Berlin et al., eds., *Brigid Berlin Polaroids*, First edition (London: R|A|P, Reel Art Press, 2015). John P. Bowles, ““Acting like a Man”: Adrian Piper’s Mythic Being and Black Feminism in the 1970s,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 3 (March 2007): 621–47, <https://doi.org/10.1086/510921>. CHRONICLE BOOKS, *POLAROID NOW*. (S.l.: CHRONICLE BOOKS, 2020). Robert Mapplethorpe et al., eds., *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Photographs* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2016). Lucas Samaras and Ben Lifson, *Samaras: The Photographs of Lucas Samaras* (New York, N.Y.: Aperture Foundation: Distributed by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987). Lucas Samaras, Marla Prather, and N.Y.) Craig F. Starr Gallery (New York, *Lucas Samaras: AutoPolaroids, 1969-71*, 2016. Cherise Smith, “Re-Member the Audience: Adrian Piper’s Mythic Being Advertisements,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (March 2007): 46–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2007.10791239>. Andy Warhol et al., eds., *Polaroids: Celebrities and Self-Portraits; [Anlässlich Der Ausstellung “Andy Warhol ‘Polaroids: Celebrities and Self-Portraits’” in Der Starmach Gallerie, Krakau, 13. Oktober - 17*

Prompting questions about the ontology of the photograph and the conceptual underpinnings of imaging his transition in this manner the series of Polaroids demonstrate that a photograph can never begin to accurately capture what was imaged, let alone reveal anything beyond the surface of the subject. The significance of this intervention goes far beyond showing that gender is malleable, that identities are changeable, and that identity does not necessarily reflect on the outside, but the project unfixes the notion that the surface of a picture relates to a static truth and indexically references, like a window into a world—something beyond the picture plane.

The linear installation of self-portraits probes the alleged indexicality of the photograph in what at first seems to be a very non-invasive way. However, the subject's continually shifting corporeality calls attention to the way in which the photograph can never be an accurate representation of the person pictured, for even after the image is made the subject has already changed. While this fact is arguably true of all photographs, *Female To Male* makes this visually and explicitly clear. From one image to the next, a physical transformation is observable, and while the picture can only ever reveal the visual changes, the work suggests that he may also be undergoing other types of changes as his gender presentation and reception is changing

November 2000, in Zusammenarbeit Mit Der Jablonka Galerie, Köln (Krakau: Jablonka u. Starmach, 2000). Andy Warhol et al., *Andy Warhol Polaroids 1958-1987* (Köln: Taschen, 2017). Sylvia Wolf and Robert Mapplethorpe, *Polaroids: Mapplethorpe* (Munich: New York: Prestel Verlag, 2013).

as well. Thus, the photograph's ability to render visual or conceptual "facticity" about that which is imaged is confounded.

The notion of a complex space between the surface of the photograph and its relationship to what was photographed is conceptually complex and is an area that artists and photographers have been exploring in the recent past. *In Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, Amelia Jones argues that since the digital turn in photography the belief in the picture's inherent indexicality has waned, and this change is due to a shift in understanding about the relationship between the picture and that which was photographed.⁵⁷ Jones writes, "European-based cultures conceive of representation as both collapsing and maintaining the gap between subject and object."⁵⁸ Jones observes that our cultural tendency—especially when it comes to portraiture—is to conflate the representation, the image, and the portrait of the person it represents.⁵⁹ This space between the image and the subject imaged create what Jones has referred to as a "gap." This gap refers

⁵⁷ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 19-23.

⁵⁸ Ibid..

⁵⁹ Western art-historical and social conceptions of representation originating in the Renaissance. It was during this time that the belief in the ability of the artist to render truth and insight into a subject through representational likeness was established. For more on the discussion of conception of representations as subject originating in the Renaissance, see: Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 2-5, 13-14. Also see Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning", 1974, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 3-21. Also see Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 15-64.

to the ideological and temporal space between the picture and the subject. It is the cultural belief that the picture is a scientific and unmediated representation of the subject that collapses this space or this “gap” and inaccurately creates discourse around the ontology of the photograph that is conceptually flawed and ideologically problematic.

Photographic “truth-value” is a conceptual framing that reinvests in the privilege of looking and the subsequent assignment of value to subjects based on the visual encounter. This ideological framework has profoundly shaped our interpretations of photographic images and is also bound up with how we visually assign identities and value to people based on their corporealities. The relation of photographic image to the lived experience of looking at someone is highly complicated.⁶⁰ It is, however, an ideological process in which during the visual encounter we ascribe meaning to people based on gender matrixes and racializing assemblages.⁶¹ Thus, flattening the surface and the referent, something Neilly’s images work to break open. When artists begin to intervene in the space between the surface of the photograph and the subject there is potentially massive impact on undoing the ideological and cultural belief that there is something to be gleaned of the

⁶⁰ Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 26-31. In his text *Portraiture*, a book devoted entirely to thinking through the complexity of art portraiture, Richard Brilliant observes that the portrait itself a complex relationship in which meaning is created.

⁶¹ Moreover, if not actively and critically interrogating our ideological indoctrination, the assumptions we make about people based on their corporeality alone can be massively damaging, often racist, misogynist, anti-trans and worse and often inaccurate at best.

subject based on their image. Furthermore, projects that intervene in this space potentially highlight how images are products of the investments of the image-maker.

Decolonizing Photography

The conception of photography that we have inherited in locations where ideologies are rooted in a legacy of colonialism links photography to claims of “truth” via its indexicality. This ideological framing is rooted in the colonial agenda, which used photographic images’ alleged objectivity to stereotype people in efforts to colonize them. Thus, the ideological framing of photographs as inherently truthful should be viewed not as a given but as rooted in ideologies that were established in the service of colonial expansion, and domination. Stuart Hall has extensively theorized representation and signifying practices and articulated a significant portion of the discourse around representation in general. In one particularly pertinent observation, Hall urged that we must remain vigilant about how the image of a given subject should never be confused for the actual subject.⁶² Hall confronts the ways images have been used in the service of various projects aimed at disenfranchising certain groups and the use of stereotypic representations to fictively demonstrate that certain constituencies were less

⁶² Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 15-64.

human and less deserving of rights than other groups. The conception of photography as being indexical and linked to notions of truth comes out of the colonial project and a history of using images in upholding racist, colonizing practices.⁶³

The image can never be an accurate representation of the subject; the photograph in its very nature will always be an ideologically saturated fabrication, made in a sliver of time already past.⁶⁴ Showcasing the photograph as deeply limited in its ability to capture the subject accurately or in its entirety, Neilly's self-portrait Polaroids reveal that the exterior self has no necessary link to the person's interiority or the surface of the photograph and indeed that both a person's corporeality and the photograph are mutable surfaces.

This occurrence is in line with what photography scholars who look at photographic practices in postcolonial locations have described as "surfacist" practices. In such locations, photographic practices have used aesthetics that have been explicitly mobilized to visually remind the viewer that photographs are necessarily flat, two-dimensional works of art and that

⁶³ See Martin Berger, "Landscape Photography and the White Gaze," *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Also see: Willis, Deborah, and Barbara Krauthamer, "Representing the Appeal," *Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013). Also see: Mary Warner Marien. *Photography: A Cultural History*. Also see: Smith, Shawn Michelle, *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, 2012

⁶⁴ Roland Barthes takes up this idea in more length and more philosophically in *Camera Lucida*. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Pbk. ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

they can never be a window into a world. Via calling attention to the surface of the image, photographers such as Seydou Keita signal to viewers that the subject is not fixable in the image; instead, the image is a highly performative iteration of self for the camera and not indicative of anything more profound (neither psychologically nor physically).⁶⁵ The row of Polaroids reveals that the photographic portrait is *not* a window into a world; rather, it is always an image that was made in an extremely brief fraction of time that records the surface aesthetics of the person imaged. What this spells out is that, culturally, we need to stop equating the visual appearance of people with essentialized beliefs about them. We need to stop thinking that we can definitively know anything about anyone based solely on their appearance. The project does not linger in the conceptual realm or directly work to redefine the ontology of the photograph; *Female to "Male"* as praxis reworks ideological framings of how we conceive of understanding people and representations. Scholars Christopher Pinney, and Okwei Enwezor, have both turned their attention to investigating complex aesthetic practices of photographers working in post-colonial locations, using pictures as political interventions and agents of self-articulation. Both have observed that post-

⁶⁵ Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories*, Objects/histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Surfacist practices can be observed in works of contemporary artists today and while these works have not yet been described in these terms, their influence by an earlier iteration of surfacist photographic practices are observable. Take for example the work of Mickalene Thomas or Hassan Hajjaj. However, while these colorful patterned, bright and visually boisterous photographs deploy surfacist practices, Neilly's work looks entirely different in its visual simplicity and its minimalism, but it too deploys surfacist practices.

colonial imaging strategies are often deployed precisely to keep viewers' awareness on the surface of the image.⁶⁶ Such surfacist practices have been forwarded by photographers in post-colonial locations to fight against stereotypic representation of colonized subjects and were mobilized in conjunction with liberation struggles and as means for subjects in post-colonial locations to re-imagine cultural identities for themselves.⁶⁷ Seydou Keita, for example, was famous for working collaboratively with his subjects in studio settings to fabricate the best version of the subjects that the collaboration could produce; while using various aesthetics strategies, including patterned backdrops, props, and stylish outfits, Keita's images draw attention to the surface and performativity of the photograph, reminding viewers that the picture is a two-dimensional image.⁶⁸

The Caucasian, Canadian artist is not working from the position of someone in a post-colonial geopolitical location, but he is working from the position of post-colonial conceptions of photography. Discursively constructed beliefs about the ontology of photographs in locations ideologically descended from the colonial project maintain colonialist beliefs

⁶⁶ Pinney, Christopher and Nicolas Peterson, "Notes from the Surface of the Images: Photography, - Postcolonialism and Vernacular Modernism," in *Photography's Other Histories*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003). Also see: Okwui Enwezor, International Center of Photography, and Exhibitions Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography, eds., "*Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*" Organized by the International Center of Photography, New York (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006)

⁶⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁶⁸ Discussion of Enwezor, Pinney and surfacist practices of post-colonial photographic artists like Seydou Keita have been discussed in the Introduction.

about images –i.e. the belief that the surface image necessarily equates to a truth about the subject. The ideologically constructed and maintained belief in the photograph’s immutable ability to transmit facts goes hand in hand with the belief that via looking we are capable of producing knowledge. This cultural belief is constructed precisely to establish and maintain the oppression of certain constituencies and to set up and maintain dominant cultural ideologies and power structures based on visual transmission of ideologies under the guise of information. To undo the colonialist ideology about photographs being linked to truth is to begin to undo the entire system by which current power structures exist. If one cannot rely on how others look as a necessary means of identifying and subjugating, then the entire premise of maintaining power structures by dividing and hierarchizing based on physical attributes, including but not limited to visually manifesting cis normativity, binary gender, heteropatriarchy, Caucasian supremacy and more, begins to fall apart.

To make the comparison between post-colonial photographic practices and trans self-representations is not simply to observe shared practices of producing counter representations to those stereotypic representations forwarded by dominant regimes, but is to highlight the way both work to undo how we have conceived of representation at its very ontological level. Transforming cultural understanding of photographs from windows into worlds to flat, highly constructed, aestheticized moments

Neilly, like other image makers using surfacist practices, radically reworks the way we conceive of representations and thus pushes us toward a reconceptualization of the ontology of the photograph - a reconceptualization that sees photographs as highly constructed, flat, fictional, performative collaborations made in a fraction of time.

Photographic practices invested in decolonizing photography discourse or what one might view incorrectly to be the ontology of the photograph –it’s indexicality- engage in what Stephen Best and Shaun Marcus have discussed as surface reading in their text *Surface Reading: An Introduction* which looks at surfaces as a materiality rather than as a thing to see through. Writing specifically about literature and offering a polemic about how to read surfaces rather than see through them they turn to Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation” (1966). Citing this canonical work Best and Marcus argue that along with Sontag interpretation does not uncover meaning but rather changes it. Sontag’s interest in experiencing the immediacy of that which is before us as viewers pushed aside critic’s commitments to uncovering a work’s meaning as something only they could espouse; instead what Sontag referred to as the “erotic’s of Art”⁶⁹ invested in the experience of perusing the surface and reflecting on one’s affective response. Best and Marcus point out that a surface reading divests from both

⁶⁹ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 1966), 6,5, 14.

the heroism of the work of art and undermines the critique as genius and sole viewer capable of deciphering the work's deeper meaning. Best and Marcus' text is useful in thinking along with Polaroids as the pictures align with their suggestion-that is to say the viewer is not bound to look for obscured meanings but rather may be better suited to reading the surface for what it is and how it exists in an intersection of often disparate discourses. The critic's job is to bring an assemblage of texts to the viewing experience in order to get closer to understanding the surface.⁷⁰

In the pictures the subject's physical form shifts through a series of subtle corporealities that highlight how we analyze aesthetics to arrive at a connoted interpretation of gender. We visually read the physical form against the matrix of gender and binary gender forms we have been ideologically indoctrinated to recognize. Performing variations of masculinity that shift ever so slightly from one image to the next recalls Sean Nixon's writing on masculinity wherein he argues "identities are necessary fictions"⁷¹ and goes on to say we need them to find our way in the world and to interact with others. However, he also argues "cultural languages or systems of representation, are not a reflection of a pre-given masculinity fixed outside of representation. Rather, they actively construct the cultural meanings we give

⁷⁰ Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1-21. doi:10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1.

⁷¹ Sean Nixon, "Exhibiting Masculinities," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 301.

to masculinities.”⁷² Masculinity is both constructed by and co-constituted by representations. *Female to “Male”* interrogates the limits of Caucasian masculinity. The Polaroids depict his physical appearance as his body shifts through a series of subtle embodiments of gender, which highlight the ways we culturally analyze aesthetics to arrive at an interpretation of gender. We try to ascribe a gender to Neilly’s body in each image, but in many of the Polaroids it is impossible to commit to a simple, binary gendered reading of his physical features as the subject’s body confounds our cultural conception of how gender looks and operates visually and how to interpret bodies into gender categories. The various gender manifestations of the imaged body are outside of binary gender aesthetics, demonstrating that we need to create a new conception of gender to fully understand gender today. The problem with this is that existing in a gendered space that is not culturally nameable via dominant culture rhetoric and representational systems puts the non-binary subject at risk. For in the very existence of being non-binary one creates a visual and corporeal disruption of the binary gender system and exposes that gender is in fact a matrix, a massive field with exponential possibilities. The binary gender system in effect folds the matrix of gender and moves the non-binary options of gender out of view --but they still exist. Trans subjectivities and trans non-binary and gender-non-conforming (GNC)

⁷² Ibid.

people and projects like Neilly's demonstrate that there are a multiplicity of gender possibilities, and they open up the matrix of gender for us all.⁷³



Figure 9. Wynne Neilly, “January 24th, 2014,” Polaroid, from *Female to Male*, 2013

Looking at the Polaroid self-portrait taken on the day of the 24th shot on January 24th, 2014, (see Figure 9), we encounter corporeality that does not read easily as masculine or feminine. Does it seem wrong? Do we assume

⁷³ The specificity of Neilly's project only begins to show numerous iterations of gender while it should be understood that there are in fact infinite permutations of gender.

the subject strove for and failed to produce a masculine physique or failed to properly embody femininity? Or does it propose another gender option? It does not read easily into either of the two prescribed binary gender categories and, as such, do they become freakish? The artist invites viewers to peruse the surface of the self in the image and to consider the physical traits in the image to observe our own ideologically indoctrinated ideas about gender and our own confounded efforts to neatly categorize the gender we see in the picture. The artist has offered a spectrum of gender options that the singular subject may embody. Contingent on our deep-seated ideologically constructed ideas about gender, any number of these images may appear to be non-binary, and we may assume they fail to be normative. Indeed, contingent on our viewing perspective and ideological indoctrination regarding gender, we may have various degrees of responses to the images. Halberstam has described the process of ascribing value to bodies based on their “morphologies”⁷⁴ and Mel Chen has observed that via “phenotypic judgment”⁷⁵ we view, and confer gender to bodies. Taken together these observations can be experienced and observed in *Female To “Male”* as from one image to the next we engage in phenotypic judgment via looking at and

⁷⁴ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 58.

⁷⁵ Mel Chen “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 149.

assigning gender and value to subtle shifts in morphology seen in the Polaroid images.

Disidentifying With Masculinity: Making Cis, Binary Gender and Caucasian strange

To be gendered in a way that is intelligible to the rest of society, it is necessary to embody aesthetics, gestures and corporealities that can be understood via the visual cultural frameworks in place in our temporal and geopolitical location. These embodiments of gender are necessarily bound up with aesthetics and expectation about our racialized physicality.

The visual encounter is where meaning is produced, where we interpret surface aesthetics and ideas about gender and race are sutured to bodies. Assigning gender to bodies is achieved via an assessment of our corporeal aesthetics or our “visual morphology,”⁷⁶ which are interpreted to assume a gender of the subject we are encountering. Nicole Archer has described the process of looking as “ideologically saturated”⁷⁷ in looking at the self-portrait photographs of *Female to “Male”* the highly ideological process of interpreting the surface aesthetics of the person vis-a-vis the photograph comes in to focus as we assign multiple values to people based

⁷⁶ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 58.

⁷⁷ Nicole Archer “Dynamic Static,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 293-319.

on cultural ideologies in a fraction of time. The conceptual flattening of the photograph of Wynne Neilly and Wynne Neilly the person invites us to recognize the phenotypic judgments that we are making constantly about people's corporeal aesthetics.⁷⁸ Based on subtle shifts in body thickness, muscle tone, body hair, face structure, shoulder broadness, chest definition, facial hair, and posture we assign gender assumptions and attributes to the image of the subject. What comes into focus with *Female to "Male"* is that gender is always bound with aesthetics and is an arbitrary and ideological process of assigning gender expectations to people based on looking. What also comes into view is that the color of the subject's skin relates to this process of gendering. As his corporeal aesthetics change and his gender is interpreted differently, his Caucasian palette remains the same. Writing about the problematic centering of Caucasian bodies in art history and visual culture in the West, Devon W. Carbado dubs the contentions issue of Caucasians as neutral as a "transparency phenomenon."⁷⁹ He goes on to point out that the unfounded situating of the specific identity group as invisible, or lacking signifier, positions Caucasian subjects inaccurately as the default. As has been widely observed by many scholars there are no neutral positions, not in terms of identity, ideas or visual culture, everything is uniquely

⁷⁸ Mel Chen "Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet," 149. See Chen's discussion of Phenotypic judgment

⁷⁹ Devon W. Carbado, "Privilege," in *Black Queer Studies* Johnson, E. Patrick, and Mae Henderson, eds. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 190-212. 194.

situated, and any suggestion otherwise needs to be challenged and de-centered.⁸⁰ Queer of color critique has compellingly outlined that without attending to racialization and naming Caucasian-ness, we homogenize queer theory under whiteness as the default.⁸¹ Other scholars have noted similarly that heteronormativity is an invisible norm, and we should work to make that strange as well.⁸² Being careful not to conflate heterosexuality, Caucasian-ness, and cis-normativity I would like to suggest that *Female to “Male”* as praxis invites a reflection on the unseating of norms in general as it unseats cis-normativity in particular while also working to make Caucasian-ness visible.

⁸⁰ Particularly poignant account of the inaccurately frame neutrality of art history, cacucianness etc can be found in Derek Conrad Murray & Soraya Murray (2006) Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity, *Art Journal*, 65:1, 22-39, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2006.10791193, Patel, Alpesh Kantilal. *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories*. Rethinking Art's Histories. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. Also Martin Berger *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

⁸¹ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Roderick Ferguson and E. Patrick Johnson's Quare theory to discuss that gender and queerness and additionally transness is always intersecting with racialization. Also E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). Particullary see Kara Keeling's included work is a critique of the regime of visibility. She argues that to interrogate the regime we can consider what is hidden to make certain groups visible. Author argues that we need to reconstruct the "we" of who's inside various identity-based groups. This is also dicussed Mel Chen "Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet," in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017) asking the question of how to "not center white masculinity" p 155.

⁸² Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2002). Representations mediate how we can be in the world. "We need to make heterosexuality strange." 119.

Transitioning across genders highlights how we also ideologically interpret and ascribe value to bodies based on our interpretation of someone's gender in relation to racialization. In the moment of the visual encounter we assign a person an identity based on their corporeality. Simultaneously, our understanding of their identity constitutes an intersectional, nodal point on the matrix of gender and the matrix of racialization, and it is via our perception of their identity based in this visual encounter and based in a specific time and place that we ascribe value and determine our treatment of them. Racialization intersects with gender by provoking different reactions to one's corporeality and perceived identity, depending on the ways one's gender is perceived in relation to how one is racialized.

The attempt to ascribe value and situate subjects in pictures into a hermetic category reveals that these visual assessments are also interpreting the subject's skin color while simultaneously interpreting gender signifiers. Due to the way gender necessarily intersects on bodies with skin as a signifier, we cannot interpret gender without engaging in processes of racialization. Repeatedly imaging himself, ostensibly under the guise of making his shifting gender morphology visible, the artist is also bringing his Caucasian identity into view.

Gender is manifested through practices that cite forms already in circulation.⁸³ Judith Butler sees this as transpiring via norms and intelligibility, viewing gender as something that is socially constituted.⁸⁴ For Butler, gender operates via a cultural matrix of gender norms, where masculine and feminine are attributes of male and female. She also suggests that the matrix necessarily will outline certain genders as impossible, but that it is possible to rework the matrix and push it open.⁸⁵ Butler's insights have been critiqued for being disembodied and for neglecting and mischaracterizing trans identities and experiences. I want to offer two other critiques of Butler, one, that she neglects entirely how processes of racialization necessarily are always bound up with gender and two that she ignores any consideration for how gender is visual. Without looking at how her argument transpires on actual bodies, existing in visual culture we are left

⁸³ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993. Building on Foucault, Butler thinks about the ways in which there are regulatory ideals at play in life and that they are inextricable governed by power. Sex for Butler produces the bodies that it "governs." Sex is one of the norms through which bodies "become viable" within the "domain of cultural intelligibility." Butler argues that this text pushes her thinking in *Gender Trouble* further and allows her to see gender as performative, but she articulates that this performance is necessarily imbedded in frameworks that govern the materialization of these performances. She sees the "heterosexual imperative" as enabling certain sexed identifications and disavowing others. She calls this phenomenon an exclusionary matrix. She articulates as abject those who live outside the domain of the matrix, and she describes these lives as "unlivable." However, she also contends that these categories are also unstable and through disidentificatory practices new alternative modes can be expressed and queer and feminist politics mobilized.

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23.

⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23-24.

methodologically lacking. It is necessary to apply her observation to visual culture and in conjunction with a theory of racialization.

Race and gender are always intertwined on bodies, in how we imagine the forms of embodiment we might take, how we are interpolated into different visual fields, how we disidentify, how we perform, and how we are looked at and treated in life. K. Anthony Appiah observes that when racial labels are applied to people, there are social as well as psychological implications and that this shapes “the way people conceive of themselves” and the plans they make for their lives. He observes further that “It follows, of course, that what people can do depends on what concepts they have available to them.”⁸⁶ What Appiah is suggesting is that when we are assigned to a racial category, we unconsciously begin to perform in ways that we believe fit that heading. In our processes of self-identification, “the label shapes the intentional acts of (some of) those who fall under it.”⁸⁷ Another way of observing this occurrence is that in shaping ourselves we are inserting ourselves into already existing visual fields, and we often form ourselves via already existing signifiers, norms, and aesthetics in an effort to be culturally legible. Depending on our particular intersecting identities, there are specific ways of being that will facilitate greater ease of existence as they are less disruptive or reflect positions ascribed higher value culturally. As a

⁸⁶ K. Anthony Appiah, "Racial Identity and Racial Identification," *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, (Ed. Les Back and John Solomos), (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 609.

Caucasian artist Wynne Neilly transitions into a position of masculinity; he shifts into an embodiment that is ascribed a great deal of value culturally in location descended from the colonial project. His use of “male” in the title of his work suggests some ambivalence about this and opens up a question about how he situates himself. In his own words:

To me, being “male” is my way of explaining my trans identity in the simplest form. I am male appearing in many ways, I live my life in society as male, but my maleness is really only based on my physical appearance and that alone. I like to use quotes around the word male because, yes, I do seem like I fit into the category of male, but there is a lot more to me and my gender identity. I don’t see myself as being born into the wrong body really; I’ve pursued this journey to reach a point where my physical appearance is comfortable for me. Everything about my identity is pretty queer.⁸⁸

My body definitely does not represent some of the major issues that exist within the trans community. I “pass” as “male” and I am white and able-bodied with a naturally slim physique. I am able to at least get a job that puts a roof over my head and food in my mouth, which is unfortunately not a reality for a lot of trans people of color and trans women in this society. I’m sure some people look at my work and are annoyed that it doesn’t speak to certain issues.⁸⁹

Transitioning into a masculine perceived corporeality while Caucasian affords him an increase in privilege. Being perceived as Caucasian grants him a modicum of safety when it comes to his non-binary, transmasculine gender, for he is not facing combined and the real danger of living on various visible manifestations of constituencies that have been

⁸⁸ Neilly, Wynne. Personal interview. 11 October 2015.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

visually marked as a less valued culturally.⁹⁰ The artists' Caucasian identity allows him a significant amount of freedom when it comes to embodying gender ambiguity or gender nonconformity. Self-imaging as his Caucasian body transforms from more feminine morphology to a more masculine morphology enables reflection on precisely how we interpret Caucasian subjects via intersecting matrixes of gender and racialization. While his gender ambiguity may be outside of sanctioned versions of rigidly defined binary genders of male and female, his Caucasian status grants him a status of human. With only one aspect of his intersectional identity visually disrupting dominant cultural regimes. *Female to "Male"* reveals precisely how transitioning intersects with racialization and the ways the ideologies and visual encounters of gender and racialization are bound to one another. When a person undergoes a shift in their perceived gender, the way in which the intersection of their perceived gender interacts with their racialized body in the visual encounter is highlighted.

In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* Alexander G. Weheliye articulates some powerful and poignant observations regarding the concept of "race."

⁹⁰ Preciado has written a wonderful book about rejection and complexity of non-passing trans bodies that are uninterested in passing. Preciado articulates a rejection of the structures that seek to regulate genders, writing: "I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it." Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

Building on the work of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter Weheliye works to decenter the construction of the liberal humanist figure of man as an unarticulated Caucasian figure. A key feature of Weheliye's in application to the issues at hand is his notion of racializing assemblage.⁹¹ Weheliye observes that via racializing assemblages' non-white subjects are articulated as "not-quite-human." While "whiteness" designates "not actually existing groupings but a series of hierarchical power structures that apportion and delimit which members of the Homo sapiens species can lay claim to full human status."⁹² Weheliye observes that the conception of visual truth enables a cultural belief in the distinctions between different human groupings. He wants us to view race as a political relation and assemblage, not as a biological descriptor. These distinctions for Weheliye are carried out primarily via, hierarchical indicators, racializing assemblages, which are primarily ascribed via the flesh as the key signifier.⁹³ In other words, by

⁹¹ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). P 20,

⁹² *Ibid.*, 19, 40, 43. For more on skin as signifier of racialization see: Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Stephens argues that we need to consider the skin as both a boundary and as an entry point and that we need to think about skin as experiential for both ourselves and for others. And arguing further that black male performers are both phallicized and epidermalized, that time changes how we see such performances, that photography helped to turn African Americans into signs and that we need to begin to reflect haptically on such cultural performances. The author uses visual materials such as album covers, which resonates particularly well with the notion of the skin as surface and thus stands in for performer but covers the performer as well. The skin, she argues, is sensual and while many things may be done to the skin and they may look different that all ours skins *feel* largely the same. Following this line of thought and thinking with Fanon and Paul Gilroy about epidermalization Stephens' conceptualizes race as being understood socially. He sees skin as a sign of a "secularizing gaze" while he argues that flesh is about humanity and relationality.

⁹³ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, 40.

viewing and interpreting the hieroglyphics of the flesh (or skin as key signifier), specific concepts of humanity are linked to the flesh; relying on scopis drives and stereotypes, racial assemblages ultimately naturalize the expulsion of some humans from the category of human.⁹⁴ This move ultimately helps to sediment racializing assemblages into political relations. What we believe skin to connote is in fact a complete ideological fabrication, put in place by Caucasian supremacist ideologies and maintained by and large via visual culture. While perpetuated and visualized, these structures are sedimented into society and must be actively brought to light to appear as the fabrications that they are. To make such profoundly unfounded ideas seem natural they must be perpetuated and prolifically circulated to be maintained. In cultures descended from white supremacist colonizing nations, we have inherited a visual culture and ideology that binds the ascribing of status to people based on how they look. It is in the advent of the visual encounter that we engage in sociopolitical processes that inform us of what value to assign people based on their corporeality.

It is key to point out that while Weheliye encourages a reworking of racialization so that we view it as a process rather than rooted in biology, that the way that the process plays out is most often based on skin as key signifier. In this way racialization and assigning of value to people is by and

⁹⁴ Ibid. For insightful and compelling writing dealing with the complexity of racial identity see Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

large based on visibility. Suturing, value, meaning and expectations to folks based on surface aesthetics is also how gender functions for the most part (albeit both racialization and gender are often contingent on performances and voice as well).

The photographs in *Female to "Male"* work to unfix both the image and the visual encounter, pointing out that visual encounters are ideological processes and our perception of the photo relies on naturalized processes of assigning meaning to the image. Like the visual encounter, the photograph is based not on truth but assumptions, and it should be viewed with caution and with critical awareness of one's ideological framing.⁹⁵ During the visual encounter, the gender of bodies (in person and photographic) are interpreted in relation to the ideological understanding of gender circulating brought to bear on the situation from the viewer's ideological perspective. To be gendered in ways that cannot be understood or interpreted via the visual field of gender conceptually challenges our very reductive and limited binary gender system, but it also puts one's life in danger. Visually creating the erased iterations of multiple in-between genders, *Female to "Male"* expands the visual repertoire of gender proposing more gender options, while also demonstrating gender as multiple and malleable.

⁹⁵ Richard Dyer discusses how Caucasian is the invisible signifier. Matter of images discussion of associations of skin color to other ideologies about hierarchical value systems. "whiteness as everything and nothing" (127) See for example discussion of heightened violence against trans women of color particularly those that disrupt gender matrix.

What the artist manifests is a sustained experience in which viewers may attempt to ascribe value to the corporeality in front of them, but they are met only with their ideological assumptions about assigning value to bodies based on perceived race and perceived gender. As the body shifts through genders, viewers must continually shift their assumptions about the body and about how to assign value to the person imaged.⁹⁶

Gender is dependent on the visual encounter and the assigning of value to bodies based on an ideological matrix: a complex system of processes about what our expectations of gender are and how gender can look and be performed. The ideological matrix that governs gender intersects with that of racialization and living at the intersection of the masculine zone and having Caucasian skin affords subjects the position of occupying exemplary humanness, which also affords them the greater freedom to play with non-binary gender performances. In this way the expansive self-portrait makes visible what Devin W. Carbado has called “negative identity signification.”⁹⁷ Carbado has observed that Caucasian, heterosexual men live on the “white side of race, the male side of gender, and the straight side of sexual orientation. He is, in this sense, the norm. Mankind. The baseline. He

⁹⁶ During the colonial period under the pseudo sciences of phrenology and physiognomy colonialist Europeans proposed that the Caucasian “race” was superior, and our current moment engages in reaffirming such ideologies in visual culture.

⁹⁷ Devon W. Carbado, “Privilege,” in Black Queer Studies 194. Johnson, E. Patrick, and Mae Henderson, eds. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 190-212, 192.

is our reference. We are all defined with him in mind.”⁹⁸ The wall of Polaroid photographs in the installation image the same subject repeatedly in nearly the same composition in an effort to highlight and make visible the changes in his physical form from one picture to the next. In exhibiting all of the nearly 50 Polaroids simultaneously a gender range from Caucasian butch, androgynous feminine to Caucasian masculinity come in to view unseating Caucasian masculinity as a fixed and essentialized position and showing it to be constructed and malleable.

Self-portraiture is a human impulse bound up with the pursuit of self-introspection and the interrogation of one’s likeness in relation to ones skill as an image-maker, the visual field, aesthetic practices and culture at large.⁹⁹ James Hall has noted that portraits and self-portraits in the west are culturally believed to grant access to the sitter’s soul.¹⁰⁰ Recent directions in art history regarding the study of portraiture and self-portraiture have positioned these genres centrally in the development of art, and of naturalism as a subgenre. Scholars have also recognized that portraiture and self-portraiture continue to make up a major component of art and art history and yet remain under theorized.¹⁰¹ Traditionally the ability of the portrait to function as a facet of naturalism was contingent on the portrait being one solo iconic image of the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 190-212, 192.

⁹⁹ Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 9, 19-21. Also See: James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Critical Introductions to Art (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997). p xiii)

sitter or the artist that circulated and conflated the image and the subject. A self-portrait comprised of multiple discrete self-images, depicted subtle corporeal shifts from one image to the next at its very ontological level breaks apart the notion of the iconic self-portrait, challenging the way we understand images and self-portraiture. For the artist to grant access to his personhood via the photograph the artist shows multiple iterations of non-binary gender, confounding the iconic image and reworking how we view and conceive of portraiture.

Taken en masse, the Polaroid images present countless images of non-binary gender presentations of one person, and they radically explode how we see gender and how we understand the gender of one person. Viewing all of the pictures simultaneously, the self-portrait in the traditional sense – one image of the subject as iconic representation – is exploded. The project depicts the multiplicity of the self-portrait, suggesting that the subject is made up of multiple versions and iterations of self. Neilly self-identifies as trans and his images reflect this. His work reflects his complex, non-binary masculine gender. Looking at the row of Polaroids and traversing the space to peruse them, we bear witness to a corporeality - a subjectivity that takes up space as a non-binary subject, as many non-binary subjects at once and simultaneously, expanding the visual matrix and aesthetics of gender-non-conforming masculinity, thus expanding the visual field of gender and

pushing open the gender matrix. Speaking about his relationship to gender, the artist states:

I very strongly identify with being trans. My trans identity is not binary in the ways that society probably expects it to be. When heteronormative or mainstream society imagines a female born body transiting to a body that is perceived as masculine, there is an automatic reading of that person being "female to male" or FTM. This FTM experience might be very relatable and true for many trans people, but it is also completely wrong for others. I don't identify as being male at all. Putting it in quotations challenges what it means to be a trans masculine individual. Having "male" in the title acts to eliminate some of the stigma behind thinking there is only one way to transition, and there is only one type of trans experience.¹⁰²

The Polaroids in the installation open up conceptions of self-portraiture, facilitating an image of the subject that is simultaneously multiple. To view the documentation one must move through the physical space of the gallery, one can move left to right or right to left or stand still and back up and move in and out, as viewers we control the direction and the way in which we encounter the subject's changing corporeal form in the Polaroids. We can consume a gender that is non-binary by looking at the images in the center of the wall and we can masculinize and de-masculinize his body as we traverse the room. Standing away from the wall after looking closely at the images, we can recall details of the images and absorb them through our embodied viewing experience and memory.

¹⁰² Neilly, Wynne. Personal interview. 11 October 2015.

In titling the work *Female to "Male,"* the artist actively calls attention to the narrowly prescribed ways that masculinity is constructed, and he pries open how masculinity is defined. Neilly explains, "I don't see myself as being born into the wrong body really; I've pursued this journey to reach a point where my physical appearance is comfortable for me. Everything about my identity is pretty queer."¹⁰³ In its ethos, *Female to "Male"* is a visual cultural intervention that resists the gender binary. For the photographer it is a way that in his masculine corporality he can visually assert his non-binary identity. As a trans masculine queer person, his intent is to remain out as a trans queer subject while also procuring a corporeality that feels more at home to him. Showing multiple visual manifestations of self simultaneously reiterates his commitment to being aesthetically complex and not reducing himself to one discrete gender manifestation.

Showcasing many versions of gendered embodiments between masculinity and femininity in the same moment and space, ties back to his personal identification with occupying the space in between gender polarities. Taking in multiple genders simultaneously, we are presented with a complex depiction of the gender of one individual. Taken together the images open up the gender matrix, visually offering options other than manifestations of male and female. Each of the 48 Polaroid photographs images a new gender. The project prompts us to consider that if one person

¹⁰³ Ibid.

can have 48 genders imaged over a brief span of time, then they must have even more non-imaged genders over their lifetime. In turn, as we traverse the images along the length of the wall, we are prompted to reflect on our own trajectory through time and space and our own manifestation of self, perhaps allowing us the space to reflect on our own changing corporealities and various gender performances. Imaging his transition in this way, the photographer suspends the visuality of his changing corporeality intervening in the gender matrix holding open the space of non-binary gender, visualizing it, and making it manifest. By displaying multiple versions of his gender simultaneously, he also mobilizes the photographs to sustain his non-binary identity. Rather than erasing the moments between gender, he chooses to keep them visible and suggests further that gender is a process and made of a multiplicity. “To me, being “male” is my way of explaining my trans identity in the simplest form. I am male appearing in many ways, I live my life in society as male, but my maleness is really only based on my physical appearance and that alone.”¹⁰⁴ In discourse with emerging trans visual culture and gender-non-conforming discourse and movements, the project complicates the notion of being “trapped in the wrong body” and instead suggests that the framework by which we have been told to understand gender is to be questioned, and that the binary gender system itself is the trap.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

The process of expanding gender concepts that Neilly's complex identification with masculinity makes visible can be understood more fully using José Esteban Muñoz's conception of disidentification. In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz developed the important concept of disidentification.¹⁰⁵ Disidentification has been conceptualized by Muñoz, who has extensively researched and theorized the ways in which queers and queers of color, in particular, engage in various strategies throughout the course of their lives to make the systems in which we live more livable. They often disidentify with various subject positions in efforts to make sense of ways of being in the world that play with popular forms of representation and identity formation while perverting and/or jettisoning parts of mainstream identities that they reject.¹⁰⁶ For Muñoz and the queer of color performers he writes about, disidentification is a way of life and a survival strategy. It is a mode of producing one's identity that actively takes the language of dominant culture and the aesthetics and expectations associated with dominant cultural ideals about given identity categories, and it actively reforms them and reshapes them by using only that which is advantageous for the queer subject, transforming those aspects of the identity that the queer subject rejects. Disidentification is also a praxis that has the potential to change the

¹⁰⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

ideological and social systems that seek to govern all of us. In this case, disidentifying with masculinity enables a praxis of challenging and changing binary gender specifically and the category of masculinity.

Disidentification is not only a term to describe the activity that many queers deploy, but it is a significant political and social form of resistance to dominant modes and norms as well as a way in which to change them and to propose new identity categories. *Female to “Male”* disidentifies with binary gender—and specifically with masculinity. The work intervenes in the field of masculinity by rejecting aspects of masculinity that do not feel right for the artist but in doing so, it opens up assumptions about what it means to be a Caucasian man. The work disrupts the category of masculinity by infusing queerness, femininity and non-binary gender into the category of male. The intervention has the potential to change the field of masculinity by challenging the assumed aspects of the category, de-essentializing what it means to be a Caucasian man and opening up the possibilities of other forms and ways of being. Via his demonstrated embodiment of gender, the artist visually shows the complexity of gender by providing multiple iterations of genders in between female and male, demonstrating that gender necessarily always intersect with racialization, while simultaneously challenging the categories themselves.

Parting Thoughts

Trans self-imaging practices that document transitions from one gender to another undermine the primary way that we engage with pictures by depicting an individual who is transforming their gender over time and changing their corporeality rapidly over a sustained period. These pictures, combined with how we understand trans identity in transition, undo what we thought to be the ontology of photographs and underline the complicated relationship between the surface of the picture and the fundamental identity of the person pictured.

During modernity, binary oppositions were established to uphold white supremacist patriarchal ideologies in the service of granting Caucasian men social power. The relationship shared between photography, gender and racialization is intimately bound with our current cultural ideologies, in which sight is the most privileged of the senses and that via looking, we assess and seek to ascertain knowledge about people based on how they appear. Preciado argues that the 21st century is the era of the “Pharmacopornographic” control of masculinity. It’s not clear if the author is distinguishing between cis and trans men, but it seems to be true of both. For Preciado, gender is a “biotech industrial artifact,” dependent on visual recognition and “optical ontology.” This notion is then tied to photography, as Preciado argues photography marked a significant stage in the production

of a new sexual subject and its “visual truth.”¹⁰⁷ Our cultural conception of photographs, gender, and racialization (in nations that are legacies of the colonial project) shares the belief that, via visual assessment, a truth about that which is before us can be ascertained. With photographs, we tend to believe that a picture is a window into a world; with gender, it means we can know a person's gender based on how they look; and with racialization, this means we can ascribe a value to a person and make assumptions about them based on skin tone. None of these assumptions are accurate. Moreover, they can often be highly inaccurate and, more to the point, they are deeply problematic, for they uphold a belief that via looking, we can believe our culturally informed ideologically structured assumptions about what we think we see. These shared conceptualizations are all rooted in the colonial project, in which reason and vision were deemed supreme, but both were bound up with oppression and colonization.

Trans self-images reflect what Halberstam has called a repudiation of the veracity of the visual.¹⁰⁸ What trans-self-representations are underscoring is that the surface of the picture and the surface of the person are not necessarily correlative to any assumption we may make based on looking. In this way, trans-self-representations are challenging traditional methods of visual apprehension that have been entrenched in North American and

¹⁰⁷ Preciado, Beatriz. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*.

¹⁰⁸ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 6.

Western European visual culture. *Female to "Male"* utilizes Caucasian masculinity to rethink masculinity and to make a radical break with the way we have come to conceptualize the indexicality of the photograph. The project highlights precisely how it is in the visual encounter that we assign meaning and value to bodies based primarily on ideological interpretations of visual information. The work also proposes that we unfix identity and rework how we think about Caucasian-ness and masculinity as given and neutral position. The work visualizes gender as a continuum; that gender has countless iterations even for one person, and that gender intersects with racialization. It is in the visual encounter that value is assigned to corporealities. Suggesting that if we can unfix the idea of reality being sutured to the privileging of sight that we may be able to make new futures possible.¹⁰⁹

Part and parcel of our culture is that we are social creatures desiring to be recognized as part of various social categories with which we identify. To be recognized as part of a given constituency, we need to perform at least somewhat within the parameters of how the categories are defined socially and by and large visually. Engaging in a trans visual studies method of thinking through *Female to "Male"* reveals that photography needs to be decolonized, gender is always in relation to racialization and is contingent on

¹⁰⁹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xvii-i.

embodiment and ideological perspective of the viewer. Ultimately unfixing photography and decolonizing gender and un-naturalizing Caucasian-ness *Female to "Male"* works to undo the legacy of colonialism and entrenched colonialist ideas about images, representations, and identity.

In its most radical reception, *Female to "Male"* urges viewers to remain critical about how photographs can seem to fix subjects and provide us with a false sense of omniscience. The work points towards how images can never actually represent the subject; they are only ever an image—and the path to the subject is never a set relation. This profoundly challenges and potentially undercuts the long-established culturally accepted equation that seeing equates to believing and that sight renders knowledge - a position that originated in a culturally specific time and place with the advent of modernity, colonization and western colonial expansion. The photograph in this context was conceptually framed as a tool that could reveal truth about what and whom was imaged while belying the fact that all photos are always ideologically constructed and made in the service of the image-maker's aim.

CHAPTER TWO
INTIMATE DURATIONALITY:
TRANS-QUEER PHOTOGRAPHY AS PRAXIS

“We must dream and enact new and better pleasure, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”¹

- José Esteban Muñoz

When Mieke Bal outlined methods of doing visual studies, calling for interdisciplinary approaches to apprehending visual culture, she also proposed that in an effort to avoid the pitfalls of outmoded strategies deployed by art historians’ visual studies, practitioners ought to consciously allow the work at hand to co-constitute and inform analysis.² For Bal, interdisciplinarity is both a critical tenet of visual studies and a necessary method for most fully apprehending visual culture. She argues that each case study of visual culture exists at the nexus of numerous fields of study and holds implications for countless areas of scholarship, philosophy, and life. She urges scholars to attentively observe the complex impacts visual culture has made on multiple sights and fields, positing that, “Objects are active

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

² Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 5-32, 22.

participants in the performance of analysis”; they enable reflection and speculation, and they can “contradict projections and wrong-headed interpretations” (if the scholar lets them) and, as such, each is a “theoretical object with philosophical relevance.”³ For Bal it is necessary to look at and philosophize visual culture from a place of openness, in which the scholar is not already invested in forwarding a particular claim. Bal warns us that an approach that includes already-held beliefs, intended to be deployed in analyzing visual culture, often results in an object of analysis that functions as an illustration used to uphold one’s pre-existing argument. Her urging is to allow the work at hand to instruct the viewer on what methods to use and allow the work under speculation to inform the resulting conclusions. As an artist, a scholar, and an art educator, I view Bal’s suggestions as particularly poignant. Visual culture and art are discursive, or made between the artist’s or visual culture producers’ intent and the space in which the viewer(s) experience the work or aspect of visual culture; it is a process that is co-informative between what we bring to the work and what the work brings into being. I build on this crucial tenet of visual studies, deploying the methods of analysis in this chapter, informed by the works I discuss.

This chapter embodies a method of trans-queer futurity that embraces Bal’s directive, taking the project *Relationship* as praxis in and of itself. *Relationship* demonstrates overall the necessity of de-essentializing how we

³ Mieke Bal, *Visual Essentialism*, 24.

think of images, identities, and methods. The images themselves work to untether assumptions about gender, sex, and sexuality and complicate pictures and photographic practices. As a project, *Relationship* embraces the praxis of image-making that is collaborative, intimate, and expansive.

What Ernst and Drucker's project both necessitates and makes clear is that we need a more complex method of theorizing photography, one that incorporates queer and trans theory. In doing so we may find that visual studies and photographic theory have interdisciplinary, self-reflexive, critically engaged, intersectional visual studies methods by which to help guard against essentializing, or taking at face value, what we are viewing. The complex relationship between the surface of someone and their interior makeup becomes more explicit when looking at trans subjects, generally, but these methods and observations reveal insights widely applicable to considering various aspects of art and visual culture.

Micha cárdenas notes that a trans method requires a “radical embracing of experimentation,” and “perhaps we must accept that we cannot completely understand ourselves, and thus cannot understand others, but that we must still work towards compassion and empathy in order to foster collaboration.”⁴ In deploying these urgings as a praxis of trans scholarship, I embrace the ethos of experimentation and collaboration while also noting the unlikelihood that I ever fully apprehend the entirety of the projects at hand. I

⁴ micha cárdenas, *Trans Desire* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010), 73.

can, like all of us, only begin to unpack what is available in this moment and what is in front of me at this juncture. I change and time moves on, shifting the discourse and context in which the work exists and, in turn, all meaning will shift.

I strive to situate myself as a desiring and embodied artist, viewer, and thinker. The method contains an ethic: one in which the viewer must commit to undoing exclusionary practices and move forward toward what I frame as trans-queer futurity, in which nothing is essentialized or fixed and nothing is taken as a norm; all things remain unmoored from necessary relations but in conversation with their intersecting points and discourses. It is not to say that nothing matters, for perhaps now more than ever everything dealing with hierarchies, injustices, and identity matters. Nevertheless, we must work to remove and resist things as outside of their place in hierarchy, essentialism, or any forced relation to anything else. We have an orientation toward what we desire, study, theorize, love, look at, peruse, or consider, but our orientation is free to change, to grow, to learn and even to undo.

My interdisciplinary, intersectional, self-reflexive trans visual studies approach in this chapter recognizes the failures and limitations of both structures of assessment and abilities to completely comprehend a given subject, based on current methods. It proposes a trans-queer, visual studies approach to trans visual culture as a method that embraces experimental collaboration between it as praxis and as embodied scholarship. When

turning to a trans-queer visual studies approach to aspects of trans visual culture, the intersecting praxis and resulting understandings reveal that this new intersection of scholarly methods of apprehending contemporary photographic projects, produced by and about trans representations, demonstrate new insight into visual studies, trans studies, photography, and theories of identity.

Arranged salon-style at the Whitney 2014 Biennial and installed so that they float a few inches in front of the wall, the nearly fifty glossy, color photographs, printed full-bleed, depicting various embodiments of Caucasian 20–30-something-year-old queerness. (See Figure 10). The pictures range in size, from works that might be cradled in one’s hand to those that render the figures nearly life-size. Each image in the project depicts one or two figures, mostly in domestic settings, with some in exterior spaces, posed in various states of dress and undress.

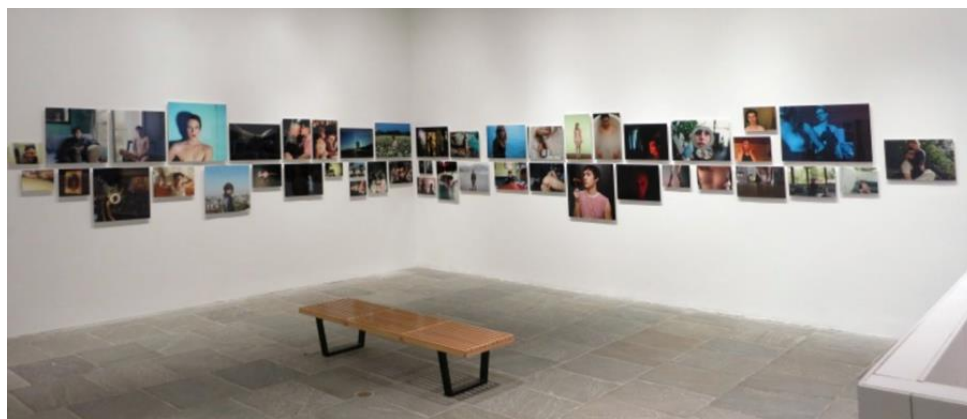


Figure 10. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship*, 2008-2013, installation view

The figures appear to reveal themselves intimately while also remaining aware of their exposure. They lounge in bedrooms, stand in hallways and hotel rooms, and recline by swimming pools. The images reflect a lifestyle coming of age in the early 2000s, in a California landscape filled with objects and ideas of leisure—pools and palm trees. The vernacular images and intimate moments are often shot with an outstretched arm and a self-facing camera; this, coupled with the glossy, rear-mounted treatment of the photographs hovering in front of the wall, connotes computer screens and image banks found on social media.⁵ The overall aesthetic feels personal, intimate, and self-conscious.

The photographs form a collaborative project produced by Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, taken throughout their five years of falling in love and photographing their relationship, while each underwent a gender transition. Drucker transitioned from femme male androgen to female, and Rhys Ernst from soft butch to queer masculine. The product of two artists who already had separate artistic practices that often included self-imaging within their respective oeuvres, *Relationship* was conceived by Ernst and Drucker from a place of not seeing visual representations of trans people in

⁵ Interestingly, the work was produced in a pre-Instagram historical moment, so the photographs were taken with various types of film and some digital cameras, but none were shot with iPhone, for example, or uploaded to social media. However, when the work was installed at the Whitney, social media images banks, rear-illuminated photographs on screens, and Instagram had already become part of the cultural vernacular. So, while the work is pre-Instagram and post-internet, the project resonates visually with Instagram aesthetics. From Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, personal interview, October 16, 2015.

visual culture, and from what they described as their shared need to fill this representational gap. The work originated from the desire to “reflect ourselves back to ourselves.”⁶ Ernst notes that the timing of their meeting coincided with each beginning medical transitions, thus it was serendipitous but also a part of what made the era so significant for both of them and worthy of photographing, “Had we met at another point in our lives, we might not have been so driven to document ourselves. But we were in the unflattering throes of yet another puberty . . . each learning from the other’s gender history.”⁷ Ernst and Drucker produced a prolific number of photographic images of themselves from 2008 to 2014. The high-gloss, color photographs sometimes depict Drucker and Ernst as individual subjects, while at other times, the couple is imaged together. Almost all of the photographs are shot in interior domestic spaces. The images are candid, vernacular, funny, sexy, and intimate, and they constantly blur the distinction between image-maker and subject. As their bodies morph, their styles evolve, their hair colors change, and their physicalities shift, it is often difficult to discern which thin, androgynous Caucasian body is which.

By titling the work simply, as *Relationship*, the artists frame the project as just that; it is a depiction of intimacy and falling in love, and of the two artists cultivating and exploring and imaging their budding and

⁶ Drucker and Ernst, personal interview, October 16, 2015.

⁷ Maddie Crum, “In ‘Relationship,’ A Trans/Trans Couple Collected Intimate Photos Of Life Together,” *Huffpost*, June 23, 2016. (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/relationship-photos-zachary-drucker-rhys-ernst_n_576af7a4e4b065534f48caba).

deepening romance. In some ways, the title seems an attempt to normalize the work, to make it banal, but at the same time, it may also be a reflection of their feelings about themselves and who they are together. The overwhelming sentiment of the work when perusing it in the gallery or as it exists now in book form is a sense of sustained love, an extending moment of becoming, both in terms of a couple and as their future selves. The images reflect various affective sentiments and countless physicalities that present various embodiments of non-binary genders. As it stands, the work creates a place of perpetual becoming, a sustained space of in-between, of ongoing and yet always augmenting liminality.

Relationship presents a new visual language, new aesthetics of gender, and new visualization of sexual orientation. The project eschews essentialist ideological constructions about portraiture, photography, and the connection between biological sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Ernst and Drucker's self-representations are a praxis of bringing new identities into being, along with prompting new understandings of identity and facilitating new methods that unmoor essentialisms and stress the complexity of a visual assessment of identity.

In our current gender/sex/sexuality regime, sexual interactions and desires that people perform are often contingent on perceived genders of self and other; thus, trans people often have difficulty formulating sexual fantasies much less living them: trans bodies are often not in line (yet) with

how one wishes to be gendered (and perceived) by others (and sometimes sexed), especially when it comes to intimate partners. In *Trans Desire / Affective Cyborgs*, trans scholar and artist micha cárdenas astutely theorizes the complex way in which trans people come into desires—i.e., desire for self and desire for others. Examining the complexity of how desire informs trans identification in terms of both gender identity and sexual identity, cárdenas examines pornographic films starring queer and trans people who are untrained as pornographic performers (she refers to this type of subgenre as “radical porn”) and notes its radicality in who is cast as stars and in its framing of consent as sexy.⁸

Looking at radical porn, cárdenas observes the intricate ways trans people come to form notions of self and orient desire toward others. For cárdenas, porn is about fantasy and pedagogy. In considering the effects of radical porn on the formation of trans identities, cárdenas writes, “Often, transgender desire is at odds with physical and social reality, it contains within it a kernel of fantasy.”⁹ Building on methods established by Žižek and Lacan, cárdenas contends that the object of desire and fantasy is both sexually desired and teaches us how to desire. Cárdenas observes that, when viewing radical porn, trans viewers identify with ways to desire others and to embody gender.¹⁰ Cárdenas’ observations about radical porn and its ensuing

⁸ micha cárdenas, *Trans Desire* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010), 59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 59-62.

effects are applicable to *Relationship*. While *Relationship* is not radical porn, it is similar and produces shared effects. In forwarding a work explicitly about trans desire, the project creates a cultural touchstone that forwards trans subjects as desirable while picturing and concreting fantasy.

Cruising and Relationality

In Muñoz's final book project before his untimely departure, he proposes that queerness is not yet here, forwarding instead that queerness lingers forever on the horizon as something toward which we must continually strive.¹¹ This formulation of queerness suggests continual movement toward a future that is precisely the sustained, embodied affective space created in *Relationship*. The notion that queerness is something that lingers perpetually in the future, in the space in front of us, implies that there is always movement, continual shifting, and constant change; it necessitates that queerness itself may endlessly augment, and remain just outside of and beyond a concrete grasp or full understanding. The images that make up *Relationship* and the impetus to create them both come from a commitment to futurity, to the belief in striving toward a self-made reality that is different

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Muñoz writes that his interest in utopia is not as radically new, as he agrees with some of his critics that utopia is a longstanding intellectual project and notion, but rather that his interest in utopia and futurity is set in opposition to LGBTQ politics of the moment, which seem to be far too invested in the present and underlie the "pragmatic gay agenda." Cruising Utopia's first move is to "describe a modality" of queer utopianism that Muñoz points to in the Stonewall era of 1969.

and more self-actualized than the current moment. The amalgamating of images overall presents bodies that are in between binary gender. While also vulnerable and intimate, the figures often lounge, scantily clad, presenting intimate and often sensual images of subjects whose genders appear outside of binary gender expectations of masculinity and femininity. The images are about becoming and also about perpetual transformation, reflecting an impulse toward queer futurity.

The notion of cruising deployed by Muñoz in his text and cruising deployed in radical porn are both about actively seeking the object of one's desire and implying movement through space and time. I would like to suggest that we understand cruising as seeking without a specific person or object of desire in mind but seeking someone or some idea that compels the cruiser. I suggest further that the notion of cruising utopia is one that implies a full mind/body experience, a movement compelled by desire to find something not yet fully imagined, but also something unmistakably recognizable when found. The ethos of cruising for utopia and the impulse driving Muñoz's thinking is a queer-embodied desire that is interested in queerness both theoretically and physically. The description of cruising widens to continue to move and seek, compelled by one's desires to find queer futurity, a queerness that is a theory, a world-view, a method, a way of being, gender identification, and sexual orientation. This is the very ethos of

Relationship – it visually manifests Muñoz's notion of cruising utopia of continually moving toward queer futurity.¹²

If queerness is indeed, as Muñoz suggests, something we must continually work toward and to strive toward, then scholars and artists invested in queerness as method, praxis, and worldview must become ever queerer, to push the notion of questioning all normative structures and essentialisms further, to undo the binary and essentialist thinking, ways of being that are so interlaced into our culture that they regulate our lives in ways that are often difficult to detect. Queer has provided a way out of these structures, a means of questioning and rethinking; however, it has been somewhat co-opted back into binary structures. The promise of queerness to remain radical and interventionist must then also embrace trans as worldview and as method, as trans offers a continually unmooring and de-essentializing methodology. Trans as an identity and a method continually unfixes any essentialism and proposes that identities and ideas are unfixed. A trans-queer method, then, might be one in which we allow ourselves, as scholars, to question anything taken as a given and to be flexible, adaptive, intersectional, and expansive in our methods, and to be changed in the process. For it is our desire, our cruising, that draws us to the subject at hand; so how might we

¹² Cruising as a method has been taken up by Alpesh Kantilal Patel in *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017). This move to take on futurity and cruisiness as methodologies is also in discourse for me with Mel Chen's discussion of queer studies as being a rangy, interdisciplinary nexus of interested and methodologies" (63), and how relationship as a project is full of potentialities and liminalities and a sustained space of in between.

change in spending time with the object of our desire? To recognize any transformation taking place within oneself is also to feel the ways theory, scholarship, and philosophy impact physical life. In ethos, *Relationship* embraces Muñoz's impulse of queer futurity. The pictures en masse model the necessity of developing new anti-essentialist, fluid, and forward-thinking methods for apprehending photography.

Situating *Relationship*

Drucker and Ernst's *Relationship* visually images the complexity of trans identification, trans becoming, and trans desire. In doing so, it reworks notions of gender identity, sexual orientation, and self-representation practices via collaborative self-production. (See Figure 10). In observing the work, one realizes that the pictures present multiple ways to identify with gender and numerous means of embodied and directed desire toward various iterations of gender in one relationship.

Drucker and Ernst's project was culturally marked as significant at the time of its exhibit in the Whitney Biennale. Its embrace by the Whitney, as canon-makers of Contemporary Art, and by its inclusion in a major exhibition, marks this project as a singular instantiation of important trans iconicity. However, there are countless other photographic projects made by, for, and about trans people and their relationships, particularly in this period when access to hormone replacement therapies and trans health care have

grown more accessible. Thus, while its inclusion in the Whitney Biennial makes *Relationship* appear as a singular type of work, or the best type of work about trans people, it also reflects part of a generation of queer and trans people and artists for whom these types of images and intimacies are an integral part of everyday life.

As an instantiation of trans-queer representation and love in mainstream visual culture, *Relationship* may appear unique and to some, even radical, but in the trans-queer community and particularly in the community of trans-queers of their generation (like myself), these images, this story, and its aesthetics are deeply familiar. Indeed, like many trans-queer people born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 2000s symbolized years when many of us reveled in our queer and trans adolescences, partying, cruising each other, exploring our identities, changing our identities, transitioning, and transgressing sex, gender, and sexual orientation in all directions imaginable. And just like Ernst and Drucker, many of us were falling in love. I was falling in love while completing an MFA and making photographic work about my queer relationship. Many more like us were doing the same. But all of these relationships look different. So, what does it mean, then, for *Relationship* to end up as *the one* instantiation of this generational story? What does its inclusion into the Whitney Biennial mean? What about the rest of us? Why, for example, were other artists of gender disruption and representation not included? Why were the only trans bodies

visible in the biennial the works of these Caucasian, thin, able-bodied figures? In the moment of curation in major exhibitions, practices of inclusion and exclusion are almost always about canon formation. These institutional decisions have major impacts on the particular artists, aesthetics, and bodies we are taught to value culturally, via precisely these types of inclusionary and exclusionary practices by major art institutions.

In a review of *Relationship*'s debut at the Whitney Biennial, which ran in the *New York Times*, Jacob Bernstein wrote, "That a show by two transgender artists should be so prominently featured at the 2014 Biennial should come as a surprise to no one. It is just more evidence of the increasing presence of trans people at the center of popular culture."¹³ While Bernstein's words might be true, to take his comment at face value is to neglect to consider that, historically, there have only ever been few instances of trans people appearing in mainstream art, and they have consistently been bound up with dominant cultural ideologies held at the time and in that particular place. The oeuvre of portrait photography in the art world has periodically displayed trans icons, particularly at moments during which trans people have been spectacularized points of cultural fascination. Such spectacle is in many respects the case with the inclusion of Ernst and Drucker in the 2014

¹³ Jacob Bernstein, "In Their Own Terms," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2014 (https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/13/fashion/the-growing-transgender-presence-in-pop-culture.html?_r=0).

Biennial. As Drucker recalls, when the artists were installing their work at the Whitney, someone asked:

... “Oh, this is great. Who was the photographer?” ... They assumed we were just the subjects, which is of course the history of this kind of work. But this is what I hope changes going forward. It’s the work we’re doing in television. It’s the work we’re doing in filmmaking. It’s the work we’re doing in photography. It’s making trans people the author, rather than just the subject. That’s really the key.¹⁴

A small instance of misunderstanding the moment of misrecognition is a reflection of a broader belief in trans people as subjects of art history, as objects to be studied, not as the makers of culture. Nevertheless, while trans people often appear in photographic archives as the freakish subjects of art history, the mobilization of trans subjects in art history forms part of a larger discussion about the regulation of identity in visual culture.

Beyond the suggestion that trans artists are now heralded into the Biennial circuit and are perhaps welcomed now, too, into contemporary art, the inclusion of Ernst and Drucker’s work as part of the 2014 Biennial raises questions about tokenization and what contemporary trans artist Juliana Huxtable refers to as the “neoliberal spotlight”¹⁵ and an “empty gesture.”¹⁶ Because the art world is fueled by capitalism, such inclusions raise questions

¹⁴ Emily Bobrow, “How Two Producers of ‘Transparent’ Made Their Own Trans Lives More Visible” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/magazine/how-two-producers-of-transparent-are-making-trans-lives-more-visible-starting-with-their-own.html>).

¹⁵ Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

and highlight strained and strange deployment of various representations for capitalist ends. Caucasian, thin, able-bodied trans people in a leisurely, monogamous relationship gain entrance into the Whitney while other trans artists whose work and corporealities reflect less palatable representations remain excluded from the museum. This should come as a surprise to no one. Of all trans representations, Caucasian bodies will likely be the most visually palatable, as they most closely reflect bodies already proliferating in the majority of museums. Huxtable's "neoliberal spotlight,"¹⁷ is a critique of the phenomenon of the token inclusions of a handful of trans artists in the mainstream art world. The criticism may be elaborated on via philosopher Slavoj Žižek's term, the "acculturation of politics."¹⁸ That is to say, mainstream inclusion of trans icons reflects a cultural impulse to spectacularize a small number of trans folks for their entertainment value or to prove one's liberalism in "allowing" their inclusion, but such activity often promotes the false sense that things are "getting better" for trans people while, in fact, the inroad is nothing more than a fetish.¹⁹ As Žižek articulates it, rather than fighting for the rights of disenfranchised constituencies and working across differences to reshape society as more just, the dominant

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2007, <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-inquiry.html>.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2007, <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-inquiry.html>. Also see bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

culture often produces only a veneer of tolerance.²⁰ The inclusion of *Relationship* in the Whitney's 2014 blockbuster exhibition underscores how the seeming embrace of trans characters and trans icons in mainstream media does not equate to either political or social change. Furthermore, these representations potentially have the dangerous effect of facilitating complacency under the auspices that no more social or political action need be pursued on behalf of trans people now that trans icons have been represented in the highest echelons of mainstream culture. Now, several years later, there has still been an impoverished amount of trans artists included in subsequent biennials, and the political and social status of trans people is still seemingly up for grabs. To further understand the specificity of the dominant cultural inclusion of token trans artists and representations and the issues at stake, it is instructive to look to art history, in particular photography, for it is a significant part of the discursive process that frames how we understand the polemic.

Art History and Gender Regulation in the Visual Field

Photography is informed by ideologies of image-makers, which impact processes of image-making and create and reinforce cultural discourse as images circulate. Photographic portraits in and of themselves cannot and should not be viewed as political; however, they form part and

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance," in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 34, no. 4 (Summer 2008): 660.

parcel of the fabric of culture and the construction of cultural beliefs.

Photography is reflective of the cultural belief systems of the image-maker, while simultaneously re-articulating such beliefs in discourse.²¹



Figure 11. Arthur (Weegee) Fellig's *The Gay Deceiver/Man Arrested for cross-dressing*, New York, circa 1939

One of the most notable photo-historical examples of how mainstream visual culture regulates trans identities is Arthur (Weegee) Fellig's *The Gay Deceiver*, from circa 1939. (See Figure 11). Weegee is best

²¹ For nuanced and insightful debates on what Sontag regarded as “to take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged” see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador Press, 1973), 12.

known for his dramatic photographs of crime scenes in lower Manhattan. His title frames our encounter with his subject as engaged in dishonest behaviour. The black and white photograph depicts a portrait of a Caucasian, femme, dressed in a fur coat with a small hat tipped back above her blonde curls. She daintily hoists her skirt above her thigh-highs as she grins and lifts a thin leg to step off the back of a police van into the dark night. Weegee's harsh camera flash brightly lights her face, and behind her, we can see a few frightened faces peering toward us from the shadowed interior of the police van. We surmise that they were also arrested in conjunction with a police raid of a queer bar, for wearing clothes that failed to conform to social expectations, based on their assigned sex at birth.²²

Susan Stryker's writing on biopower in relation to the formation of trans identities is invaluable in discussing trans representations. Building on the methods of Foucault, Stryker contends that gender functions as a biopolitical apparatus and considers the ways in which gender regulates our entire lives through bureaucracy, legislation and state-sanctioned identification. For Stryker, gender identifying in this way is a means of power enacted in a particular area, of groups of people via administrative and bureaucratic structures. Biopower "surveils" transgender as a "category" in

²² Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15-18. Also see Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 91-99. For more discussion on the relationship between photography, cultural ideology, and gender regulation see Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

order to subdivide the category into areas of acceptable trans people and normativity, bestowing citizenship and humanity vs. “consigning others to decreased chances for life.”²³ In Weegee’s image, for example, we witness the circulation of the representations of gender as biopower regulating a person’s life, arresting the subjects, and likely connecting a criminal record to the subject for the rest of their life. Gender as biopower marks this person’s life as having decreased chances of success and survival. Now, in the current moment, with the inclusion of Drucker and Ernst in the Whitney museum, gender functions as biopower marking their lives, or any life that performs gender and life like them, as inside the sanctioned parameters of trans gender embodiment.

The ideological work that Weegee’s image does not only articulates trans identities as deceptions, but also explicitly shows how subjects who disrupt binary gender and cis-normativity will be legally persecuted. His title and subject not only conflate sex and gender, or “gay deception,” with gender expression, but also visually reinforce the policing of such unacceptable embodiments of queer gender performances.²⁴

²³ Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies,” in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, 1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 41.

²⁴ Gender is something entirely different than biological sex, and yet historically the two have often been inaccurately conflated. For more in-depth discussion of gender, see: Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, New York, 1997); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge Classics, New York, 2006); Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge (New York; [pub, year]), 2004; Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (Feminist Press, 2013); Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1998).

Cultural beliefs about trans people and discourse around trans representations shift, contingent on place and time and the viewing perspective of the image-maker. In making the image, Weegee participates in the discourse that contends that trans femmes' lives are illegal, putting them at risk. Trans stereotypes as extensions of biopower, like Weegee's *Gay Deceiver*, both reflect dominant cultural ideologies about trans folks popular at the time and reinforce them by further circulating them. As dominant culture and dominant cultural ideologies create representations of trans people that circulate, the resulting discourse presents reductive, fixed icons and sutures meaning to images that solidify already circulating beliefs about various groups to a reductive representation of said constituency. Suturing ideas about groups of people to images sediments the ways that culture expects such groups to appear, behave, and be treated.

In 1966 Diane Arbus made the now iconic picture *A Young Man With Curlers At Home on West 22nd Street, N.Y.C.* (See Figure 12). Arbus's title frames our perceptions of the subject. Describing her subject as a "young man," she biases the viewer toward perceiving the non cis appearing individual as male. Her visual assessment of the subject reflects her adoption of the dominant ideological belief in binary gender and gender non-conforming people as transvestites (or what was understood and termed at the time to be a person—typically a man—who derives pleasure from dressing in clothes primarily associated with women).



Figure 12. Diane Arbus, *A Young Man With Curlers At Home on West 22nd Street, N.Y.C.*, 1966.

Arbus began her career in the 1940s as a street and documentary photographer, gaining recognition in the 1960s when she received a Guggenheim fellowship and participated in the influential *New Documents* exhibition at the MoMA. She is renowned for her photographs documenting people who, up until that point, had remained mostly invisible in the

dominant culture²⁵; her oeuvre includes circus performers, nudists, little people, trans people, and folks from other representationally marginalized communities. Arbus's familiarity with the lives of her subjects was minimal, and the work raises issues about the ethics of people from privileged positions imaging people they barely know, especially whose lives are under-represented and undervalued in mainstream culture.²⁶

The frontal composition of *A Young Man*, in shallow pictorial space, and the position of the subject's hand in the foreground, render the subject and hand large and disproportionate. The way in which Arbus has used harsh light slightly off to the side creates a high-contrast image with deep shadows: the subject's features appear angular and reveals small details (like facial stubble). In other words, all the photographic techniques Arbus deploys render the subject in ways that uphold her perception of the subject as "a man in curlers." When Arbus looks at the subject, the very act of looking is a

²⁵ Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations*, (New York: Random House, 2003).

²⁶ Biography is not always significant when studying art and visual culture, but in this context it is important to consider Arbus' socio-economic remove from her subjects coupled with her approach to photographing folks who would have been perceived as culturally marginal and her choice of primarily making one-off images of subjects and then grouping them all together in a manner reminiscent of a freak show. For more information on Arbus and debates surrounding her work see: Lyle Rexer, "The Arbus Effect," *Art on Paper* 8, no. 3 (2004): 66-69; Susan Mernit, *The Georgia Review* 39.1 (1985): 209-11. For a discussion of the power dynamics of the gaze in photography and the privileged position of the photographer see: Catherine Lutz and Jane Lou Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 187-216.

“profoundly ‘impure’”²⁷ process, deeply informed by the cultural ideologies she (as the artist) is steeped in.²⁸

The image also depicts a subject with long manicured fingernails, a soft grip on a cigarette, parted, shiny lips, plucked and penciled eyebrows, mascara, and several curlers wrapped tightly in what one can imagine being relatively long hair. All of these visual cues point towards the subject’s identification with and commitment to aesthetics associated with femininity. The question of whether the subject’s gender identity was trans, gender non-conforming, or self-identifying in some other way is confined and undermined by Arbus’s titular framing. Through her title and image aesthetics (as noted above), Arbus transmits her ideological interpretation of the subject into our perceptions of them. Due to cultural beliefs about the photograph’s ability to convey unmediated “facts,” we view the subject through Arbus’ ideological perspective without even noticing. This perspective, in line with dominant cultural ideologies of the time, held that any gender performance challenging gender binaries would be viewed as a person with pathological desires for transgressing gender boundaries. Arbus, as an influential photographer, created an image of a trans/non-binary person

²⁷ Mieke Bal describes the act of looking as “profoundly ‘impure,’” directed by biology, and laden with interpretations. She also discusses how each culture has “regimes” of truth that are “accepted as rational” and many methods in place that will work to keep these beliefs functioning. When we are observing photography history, circumscribing, in which lives are viewed as illegal and as freakish, we are witnessing the playing out of the regime in photographic media. Bal, “Visual Essentialism,” 12.

²⁸ See Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

that circulated widely, reinforcing ideologies about gender and trans people prevalent at the time.

The outspoken trans activist Kate Bornstein wrote about her formative years and the impact of visual culture on the formation (or stunting thereof) of her trans, queer, non-binary identity.

When I was growing up, people who lived cross-gendered lives were pressured into hiding deep in the darkest closets they could find. Those who came out of their closets were studied under microscopes, ridiculed in the tabloids, or made exotic in the porn books, so it paid to hide. It paid to lie.²⁹

Bornstein would have been about eighteen years old when Arbus shot *A Young Man*. While Arbus arguably used photography as a positive intervention into visual culture to make inroads for the acceptance of people not customarily imaged, her work also demonstrates, in part, that visibility in and of itself is not to be confused with identity politics. As articulated by Bornstein, such representations also impact the individual's processes of identification and identity formation: Arbus's work often further objectified, dehumanized, and marginalized her subjects. In this case the overwhelming sentiment is that the picture projects trans femmes simply as young men in curlers, freakish and sad characters.

The deployment of trans people and gender non-conforming people in visual culture is also intertwined with heteropatriarchal systems, which both

²⁹ Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman, eds., *Gender Outlaws: The next Generation* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2010), p. 8.

objectify women and demean femininity. The heightened sense of sexualisation and exploitation of trans femmes outstrips their humanity in ways that go beyond even the exploitation of cis women. In her text *Trans-misogyny Primer*, trans scholar and activist Julia Serano observes how mainstream culture mobilizes trans femmes in ways that depict them as sexualized bodies in “titillating and lurid fashion.”³⁰ Serano’s observation that trans femmes are mobilized in visual culture as simultaneously obscene and objects of sexual fantasy (or at least arousal) resonates with Homi K. Bhabha’s observations of the production of and circulation of stereotypes. For Bhabha, stereotypes are often contradictory, constructed forms of meaning based in what is already culturally believed and invested in maintaining established systems of power. Writing specifically about postcolonial cultural conditions and racist stereotypes, Bhabha’s insights are applicable in thinking through the circulation of trans stereotypes: “the stereotype, which is a major discursive strategy is a form of knowledge that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.”³¹ Photographic representations have often been deployed as fixtures, of producing and maintaining expectations about groups of people and for maintaining power structures; thus part of what

³⁰ Julia Serano, *Trans-misogyny Primer*, accessed 19 October 2016, <http://www.juliaserano.com/av/TransmisogynyPrimer-Serano.pdf>. Also see Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

enables stereotypes to function as producing discourse and ideologies is the concept of “fixity.” For Bhabha, the stereotypes function as fixed and anxiously repeated representations of members of constituencies, in efforts to attach belief about groups to the images repeatedly circulated. These stereotypic representations are also flattened and essentialized and, as such, their simplicity and lack of complexity is easily sutured to ideas about said groups.³² What these representations demonstrate is the interconnection of the dominant culture’s mobilization of stereotypes with the operation of gender as biopower.

Trans and queer people have often self-imagined and imaged members of our communities in efforts to counterbalance or counteract stereotypic representations. The notion of positive visibility countering negative visibility fails to answer to dominant cultural representations of trans people historically, and as mobilized by dominant visual culture. The issue is far more complex; ultimately, the oversimplified and binary conception of positive and negative visibility is an essentialism that needs to be reexamined, critiqued, and called to an end. What we can learn from observing art historical iterations of trans subjects is that, contingent on the viewing perspective of image-maker, subject, and observer—as well as time and place—meaning may shift. What is more proactive to observe is that, via

³² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. See chapter 3: “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism.”

various imaging strategies, different results can be achieved about how representation is understood.

Nan Goldin's Queer Imaging Praxis

A pioneer in imaging queer communities and trans people, Nan Goldin exemplifies precisely how queer photographic practices are both normatively and radically contingent on viewing perspectives and methods. In response to the question of marginality regarding her practice of imaging those closest to her, Goldin notes: “we were never marginalized, we were the world, we didn't care what straight people thought of us.”³³ Vacillating between sounding flippant and deeply sincere, Goldin's remark perfectly encapsulates an ethos shared by many artists who, to the outside world, may appear as marginalized but who intimately feel as though we are everything.

Relationship shares this point of departure: falling in love takes over one's world, as does transitioning, so the doubly transformative period when Drucker and Ernst produced the work is deeply self-referential and self-reflexive in the most intimate and revelatory way. Deeply committed to self-interrogation and self-exploration, as Drucker and Ernst both self-augment individually (as transitioning subjects) and together as a couple (as their relationship creates a whole new identity), the project in impetus resembles

³³ Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, MOCAU, MOCAtv, accessed September 13, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2B6nMlajUqU>.

Goldin's oeuvre, in that the work is not marginal, it is the world. Only the received art history/canon has made it marginal.

Known for her gritty, vernacular color photographs taken of herself and her close friends, often portraying lives that are challenging, and revelatory, Goldin (born 1953) often photographs queer community, love, intimacy, and addiction, but always with a sympathetic and empathic eye. Goldin speaks openly about her love for trans women and drag queens, and how her approach to picturing them differs from the work of Arbus. Goldin comments on Arbus's work in relation to Goldin's most well-known work, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, which chronicled the intimate lives of her close friends and lovers in the 1980s downtown NYC scene:

I felt with drag queens [Arbus] was seeking to reveal them and that wasn't my desire. My desire was to show them as a third gender, as another sexual option, a gender option. And to show them with a lot of respect and love, to kind of glorify them because I really admire people who recreate themselves and who manifest their fantasies publically. I think it's really brave. I just have so much love and respect and attraction for the queens. So I don't like her stripping them and exposing them according to her own preconceptions of who they are.³⁴

Her emotional bond is key to Goldin's approach in photographing someone. She encourages her friends to be themselves and to explore their identities before the camera; however, she also respects her subject's privacy and, on

³⁴ Stephen Westfall and Nan Goldin, "The Ballad of Nan Goldin," in *BOMB*, no. 37 (Fall 1991): 27-31, 27-28.

occasion, has taken images out of circulation at her friends' request.³⁵ Goldin uses "queens" and she also uses "third gender," and some of the subjects she photographed were indeed trans. Rather than make the critical error of mislabeling drag queens as trans, we must recognize that language has shifted over the years. In fact, both Arbus and Goldin imaged drag queens as well as trans people. Unlike Weegee and Arbus, who forward one-off images of trans people in the context of a larger oeuvre that images people and moments similarly positioned by the image-maker as scandalous, freakish, and weird, Goldin's pictures of trans and queer people position them in a rich world full of community and as living full lives.³⁶

Arbus's oeuvre seems to concentrate on subjects she works to make strange icons of, and to forward them as exemplary of an identity category; in contrast, Goldin's images strive to transmit her familiarity with her subjects and render them as they are in a passing moment. In Goldin's images, viewers are put in a position of emotional proximity to the subjects. Unlike Arbus's images, in which dominant and problematic ideologies are reified, Goldin's images uncover assumptions and culturally constructed beliefs

³⁵ F. C. Gundlach and Hamburger Kunsthalle, eds., *Emotions & Relations: Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, Philip-Lorca diCorcia* (Köln: Taschen, 1998), 32-33.

³⁶ For more on the imaging practices of Weegee, see Christopher Bonanos, *Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018); Weegee, *Naked City* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2010); Weegee et al., *Extra! Weegee: A Collection of 359 Vintage Photographs from 1929-1946* (Munich: Hirmer, 2017). For more on the intricacies and complexities of Arbus's oeuvre, see Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus: Revelations* (New York: Random House, 2003); and *Diane Arbus: Portrait Of A Photographer* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

about identity and are made in durational collaboration with her subjects. Goldin's oeuvre/imaging praxis offers space for viewers to spend time with her friends and community and hang out with them; indeed, they are often shown in slide shows set to music—but not chronologically. The durational process of observing and experiencing Goldin's work is immersive and requires a viewers' time, inviting the audience to immerse into her world. The work of Weegee and Arbus, by contrast, situates trans people in an oeuvre outside the subject's world, and reflects the photographer's interest in capturing sensational moments and freakish figures.

In both motivation and style, Goldin's images are unlike the images of trans people and queers produced from a perspective aligned with the biopower of gender, often deployed via images made from the perspective of dominant cultural worldview.³⁷ While Arbus would exhibit a single iconic image of a given subject that (as discussed above) often reinforced dominant cultural views of her otherwise underrepresented and often socially marginalized subjects, Goldin's images tap into her camaraderie with her subjects, often imaging people multiple times over a span of a friendship, or as lovers for many years. Because of their emotional closeness, Goldin's subjects appear human, vulnerable, and nuanced. One can observe the

³⁷ For more on gender as biopower see: Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., "Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies," in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, 1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 41. See also: Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

subjects as changing and growing, not as flattened stereotypes, fixed for perpetuity. Similarly, Goldin's use of a vernacular style of imaging lends a candid and intimate feel to the work, which resists the iconic stoicisity of the stereotypic image. The style itself implies temporality, while Arbus's more formalist aesthetic signals the work as less a reaction to a passing moment before the camera than a cagey transaction, replete with power imbalances, that results in an estranged exchange of the photographer probing the physicality of the sitter. In contrast, Goldin's work reveals an intimate connection as Liz Kotz has written of: "a sense of something private and precarious has been disclosed to you [in Goldin's work] Part of the pleasure this work offers is to allow the *viewer* to feel like an 'insider.'"³⁸ The camera is often described as being an extension of Goldin, the work arguably unvoyeuristic.³⁹ Either way, Goldin's work established new modes of imaging, described as "unposed," "off-kilter," "snapshot style," "often a bit grainy, unfocused or off-color."⁴⁰ She established the idea of making work entirely about one's life and relationships as a worthy artistic project. The intimacy of Goldin's images rely on the viewer's interpretation of the aesthetics. Photography scholar Charlotte Cotton has observed that vernacular style photography intentionally deploys what had historically been viewed as debased forms of image-making to highlight the feelings of

³⁸ Liz Kotz, *Aesthetics of "Intimacy," Liz Kotz in the Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1998), 207.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

intimacy and candor between the image-maker and the subject. Cotton claims:

Rather than offering an appreciation of virtuoso photographic practice or distinguishing key individuals as ‘masters’ of photography, conceptual art played down the importance of craft and authorship [... it] took in a distinctly ‘non-art,’ ‘deskilled,’ and ‘untutored’ look and emphasized that it was the act depicted in the photograph that was of artistic importance.⁴¹

In other words, conceptual art and photography purposefully try to appear de-skilled and to emphasize the subject rather than the technology through which it is pictured. Cotton notes that “The use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject.”⁴² The snapshot is used by image-makers precisely because it invokes a feeling of closeness and puts the viewer in emotional proximity to the subject. In the art historical context, Goldin’s imaging strategy may be viewed as shifting viewers’ perspectives of queer and trans people via the intimacy with which she images them. Goldin’s durational oeuvre includes multiple images of many of her subjects, lending nuance and dimension to them as ever-changing. (See Figures 13, 14 and 15). By portraying them in the context of their community, Goldin shows trans, queer, and gender non-conforming people as part of communities, nuanced, and loved. Similar photographic methods

⁴¹ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 137.

are observable to various degrees in younger contemporary artists influenced by her, particularly in *Relationship*.



Figure 13. Nan Goldin, *Misty and Jimmy Paulette in a taxi, NYC, 1991*

In fact, intervening in viewer perception is part of the ethos on which *Relationship* builds, although I would suggest that the durationality and the depiction of queer and trans people as malleable and existing in contexts have the greatest disrupting effect to stereotypic imaging practices of previous photographers. Goldin's production of an entire world through her pictures opens up portrait traditions and understandings of portrait photography.

Because Goldin shoots the same people over time, viewers encounter complex, often contradictory representations of various individuals. Her images of people who transgress gender are thus presented as human rather than spectacles or freakish demonstrations living outside of binary gender, thus punishable or undesirable, or reaffirming binary gender roles.

Historically, while scholars and critics of portraiture have upheld a belief in the single iconic image as able to accurately capture and transmit some interior essence of the subject, this style of portraiture in fact underscores the inability of any amount of image to ever fully capture the subject. Speaking about her work in an interview with David Armstrong, Goldin once said, “I do not believe in the single portrait. I believe only in the accumulation of portraits as a representation of a person. Because I think that people are really complex.”⁴³ The accumulation of images of a portrait invites the viewer to see the subject living their life, in context and evolving.

For example, Goldin’s repeated images of Jimmy Paulette show her subject as someone who lives a gender that contradicts binary and fixed gender presentations. Portraits of Jimmy Paulette are often contradictory, and they appear inhabiting a space in between masculine and feminine. In Goldin’s image Jimmy Paulette appears in an indoor location, cropped

⁴³ F. C. Gundlach and Hamburger Kunsthalle, eds., *Emotions & relations: Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, Philip-Lorca diCorcia* (Köln: Taschen, 1998), 33.

closely, with her/his/their⁴⁴ hand resting gently on the shoulder of someone turned away from the camera. (See Figure 14).



Figure 14. Nan Goldin, *Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! in the Bathroom, NYC, 1991*

It appears to be a dimly lit bathroom, judging by the empty towel holder on the wall, and what may be a medicine cabinet in the upper left corner of the picture. The pictorial space is shallow, and the cropping makes one feel as though we are all squished into the space and moment together. Jimmy

⁴⁴ I am intentionally using this slash marked pronoun to call attention to the countless times that gendered pronouns are used. I hope that this slight gesture may insight readers to how troubling it can be to use the wrong pronoun repeatedly. Deploying the wrong pronoun may occur unintentionally or intentionally; nevertheless, it undermines the identity of a subject and is in fact an act of aggression and hostility.

Paulette is topless, a nipple peeking out from behind a soft left forearm, her/his/their face made up to such a degree that connotes a moment in which she/he/they just completed putting on her/his/their makeup and has yet to put on her/his/their clothes. It is an intimate moment that would not likely be viewed by many, but Goldin's picture allows the viewer to experience this intimacy without any seeming mediation. The picture is a window into this moment, into this world. Jimmy Paulette's gaze meets ours through the picture plane, seemingly granting us permission to look. She/he/they looks out of the picture with an expression that is neither hostile nor inviting, but seems instead to be perusing us, as well. The gaze makes the picture feel as though it is a mutually consensual perusal of subject and viewer.



Figure 15. Nan Goldin, *Jimmy Paulette After the Parade, NYC, 1991*

In another image, Jimmy Paulette again appears close to the photographer, relatively central in the picture plane; this time, the setting is urban, an outside location in a public space with trees, and three figures appear in the distant background. (See Figure 15). A sidewalk, a street, and some type of awning are all out of focus behind the subject, who appears forward facing and centrally located in the frame. The skimpy gold, synthetic crop-top across her/his/their chest is slightly deflated due to the flatness of her/his/their bust, and the frame cuts off her/his/their torso almost parallel to and just below the bottom edge of the garment. Her/his/their long, dirty-blond hair is pulled back, and wisps of dirty-blond hair lightly frame her/his/their fully done-up face, blurring into large earrings floating buoyantly beside her/his/their neck. The composition centers around the subjects' saturated red matte lips (parted ever so slightly), blue-grey eye shadow, matte and saturated, matching the matte and saturation of her/his/their lips, soft highlights along the bridge of her/his/their nose, and dark brows above her/his/their sad and glassy looking eyes.

A side-by-side comparison of Goldin's images of Jimmy Paulette presents the subject as fluctuating and changing over time, embodying gender in a queer, binary-disrupting way, as an active agent in crafting non-binary gender and deploying various aesthetics not beholden to cis-normative gender dictates. (See Figures 13, 14, and 15). Jimmy Paulette cannot be distilled and captured within one frame or become a stereotypic iconic image.

Goldin seems to say that people are complex, evolving, shifting, always augmenting and confounding the ability of a singular image to encapsulate who they are. They change and transform over time, and one can only assume and infer what has transpired in the spaces between the images, reflecting the complexity of people and the particular significance of folks from marginalized communities. These images of Paulette also highlight the ways a single image would not be able to articulate her/his/their complexity. Moreover, this comparison demonstrates how we are always missing so much more, marking the photograph's inability to convey a complete truth about a given subject. Photographic approaches like these also show how subjects always exceed the capacity of the photographic representation.

The multiplicity of pictures comprising Goldin's work, all shot with a consistent aesthetic, undoes the way stereotypes of marginalized communities operate. Stereotypes are fixed representations, anxiously repeated: the frozen icon repeatedly mobilized along with consistent ideas sutured to them.⁴⁵ Stereotypes work because the iconic image is a simplification of a subject which becomes the standard for a constituency and is removed from context (community, life, etc.) that may challenge the stereotype as a constructed fiction.

⁴⁵ See discussion of Bhabha's conception of the stereotype above and in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.

In making many images that give context, fill out a world, depict subjects as nuanced, malleable and ever-augmenting, Goldin's work creates an entire world in which her subjects exist, unfixed and ever-changeable. Her commitment to her work, imaging her community in this way, changes the photographic landscape of representations of queer and trans people. The iconic singular images, as we have culturally and historically understood portraits to be, tend to fix moments in time, allow sustained and unchallenged viewing, and to encourage viewers to interpret surfaces as clues about essentialized beliefs about a given subject. In other words, this conception feeds into the ability to create stereotypes. We have been taught to view subjects in photographs—literally a fraction of a second in a person's life—as an encapsulation of who they are in totality. Photographic projects made up of multiple images of subjects over time *unfix* the temporal and singular way we typically encounter and conceive of portraits, disrupting our ability to essentialize the subject.

Beyond sharing imaging practices of depicting queer and trans subjects from the perspective of the insider and imaging those most close to oneself, Goldin's oeuvre and *Relationship* share the vernacular style and the copious number of images made over a sustained period of time. It is the method of intimate durationality in image-making practice that is relatively unique in photography, and what marks Goldin's oeuvre and *Relationship* as

significant breaks from photographic traditions in Western European and North American art historical contexts.

The iconic image, no matter how favorable, can never be as complex as multiple images of the same subject. At the most basic level, a singular image is a minuscule moment in time, a fraction of a second captured and fixed for posterity (or as long as the image can survive), while even the addition of one more image—two images of the same subject—even when captured just moments apart, implies the passage of time, a gap in rendering, a failure to capture where something transpired that went unrecorded, one that viewers could not and would never see. The simple addition of a subtle shift in viewing two photographs rather than one creates a significant conceptual difference. It alludes to a greater context outside of the frame and suggests movement in time, space, and the always-inevitable failure of the picture to ever accurately represent the subject. Human subjects will always exceed the ability of the photograph to fully represent. In creating bodies of work about subjects that consist of many images in different locations, setting, poses, outfits, and so on, the ethos shared by Goldin's oeuvre and Drucker and Ernst's *Relationship* is one that embraces the subject as complex, expansive, nuanced, and malleable.

Goldin's photographs are a visual manifestation of what was transpiring in much of queer culture during the time. Imaging the downtown New York scene and urban life on the East coast in the 1980s and 90s,

Goldin's work reflects a cultural moment that was full of potential and also devastating. Queers were celebrating themselves and some newly won cultural victories, but HIV/AIDS and addiction also figure into the time and into Goldin's work. Goldin's pictures and worldview are very much in line with the era in which she was living and working. Her work images herself and her chosen family via a method that functions very much like a sustained glimpse into a world. The images do not feel staged or performative; they feel candid and autobiographical. She achieves this through her vernacular aesthetics, the moments she images, the expressions on people's faces and bodies, the close proximity between the camera and the subject, and shallow pictorial space. Goldin's work images a way of life particular to a time and place and group of people. Similarly, *Relationship* is also steeped in its particular time and place and reflective of a generational and locational ethos. *Relationship* reflects the gloss of Los Angeles in the early 2000s – a time when queer celebrities are in the media, trans health care has made massive strides, the queer community is not wracked with the AIDS crisis, and Barack Obama was president of the United States, heralding in an era of feelings of hope and social progress.

Aesthetically and ideologically *Relationship* is very much of a generational moment of coming of age in an era in which queer icons are appearing increasingly in mainstream media and trans people have just begun to gain cultural recognition and some acceptance. The artists and the work

are also reflective of coming of age in an era of the internet where we have become increasingly aware of how our bodies appear in images, and queer and trans communities have benefitted from the connectivity of social media to galvanize discourse and movement around queer and trans constituencies.

Indicative of the moment is that while the vernacular aesthetic is shared with Goldin, *Relationships*' style is much more self-conscious and cleaner. Vernacular in an attempt to present a carefully constructed yet seemingly un-staged version of themselves, even in the works in which they present themselves in intimate configurations, there is an undercurrent of self-conscious performativity. Even if, as they claim, the works were initially intended only for themselves (which is hard to believe), the work presents a clear awareness of the performativity of the artist/subjects in the images. While *Relationship* is in the lineage of such significant photographers as Goldin, it simultaneously deeply reflects a particular generational photographic moment. Created throughout the late oughts into a time just before the massive cultural shift instigated by social media and Instagram, in particular, the project reflects both the moment before the visual culture proliferation of trans representations and the moment before the ubiquity of social media. The work aesthetically reflects a unique photo-cultural moment of post-internet and pre-Instagram.

In creating a body of work about falling in love, both artists commit to image each other from their perspectives of intimacy, vulnerability, desire,

and admiration (as well as a variety of other affective and emotional lenses through which two people falling in love might view one another). This investment of imaging via a gaze of love helps ensure the subjects represented in the images have nuance, while the accumulation of non-linear images pushes the project beyond a narrative account of the subjects transitioning and falling in love. The work presents an expansive perspective of the subjects and suggests the unfathomable number of images that could be made. In a way, making photographs will always fail to show the entirety of the subject, leaving the viewer only a glimmer of an understanding of some of the nuances of Drucker and Ernst's relationship, but without easily summing up either artist as subject, or easily describing in a simple sound bite what it means to be a trans person in love. While the work images the affectual relationship between the two artists/subjects, it is also about how the work extends outwardly to viewers. Awkwardly cropped forearms, for example, become lines leading into the sensual image. Other photos deploy a sense of humor that invites us to engage with the image-makers and the joke. The humorous situating of eggs, for example, so that they appear in the bodily location where testes would be, or a picture where the subject's nude butt would be the focal point, also implicates the viewer participating in the joke, as well as the intimacy.



Figure 16. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, image from *Relationship*, 2008-2013

Marked by playful performativity, slick attention to the aesthetics of their bodies, and their knowledge of the history of photography, *Relationship* is at once playful, sincere, and performative. The images deploy a hybrid style that is simultaneously sincere and self-aware. Take, for example, one image of Rhys Ernst lying nude on a bed of purple sheets with a crumpled garment behind him, his face slightly out of focus, gazing out of the frame with a pensive expression. (See Figure 16). Prominent in the picture's foreground, Ernst's bare butt is front and center, confronting the viewer, and between his thighs are two thoughtfully positioned light brown eggs. The specific color, placement, and size make them akin to Ernst's testicles, were

he to possess biological testicles. It is a visual joke in which the photographer and subject, Drucker and Ernst respectively, collaborate to create trans visual humor about the claiming of their bodies as trans subjects. In the image, they play with the position or lack thereof of certain body parts associated with particular identities - the image seems to question whether masculinity necessarily requires testicles. Moreover, if so, what kind? Eggs, of course, are also what ovaries produce, so there is a double humor in the choice to use eggs as a visual manifestation of testicles. The picture seems to suggest that while it is true that Ernst does not have biological testicles, he does, in fact, have biological eggs, and he is also whomever he wants to be and capable of making visual jokes about the aesthetics of gender and how they are both performative and playful.

Against Linearity

Since its debut at the Whitney Biennial, Drucker and Ernst's *Relationship* has been discursively framed by the language used by the Whitney's curatorial team which described the project as "a transgender couple whose bodies are transitioning in opposite directions (for Drucker from male to female, and for Ernst from female to male)."⁴⁶ The text provided by the Whitney inaccurately describes the project as depicting the

⁴⁶ "Zachary Drucker and Rhys Ernst," *Whitney Museum of American Art*, accessed August 10, 2019 (<https://whitney.org/exhibitions/2014-biennial/Zackary-Drucker-And-Rhys-Ernst>).

artists transitioning in “opposite directions,”⁴⁷ which undermines the fact that the work is in fact against linearity or non-linear. This framing on the part of the institution works against the overall progressive photographic and identitarian interventions the work makes—one that undoes stereotypic imaging practices of trans people and opens up how we conceive of portraiture more generally as being a complex, multi-picture portrait of sustained liminality. The Whitney press about *Relationship* was a significant framing device, communicating the work to a broad audience and, in effect, teaching many about trans identities. The reductive binary-affirming language the Whitney mobilized, which echoed throughout discourse about the project, set up expectations of the project as a representation of a couple, while also reifying beliefs about gender as binary and transitions as linear and mono-directional.⁴⁸ This is an inaccurate oversimplification.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ In a review of the book published in Aperture online, William J. Simmons recalls “Kate Bornstein mentioned at a recent conversation at the Strand bookstore in New York celebrating the release of *Relationship*, this is the first visual account of trans-trans love.” Simmons noted, “Drucker and Ernst allow us to see their journey as it happens. They don’t have to explain themselves or allow us any access; it’s not their responsibility to educate cisgendered people, but it is certainly an act of generosity that they do.” “It’s an earth--shattering book,” says Kate Bornstein, a trans activist and queer theorist. “You can’t read this book and not understand that trans is an identity that is desirable and filled with desire. There are going to be people writing to Zackary and Rhys saying, ‘Oh, my God, thank you!’ Because right now, being attracted to a trans person is seen as a perversion.” See: William J. Simmons, “Living, Inventing, Becoming,” *Aperture*, June 24, 2016 (<https://aperture.org/blog/trans-love-look-like/>). Much of the rhetoric on the project focused on the couple’s simultaneous transitions, using language like “opposite directions,” which further undermines the radicality of the work, being anti-linearity and imaging a sustained space of liminality. See: Emily Bobrow, “How Two Producers of ‘Transparent’ Made Their Own Trans Lives More Visible” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/magazine/how-two-producers-of-transparent-are-making-trans-lives-more-visible-starting-with-their-own.html>).

The proliferation of this binary and linear discourse around the project oversimplifies what is actually transpiring in the project. The collaborative portrait work does not in fact showcase two linear transitions, from one of two genders to the presumed other of only two genders.⁴⁹ Furthermore, to rigidly articulate the subjects' identities into a binary gender formulation is inaccurate; it would be more fitting to describe them as the following: one from assigned male at birth but actually femme-androgen to femme, the other from assigned female but soft-butch androgen to queer masculine. Perusing *Relationship*, one observes that the work is not narrativized, nor is it a documentation of binary gender transitions; instead, it reflects a space of sustained liminality and exploration of gender and an intimate partnership. Unlike what the discursive framing suggests, *Relationship* is not illustrative of the transitioning bodies in a linear format; rather, the work images a sustained affective liminal space.⁵⁰

The only mark of transitioning with start and end comes in a curatorial decision to bookend the salon style configuration of photographs. At the far left of the installation is an image taken early in the artists'

⁴⁹ For example, in a piece in *Artillery* magazine, the author writes "In 'Relationship,' their ages would be mid-20s to their early 30s. Five consecutive years in this age range might show a change in appearance. Typically, men get a little more manly, and women get a little more womanly. But in Drucker and Ernst's cases, it's a bit skewed. At that particular time and period, they were also transitioning. So, it's more like Zackary Drucker becomes more womanly, and Rhys Ernst becomes more manly." This is not unique framing, indeed in the text accompanying the Whitney exhibition focuses on binary and linear transitions of Ernst and Drucker. See: Tulsa Kinney, "Trading Places; Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst at the Whitney Biennial," *Artillery*, March 4, 2014 (<http://artillerymag.com/zackary-drucker-and-rhys-ernst/>).

⁵⁰ For example, Wynne Neilly and Jaime Rayne's, discussed elsewhere in this project.

relationship, and on the far right is a photo taken toward the end of their project (see Figures 17 and 18), but the remaining images are not arranged chronologically, and no indication suggests that viewers read the work from a place of bodies transitioning in process of pre-hormone replacement therapy to post-hormone replacement point of arrival. Instead, the artists present multiple and various embodiments of gender disruption throughout the photo installation. At its most compelling, *Relationship* provides a plethora of images wherein binary gender is disrupted, and a playful, sensual affectual connection between the subjects lures us into perusing intimate pictures of gender non-conforming bodies as desirable and desired.

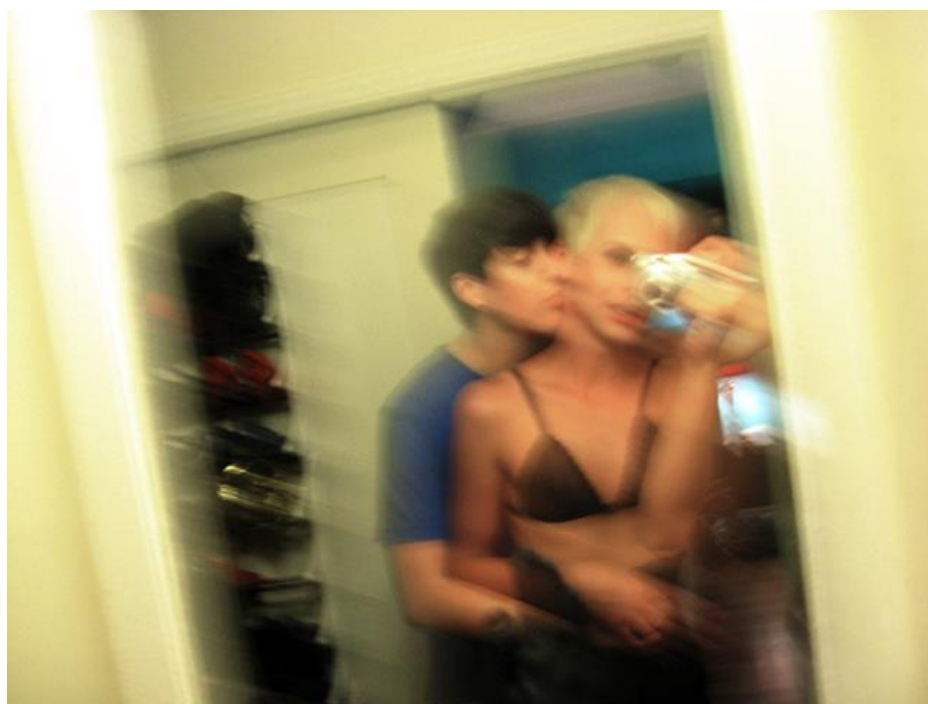


Figure 17. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship*, 2008-2013,

photograph displayed on far left side of Whitney 2014 installation



Figure 18. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship*, 2008-2013, photograph displayed on far right side of Whitney 2014 installation

Queer Trans Love

In making the work collaboratively, Drucker and Ernst's images also depict views of self-love, self-actualization, and images of self and others, all invested in creating a work that pictures their transitioning bodies as beautiful, sophisticated, and desirable. The images invite the viewer in—through the gaze of desire, love, and admiration—to see Ernst and Drucker as sexual, desired subjects. This is significant for art historically, because, traditionally, a masculine gaze has dominated depictions of a feminine

subject as an agency-less object of desire.⁵¹ Against this flawed art historical tradition, *Relationship* proposes an entirely new paradigm of imaging desire and photographic power structures. Two subjects/makers imaging self and each other collaboratively, through a complex lens of affect, propose a reconstitution of methods of image-making and new understanding of image-making praxis.⁵²

As cárdenas proposes, sexual fantasies are about the desired and they teach us how to desire; through studying sexual fantasies, we can begin to understand sexual representations as the kernel of fantasy. In other words, the spark of possibility for other ways of being does in fact lie with the ability to imagine one's gender as other than it is, and that, in doing so, individuals may also be able to imagine having a sexuality and sexual experience that acknowledges their desired gender embodiment/gendered recognition. Thus, arguably, the images in *Relationship* reflect Ernst and Drucker's sexual attraction to one another as partially invested in supporting each other's

⁵¹ Feminist art history has demonstrated the historically masculinized gaze and its objectification of feminine bodies. Now, trans people are looking at self and objects of desire via trans desiring gaze.

⁵² *Relationship* is the first widely seen account of two trans people in a relationship with one another while transitioning, which, on the surface, is a significant intervention into visual culture. While self-imaging of one's medical transition has become a regular occurrence on various social media platforms from YouTube to Instagram and Tumbler, self-imaging of transitions has remained largely unseen in mainstream visual culture. Furthermore, trans on trans relationships have been obsequiously absent from visual culture. Indeed, the sexuality of trans subjects has been wholly eradicated from popular imaginary. So, to image two trans people undergoing gender transition is in itself a significant intervention into mainstream visual culture. However, that the work images an intimate, romantic, and sexual partnership of two trans subjects is further radical in that it mobilizes trans subjects as sexually active and sexually desirable.

imagined future genders.⁵³ *Relationship* in many respects reflects cárdenas' argument that "desire and the fantasies that structure desire serve to create a subject which is yet to be."⁵⁴ In other words, to desire a certain type of sexual relationship is bound up with how we imagine our future selves.⁵⁵ Because desire is a feeling, the desire to *transform* reality requires embodied movement toward transformation, and following the feeling leads to action.

The creation of a work that images a space of liminality and perpetual becoming in ethos presents what can be more fully understood as the notion of queer futurity, a temporal location before arrival where the act of desire drives us, a mode of striving toward being able to fully arrive in our queerest potential. On the whole, a project about love, about falling in love, about transitioning genders, and about making pictures out of a place of insatiable appetite for imaging one's emotional state and transforming body, is fully an impetus for queer world creation. It is full of possibility and, as such, the project remains in this moment of falling in love and of bodily changes, never fully arriving in any one body, emotional stasis, or iconic image. The work sustains a liminal space of not being quite there and of continually becoming.

⁵³ Future gender was covered in an issue of *Aperture Magazine*. See: Michael Famighetti, Zackary Drucker, and Aperture Foundation, *Future Gender*, 2017.

⁵⁴ micha cárdenas, *Trans Desire* (New York: Atropos Press, 2010), 59.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73

Micha cárdenas contends that radical porn enables trans subjects to imagine their “future body and identity.”⁵⁶ In other words, a culture where the reductive, constructed, and default sexuality is heterosexual—a sexuality predicated on cis people fitting into narrowly preset gender identities and being attracted to someone from the other of the two pre-established gender categories—leaves very little room for trans people to articulate desire when the gender they embody happens not to reflect the predetermined gender to embody heterosexual relations. Cárdenas turns to radical, queer-trans porn as a significant cultural location, able to both inform and give pleasure. Porn for cárdenas enables the viewer to identify with one of the performers, thus having the possibility to open the viewer up to new potential ways of identifying sexually and new ways of understanding their own gender.⁵⁷ In having an idea of one’s future gendered body, one can begin to imagine a more comfortable or fitting sexual relation. This is where the “kernel of fantasy” lies, with the ability to imagine one’s gender as other than it is, and one may also be able to image having a sexuality and sexual experience that acknowledges one’s desired gender.⁵⁸

Cárdenas, developing her point, notes that “[i]n this way, desire and the fantasies that structure desire serve to create a subject who is yet to be.”⁵⁹ Thus, to desire to have a certain type of sexual relationship is bound up with

⁵⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59-62.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 59-64.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 59.

how we imagine our future selves. However, desire is also, as cárdenas suggests, “constituted as an assemblage of the biological, the social and the symbolic.”⁶⁰ The intimacy and corporealities imaged in *Relationship* make visible the ways that biology and the biological sex of a given body are distinctly different and unattached to the gender of that person, and to that subject’s sexual orientation. *Relationship* visually challenges binary and fixed ideological structures that govern gender as biopower, and also challenges cultural assumptions about how sex, sexuality, and gender operate, forwarding instead that many genders and many sexual orientations are encompassed in two people, even in a monogamous relationship. As a photographic installation, the work invites viewers to identify with or partially identify with any of these genders while also showing how gender identity can change over time. The photographs taken en masse in *Relationship* highlight the complexity of gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation; the images show gender and sexual orientation to be contingent and infinitely reconfigurable.

Pictures as Praxis of Rethinking, Gender and Orientation

Within the configuration of images that make up *Relationship*, two images in particular reflect the ethos of the project on the whole. These images are arranged side by side in such a way that might describe a diptych.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 73.

(See Figure 20). The arrangement precisely pairs them in vertical orientation, scale, composition, and subject matter. The pair prompts comparative analysis in how its two parts interact, and consideration of their similarities, differences, and overall meaning. The figures in both images are pictured from the waist up and fill the entire frame, even exceed it, the bodies extending off on either side. The cropping seems a bit awkward in both images, giving the compositions a spontaneous feeling; both images are shot with a self-facing camera, the aesthetics of which are detectable by viewing the outstretched arm and the awkward framing, which often accompanies what are nowadays ubiquitously called selfies. The photographer's arm in both images is located in the lower-left corner of the frame, a familiar and awkward gesture of a person taking their picture with a handheld camera. But Ernst and Drucker's self-imaging, done prior to the term selfie, reflect an art historical moment when hand-held cameras were used in the same way that smart phones are now used, and thus questions the distinction between self-portraits and selfies. (I take up the polemic of selfies and self-portraiture in more detail in chapter four). It is the awkwardness of the tight crop and strange truncated arm that has come to exemplify selfies, and easily detected in these pre-selfie-era images. In both images, the figure clicking the shutter is blonde, while the figure on our right is brunette; their bodies in each image are touching, and their faces close together. In both images, the dark-haired figure reaches out and touches the photographer, or the figure on the left.

Both pictures deliver feelings of intimacy and feel charged with desire between the two subjects.



Figure 19. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship*, 2008-2013, installation view of Diptych

The two images highlight the similarities of the intimacy, sexual attraction, and chemistry of the two, while also demonstrating how their intimacy has changed, and how their corporealities are shifting. In the image on the left, we see the couple in an ambiguous, but likely outdoor or public space as indicated by a riveted, industrial object in the upper-left corner of the foreground. The figures are caught in an intimate moment, frozen by the

stark light of a camera flash. Ducker's pixie-cut, platinum hair reflects the flash so strongly it almost blows out the highlights, and, framed by the



Figure 20. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship*, 2008-2013, diptych (I will refer to the image on the left as One and the image on the right as Two)

hounds-tooth scarf, we detect the shadow of closely shaven facial hair.

Ducker's arm stretches out of the frame, indicating it operates the camera.

The couple's eyes are closed, their faces close to each other with lips parted, and Ernst's nose presses against Ducker's forehead in the way that indicates

a moment of erotic arousal in an impassioned nuzzle. Ernst's arm cuts off at the bottom of the frame as it stretches toward Drucker, and we can imagine that, off-frame, Ernst is embracing Drucker's torso. It is a tender and lust-filled moment, capturing the haphazardness of photographing lustful attraction.

These images question aesthetics of gender, particularly as the arrangement also shows each figure occupying the same location in the picture in both images: Drucker on the left and Ernst on the right in both frames. Image One, ostensibly taken early in the subjects' transitions, shows Drucker visually fitting more conventionally into a box one could label "femme masculinity," while Ernst in this image fits into a category one might call "soft butch." In Image Two, however, the bodies appear to be located in indiscernible genders, neither obviously male nor female. The viewer is confronted with aesthetic particulars that signify in specific ways: stubble is traditionally associated with masculinity, soft physiques often associated with femininity or soft masculinity.⁶¹

In Image Two, the couple depicts themselves vertically, but we get the sense from the way their bodies lie, how their hair falls, and what appears to be a sheet filling up the frame around them, that they are lying on a bed. They are illuminated by a sidelight coming in the frame from the right, a soft

⁶¹ Mel Chen has discussed the reading of physical aesthetic signifiers as making "phenotypic judgment." In "Trap Door, Tourmaline," Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 149.

glow by comparison to the flash in the picture on the left, but relatively bright, enough so and angled in such a way that the resultant light and shadow contrast allows us to see the bodies as smooth and sculptural. We can see that the artists are both relatively thin, with smooth pale skin. Unlike the crispness captured by the flesh of Image One, Image Two is in soft focus with a subtle blur. The figures' matching gold chains sparkle in the light, and the color reverberates with the bedding behind them—gold, the only tone—in the frame beside their bodies.

The eye travels around the picture, following the shape of their slender, yet toned shoulders and collar bones, and tracing the soft shadows around their armpits, arms, and necks the way an abstract expressionist's painting keeps one's eyes moving, following shapes and forms. The face of the figure on the right—presumably Ernst—is obscured by a shadow and shaggy dark hair. The figure on the left parts their lips minutely, with eyes ever so slightly open, glancing downward so that we see their eye shadow and dreamy expression. The dark hair and the shadow cast on the other figure's face seem to blend away the space separating them, and the deep shadow between them obscures where one body begins and the other ends.

Compared to Image One, both figures in Image Two have longer hair, alluding to the passing of time between the pictures. The change in location from outdoor to domestic space—from a likely inebriated, standing, make-out session to the intimate, domestic space of the figures lying on a bed—

suggests not only a change of setting but also a shift: the subjects have become more domestic; their relationship has evolved into one of sensuality and intimacy from the prior image, which portrayed the throes of the early stages of lust. The drastic difference in style, locations, and physical bodies of the subjects and the affective space between them creates a diptych that in many ways is representative of the ethos of the work overall; that is to say, the multiplicity of images produce two subjects that are ever-changing, malleable, and highly complex.

Gender, biological sex, and sexuality are independent but also interconnected, influencing one another and inherently highly visual. Judith Butler examines the construct of gender in an effort to undo gender.⁶² For Butler, theory instructs and informs us of the operations that make lives livable or unlivable. Her investment in undoing gender is not only deconstructive and theoretical, but it is undertaken in the hopes to make all lives livable. Some of Butler's most applicable insights into *Relationship*, and most relevant to the state of deconstructing gender and sexuality in which we live today, are also made in *Undoing Gender*. For example, she argues that, via engaging in gender roles, we are also engaging with others.⁶³ In *Undoing Gender*, Butler builds on her earlier thinking on the concept of gender as being performative, even compulsorily. She argues that we

⁶² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁶³ Ibid.

manifest ourselves within the parameters of gender in an effort to be legible. For Butler, there is no author of gender; rather, she views gender as an amorphous field grounded in social norms. She argues it is compulsory to perform within the set guidelines in order to be understood culturally, and posits that gender is about desire for recognition.⁶⁴ Building on Foucauldian thinking, Butler argues that gender has its own regime of regulatory power, which separates it from larger regimes of regulatory power. She is careful to also argue that gender is a norm that governs acts and intelligibility, but norms are not the same as the actions they govern: “. . . gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized.”⁶⁵ So, in enacting gender in particular ways and performing within the culturally constructed performative language of gender, we are doing so in order to be recognized and treated by others in particular ways, ways that correspond to how we identify in terms of our gender. In order to more deeply understand the praxis of the image, it is necessary to unpack the interconnection between gender and sexuality.

Susan Stryker has observed that not only are “gendering practices”

⁶⁴ Butler illustrates the political stakes of existing outside of normative gender roles as life threatening with discussion of examples of Brandon Teena, Mathew Shephard, and Gwen Araujo. Her key point here is the way in which we are at the mercy of broader culture and legal rights when it comes to embodiment, and choices about our own bodies and medical access.

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 42.

“inextricably enmeshed with sexuality,”⁶⁶ but also that “the identity of the desiring subject and that of the object of desire are characterized by gender.”⁶⁷ This suggests that not only is gender enacted and embodied by us all when we seek to be treated in particular ways by people around us, but the way we bring ourselves into gender is in relation to our sexualities, that our genders are in relation to the genders of the people we desire. It is important to emphasize that none of this is necessarily pre-determined; it can’t be essentialized or taken for granted, nor is there any particular set of configurations of one’s own gender, the gender of whomever one desires, or one’s sexual orientation: all are malleable and yet in relation to one another.

As is demonstrated in *Relationship*, gendering practices are inextricably enmeshed with sexuality. The identity of the desiring subject and that of the object of desire are characterized by gender. But as Stryker has observed, in the operation of binary gender structures and default heterosexuality, in the cis world in particular, “Gender difference undergirds the homo/hetero distinction. Gender conventions code permissible and disallowed forms of erotic expression, and gender stereotyping is strongly linked with practices of bodily normativisation.”⁶⁸ While Stryker is not attending to visual culture in particular, it becomes very clear, when applying

⁶⁶ Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., “Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 39.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

her methods alongside *Relationship*, that Ernst and Drucker's work acts as an intervention into these systems. As Stryker articulates:

Gender subjectivizes individuals in such a manner that socially constructed categories of personhood typically come to be experienced as innate and ontologically given. It is a system filled with habits and traditions, underpinned by ideologies, religious, and scientific supports that all conspire to give bodies the appearance of a natural inevitability, when in fact embodiment is highly contingent and reconfigurable artifice that coordinates a particular material body with a particular bio political apparatus.⁶⁹

Stryker's account of gender here demonstrates and clearly lays out that gender as biopower surveils and promotes certain gendered, sexed, and sexual ways of being, to the necessary detriment of those who exist outside the regime.⁷⁰ With Ernst and Drucker's project, the images work to open up the spaces of gender and sexuality.

As I peruse *Relationship* and think about the operation of gender, I see clearly and pointedly that established theories of gender are fitting but also fall short. Gender is about who we are, and when we perform gender, we are doing so in relation to how we wish to be seen and treated by those around us. Drucker and Ernst's' images make visible that gender is constructed in social space and carried out via bodies, performances, and

⁶⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁰ As I discussed with art historical examples of trans femmes imaged by Weegee and Arbus, biopower operates in visual culture. For more on gender as biopower, see: Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., "Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies," in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 41. See also: Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

aesthetics; it is how we express ourselves and form desire for one another. Gender is primarily visual, and Ernst and Drucker's project provides visual space for contemplating the relationship between sex/gender/sexuality.

As visualized in *Relationship*, gender is not about authenticity nor is it fixed; rather it is constituted in discourse with oneself and with one another. Indeed, gender is a regime of power, but the current wave of trans people are pushing gender well beyond the bounds of binaries, essentialisms, and performance, and far outside of masculine and feminine; gender today is pushed into ever more complex relations to sexuality and biological sex to more expansive, fluid, and open lives. *Relationship* itself, as one relatively simple instantiation of this current trans wave, pushes back against the dominant cultural order of gender as biopower, proposing gender as multiply complex and in a constant state of production, and demonstrating gender as specific to each individual in each moment. In each discrete relationship, from interactions with strangers on the street to intimate sexual acts in private, our genders transform constantly and are always intersectional and relational.

Relationship is a proposition of new ways of being, doing, and having gender and sexuality. The work prompts viewers to reflect upon our embodied assumptions about relations, gender, and sexual orientations. As viewers, we might see disparate versions of each image, based on our own situatedness and viewing perspectives. *Relationship*'s images as a series

prompt complicated questions about how one articulates sexual orientation and its relation to gender identity. For example, if one views the blonde figure in Image One as a non-binary femme or someone gender-non-conforming and femme-identified and the dark-haired person as a masculine-identified person or a soft butch person, then what type of relationship are we witnessing? If we allow the gender presentations of the subjects to dictate how we might expect them to orient their desire, then what we see is unexpected and radical.

If one imagines the blonde to be femme-masculine or gender non-conforming masculine, then the assumption might be made that their queer-gender presentation indicates they orient sexually toward desiring men. The dark-haired figure, with the lack of facial hair, the soft, rounded cheek, the lack of Adam's apple, and the thinly plucked eyebrow, might connote gender somewhere on the female spectrum. Making arriving at a conclusion about the subjects' discrete gender identities and their sexual orientations and their relationship nearly impossible, the pictures confound assumptions about the genders, desires, and orientation of the figures, highlighting not only how these definitions are contingent on the object of ones' desire, but also contingent on the viewers' perspective. If we imagine the figure on the right to be somewhere on the feminine spectrum – a soft butch, queer young woman for example – then we might similarly assume that the queer presentations of gender they display signals a sexual orientation directed

toward women. However, what we may be viewing in the image is a non-binary femme masculine person (the blonde) being attracted to a soft butch person (the brunette), and vice versa. This would be a depiction of a relationship that confounds expectations of their respective sexualities based on their gender presentations a

Conversely, if one views the blond as a feminine person and the brunette as masculine, then is this a representation of a heterosexual relationship? If so, then the gender presentations of femininity and masculinity certainly disrupt normative aesthetic standards associated with these gender categories. So, either the image disrupts our expectation of the figures' respective sexual orientations, as determined by how one assumes their orientation based on the figure's gender, or the perception of their gender does not correspond to preconceived notions of gender aesthetics. Or one might view both subjects as "in between" genders, while also embracing aesthetics associated with masculinity and femininity and proposing new gender categories freely signifying various aspects of gender and deploying numerous, often seemingly contradictory aesthetics associated with any gender. Regardless of the multiple different readings one may make of the image, one cannot fit the genders and sexual orientations of the subjects and their resulting sexual relationship into binary essentialist categories.

One might consider using the term "androgynous" to describe the figures, but the figures being in a sexual relationship with one another lends

the image complexity in how one might conceive of both gender and sexuality. Is it possible for androgynous people to also be homosexual? How do we define homosexual? Does homosexual mean being attracted to the same biological sex, or the same gender? If the same gender and both subjects are androgynously gendered, then it seems plausible that they are homosexual. Any way one might interpret it, the pictures explode the binary and essentialist ways we conceive of sexual orientation and gender and beliefs and expectations about their aesthetics.

Turning to the second image in the diptych, we see that neither of the two topless figures are overtly masculine or feminine; neither possesses any overtly discernible gendered aesthetics. Both physiques have soft, undefined musculature; neither has any body hair or facial hair. Both hairstyles are short and could be worn by someone identifying with any gender. The blonde haircut falls slightly more in line with a feminine bob style. The blonde figure also wears a small amount of eye makeup and perhaps a touch of nude-colored lipstick. If we read both figures' genders as soft masculine, then we might describe their sexual intimacy as homosexual. If we interpret their aesthetics to connote two feminine people, then their relationship could also be homosexual. To imagine the relationship is heterosexual, one must determine which figure is masculine and which is feminine. All of these scenarios seem inaccurate based on what is observable in the image. The figures in the second image of the diptych seem to embody gender that lies in

between masculine and feminine; both subjects seem to exist in a place of in-between. Their orientation is toward one another, so they are thus sexually oriented, but to articulate a sexual orientation becomes impossible with our current language. For articulating sexual orientation currently relies on a determination of the genders of both parties involved. In Image Two there can be no definitive articulation of the subjects' genders, so to articulate their sexual orientation also becomes impossible given our current vocabulary. This diptych reflects how as contemporary art, *Relationship* is also praxis, in that it visually articulates the complexity of gender and sexuality for which we have yet to develop adequate language. This also suggests that it is necessary to jettison binary essentialist structures in order to attend to contemporary lives and representations.

On Desire and Orientation

The praxis of reconfiguring sex, gender, and sexuality occurring in *Relationship* is about creating unknown directions out of a place of desire and emotionality that exists beyond or before articulation and may be better conceptualized spatially. While each figure moves in its discrete gender direction, the subjects remain oriented toward one another sexually. So, if the gender one is attracted to and one's own gender shift, but subjects remain attracted toward each other, is the sexual orientation then not the same? Or do we redefine their sexual orientation based on the gender shifts that one

perceives in the photographs? Or should we view their genders as static and non-transforming, disregarding how their corporealities appear in terms of aesthetics one normally ascribes to a certain gender? No simple answers to these questions exist; to arrive at a simple answer would be to enforce one's agenda or ideology on what one observes. To consider the photographs together and the meanings made in the encounter with the pictures side by side is useful. In the making of the work the artists propose meaning, but the social meaning is made in the moment of the viewers' encounter with the work. The diptych in itself proposes as a praxis that the figures defy established definitions of gender and sexual orientation. To remain open to an assessment of the work that exists outside of definition is difficult to do. Part of the promise of trans and the potential of *Relationship* is to prompt us to remain in a liminal space, a position of in-between full of potentialities while continually shifting in a space of queer futurity. Thinking through sustained positions of change, it can be instructive to consider queer phenomenology.

To imagine the spatial implications of queer desire is to twist and reconfigure what one might conceptualize as the linear orientation of heterosexual desire. If one visualizes heterosexuality as a directional orientation, one might conceive of it as a line—a line of desire that moves linearly and flatly, without twist or torque or curvature, which connects the masculinely gendered subject and the femininely gendered subject. This also

conflates masculinity and male biology and femininity and female biology. In this configuration both the masculine and the feminine subjects fit into respective gender categories without complexity. This is a sketch of heterosexuality visualized spatially. In unseating compulsory and normative ways of orienting one's desires and reworking them in the way Ernst and Drucker's images propose, it may also be useful to think about what Jack Halberstam writes, "hapticity organizes meaning, knowing and seeing in ways that exceed rational sense-making enterprises and instead force the viewer to examine their own relations to truth and authenticity."⁷¹ The notion of the haptic as a way of reorganizing thinking and engaging is deployed in the photographs. By using sensuality, inviting viewers to view body parts as leading lines and deploying visual humor, viewers are lured into the images, and the hapticity of the images becomes a part of viewing. As one finds oneself entering into the picture as spectator, the tactility, sensuality, and physicality of the images – the components of the hapticity – create a sensory experience out of the visual and invite an embodied viewing experience undoing normative intellectual sense-making of images.

Drucker and Ernst's work, seen through this prism, undoes basic concepts of sexual orientation. In making a work that undoes established concepts about gender while being in a relationship, the artists call attention

⁷¹ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 90.

to ways that the two constructed and ideologically regulated identity fields (gender and sexuality) are dependent on one another for their very perpetuation.

In conceptualizing queer phenomenological methods, Sara Ahmed recalls that the term *queer*, commonly used to describe non-heterosexual relations, originates from the word *twist*. As she writes, “queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a ‘straight line,’ a sexuality that is bent and crooked.”⁷² The sexualities embodied and enacted throughout *Relationship* are anything but straight; in fact they very much circle each other while moving through space. To visualize the spatial dimension of *Relationship* requires more than a twist—as Ahmed suggests queer desire implies and requires. The relationship in *Relationship* is not merely a twist of the straight heterosexual line, but also a curvature and an orbit around the person of one’s desire, while both figures traverse gender identities. Ahmed has also argued that, “. . . different ways of directing one’s desires, means inhabiting different worlds.”⁷³ Looking at the images overall, the directionality of desire and gender orientation appears to be absolutely non-linear; the paths of evolution in the work circumnavigate one another and swirl in directions following trajectories of desire. Ultimately, the work

⁷² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 67.

⁷³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 68.

demonstrates the complete absence of any type of necessary or essentialized way of being, either gendered or sexually oriented. Moreover, the work makes visible that gender and sexuality are free signifiers in relation to one another but with no necessary correlation between any one aspect of one's gender, one's biological sex, or one's sexual orientation.⁷⁴

Relationship as praxis of trans worlding facilitates an embodied understanding of sexual orientation as unfixed, always changeable, not essentialized, and often fluctuating. To commit to a sexual orientation for all of one's life seems limiting and reductive, for the physical attributes and embodiments of self and the person of one's desire may change and one's desires may change, thus causing us to rearticulate or re-orient our sexual orientation. It becomes clear, then, taking *Relationship* as co-determining of a new theory of gender and sexual orientation, that none of our genders or sexual orientations should be taken as a given, particularly as they are in their very definition contingent on our gender remaining the same and contingent on the gender of our sexual partner also remaining the same. Therefore, with each new relationship we enter into, our sexual orientation changes slightly and sometimes significantly.

As praxis, Ernst and Drucker's artistic project is an intervention into the conceptualization of the discourse on gender and sexuality. Redefining

⁷⁴ For discussion of signification as it particularly pertains to Lacan Saussure and queer identities, see Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986/2005), especially chapter 2: "Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the *école freudienne*).

gender in conversation with *Relationship* necessitates a reworking of gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation. It seems the figures of *Relationship* propose that, generally, attraction to someone is foremost motivated by desire, regardless of one's own gender or the gender of the person one is sexually attracted to. As praxis, *Relationship* also proposes that we disorganize the conceptions and assumptions about gender and sexuality, undoing compulsory heterosexuality binary gender structures and linear orientations, in lieu of cruisy, twisting paths without set points of beginning or end.

Relationship not only refigures conceptions of sex and gender and sexuality, but the configurations of the image in a non-linear mode also create a sustained space of liminality. In ethos, this reflects what trans scholar C. Riley Snorton has observed about trans as both “method and life.”⁷⁵ Rather than push for trans as starting in one gender and striving to arrive in another, as the discourse around many trans identities and around *Relationship* has forwarded (a very binary and essentialist and limited way of thinking trans), Snorton views trans as potentially perpetually in process of becoming. This conception of trans resonates with the images in *Relationship*, a project that suspends the time and space of being in transition and in love, the images proposing transgender lives and queer-trans

⁷⁵ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

relationships as continually in motion; and yet rather than linear in their directionality, they are exploratory or cruisy in the trajectories they trace.

As Muñoz argued, “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”⁷⁶ This impulse toward futurity is politically powerful: in our current state of global and national inequities and aggression and violence perpetrated against countless people whose bodies mark them as targets in some way, it is critically important to heed Muñoz’s call. “We must dream and enact new and better pleasure, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”⁷⁷ In reflecting what can best be described via Muñoz’s formulation, *Relationship* constitutes a type of “queer futurity.” Queer futurity lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. He also points out that “Queer Theory has made one lesson explicitly clear: the set of behaviors and codes of conduct that we refer to as feminine or masculine are not slaves to the biological.” Muñoz suggests that, in a refusal of the “performance principal” and normal love, or a rejection of doing what is a pre-established norm within culture, “[a] queer aesthetic can potentially function like a great refusal because art manifests itself in such a way that the political imagination can spark new ways of perceiving and acting on a reality that is itself potentially

⁷⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

changeable.”⁷⁸ Drucker and Ernst’s collaborative project images queer utopian futurity. Making work from a place of love, self-introspection, shared intimacy and vulnerability, the resulting images create a world that exists in the liminal place of in-between, of becoming of sustained non-binary gender, of sustained love and desire, of imaging desire for self and other outside of compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender. As a praxis, *Relationship* benefits from and enables a co-formation of a method of trans-queer futurity; the impulse to make this work comes from a need to self-represent not only oneself but the feelings of falling in love. The dearth of this type of representation, coupled with its production from an ethos of love and desire, results in a project not only significant as a visual culture intervention, but establishing its gaze as one of complex trans-queer futurity. *Relationship* is not just about the affectual relationship between Ernst and Drucker, but also how viewers are implicated in a relationship with Ernst and Drucker, not only as the subjects of the work, but as co-creators of meaning about the work and how the meaning extends out into life.

⁷⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009). See also Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), wherein they write, “male and female exist only as political fictions,” 142.

Final Futurity

Relationship is liberatory in its brazen utopian impulse toward making work about love, about multiple forms of transgression, gender disruption, and imaging identity fluidity. In creating a work about sustained liminality, perpetual in-between, full of affect and emotion, the work rejects presenting normative orientations, timelines, and ways of being. *Relationship* in ethos reflects how Muñoz described queerness: as a refusal of “normal love that keeps repressive social order in place”; queer love is about saying no to carrying out pre-established ways of being in the world, he argues, and to denying to perform within established frameworks, or what Muñoz called the “performance principal.”⁷⁹ The project disrupts the expected chain of behavior and normative ways of being. The subjects do not perform within compulsory norms; instead the project forms a radical gesture, proposing new ways of being gendered, new ways of thinking about sexual orientation, and an overall way of life and photographing, motivated by love and desire.

The work embodies a way of cruising for a queer utopian futurity. In making work from an ethos of queer love, the artists allow themselves to dream, imagine, and create a space of possibility. Imaging bodies in a space of liminality, *Relationship* proposes queer trans futurity. Drucker and Ernst's project anticipates a world that is now here in some places but is not yet here for many of us. A utopian world of love, where gender, sexuality, and

⁷⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 134.

biology are not fixed or predetermined and—at least in the context of the project—not challenged and regulated by the outside world. The project is full of continual augmentation, malleability, and change, continually compelled by one's desires. Allowing the photographic project to co-constitute a method of analysis and approaching the work with open-mindedness rather than method first reveals the work's praxis of world-making that unfixes, photographs, and de-essentializes sex, gender, and sexuality, while forwarding new image-making practices, suggesting the productive results of allowing a work to co-constitute analysis and only some of the interventions revealed by attending to trans visual culture.

CHAPTER THREE

GALVANIZING AESTHETICS IN THE TRANS-MASCULINE

VISUAL FIELD: *ORIGINAL PLUMBING* | *TRANS MALE QUARTERLY*

“Most folks take for granted the importance of being reflected. They do not give a second thought to the power of representation or, conversely, the implications of being rendered completely invisible at the mercy of people’s imagination and misinformation.”¹

- Tiq Milan

What do pictures want? The critical question posed by W.J.T. Mitchell in his text by the same name suggests that we adjust the oft-asked scholarly question, “What do pictures ‘do’ to what they ‘want’?” It’s not that pictures have innate desires, but we should adjust our expectations that images can necessarily achieve what they intend or that they are able to have intentions at all. In asking what pictures want, Mitchell proposes a reassessment of where the field of visual studies is headed, and he pauses to rethink what he views as visual studies’ rejection of thinking about mimesis in any nuanced way in favor of over-determined theories of images as bound to ideological structures

¹ Amos Mac, Rocco Kayiatos, and Tiq Milan, eds., *Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2019), xi.

and technologies of domination.² Mitchell suggests that we consider pictures along with the social field in which they exist. His view is that images are part of mediating social relations, and his belief is to consider the intersectional and specific lives attached to images of people. Mitchell forwards that pictures may not want anything at all, yet they require a committed rethinking about the amount of power we invest in images.³ His take on looking at portraits and the many ways they are deployed points out that it is very much the media and aesthetics of the image that shape an image's reception. Building on Mitchell's observations, I would like to contend that while there is something complex about the mimetic quality of portraits, it is necessary to temper our expectations and consider their specificity and social implications. They are not necessarily bound to ideologies of domination, but they are part of the negotiation of identities. Putting Mitchell's urgings in conversation with Mieke Bal's observations on the cultural construction portraits produce is informative to the discursive framing of this chapter.

Mieke Bal has argued that, via the canon of portraiture in the Western European and North American contexts, ideological value systems are continually reified.⁴ Objectifying, sidelining, and erasing representations of those other than cis-Caucasian men from the canon of self-portraiture, this art-

² W. J. T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 47.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 5-32, 22.

historical tradition symbolically marks non-imaged constituencies as of little value to said culture.⁵ Although portraits other than those of cis-Caucasian men have circulated art-historically, they have less commonly been self-portraits, and even these have appeared in limited numbers. When such images are produced, they are often imaged by members of dominant cultural groups, and from a mainstream ideological perspective – due to the cultural belief that portraits transmit knowledge – such images often transmit and reify problematic beliefs about constituencies other than those of dominant constituencies.⁶

Western Art History has consistently imaged and theorized feminine bodies as objects of the male gaze, and while feminist art historians have debated issues in representations over the last few decades and trans femmes have recently come into public consciousness gracing the covers of many magazines, little to no attention has been paid to trans-masculine representations. The dearth of scholarship on trans-masculine visual culture

⁵ Cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer and visual studies scholars Mieke Bal and Richard Dyer, among others, have observed that it is in the visual field that identity constituencies and livable subjectivities are negotiated. See Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular.’” R. Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

⁶ At stake here is that the limited visual examples of figures of “otherness” become stereotypic representations and are thus devoid of nuance or narrative and rendering in ways that reinforce stereotypes about said constituency. For more on the way stereotypic representations have been produced by western ideological positions and in service of domination, see Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices: Culture, Media, and Identities* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997); Stuart Hall, “Signification, Representation, and Ideology” in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2 (CITY: Press, 1985), 91-114. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

remains unprecedented.⁷ Indeed, while some inroads have been made into thinking about how masculinity has been constructed in Art History and visual culture, trans masculinity has yet to be theorized.⁸ Generally speaking, trans is, in some ways, about a gesture toward futurity, both in that trans identities are often about a desire for a future self and that trans as an analytic is about rejecting fixity; thus essentialism and binary thinking in lieu of moving toward shifting, de-essentialized, mobile, embodied intersectionalities. As such, trans masculinity as the most under-viewed, under-studied, and under-theorized facet of trans visual culture may propose the most extensive area of potentialities, tranifesting⁹ the widest breadth of trans identities, methods, and praxis.

Studying trans-masculine self-representations as praxis of identity formation lends revelatory insight into the discussion of the complexity of how portraiture functions as an integral component of society. Today's transmasculine self-images often offer interventions into masculinity, pushing the gender field in ever-expansive directions that de-binarize and complicate

⁷ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 9.

⁸ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997). Also see Stuart Hall and Open University, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Culture, Media, and Identities* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997).

⁹ Tranifesting is discussed in *TSQ* by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, who trace its origin to a conference in Durham, North Carolina, where the term was deployed as part of an “experimental lexicon,” as they refer to it used in an effort to create community across differences in June of 2011 at a conference called Indigo Days. See Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, “Tranifest,” in Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies, Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 223.

masculinity writ large. At this critical juncture, trans masculinity exists in a somewhat amorphous, exponentially expansive field in a state of perpetual lack of rigid articulation with porous boundaries and seemingly eliding essentialization. But it may also reflect a moment of solidifying the trans-masculine visual field, wherein a circumscribing of potentialities and possibilities occurs. At the crux of this chapter is an interest in thinking through the issues of visibility, that in bringing trans masculinity into view—a necessary component of trans culture—the process may also be closing down possibilities and unintentionally setting parameters on who is visible. This conundrum is not unique to trans visual culture and trans-masculine self-representation; however, in the particular predicament of trans-masculine representations, the case exemplifies the issues at the crux of debates about the problematic nature of creating representations as a cultural intervention. This issue continues to impact multiple, visually underrepresented, and socially marginalized groups.¹⁰

¹⁰ Issues in representation have been substantially discussed in scholarship particularly by feminists. See, for example: Jennifer Doyle, and Amelia Jones, "Introduction: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture." *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 607-15. doi:10.1086/499288. Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*, Icon Editions (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1989). bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995). bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: black female spectators," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* p 107-118. Also see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly

The complexity around making images about the trans-masculine community and the complexity regarding the impulse to self-image as a trans-masculine person needs to be adequately explored. As an unprecedented intervention, inserting a proliferation of trans masculine portraits into visual representation in *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly* is uniquely poised to serve as a point of meditation on the question of what do pictures want? and to think through the specificity of bringing trans masculine representations into visual culture. The question is: How do these pictures intervene in the cultural fabric of our time? In attending to this issue, I will focus on the longest-running example of trans-male visual culture to date, the trans male quarterly journal, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*, founded and edited by Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos (*OP*, 2009–2019). The methods used to apprehend the specificities of trans-masculine visual culture and trans-masculine self-representations may also apply to other areas of emerging and galvanizing visual cultures. For to create representations is also necessarily to *not* represent at the same time; what comes into focus is always at the expense of what is *not* in focus—this is true across representations and constituencies.

In efforts to cultivate methods for assessing emerging visual forms and the galvanizing of emerging visual fields—in this case the trans-masculine visual field—I bring together methods forwarded by scholars who have attended to similar questions (for example, feminist studies, cultural studies,

critical race studies, trans studies, and archive studies), to view and assess trans-masculine visual culture emerging today. In this chapter, I trace how *OP* acts as an archive in the making and a galvanizing of the trans-masculine visual field, and as such, it necessarily comes with exclusions—whether intentionally or not. I will consider what these exclusions are and the stakes at hand. I also examine how *OP* functions to interpellate trans masculinity and further galvanize the trans-masculine visual field and how gender and race are integral to the processes of identity formation.

In 2009, when *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly* was established, it was done so to create a venue in which trans men could see themselves and their culture produced in print and could find stories and articles that related specifically to their lives. Since its inception, founders Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos aimed the project at bringing trans masculinity into view. Now in its tenth and final year, *OP* has been a significant sight of cultural intervention as the preeminent and now longest-running publication dedicated to trans-masculine culture, produced by and for trans men. *OP* has been and continues to be a force in the production, consumption, and circulation of trans masculine culture. As a significant form of cultural production and aesthetic constitution of trans-masculine visual culture and identity formation, *OP* is an archive in the making. The trans-masculine visual field is relatively new, but it is beginning to galvanize; *OP*'s

run marks a critical moment in the production and circulation of trans-male visual culture.

The title itself—as titles often do—frames our encounter with *OP*. “Original plumbing” is a euphemism made popular by the personal ads on Craigslist to describe a trans person with the genitals they were born with.¹¹ In this case, *OP* covers depict trans men, and one reads the work as a statement that the cover model(s) have not had bottom surgery; thus, they most likely have a vagina. This points to a trend in a culture wherein cis (or non-trans people) and those not familiar with trans people often immediately ask trans people about the surgical state of their genitalia.

Before even opening an *OP* zine or clicking through the website, there is a light-hearted yet political message given. Inclusion in this zine is not based in a politics of passing, or realness, but instead in a person’s self-identification of being a trans man, regardless of bottom surgery status. With a nod to the culture of Craigslist personals, where people talk openly about their sexual desire for men with vaginas, and using a term that also references a working-class profession, “Original Plumbing” as a name does considerable work to outline the publication’s commitment to showcasing trans men, regardless of their access and/or relationship to surgeries, an affinity for the working class, a sense of humor, and a stance of “If you get what we’re

¹¹ The term “original plumbing” was popularized in the personal ads on Craigslist as a euphemism for someone who is trans and has their original genitals.

saying, cool, and if you don't, we're not interested in explaining it to you.”

Beyond the impulse to create a publication dedicated to publishing images and stories of trans men and trans-masculine issues, for trans men, *OP*, since its founding, has continued to remain committed to holding transmasculinity as a loosely defined category with porous boundaries. It has been invested in sidestepping essentialist attitudes about who belongs under the title of “transman.” *OP* features a wide variety of articles, and the zine is organized thematically to probe various trans issues. For example, *OP* has issued No. 3, “Health & Safer Sex;” No. 4, “Workin’ Stiff;” No. 5, “Fashion;” No. 6, “Schooled;” No. 7, “Green;” No. 8, “The Family Issue;” No. 9, “Entertainment;” No. 10, “The Jock Issue;” No. 11, “The Hero Issue;” No. 12, “The Party Issue;” and No. 13, “The Atlanta Issue.” The representations forwarded in *OP* are fruitfully diverse, nuanced, complex, and intersectional.

The dimensions of the print zine are 5.5 x 8 inches, ranging in thickness between fifty and ninety pages. The cover consistently depicts one or two trans men in either a full-bleed color photo or with a small border. Cover text is minimal and consists of the letters “OP,” “Original Plumbing | Trans Male Quarterly,” “\$9 US,” the issue’s title, quarter and year of publication, and occasionally a small amount of other information as the editors see fit. It includes photographic spreads of trans men often accompanied by feature stories, editorials, and interviews. It boasts multiple perspectives and various ways of being trans. The staple-bound zine has

grown into an Instagram channel and web platform, and a veritable cultural hub of trans-masculine cultural production, galvanizing community across the globe. The identity category is flexible, which works to belie foreclosing possible identity formations. For example, *OP* predominantly depicts trans men but often features trans women and other members of the queer community; for example, Kate Bornstein and Janet Mock were both featured in the *Hero Issue*. The pages are in full color, and portraits often take up a full page; when text is present it often appears as complementary to the images, rather than the prominent element. Amos Mac is a professional art photographer and his investment in poised and intimate portraits has always come through strongly. As an image-driven publication focused on creating a visual representation of trans men in a culture where they are otherwise often invisible,¹² *OP* offers space wherein trans men can visually exert their trans identities. The significance, then, of *OP* as a site of visual culture production lies in that transmen are creating it for other transmen and their allies. *OP* embraces trans masculinity in all its forms, based solely on an individual's self-identification. As a project, *OP* includes multiple perspectives and various formats of representations, and in general subjects appear in ways that render them sexually desirable.¹³

¹² The format and aesthetics of *Original Plumbing* reference those of *BUTT* magazine. These were more prominent in the early years and changed gradually. *Original Plumbing Panel*, Strand Book Store, New York, July 22, 2019.

¹³ Mac et al., eds., ix.

On the whole, the images in *OP* function as a galvanizing and augmenting visual field about tranifesting trans masculinity in a diverse way, while interpellating a particular group. *OP* deconstructs and re-constructs masculinity as trans intersectional, critically self-aware masculinity that is expansive, porous, and co-constructed intentionally by all who self-identify under the sign. On the level of the individual photograph, it becomes clear that relationships between self-negotiation, self-imaging, gender identification, and racial identification are always particular to the individual in the moment of image creation.

Tiq Milan is a writer, public speaker, activist, and strategic media consultant, currently a national spokesperson for GLAAD, and the former senior media strategist of national news at GLAAD.¹⁴ He is an African American Trans man and has appeared in *OP*. He was invited by the founding editors to write the preface for the tenth-anniversary edition book of *OP*, in which he reflects on the politics of visibility and the significance of *OP* over the past decade:

Most folks take for granted the importance of being reflected. They do not give a second thought to the power of representation or, conversely, the implications of being rendered completely invisible at the mercy of people's imagination and misinformation. To be reflected in media and culture, in a way that is authentic and true, gives us the space to dispel whatever myths or stereotypes someone may have about transgender people.¹⁵

¹⁴ For information on Tiq Milan, one may consult his work profile and his personal website: <https://www.glaad.org/profile/tiq-milan>; <http://www.tiqmilan.com/>.

¹⁵ Mac et al., eds., xi.

The publication functions as a form of cultural production and intervention into the visual field that becomes a prominent and needed beacon for trans-masculine people who otherwise cannot imagine a future for themselves. Even as *OP* creates a needed intervention in visual culture, forwarding representations of trans masculinity, the stakes around this intervention are not so simple. To begin to attend to the significance of *OP*'s visual culture intervention, it is necessary to situate the zine within its cultural history. Tiq Milan has written of *OP* as “the only quarterly dedicated to trans-masculine culture and aesthetics.”¹⁶ The publication showcases trans guys of different body types, races, and a multitude of masculinities—some femme, some gay, some macho; leather daddies and family men. The ethic and commitment to co-creating a diverse and nuanced field of trans masculinities plural reflects a shift in thinking about the discursive way that culture is produced. In their commitment to actively working to showcase a diversity of trans masculinities, *OP* as a form of popular culture visualized masculinity as relatively open, porous, and malleable. In showing a diversity of trans representations and experiences, *OP* demonstrates that some of the trans men in *OP* are invested in embodying dominant cultural norms, some are radically opposed to enacting norms, while others embody masculinity in completely unexpected ways.

¹⁶ Ibid., ix.

The Erasure of Trans Masculinity

Since the establishment of trans studies as a field in the 1990s, trans masculinity has gained a small amount of scholarly inquiry, observable in such texts as Aaron H. Devor's *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*,¹⁷ Henry Rubin's *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men*,¹⁸ and B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*.¹⁹ The latter title is not explicitly a study of trans masculinity, but it incorporates the author's experience of taking testosterone as a gender-non-conforming person and exploring a more masculine physique, in a text deconstructing gender through the lens of the history of pharmacology of gender maintenance.²⁰ There has been very little trans-male visual culture production, save for a few examples:²¹ Loren Cameron's *Body Alchemy* (1996), a collection of black and

¹⁷ Aaron H. Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

²⁰ Other books on the topic of trans masculinity focus by and large on autobiography or sociological studies in their approach. See, for example, Bryant Keith Alexander, "Queer(y)ing Masculinities," in *Global Masculinities and Manhood*, eds. Ronald I. Jackson and Balaji Murali, by Molefi K. Asante, (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 52-74; Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, and Sarah Tobias, eds. *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normativities* (Rutgers University Press, 2016); Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality, Gender and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Arlene Stein, *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018).

²¹ The first literary account is the case of Michael Dillon, perhaps the first trans man, depending on how we define this category. In the 1930s and 40s, he used hormones, had surgeries, and wrote about it in the book *Self: A Study in Endocrinology and Ethics*. This text

white photographs of trans men, is one of the few examples of trans masculinity that gained some popularity,²² and artist Del la grace Volcano has made some genderqueer work that borders on trans masculinity. Cathy Opie has produced a handful of images of trans men and, more recently, Jess T. Duggan and Elle Pérez have gained recognition for bodies of work that include a scant number of images of trans masculinity.²³ Beyond this meager representation of trans men circulating in visual culture, little to no visual examples of trans-masculinity or scholarship on trans-masculine visual culture has appeared.²⁴ Of the above-mentioned examples, *Body Alchemy* was the only project created by a trans man.

While there are certainly a significant number of trans men living in the world today, the absence of trans-masculine folks in visual culture

was the first account that differentiated between lesbians and trans men and began to sketch out trans masculinity as an identity. Judith Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 25-26. Also see: J. Halberstam Eric's Ego Trip: One trans mans celebration of twentieth century masculinity" in Michael Famighetti, Zackary Drucker, and Aperture Foundation, *Future Gender*, 2017. p. 36-39) Halberstam (in Aperture issue 229 p. 37-39) discusses the erasure of trans men from the archive. For more writing discussing the erasure of trans men from visual culture and their lack of representation see Aaron H. Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). See also: Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007); Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Also see: C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

²² Loren Cameron, *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*, 1st ed (Pittsburgh, Pa: Cleis Press, 1996). Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, Seal Studies (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008), 144-147.

²³ For example, see Michael Famighetti, Zackary Drucker, and Aperture Foundation, *Future Gender*, 2017.

²⁴ Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith Halberstam, eds., *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999). Also see: J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

misleadingly suggests that trans-masculine people are scant and not valued by society. Other than the marginally recognized Chaz Bono (who makes few appearances in visual culture), the last time a trans male character (let alone an actual trans male person) appeared in mainstream culture in a widely recognized way, was in the 1999 feature film *Boys Don't Cry*, starring the straight, cis actress Hillary Swank as trans masculine Brandon Teena.²⁵

Written and directed by Kimberly Peirce and co-written by Andy Bienen, the major motion picture *Boys Don't Cry* is based on the life events and narrative of Brandon Teena, a trans man living in Nebraska who was brutally murdered in 1993 at age 21, with his 22-year-old friend, Phillip DeVine. The film was partially based on the documentary about Teena, *The Brandon Tina Story*, and centered on the love story of Teena and girlfriend Lana Tisdell, played by Chloe Sevigny.²⁶ Named Teena Renae Brandon at

²⁵ There was also the less far-reaching and arguably less culturally visible character of "Max" on the *L-Word*, played by cis actress Daniela Sea. Max was the first recurring trans male character on a scripted television show, but the role was highly problematic, and Max, played by a cis woman, reflected problematic tropes. The *L-Word* aired on cable television and was not widely viewed outside of queer communities. See the L Word website: <https://www.sho.com/the-l-word>. Also see: For some background and debates on Max on the L Word see: Tina Krauss, "Max (moire) Sweeney" Rhizomes 14, Spring 2007. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue14/krauss/max.html>, for more on problematic depictions of trans characters in mainstream film and television see: Tre'vell Anderson "Visibility matters: Transgender characters on film and television through the years" in *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 18, 2015, <http://timelines.latimes.com/transgender-characters-film-tv-timeline/>. Apparently, the L Word will be trying to correct its problematic portrayal of trans masculinity in its re-boot.

²⁶ *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998), 23 September 1998, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0144801/>, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), March 31, 2000, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171804/>, See John Gregory "Dunne The Humboldt Murder" *The New Yorker*, Jan 13, 1997. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/01/13/the-humboldt-murders>, Carolyn Gage, "The Inconvenient Truth about Teena Brandon" in *Trivia: Vices of Feminism*, <https://www.triviavoices.com/the-inconvenient-truth-about-teena-brandon.html>, Samantha Allen, "When Brandon Teena Was Killed, LGBT Advocate David S.

birth and raised as female, Brandon Teena grew up in a mobile home. He was raised by a single mother, sexually abused by his stepfather, and he was generally surrounded by a dysfunctional family life. As an adolescent, Teena began outwardly expressing himself as male and faced relentless discrimination for it. Teena's mother continued to refer to him as female, and Teena became increasingly rebellious and more adamant about being perceived and treated as male.²⁷ This cursory description of Teena's life reflected in the film reveals *Boys Don't Cry* to be a dark depiction and contemporary tragedy showcasing the hardships of living as a trans-masculine person. The film lingers on scenes of brutality and violence and focuses on how Teena was troubled and abused.

Writing about *Boys Don't Cry*, J. Halberstam observes, "The body in transition indelibly marks late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century visual fantasy. The fantasy of the shape-shifting and identity morphing body has been nowhere more powerfully realized recently than in transgender film."²⁸

Buckel Wouldn't let the Case Die" in Daily Beast, 4.17.18, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/when-brandon-teena-was-killed-lgbt-advocate-david-s-buckel-wouldnt-let-the-case-die>, Stephanie Fairington, "Two Decades After Brandon Teena's Murder, A Look Back at Falls City," in *The Atlantic*, Dec 31, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/12/two-decades-after-brandon-teenas-murder-a-look-back-at-falls-city/282738/> the Tina and Devine's murderers were John Lotter and Tom Nissen.

²⁷ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171804/>. Also see Jude Dry, "'Boys Don't Cry' Protests: Why We Should Listen to Trans Activists Criticizing The Milestone Film — Editorial" in *Indie Wire*, Dec. 14, 2016 (<https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/kimberly-peirce-boys-dont-cry-reed-transgender-1201757549/>). Also see Oliver Whitney, "*Boys Don't Cry* and Hollywood's Ongoing Obsession With Trans Suffering," in *Them*, December 13, 2018 (<https://www.them.us/story/boys-dont-cry>)

²⁸ J. Halberstam. In *A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York: New York University, 2005), 76.

Halberstam further notes that while transcendent bodies like Teena's are, on the one hand, venerated for their morphable potentialities reflecting the "postmodern fantasy," because the subject does not comply with the desired norms of representation, the depiction showcases the punishment and demise of the trans person. While Halberstam does not explicitly state how Teena's story fails to comply with the dominant culture's norms, in both the film and the documentary, Teena represents someone outside the dominant cultural ideals of "American citizen"²⁹: he is lower-working class, lives in a trailer, disrupts binary gender, has trouble with local law enforcement, and is friends with an African American man with a prosthetic leg.³⁰

²⁹ Cardenas also argues that "neoliberalism" manages which trans people are acceptable (namely those who work toward shared ideologies of neoliberalism) and which trans people are disposable (those who reject the neoliberal ideologies of assimilation and conformity." micha cárdenas "Dark Shimmer" in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 173. This phenomenon can also be further understood by thinking along with Marcia Ochoa's discussion of sanitary citizenship in Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela, Perverse Modernities / a Series* Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014).

³⁰ John Gregory Dunne, "The Humboldt Murders," in *The New Yorker*, January 13, 1997, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/01/13/the-humboldt-murders>, also see: *The Brandon Teena Story* (1998) IMDb, 23 September 1998 (USA) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0144801/>, *Boy's Don't Cry* (1999) IMDb, 31 March, 2000 (USA), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171804/>, Carolyn Gage, "The Inconvenient Truth about Teena Brandon," in *Trivia: Vices of Feminism*, <https://www.triviavoices.com/the-inconvenient-truth-about-teena-brandon.html>, (accessed August 12, 2019). Samantha Allen, "When Brandon Teena Was Killed, LGBT Advocate David S. Buckel Wouldn't Let the Case Die," in *Daily Beast*, April 17, 2018 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/when-brandon-teena-was-killed-lgbt-advocate-david-s-buckel-wouldnt-let-the-case-die>, Stephanie Fairington, "Two Decades After Brandon Teena's Murder, a Look Back at Falls City," in *The Atlantic*, December, 31, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/12/two-decades-after-brandon-teenas-murder-a-look-back-at-falls-city/282738/>.



**Figure 21. Hillary Swank as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, (1999)
still courtesy of the author**

With Hillary Swank starring in the lead role as Brandon Teena, one tends to view Teena as Swank, collapsing the visual apprehension of a cis woman as a trans man, ultimately viewing the recognizable figure, Hillary Swank, rather than seeing the transman Brandon Teena. (See Figure 21). Viewing Swank in the lead role as a cis woman performing masculine tropes, the take-away of the film resonates with what Halberstam has observed in portrayals of tomboys in other films. In adolescence, the tomboy's gender transgression is punished and repressed, and the cultural transmission is that the masculine young woman's lesson is learned as the character is then shaped into a compliant and feminine woman.³¹ If we view Teena as a tomboy who

³¹ J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). See: *Tomboy* (2011), IMDb, April 20, 2011 (France), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1847731/>.

has made it through adolescence resisting the oppressive crush of enforced compliance with cis-normative standards of life and gender, then as a still-gender-noncompliant adult, Teena is forced to suffer the punishment for gender transgression or tomboyish behavior that has persisted into adulthood—the punishment being by the most extreme means necessary—sexual violence and ultimately death.

This reflects what Talia Mae Bettcher has observed to be the functioning of transmisogyny.³² Bettcher has written that transmisogyny is the conflation of transphobia and misogyny. In this case it is applicable to Teena, as he is not viewed as a man, but as a tragic, gender-disrupting woman. Talia Mae Bettcher has described prevalent forms of trans-phobia, such as this portrayal of Teena, as the presentation of trans people as “deceivers,” who at some point must be discovered as their “real” gender; i.e., one that matches the sex assigned at birth; she argues that trans folks are thus portrayed as the trope of the “pathetic transsexual.”³³ This is precisely the gaze of the film directed at Teena. The gaze of the film is not a trans gaze at all (as Halberstam has suggested); rather, it is a cinematic perspective that frames the trans character as a deceiver and simultaneously as a symbol of fascination and

³² Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the wrong theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Sighs*, Winter 2014, 390-391.

³³ Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the wrong theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Sighs*, Winter 2014, 390-391. Such tropes are observable in many mainstream films like *Dallas Buyers*, and *The Crying Game*.

potential disruption of normative ways of being.³⁴ The film *Boys Don't Cry* thus poses trans people as deceivers, demonstrating that trans men will meet untimely and tragic ends.³⁵ Such depictions of a trans character are reductive and transphobic (additionally, the gaze is also queer-phobic and racist).

The brief inclusion of Philip Devine and the minimization of his story within the plot of *Boys Don't Cry* suggests not only that the filmmakers were ill-equipped to contend with Devine's blackness, but using African American lives to prop up and make Caucasian lives seem more human is a trope that problematically continues to plague mainstream cinema.³⁶ C. Riley Snorton has deftly articulated the stakes of the erasure of Philip Devine and even offered a recuperative gesture and recitation of Devine's life and death, driving home the cultural tendency of erasing black bodies and eradicating their losses.³⁷ Snorton's writing recalls the work of bell hooks, who argues dominant media, and cinema in particular, mobilize black women (but here

³⁴ The gaze in *Boys Don't Cry* is much more in line with how Jay Prosser describes the deployment of trans in queer studies, wherein he argues that queer studies have made the trans subject a trope due to an interest in trans subjects' ability to challenge the binary structures of sex and gender. Prosser argues that queer theories' investment in the trans subject is due to the way transness can be mobilized to loosen fixity on gender identities. Prosser, Jay, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Gender and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. It also reflects what I have argued in my introduction: that trans subjects often appear in mainstream media as flash points of cultural fascination that can be mobilized to capitalistic ends.

³⁵ Such tropes are also viewable in films like *The Crying Game* and *Dallas Buyers Club*.

³⁶ bell hooks has written about how black lives are used to make others visible and Halberstam has noted that masculinity is only legible when it leaves the cis Caucasian body. Bell hooks *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995). p. xii

³⁷ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 8-14.

we can extend this to Philip Devine's character) as a foil that is used solely to make white people appear more dimensional. As a result, hooks argues, black women have different approaches to reading film. Black women, according to hooks, are "acutely aware of cinematic racism."³⁸ She notes that black female audiences are primarily aware when viewing film and television that mass media is part and parcel of a system of knowledge creation invested in the oppression of black women and the upholding of white supremacy.³⁹

Reflecting on hook's observations, it is necessary to recall the erasure of Devine when one considers the visibility of Teena. Albeit a tragic narrative and one that arguably positions trans men as *not* men, but rather as deceptive women, *Boys Don't Cry's* erasure of Devine was done in the service of humanizing Teena, maligning Devine as a footnote in the tragic plot of gender disruption leading to demise. The filmmakers' efforts to gloss over any discussion of race in an effort to sensationalize transness are problematic and methodologically lacking, and they suggest that the filmmakers were compelled to include Devine only in an effort to further sensationalize violence. Trans subjectivities are always about racialization, and, in fact, trans bodies often highlight how racialization is bound up with gender. The decision to include the murder of Devine alongside Teena while minimizing his life feels as though the filmmakers were not equipped to handle the complexity of

³⁸ *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2015), 119.

³⁹ *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2015).

both stories simultaneously and were more interested in creating a grim picture of a transmasculine subject.



Figure 22. Hillary Swank as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, (1999)
stills courtesy of the author



Figure 23. Hillary Swank as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*, (1999)
stills courtesy of the author

This brief discussion of trans male characters in mainstream culture is used strategically to demonstrate the dominant cultural conceptions of trans masculinity and the ideological framework and visual culture into which *Original Plumbing* intervenes. As an alleged depiction of trans masculinity, *Boys Don't Cry* may be more aptly viewed as visual cultural cementing the belief that trans men are not actually men; rather, they are adult tomboys (i.e., women) and deserve punishment for failing to comply with cisnormative life as feminine adults. (See Figures 22 and 23). The depiction of Teena exists as sensational and expendable; Swank's portrayal of Teena demonstrates what not to do, in a way that validates dominant normative gender and life trajectories. Halberstam has observed, "as much as viewers want to believe alternatives, the mainstream film assumes that they also want to believe that the choices they have made and the realities within which they function offer the best possible options."⁴⁰ *Boys Don't Cry* reinforces the valuing of choosing to live binary gendered lives in cis genders.⁴¹

Mobilizing the token trans character as a deceiver who disrupts binary gender and cis normativity as someone thus deserving of violent sexual aggression and murder is a manifestation of what transpires when one

⁴⁰ J. Halberstam. *In A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York: New York University, 2005), 84.

⁴¹ It is worth mentioning that despite the way Brandon Teena's story has been mobilized in mainstream culture, Teena has also been celebrated as a hero of sorts for many trans masculine people, a move that reflects a type of disidentificatory practice. For more on disidentification see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

attempts to live outside the norm. It reflects what Butler has observed: that to live outside of sanctioned gender is to put one's life at risk, or genders that "[do] not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" threaten to expose limits of regulatory system—her "matrix of intelligibility."⁴² Brandon Teena's life, mobilized in *Boys Don't Cry*, narrativizes the regulating structure of gender, demonstrating that to attempt to live outside of gender and biological sex norms will result in one's demise—or at least this is the story dominant culture tells via producing the blockbuster film about Brandon Teena as *the* mainstream representation of trans masculinity for the past two decades.

There are certainly ways of viewing the film via an oppositional or even disidentificatory gaze,⁴³ as Teena has become, for many, a sort of trans-masculine hero.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as a point of cultural transmission, the circulation of Teena's story as the sole example of trans masculinity viewable by trans men and cis folks alike, sets up a deeply limiting and problematic

⁴² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 24.

⁴³ Bell hooks has written about the oppositional gaze as viewed via black feminist perspective, but it could be applied here to a reading of Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* as a type of hero, which is arguably what has transpired in the viewing perspectives of many trans masculine folks. One could also make the argument for a disidentificatory reading of the film by trans and gender-non-conforming viewers. See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), also see: bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁴⁴ For a discussion of Brandon Teena as a trans hero and the erasure of Philip Devine see: C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Also see: J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

expectation about the lives of trans-masculine people.⁴⁵ When the only iteration of transmasculinity is a depiction of a life including sexual violence, instability, poverty, unhappiness, and murder, the notion of trying to live out such a life seems at best dangerous, likely impossible, and essentially may be understood as dominant culture using scare tactics to keep trans-masculine people from existing.⁴⁶

The complexity of issues surrounding the lack of transmasculine representation can be more deeply understood through discussion of the stereotype.⁴⁷ In the case of the forwarding of Teena as a transmasculine icon, the message forged in the stereotype suggests that the expectation of trans masculinity in culture is sexual violence and murder. Writing about “publically sanctioned stereotypes,” George Fredrickson argued that they legitimize “the status of one group relative to another,” which “becomes the vehicle for overt and active hostility only when the subordinate group is seen

⁴⁵ For a discussion of how stereotypes function and how they create expectations about lives, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) and Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2002) for in depth discussions of stereotypes.

⁴⁶ For an in-depth discussion of how representations delimit lives, see Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2002), Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, Nachdr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁷ Homi K. Bhabha observes that stereotypic images shape cultural ideologies as well as individuals’ personal processes of identification and identity formation. Writing about how stereotypes function in popular visual culture, Homi K. Bhabha traces the ways images of people are circulated in visual culture and how these images shape expectations about constituencies as well as individuals’ processes of identification and identity formation. Discussing stereotypes through the language of post-coloniality, Bhabha describes a stereotype as “a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible.” See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 23-27.

as getting out of ‘its place.’”⁴⁸ Such theories of representations and the operation of the stereotype about trans and gender-non-conforming people can be seen in the countless acts of hate crimes and reality enforcement perpetrated against those who do not fit into culturally-sanctioned corporealities.

In reducing and crystalizing representations of trans-masculine people, mainstream representations circumscribe the belief of what a trans man’s life is like. When representations of one’s identity constituency are absent (or extremely limited and reductive), it becomes nearly impossible to imagine one’s future, for it means envisioning and traversing an uncharted path in opposition to cultural norms and towards creating a new identity category—and, in doing so, often meeting with repeated and violent opposition. Both founders of *OP* have spoken openly about the need to see models of how to live one’s life in order to imagine one’s future.⁴⁹ One year after *Boys Don’t Cry* was released in theatres, *OP*’s Rocco Kayatios began transitioning. The only example of a trans man Kayatios encountered as he was transitioning in 2000, either in real life or visual culture, was in Loren Cameron’s *Body*

⁴⁸ George Fredrickson, “White Images of Black Slaves (Is What We See in Others Sometimes a Reflection of What We Find in Ourselves?),” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind The Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 38-45, pp. 41. He also notes that traits assigned to stereotypes may also change in response to location and historical circumstances.

⁴⁹ Trans and trans-masculine youth today have access to networked information and social media and thus can view diverse trans and gender-non-conforming individuals’ self-imaging and self-articulating publically and thus can view a multiplicity of trans lives as livable. Mac and Kayatios, on the other hand, were teens in the 1990s—an era prior to internet connectivity and lacking the proliferation of trans icons viewable in mainstream culture today.

Alchemy.⁵⁰ The lack of trans males as role models made his journey toward realizing his own identity as a trans man extremely fraught and made Kayiatos' understanding of his own identity challenging to self-articulate. Mac, who identifies as a gay trans man, now recalls that early in life he viewed Pee-wee Herman as a beacon of the type of adult he wanted to be. There was something queer about Herman's masculinity that was informative to young Mac's self-conception of his own queer masculine gender identity.⁵¹

Because trans-masculine people have been by and large culturally invisible, *OP*'s intervention has had an enormous impact. *OP* is a visual record that transmasculine people exist, and that they do so across a variety of intersectional lives and geographic locations. The ethos that led to the founding of *Original Plumbing* was precisely to create a trans-masculine visual culture where there was none, and not just to create visibility, but also to demonstrate the vibrant and diverse trans-masculine community around the globe. *OP*'s founding editors wrote about the project:

The magazine is dedicated to documenting diversity within the trans male community through photographic portraits and essays, personal narratives, and interviews. We feel that there is no single way to sum up what it means to be a trans man because we each have different beliefs, life experiences, and relationships to our own bodies. *Original Plumbing* gives the trans male community the opportunity to speak for and about themselves.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Original Plumbing Panel*, Strand Book Store, NYC, July 22, 7pm, 2019.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Original Plumbing*, "About" <http://www.originalplumbing.com/index.php/about> (viewed multiple dates in 2014).

It is through representational systems and popular cultural forms that we come to formulate and understand identities and how we can be in the world. In perusing the issues of *OP* from the last ten years, it is clear the editors strove to include a variety of trans-male corporealities, identities, stories, and issues over the decade. Cover images and topics reflect a diversity of constituencies and themes, while within the pages of each zine, a diversity of representations, portraits, stories, profiles, and perspectives appear. The cover of *OP* consistently depicts one or occasionally two trans-male models representing various presentations of trans masculinity. The cover image is often full bleed or with a small border, and the models appear to come from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, embodying various body types. Every cover of *OP* is a portrait, and in the pages of each issue, nearly every other page has a full-page image of a trans-masculine identifying person.

For example, the cover of the “Schooled Issue” depicts a twenty-something African American man with glasses, a plaid shirt, and a baseball hat; the cover of “Workin’ Stiff” depicts a shirtless, tattooed Caucasian man with plugs in a domestic interior, his gapped tooth holding a drill; the “Party Issue” cover features the brown skin of a man in front of a patterned wall, grinning, wearing a tank and Mardi Gras beads; and the “Hero Issue” depicts a Caucasian man in a white button-up shirt, eyes closed against a shadowy backdrop. In the pages of each zine there are countless numbers of a variety of trans men from all walks of life, or as Tiq Milan puts it, *OP* “brought the

global trans-masculine community together under common experience while highlighting our individuality in a way no other publication has been able to duplicate.”⁵³ Or as Kate Bornstein writes, “The collection is an invaluable, unapologetic archive of a multiplicity of queer and trans experiences.”⁵⁴ Imaging a diversity of intersectional portraits is crucial to the project of tranifesting trans-masculinity without producing stereotypes.

As a portrait-heavy form of popular culture, *OP* wields two major facets of cultural production under the cover of one project. Portraiture maintains a central location in the history of Western Art, crucial to the formation and articulation of individualism, but popular culture also plays a major role in negotiating cultural identities and norms. It is through representational systems that we also come to know ourselves and the ways that we can exist in the world—representation is what connects meaning and language to culture.⁵⁵

⁵³ Amos Mac, Rocco Kayiatos, and Tiq Milan, eds., *Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2019), x.

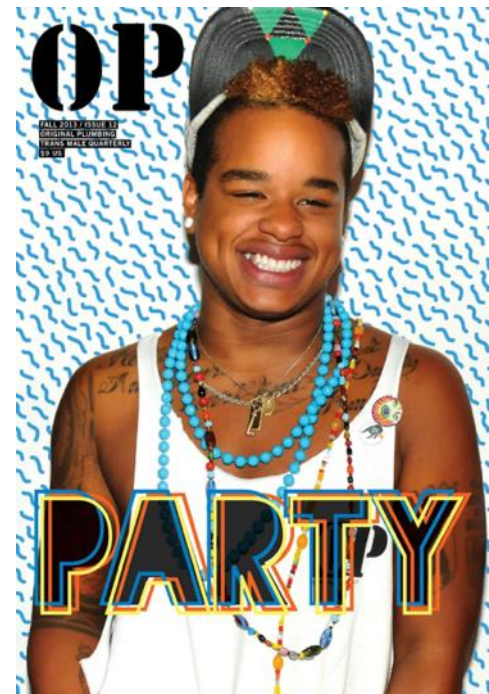
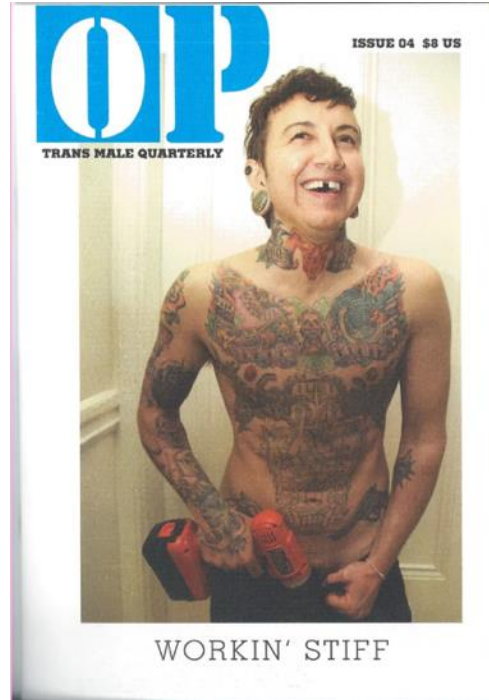
⁵⁴ Mac et al., *Original Plumbing, The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture*, see back cover.

⁵⁵ Stuart Hall and Open University, eds. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Culture, Media, and Identities (London: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997). Also see: John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Cultures: Theories and Methods* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, Media and Popular Culture 7 (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 228-29. Cultural studies here should be understood as an interdisciplinary field in which certain concerns and methods have converged and invested in understanding daily life, and the circuit of culture and method of analysis is committed to thinking through representations, identity, production, consumption, and regulation.

In imaging a complex, intersectional, diversity of trans masculinities, *Original Plumbing* makes visible that gender is a co-produced and collectively governed field, as the performances of trans masculinity within its pages are diverse, nuanced, and varied. As such, *OP* works to open up the trans visual field of gender. As a group of images making visible multiple iterations of trans-masculine and non-binary corporealities, the pictures in *OP* bring into being numerous instantiations of trans-masculine embodiment, otherwise not seen in mainstream culture. *OP* is crucial in this way, for it transforms our conceptions of gender via seeing bodies outside of binary cis genders and in processes of becoming. The porousness of trans-masculinity as articulated in *OP* is critical as part of its ethos and as a location of disrupting the gender matrix, avoiding creating stereotypes, and thus eliding creating a simplistic binary opposition between stereotypic representations and one iconic and reductive type of positivist representation. The diversity of representations in *OP* visualize gender as a complex and multi-dimensional field.

Judith Butler argues that gender functions via a matrix in which we are compelled to perform, and that this is compulsory; we are necessarily legible or illegible due to the matrix and how it governs the intelligibility of gender. For Butler, gender has no originary form: gender is contingent on reifying that which we already know. Butch, for example, is therefore not a copy of masculinity, but rather gender itself is performative iteration.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).



Cover images of *Original Plumbing* Figures 24 through 27 clockwise from top left: *Schooled*, *Workin' Stiff*, *The Hero Issue* and *The Party Issue*

Considering Butler's formulation of the "matrix of intelligibility"⁵⁷ alongside the portrayal of Brandon Teena and *Original Plumbing* helps to sketch out how the matrix functions as a field of visual culture and that one should not view *Original Plumbing* in opposition to *Boys Don't Cry*, but rather that both constitute significant factions of the visual field of trans-masculinity (itself part of the matrix of gender).⁵⁸ In *Undoing Gender*, Butler astutely observes that "practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment,"⁵⁹ wherein she contends that the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but rather as a "mode of becoming, that in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone."⁶⁰ Butler's insistence on bringing identity into being via embodiment is concretized in what is occurring in *OP*.

Similarly, Stuart Hall defined popular culture as having roots in the social and material conditions of contemporary life, while urging us to consider what is essential about it is actually about its relation to that which defines us. Hall argued popular culture as a site of "continuing tension" in a charged and dialectical relationship to the dominant culture. Moreover, he wrote, "it treats that domain of cultural forms and activities as a continually

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004). 69.

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

changing field.”⁶¹ Depending on how the field is negotiated, we can either circumscribe a very reductive way of presenting and shaping reality, or we can open up progressive opportunities and suggest new modes of being.

A Transmasculine Gaze

In a culture that has otherwise removed trans masculinity from public view, the insertion of trans-masculine people as figures to view as desirable creates a radical cultural rupture. Rendering trans men as not only visible but also attractive, *Original Plumbing* reworks visual aesthetics, inserting a new standard of beauty.⁶² Often posing shirtless, sometimes nearly nude, many of the transmen, either in self-submitted images or photographed by Mac, are invested in showing themselves and the trans-masculine community as not only thriving, but as desirable.⁶³ In the collaborative imaging strategies deployed in *OP*, images are made in an effort to embolden and empower the

⁶¹ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in R. Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 462.

⁶² *Original Plumbing Panel*, Strand Book Store, NYC July 22, 7pm, 2019. Particularly in the earlier issues of *OP*, the content was driven by making an insertion into visual culture that positioned trans men as sexy and focused on revealing their bodies.

⁶³ They are either submitted by the trans men pictured or are photographed by founder/editor and freelance photographer Amos Mac, who is also a trans man. Also see: José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 82. Muñoz writes about auto-ethnography is a form of cultural production that allows voices that are otherwise marginalized in speak for and by themselves in a way that performs their stories from a place of self-knowledge. Muñoz writes, “autoethnography worries easy binarisms such as colonized and the colonizer or subaltern and metropolitan by presenting subaltern speech through the channels and pathways of metropolitan representational systems.” Muñoz discusses auto-ethnography as performances wherein artists articulate their complex and disidentificatory cultural locations through sub-cultural performances reclaiming and transforming their status as ‘others.’ In Muñoz’s definition the performance subverts the language of mass culture to enact a subculture identity.

transmen depicted, often self-performing for the camera and exploring various aspects of themselves as they demonstrate themselves as studly and self-assured. (See Figures 24, 25, 26 and 27). Thus, the imaging strategies used in *OP* can best be described as deploying a transmasculine gaze.

When transman Amos Mac images other transmen, his aim is not to objectify the subjects; rather, he views them with intimate knowledge, familiarity, and understanding. Tiq Milan's description of the process of being photographed by Amos Mac exemplifies the camaraderie and collaboration of the process. In the preface to the book *OP*, Milan writes of his experience of being photographed for *OP*: "[...] being in front of Amos's camera was different. He was open and smiling and seemed just as excited as I was to be doing the shoot. I didn't have to worry about intrusive questions about my body or traumas around coming out."⁶⁴ The process of imaging transmen for *OP* engages an empowering act of collaborative tranifesting granting transmen agency in how their likeness is performed and presented. This process may also be understood as engaging in a collaborative practice of performative portraiture.

Practices of performative portraiture often engage in critical reflection—self-awareness of self-critical interrogation of self-in-relation to broader discourses and performance of self—while also intervening in the

⁶⁴ Amos Mac, Rocco Kayiatos, and Tiq Milan, eds., *OP Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture*, First Feminist Press edition (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2019), xi.

complex relation between a photograph's performativity and indexicality.⁶⁵

The often-cheeky performative collaborations between Mac and the transmen he photographs are playful in the way they engage with crafting a trans male gaze, reflecting Mac's interest in putting *OP* in aesthetic dialogue with *BUTT*⁶⁶ magazine. A smutty, gay, queer publication, the same dimensions as *OP* and also soliciting content from its viewers, *BUTT* magazine, is known for its playful, sometimes campy depictions of gay and queer-identified men as sexy, often nude or scantily clad, but always playfully and sexually engaged with the photographic process. Mac has noted that his impulse to model *OP* after *BUTT* was primarily to forward transmen as sexy in a playful way.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations, see: Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Thames & Hudson, London and New York, 2004). Also see Susan Bright, "Portrait," *Art Photography Now*, Aperture Foundation, New York, 2005. See also: Fillipo Maggia, 'Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Long Live Art! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!' in *Yasumasa Morimura*, Palazzo Casati Stampa, Milano 2008. See also: Liz Wells, 'Image and Identity,' in *The Photography Reader*, Routledge Press, London, 2003. See also: David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, 'The Vertigo of Displacement,' in *The Photography Reader*, Routledge Press, London, 2003, op cit. See also: Smantha Noel, 'Putting on a Bold-Face: How Renee Cox and Sonia Boyce Pull Ethnographic Art Apart,' *Third Text*, 2014 Vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 163-176. See also: Larry Qualls, 'Performance/Photography,' in *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Jan., 1995, pp 26-34. Susan Bright has observed, "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions. Susan Bright, "Portrait," *Art Photography Now* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2005).

⁶⁶ *BUTT* was a quarterly magazine for gay men, founded in 2001 and edited by Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom. In 2005, The Guardian named *BUTT* as one of its top twenty magazines. As of 2008, it had an estimated worldwide circulation of 24,000. In 2015, Taschen released *BUTT Forever*, an anthology of some of the magazine's highlights since its inception. See Jop van Bennekom and Gert Jonkers Eds, *Forever Butt*, (Taschen: 2015). *BUTT* in ethos was similar to that of *Original Plumbing* in that it solicited content from readers and portrayed queer men as sexually desirable, featuring a variety of body types. Sheila McClear, "Finally, a Chance for Fully-Splayed Men" in *Gawker*, February 5, 2008, <https://gawker.com/352832/finally-a-chance-for-fully-splayed-men>. Also see: <http://www.buttmagazine.com>.

⁶⁷ *Original Plumbing Panel*, Strand Book Store, NYC July 22, 7pm, 2019.

Modeling a trans male gaze after a gaze viewed in a queer/gay, campy zine, *OP* forwards a trans male gaze that is radical in what it images and playful in how it does so.

Representing trans-masculine people as hunky and consumable, *OP* makes a radical insertion into visual culture, proposing that non-cis, non-binary, masculine-gendered bodies should not only be viewed but viewed favorably. The zine exists for the express purposes of producing trans masculine bodies and trans male culture, as a cultural intervention, which plays into the problematic forwarding of bodies being objectifiable while also suggesting that trans masculinity presents a unique and unprecedented beauty standard. As Rachel Tiffe writes, “*OP* is, on the one hand, suggesting that bodies can be made into objects for consumption. However, the fact that the naked bodies are transgender challenges normative standards of what is and is not desirable.”⁶⁸ Tiffe notes further “the concept of the heteronormative ‘male gaze’ is turned on its head when the magazine so clearly embodies what could be more accurately described as a ‘transgender look.’”⁶⁹ Bearing in mind Tiffe’s observations as one peruses the countless portraits in *OP*, the images, overall, demonstrate that the trans look is contingent on the subject having agency. Tiffe coins the term “agentification” to describe the subject having agency in the process of being objectified. For

⁶⁸ Rachel Tiffe “*original plumbing*: performing gender variance through relational self-determination,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 9, No. 4, November 2013.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

Tiffe, the subjects in *OP* by and large invite the gaze and do so in ways that, she argues, resist normative modes of consumption.⁷⁰ Unpacking Tiffe's argument offers up the notion that the desiring gaze is one that disidentifies with normative perspectives.⁷¹ In many ways, Tiffe's observations echo bell hooks' writing on the gaze as a method of resistance for colonized black people on a global scale. Hooks observed: "the 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally."⁷² Similarly, the trans desiring gaze directed at the trans masculine subjects in *OP* result in a collaboration that situates trans masculine subjects as empowered, emboldened, and attractive; the non-normative genders that they forward are mobilized as not only acceptable forms of emerging genders, but as viable and alluring. Thus, much like hook's observation about the gaze facilitating resistance, the gaze for trans folks can serve as method of self-imaging in service of self-creation.

Putting the collaborative self-images published in *Original Plumbing* in discourse with hooks' observations about the gaze as it relates to self-actualization, one can observe that trans-masculine visual culture produced in *OP* is part of a larger post-feminist project. Positioning trans masculine collaborative self-representations in a lineage of feminist

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Disidentification is a concept forwarded by José Esteban Muñoz, in which subaltern subjects can partially identify with a dominant cultural view or position while rejecting or perverting those aspect of said trope that they do not identify with.

⁷² bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: black female spectators," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, p. 107-118, p. 108 (London: Routledge, 2010).

interventions demonstrates that gender oppression is carried out via a matrix of gender oppression that impacts all of us differently but via interrelated frameworks. To position trans masculinity in a lineage of feminist interventions is to view transmisogyny as a facet of misogyny that marginalizes, delegitimizes, and oppresses trans people. Not seeing the connection between trans liberation and all gender-based oppression, including the feminist project, is myopic and methodologically lacking.

To more fully understand the nuances of *Original Plumbing's* trans, post-feminist intervention into representation, I turn to the scholarship of Derek Conrad Murray. Observing shifts transpiring in self-imaging practices and strategies today, Murray theorizes about the proliferation of young women self-imaging on social media. From a feminist art historical perspective, Murray argues that the selfies of young women may be viewed as a massive post-feminist intervention into visual culture. Murray deploys the term "post-feminist" not to signal the triumph of feminism and thus the ending of its necessity, but rather to signal a shift in feminist priorities and strategies that move away from investments of Second and Third Wave feminisms.⁷³ He observes that contemporary image-makers working in post-feminist practice in photography engage in aesthetics and discourses that move beyond those of earlier feminist priorities. Post-feminist image-makers today are exhausted by

⁷³ Derek Conrad Murray (2015), Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 18:6, 490-516, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967, 4.

feminist investment in critiquing dominant culture's representations of women. Instead, they are creating a sexual fantasy about themselves that promotes body positivity, embraces sexuality, and rejects the male gaze. Moreover, they enable new constituencies of young women to make space for their inclusion within feminism, particularly young women of color.⁷⁴ He notes further that the insertion of these images into culture constitutes "radical forms of community building—and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentations."⁷⁵ Murray's observations about post-feminist self-imaging praxis apply to what one observes in *OP*. The transmen depicted to various degrees show themselves to be sexualized, self-possessed, and embracing body positivity and sexuality, while remaining disinterested in a cis-male gaze and uninterested in offering critiques of dominant culture. Rather they are strictly invested in creating visual culture and community building by and about transmasculinity.

Flipping through the pages of *OP* is much like perusing image banks of young women posting self-images on social media—it does feel like a political movement, but rather than reclaiming from an objectifying gaze, trans men are inserting their self-representations, countering erasure as a form of misrepresentation. It is a diverse group of trans men interested in self-imaging for themselves and community and forwarding new types of

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6. Post-feminist practices build on the work of second-wave feminists and share commitments to reclaiming women's bodies, but post-feminist projects are invested in pushing beyond essentialist ideas about what women and feminine mean.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2.

masculinity and unique aesthetics of masculinity. The process of tranifesting trans masculinity on both the collective and personal levels is tantamount and may be viewed as constituting a post-feminist project.

Murray's conception of a post-feminist gaze articulates the key tenets of self-creation, self-perusal, and forwarding of new identities that are necessarily intersectional and disinterested in critiquing dominant viewing perspectives.⁷⁶ The often collaborative trans self-imaging viewable in *OP* very much reflects the key signifiers of a post-feminist ethos. To call transmasculine imaging and a trans masculine gaze *post-feminist* pushes the limits of post-feminism. To include trans masculine people and trans masculine self-imaging praxis as post-feminist forces the question of the ontology of feminism and unmoors it from outmoded essentialist ideas about gender oppression being rooted in a binary framework, thus calling into question the structures by which feminism is delimited. Post-feminist projects (and feminism) are not necessarily bound to (cis)women but, instead, are invested in dismantling gender oppression, which can and *should* be done via frameworks that view gender not as a binary but as a system.

What the images in *OP* reveal when placed in discussion with post-feminist imaging praxis and discourse is that there is not necessarily an essential way of being feminine or masculine, but that gender is, in fact, a

⁷⁶ Ibid.

regime that is arbitrary, amorphous and regulatory.⁷⁷ The trans gaze adds awareness of gender itself as being constructed and not essentialized; moreover, invested in questioning beliefs or assumptions one might be tempted to make about the person pictured. The transmasculine post-feminist collaborative tranifestation praxis forwarded in *OP* brings new constituencies into being in ways that challenge gender-based oppressions and erasures perpetrated by heteropatriarchal systems of regulating gender, visual culture, and visibility.

A trans gaze will always be invested in de-essentializing and de-binarizing looking, thinking, and analysis. A trans gaze will decolonize cis supremacist aesthetic hierarchies, which privilege cis aesthetics and binary gender expectations. A trans gaze will always view the object of perusal as rooted in time and place, aesthetic affiliations, and as intersectional. If and when trans and non-binary subjects come into view, a trans gaze will view non-binary and trans subjects as aesthetically pleasing in their diverse approaches to gender aesthetics and presentation and to queer embodiments.

⁷⁷ This reflects what Donna Haraway has articulated, that, “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simmians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York Routledge, 1991), 155. Also see: micha cárdenas “Dark Shimmer” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 171.

Fashion as Embodied Fantasy

OP as a project, pushes outward the field of masculinity, challenging cisnormativity, and binary assumptions while showing that gender is malleable and contingent. Perusing the complexity of trans masculinity imaged in the many issues of *OP*, the “Fashion Issue” (No. 5) encapsulates particularly well the complexity of tranifesting trans masculinities as they relate to visual aesthetics. As the editors put it in the introductory pages, “in this issue of *OP*, you’ll find guys talking about how fashion is not just the act of frivolously adorning yourself in the latest trends, but rather, a proclamation of new found confidence and comfort.”⁷⁸ Fashion, in particular, plays an extensive role in the negotiation and creation of gender. As an extension of our bodies that is infinitely and instantaneously malleable, fashion lets us freely transform aesthetics as signifiers of gender in any way we see fit. Fashion, in many ways, is “embodied fantasy,” with new modes of being in the world and malleable aesthetics and performances of gender.⁷⁹ Full of

⁷⁸ Kayiatos, Rocco and Amos Mac, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*, 2009-2019 Fashion issue of *Original Plumbing* #5 p 3.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*. Butler considers gender a historical category, noting masculine and feminine as notoriously changeable terms. Butler argues that gender is for others and that we are all claimed by others when we make a claim to gender. In this text, Butler builds on her earlier thinking, much invested in the concept of gender as performative, even compulsorily performative, even if no one is there to witness. Gender in this conception has no author, but rather exists as an amorphous field founded in social norms. Building on Hegelian thinking that we are motivated by a desire for recognition, Butler forwards that gender is also about a desire to be seen and recognized. Some genders may need to remain unintelligible if the systems of recognition are not those we wish to be recognized as. She illustrates the political stakes of existing outside of normative gender roles as life-threatening, with discussion of examples of Brandon Teena, among others (Mathew Shephard and Gwen Araujo). In mobilizing the instance of Teena as the only trans masculinity in a field of visual culture full of binary cisgender people, the matrix of gender is upheld as binary and bound to

complex, intersectional, augmenting instantiations of trans bodies—*OP* as a field and as a cultural intervention—brings a diversity of corporealities into view and pushes the matrix of gender in an expansive direction that moves beyond binary and cis essentialism into a space of a porous proliferation of masculinities.

On the cover of the “Fashion Issue” (Figure 28), we are introduced to cover boys Gavin and Christian, two brown-skinned figures, photographed in a harsh flash in front of a brick wall. Gavin, on the left, crouches forward, hands on knees, in light grey shorts. They (Gavin) sport a dog tag over a sleeveless black tank top depicting a motocross rider, their lips are parted slightly, hair pulled back a bit, sporting a partial afro. They meet our gaze beneath a slightly furrowed brow. Next to Gavin stands a slightly thinner figure in plaid pants, wearing a thick black belt, gold watch, and wooden bead necklace over a sleeveless, white, Bob Marley “Soul Rebel” t-shirt. Christian’s eyes meet ours beneath a small, dapper, brown hat, their nose stud, and earring glinting, due to the bright front light of the camera flash.

The figures stand close together, looking self-possessed and self-aware. Both faces are soft and slightly angular. Gavin has subtle facial hair on their cheek, jawline, and upper lip, while Christian’s soft facial hair falls over their top lip.

essentialist ideas about sex and gender being necessarily corollary. The stereotype of Teena sutures a belief in the trans masculinity as an unlivable life.

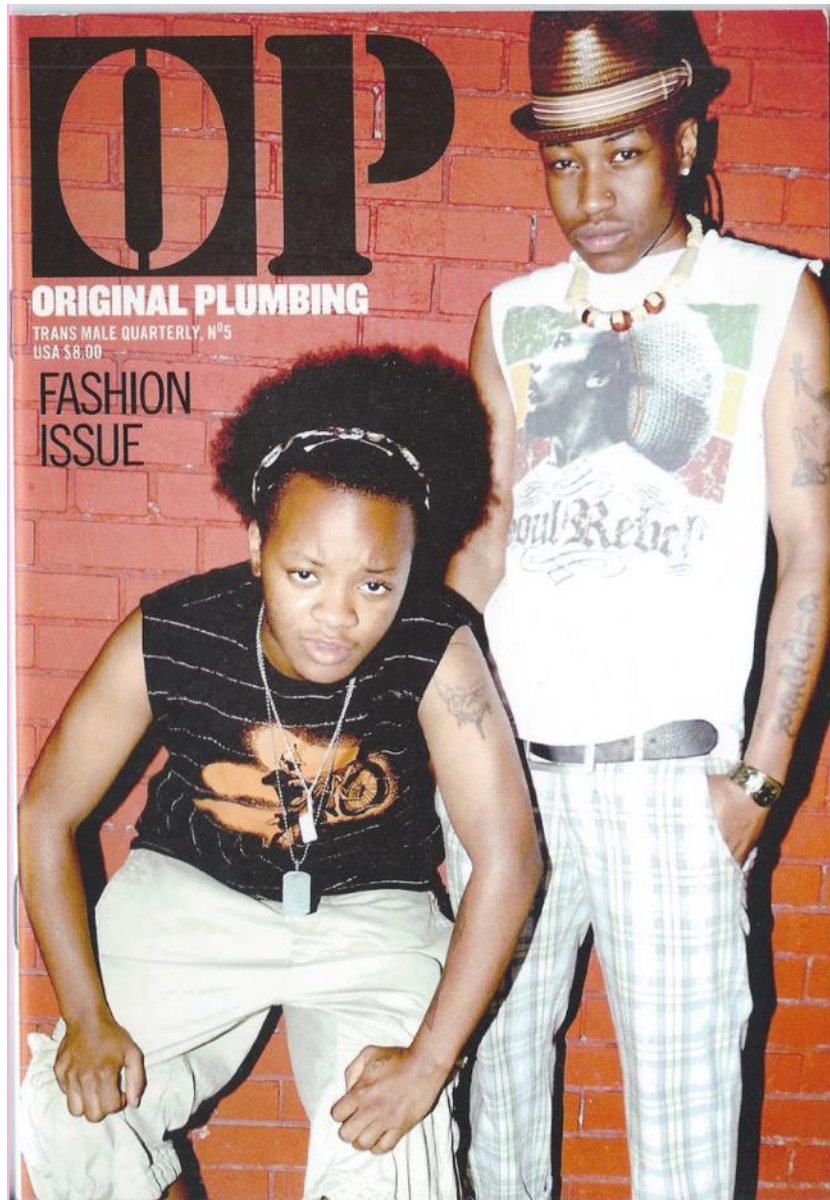


Figure 28. Cover image of *Original Plumbing The Fashion Issue*

Posing in tough yet casual stances, they appear to be enjoying being photographed and playing with performing themselves for Mac's camera (the shoot took place in Philadelphia). They convey youthful masculinity that is

somewhat androgynous. They each have a few visible black and grey arm tattoos. Gavin and Christian describe their respective styles (on pages 22 and 23) as “queerosexual” and a “fusion of vintage and high fashion with a splash of hip hop.”⁸⁰ In the cover photo, Gavin references visual aesthetics of tough masculinity, with his dog-tag necklace and small meat-cleaver necklace, cargo pants and motocross t-shirt, skull tattoo on his shoulder, slightly snarled lip, and furrowed brow. These aesthetics connote a metalhead affiliation, which perhaps Gavin is ironically playing with, constructing their look, and defining masculinity via a cynical take.

Christian, by comparison, references alternative aesthetics via their pants and hat and an interest in third world liberation and alternative world-making with “Soul Rebel” appearing under Marley's iconic profile.⁸¹ Considering the fashion choices they make in consultation with their masculine yet androgynous physiques, it is clear that, generally, in donning certain cultural signifiers they suggest that others view their aesthetic allegiances and gender in certain ways. And yet how the signifiers will be interpreted is never a given; T-shirts with the sleeves cut off, for example, are often interpreted as “butch” and “working class.” While wearing a dog tag

⁸⁰ Kayiatos, Rocco and Amos Mac, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*, 2009-2019 Fashion issue of *Original Plumbing* #5. 22-23

⁸¹ For a discussion of racial epidermalization and a particular unpacking of Bob Marley as icon see: Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

may signify feeling favorably toward the military, it may also evoke an ironic anti-military sentiment, contingent on the other aesthetics deployed.

Similarly, one may not believe that someone wearing a Bob Marley shirt—often deployed as a symbol of emancipation from oppression—would befriend someone who wears a dog tag (a visual signifier of one’s favorable feelings toward the military, a force often associated with the oppression of liberation), or that this was a sincere visualization of their allegiance to military operations. While we tend to look to aesthetics to convey information, if we view visualities via a trans visual studies method, we can become aware that we are only ever met with a subjective interpretation, with no certainty of insight. Viewing the image, noting the connotations, and yet arriving at no definitive conclusion reflects the ethos and praxis of trans as a method. As Eva Hayward has noted, trans is not about notions of authenticity but rather reveals how we are constituted socially;⁸² or how visual aesthetics are performed and interpreted add to how we are constructed and understood socially. In constructing themselves, intervening in discourses of racialization and gender, and creating trans-masculine subjectivities, Gavin and Christian deploy aesthetics to signify different readings, demonstrating the use of fashion to connote aspects of their identities that either play off their bodily aesthetics or against expectations. Cropped t-shirts suggest masculinity,

⁸² Eva Hayward, “Spiderwoman” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 255-273.

presumably in line with assumptions about the subjects' genders. At the same time, motocross and skulls often signal association with working-class Caucasian—which Gavin does not appear to be. This raises a question of how we ascribe expectations of ethnicity, racialization, class, and sub-cultural affiliation to fashion in essentialized ways, which are problematic and often unfounded. In other words, the deployment of fashion in unexpected and contradictory ways opens up questions about the assumptions we make when attempting to interpret people's identities based on surface signifiers.⁸³ While some of their aesthetic choices may open up essentialist ideas about how masculine subjects perform blackness or at least play with their looks overall, they remain within the parameters of masculinity.

While scholarship has attended to race and theories of race fairly substantially, discourses of race have significantly ignored issues of gender. I am not equating gender and issues impacting women, which is a conflation often made in scholarship. I am speaking precisely about race discourse and the neglect of gender as it intersects with racialization. Trans studies scholars are beginning to offer much-needed insight into identities of race as they intersect with gender. C. Riley Snorton has articulated that culturally, while we may tend to view gender and race as given and unalterable, they both remain discretely constructed. Of the intersection of trans and blackness,

⁸³ Amelia Jones citation about looking not equating to who we are. Meanwhile, Marley as an icon signifies in many ways, one of them clashing in expectations with the woman symbol tattooed on Christian's arm—Marley was not known for his feminist outlook.

Snorton states, “the capacity to produce distinction has come to structure modes of valuation through various forms, producing shadows that precede their constitution subject/objects to give meaning to how gender is conceptualized, traversed and lived.”⁸⁴ In desiring to be culturally intelligible, we create ourselves within the frameworks of legibility already in place and accessible to us. The shadows or sketches of what is already in place beckon us into their repetition. As Snorton puts it:

[...] although the perception that ‘race’ and ‘gender’ are fixed and knowable terms is the dominant logic of identity, [...] ‘trans’ is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival, and ‘blackness’ signifies upon an enveloping environment and condition of possibility.⁸⁵

Snorton is right to say that the dominant views of gender and race are stable in our conception of them, and permeable and changeable in how they are lived. It is also true that both race and gender impact the structures into which we insert ourselves. For Snorton, transness exposes how gender is transversal in no particular directionality, and blackness is both immersive and wields enormous power over shaping lives. Snorton seems to propose that we have agency within both gender and race, but that both also instruct on how our lives may form.⁸⁶ The frameworks of race and gender into which we

⁸⁴ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 175.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁶ Snorton’s observations can be read in dialogue with Anthony K. Appiah and a similar argument made in the first chapter regarding how racialization shapes processes of identity formation. Appiah argues that social as well as psychological implications are part of racial labels and impact how we conceive of ourselves. See K. Anthony Appiah, "Racial Identity

fashion ourselves may shape our ideas about how to become, and we may be unprepared for how our new embodiments are responded to. Stereotypes about gendered and raced constituencies reinforce external pressure to perform gender and race in certain ways; not to perform within these stereotypes reveals the social pressures that push folks to do so. Regardless, some people self-fashion with alternative citations in mind.⁸⁷

The malleability of racialization and gender is often viewable in the pages of *OP*. In the style profiles section of the *Fashion Issue* there is a brief section dedicated to Sanyu. The profile consists of one half-page photograph of his torso and a portrait in which he wears a binder, a bullet armband, a gold septum, a gold labret piercing, and wooden, wing-shaped earrings. (See Figures 29 and 30). There is a smaller portrait of Sanyu in which he wears a black t-shirt with its sleeves cut off and a skort-type garment over his legs. In both pictures he is set against a white studio backdrop, and both photographs are attributed to Amos Mac. A one-page interview accompanies the images, in which Sanyu describes his style as “Tank Girl as boi meets the Mursi tribe of Ethiopia.”⁸⁸ He notes that his style is inspired by his experience of having

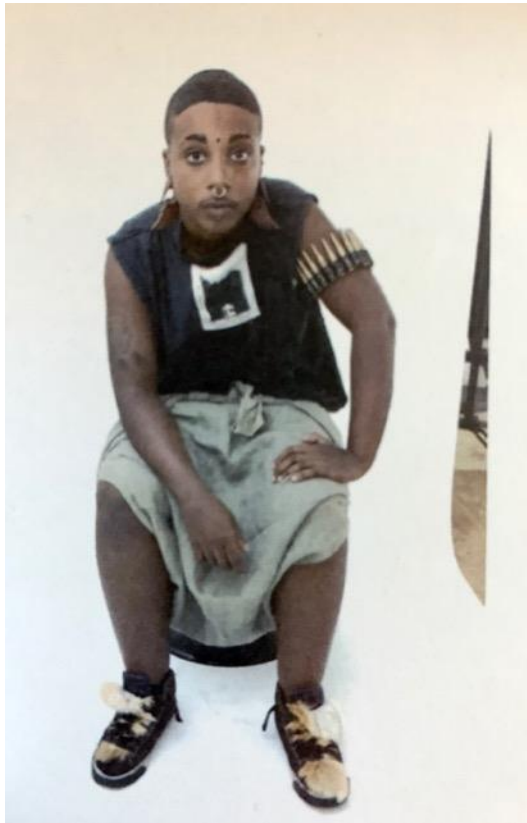
and Racial Identification," *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, (Ed. Les Back and John Solomos), (London: Routledge, 2000), 608.

⁸⁷ There are of course also processes of disidentification that people—particularly queer people and queer people of color—often engage in as means of creative self-enactment, as survival strategies, and modes of expanding identarian categories. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁸⁸ Kayiatos, Rocco and Amos Mac, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*, 2009-2019 Fashion issue of *Original Plumbing* #5.

Lupus. He goes on to discuss how he will likely not have top surgery, due to the number of surgeries and health issues he has already dealt with, but he also ties this into the theme of fashion, describing how he has been inspired to use fashion design to help him embody his identity more fully.

I didn't think that top surgery was going to be an option for me anymore. I was also at a point where I had stopped taking testosterone and was questioning my health and not only my mental gender identity. I knew that maybe I would never have the physical attributes of a bio male chest [...] I've created a series of personalized binders that I've entitled "second skin" and have a few up on my website.⁸⁹



**Figure 29. Sanyu from *Original Plumbing: The Fashion Issue*,
Image courtesy of the author**

⁸⁹ "Style Profiles: Sanyu," *Original Plumbing*, #5 Fashion Issue, 16.

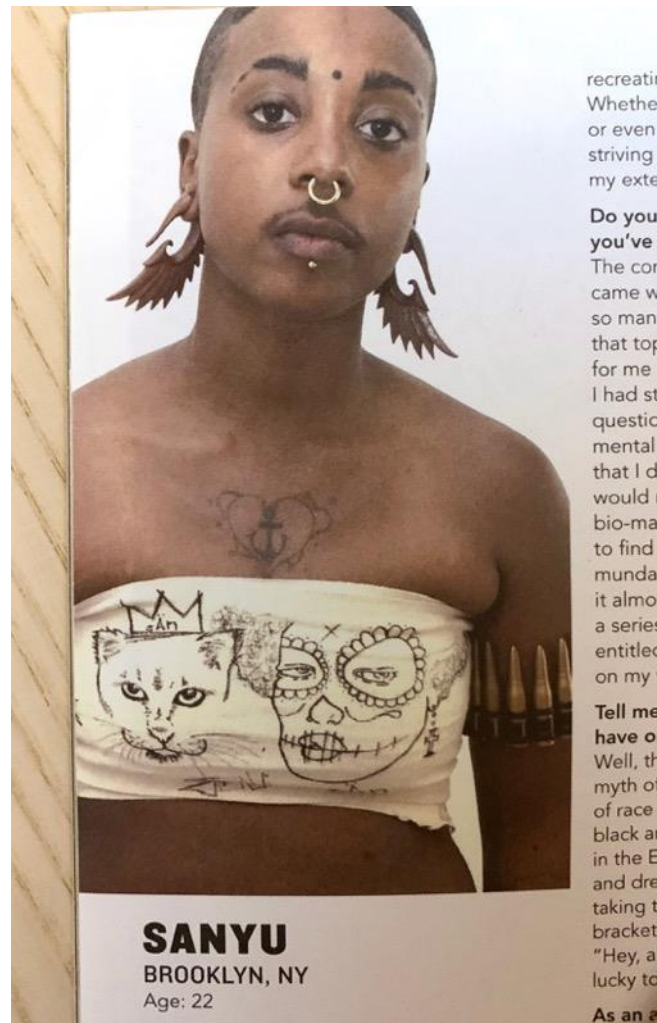


Figure 30. Sanyu from *Original Plumbing: The Fashion Issue*,

Images courtesy of the author

Sanyu disrupts expectations about masculinity, exhibiting their curvy body, wearing a binder over a curvy chest, and generally deploying aesthetics that read uneasily as either feminine or masculine within standard binary frameworks. As an example of one of the many ways, the portraits and stories

forwarded in *OP* expand conceptions of masculinity, Sanyu's intersectional identity challenges stereotypes and the identity category of black masculinity. Sanyu's visual and rhetorical self-articulation positions him outside of binary gender systems and also outside of essentialist ideas about blackness. Sanyu's production of self and fashion demonstrates new ways of being in the world. Sanyu's ability to transfigure and to challenge how we think of gender embodiment forwards new aesthetics and new ideas about the visibility of gender, masculinity, and how they intersect with blackness. In reflecting on profiles like that of Sanyu's, it becomes apparent that within the pages of *OP*, masculinity as an unexamined (or at least under-examined) category has begun to be opened up, explored, and queered. Reflecting on Sanyu's trans, gender-non-conforming black masculinity recalls Derek Conrad Murray's scholarly interventions in the queering of post-blackness and his insightful observations about the changes in the cultural framings of black masculinity in recent decades. In particular, I am referring to Murray's observation that "damaging social definitions about black men" have been produced via complex power systems and have continued to prop up conceptions about black masculinity that have often led to black masculinity being "regressively hetero-patriarchal."⁹⁰ Building on the contributions of culture producers and scholars by the likes of Thelma Goldin and Kobena

⁹⁰ Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 5.

Mercer, Murray suggests that it was during the African-American liberation struggle that black masculinity began to be defined as “black hyper-masculinity.”⁹¹ But, this is where Murray’s intervention in conversation with the portraits of Sanyu is essential. Such rigid definitions of reductive, essentialist, and oppressive conceptions of black masculinity are continually becoming outmoded. For as Murray observes, “essentialist dictates of African-Americans” are currently being critiqued and rewritten. A generational and ideological shift marks the Post-Black era that Murray investigates wherein younger African Americans are critiquing oppressive essentialist ideas about blackness and moving into a more expansive identification with blackness. Murray observes that younger artists and cultural producers now reflect a post-black movement, identity, and culture that queers the outmoded ideas of civil rights era blackness. Murray writes that scholars like Touré and Blake (amongst others) “express disdain for the essentialist dictates of African Americans who wield blackness as a restrictive yet esoteric set of guidelines and cultural codes that are nearly impossible to comprehend or adhere to.”⁹² Discussing the work of contemporary artists including Glenn Ligon, Kalup Linzy, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley, Murray’s intervention is to position these artists as queering the post-black

⁹¹ Ibid., 5.

⁹² Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 10 and 135. Throughout Murray’s text he takes up in great detail the lineages, discursive shifts, and influential scholars and artists who have been responsible for pushing art and culture to reach the post-black moment.

moment. In his discussion of the very queer gender disrupting work of Kalup Linzy, Murray writes, “his production gestures towards something new, a post-black futurity, and a fantasy space for dreams and longing of those on the margins of racial and sexual normativity.”⁹³ At the risk of doing a disservice to the complex, compelling, ever-nuanced work of Kalup Linzy, I will say for the sake of brevity here that what Murray notes about Linzy’s work gesturing toward intersectionalities yet to be and identities not yet seen but imagined is precisely what Sanyu’s collaborative self-representation imagines—aesthetics of identity beyond what has yet been seen.

In tranifesting himself/themselves as a post-black gender-non-conforming trans person, Sanyu’s portraits bring into being the post-black futurity that Linzy’s work “gestures towards,” while Linzy’s work exists in the realm of fantasy. Sanyu’s portraits, while performative, project a lived reality into the world that concretizes aesthetics of trans gender-non-conforming post-black masculinity that are certainly not reflective of a Black liberation-era blackness, and they are even beyond what Murray views as a queered blackness. Sanyu is exemplary of a burgeoning new generation of black queer trans folks pushing visual interventions further. Rather than mobilizing his/their likeness in a location dedicated to blackness, Sanyu appears in a publication under the sign of transness; thus Sanyu positions him/himself as trans in conversation with an expansive trans masculine field;

⁹³ Ibid., 186.

a gesture that suggests we view trans masculinity as a constituency that galvanizes under the self-identification of trans masculinity before any other identification—say, for example race, ethnicity or class. In this way, it seems that trans unmoors from essentialist ideas about identity categories and as a movement at its very ontology, rejects imposed exclusions in favor of embracing self-identification along with all the necessary intersectionalities.

In *the Fashion Issue*, readers encounter Glen Marla, whose self-described fashion style is “deep color embrace, old queen, Dan Connor or butch of the 90s, fierce and dapper dandy.”⁹⁴ (See Figure 31). Marla is photographed by Amos Mac in an image full of saturated colors with loud patterns, gold necklaces, a bandana, green eye shadow, no facial hair, black leather vest, zebra jumpsuit, and black leather heels. Marla’s look is femme and curvy, but their inclusion in *OP* serves to femme the aesthetic of masculinity, complicating the rigid assumptions one might have about the bounds of masculinity.

Marla’s femme attributes—in a context where dominant cultural binary gender norms suggest that masculinity not be colorful, not allow men to wear heels, not allow men to wear eye shadow, not allow men to have curvy bodies, and generally encourage angular and hard physiques—presents a radical disruption of expectations about masculinity. Marla’s embodiment

⁹⁴ Kayiatos, Rocco and Amos Mac, *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*, 2009-2019 Fashion issue of *Original Plumbing* #5, 56.

and their fashion choices challenge many of the aesthetics of cis masculinity and thus bring into view the unarticulated and regimented rules about binary gender.⁹⁵



GLENN MARLA
BROOKLYN, NY
AGE: 27

Figure 31. Glen Marla from *Original Plumbing: The Fashion Issue*, image courtesy of the author

For example, the images seem to ask how does one read eye shadow? How does one interpret a zebra-striped onesie? How does one view pointy, black leather stiletto boots? Are these aesthetics masculine? Are they feminine? Are they neither? How do they signify together? And why might

⁹⁵ One could draw comparisons here between binary gender regulation and how Murray describes blackness as restricted via esoteric guidelines that are simultaneously rigid and difficult to follow.

one make gendered assumptions about these looks? In deploying these aesthetics together under the sign of transmasculinity, they work to make plain the unarticulated gender coding of objects. The photo of Glen Marla forwards a de-essentializing of gender coding from objects and aesthetics, gesturing toward a rethinking of how we view all objects and aesthetics in terms of gender, and suggesting instead that objects and aesthetics be valued without assigning gendered signification.

Marla and Sanyu both offer expansive iterations of masculinity that question the limits of masculinity, offering challenges and critiques to gender structures. Both Marla and Sanyu reject rigid gender expectations and challenge assumptions about the aesthetics of masculinity and femininity and the way cultural ideologies instruct readings of visual signifiers to be laden with gendered attributes. In viewing pictures of Marla and Sanyu, we bear witness to gender tranifestations that expose the limits of masculinity and question the very arbitrary assigning of ideas to particular aesthetics, while simultaneously being inserted into trans-masculine visual culture; sanctioned by the publication as legitimate forms of trans masculinity, the instantiations push trans masculinity to more expansive understandings. Marla's and Sanyu's pictures seem to ask why you may or may not view them as masculine. Moreover, the pictures also question the very structure of gender as a matrix. The pictures of Marla and Sanyu suggest that viewers de-essentialize the gender attributes associated with particular visual aesthetics,

freeing various objects, outfits and accessories to be deployed without the necessary attribution of binary gender characteristics being ascribed to them. Or at least allowing objects with gendered assignments ascribed to them to be deployed alongside other objects with different gendered attributes.

Trans masculinity is always intersectional, and the frameworks into which we construct ourselves remain porous and open. Therefore, the parameters of self-articulation are not clear, thus enabling a diversity of trans masculine options.⁹⁶ The images in *OP* make clear that gender is indeed a malleable matrix, co-constituted by all of us. Turning through the pages, gender becomes visually manifest, and the multiple manifestations of trans-masculine genders expand the field exponentially, offering multiple and varied iterations of intersectional aesthetics of trans masculinity. In perusing *Original Plumbing*, it becomes readily apparent that this zine, dedicated to trans-male culture and trans-male issues and overflowing with diversity in its trans masculine portraits, acts as a cultural repository for such images. This pushing outward of masculinity and trans masculinity is achieved via a collaborative praxis of tranifestation that is facilitated by the photographic portraits.

What *OP* reveals is that gender is amorphous, and there are countless ways to be gendered; because genders are understood—in part—through referring to already circulating genders, aesthetics, performances, and tropes,

⁹⁶ The same may also be said about trans-femininity and gender non-conformity.

this is not necessarily always understood. Representations of race and class are necessarily part of any discourse on trans identity, and trans bodies reveal that all bodies are constituted visually.⁹⁷ While on the one hand we model ourselves after already visible forms of race and gender, on the other we also remain part of the co-constitution of race and gender, as both are flexible and discursively produced. The complex negotiation of identity formation is very much bound to visual culture, and in analyzing *OP*, we can begin to explore this complex negotiation.

Judith Butler has observed gender as a complex field, produced, maintained, and challenged via lived interventions. I want to suggest that, particularly in the context of *OP* as a visual culture intervention, it becomes apparent that gender is also regulated and produced in relation to processes of racialization and the field of race writ large and via visual culture. We come to understand ourselves through viewing visual culture and make ourselves legible to others within culture primarily via visibility. And thus, just as the images in *OP* suggest that we have agency to shape gender, so do the portraits suggest that we have agency to shape expectations of race. Is it possible then that in undoing gender, we may also be witnessing the undoing of race?⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Eva Hayward, "Spiderwoman," in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 255-273. Also see; K. Anthony Appiah, "Racial Identity and Racial Identification," in Les Back and John Solomos, eds., *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁹⁸ Judith Butler also contends, "gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. See *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge,

Sanyu's portrait photographs do not only forward under-represented iteration of transness and non-binary masculine gender, but the picture disrupts dominant modes of imaging black masculinity as well. As Snorton has suggested, we have agency in the construction of both gender and race.⁹⁹ What pictures want, one might then say, will always be contingent on who is imaged, how they are imaged and who is viewing.

Archival Tension: Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos As Ego Ideals

Observing the nuanced emergence of trans masculine iterations proliferating in *Original Plumbing*, at first it may seem that the citational practices trans men engage in will endlessly augment; however, viewing Kayiatos and Mac as the burgeoning norms of trans masculinity—iconicities that the founders both enact and try to supplant—trans masculinity becomes a field that is continually being performed and created by all those who identify as such. A field in the making interpellates and articulates the established and understood forms and aesthetic references concurrently.

2004), 42. Butler contends, “gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized.” For more on the complexities of interconnections between gender and racialization, see C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and Derek Conrad Murray, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

⁹⁹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 2.

OP is not only an intervention into culture, but it constitutes its own form of popular culture as it reflects a community of trans-masculine people sharing their lives and ways of being. The radical interpellation occurring in *OP* as the first trans-masculine publication is staggering—the first issue was sold out before it was even printed, which suggests that readers were ravenous for this type of popular culture and were compelled to identify with even the very idea of the zine. As discussed by Louis Althusser, the process of being interpellated into cultural ideology occurs when one is hailed, and one responds,¹⁰⁰ wherein one recognizes a call directed at herself, himself, or themselves, and responds to it. Arguably, Mac and Kayiatos have established their own cultural ideology, for, as Althusser defined it, cultural ideology is a “system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of [...] a social group.”¹⁰¹ For Althusser, it was also an “imaginary assemblage (bricolage)” outside of history; it is a dream.¹⁰²

In creating a visual field of trans-masculinity and interpellating trans-masculine-identified folks, Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos create an aesthetic and cultural ideology of trans masculinity. Althusser was careful to state that many ideologies are determined by class, region, and historical moment.¹⁰³ In examining the timeline of *OP*, we can begin to see a tension occurring

¹⁰⁰ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy* (CITY: Press, 2001), 174.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 159.

between the intent of the founding editors to include a diversity of perspectives and representations and the galvanizing and establishing of a particular set of trans-masculine people being incorporated. As Tiq Milan describes in the Forward to *Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture*:

In every issue, trans guys from Brooklyn to Germany could feel seen, validated, and part of something bigger than themselves. *Original Plumbing* was the example that so many young trans guys needed. It was the zine that made them know they weren't a freak or wrong or unworthy . . . *OP* was proof that we could live and be beautiful and loved.¹⁰⁴

Trans men could feel they had community, allies, and could learn about their community and imagine futures for themselves, based on the paths of others similar to them. As a commodity and a significant point of visual culture, *OP* reflects what John Storey observes, following Barthes and Saussure: that popular culture consumers “seek identity in consumption.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, one literally buys into what one identifies with and finds identity in what one purchases. The process of consuming the zine becomes a method by which readers also self-actualize in response to the community. Storey argues that cultural repertoires exist as necessary for meaning to be produced, and that producing meaning and visual language is contingent on location, text, time, and the “cultural formation of the reader.”¹⁰⁶ *OP* demonstrates the

¹⁰⁴ Mac et al., eds., x.

¹⁰⁵ John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Cultures: Theories and Methods* (Athens, [Ga.]: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 114.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

functioning of how popular culture is co-constituted by communities, interpellating and informing individuals about how we should be. The idea of a trans-male zine calls for trans men to buy in and to submit themselves to the zine, by which they identify with its culture and shape how this culture will manifest.

This process reflects what Slavoj Žižek posits: that in the contemporary moment we must adjust our conceptions of how systems of representations function in culture, forwarding that today we know what we are doing when we engage in a system of ideology and representations, and yet we do it anyway, rather than what previously we believed to be true. The previous belief Žižek refers to is Marx's thinking, which forwarded what now seems to be a naïveté that postulated that folks remained unaware of what they were doing and yet engaged in various processes that upheld dominant cultural ideologies.¹⁰⁷ Today the ethos of *OP*, the influx of co-contributors, and the collaborative ethic of producing trans masculinity as a diverse and amorphous field showcases a new cultural commitment to co-producing culture and identities.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 28.

¹⁰⁸ This is striking in that 2009 (*OP*'s founding year) landed in an era prior to the influx of selfies and social media, and prior to the exponential influx of trans people posting on YouTube and Instagram. Thus *OP* signaled a cultural shift prior to social media in which the practice of self-imaging was already occurring, suggesting that the power of self-imaging and self-creation as reflected in Žižek's observations was already transpiring, and that social media was simply an extension of the cultural occurrence rather than social media facilitating this trend.

For trans male lives to be intelligible to each other and to broader communities, it is necessary to fit, at least partially, into already existing templates in order to be legible. Appiah has observed that “collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and telling their life stories.”¹⁰⁹ There is an emerging aesthetic viewable in *OP* which is part of the negotiation of becoming legible but also works to partially close down what legibility looks like. In interpellating and co-constituting a trans-masculine visual field, a politics of respectability emerges that recalls what K. Anthony Appiah has formulated as a warning: that demanding respect for people (he uses the examples of blacks and gays) requires a script that goes with being an African America or having same-sex desires. He suggests we be wary of formulating “proper” ways of being black and gay, for such expectations come with demands and requirements to be met. Appiah here notes that those of us who “takes autonomy seriously” will need to question whether we have not “replaced one kind of tyranny with another.”¹¹⁰ In the moment of new trans awareness and emerging trans visual fields and identities, we must be careful, critical, and aware of how we shape the discourse around trans identities, so as not to rigidly outline reductive essentialized parameters of what trans masculinity can be. Or as micha cárdenas argues, “the abolitionist,

¹⁰⁹ K. Anthony Appiah, "Racial Identity and Racial Identification," *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, (Ed. Les Back and John Solomos), (London: Routledge, 2000), 613.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 614.

anticolonial anti-normative tradition of transgender politics needs to be actively centered with actions that go beyond visibility.”¹¹¹ So, in a project that is invested in creating representations of trans masculinity while simultaneously attempting not to foreclose potentialities, *OP* is a prime example of the complexity and problematics of visibility. In galvanizing visual fields and creating portraits of otherwise under-imaged constituencies, one must be wary of over-determining the scripts about how people come to be and which narratives are acceptable.

As W.J.T. Mitchell has observed, pictures are bound up with discourses of identity formation in culture, and the impulses pressuring visual cultures are often the same as those pressuring personal narratives. For example, in their recent book, *Sissy: A Coming of Gender Story*, Jacob Tobia offers a playful criticism of the pervasive trans trajectory in the form of a mad lib. (See Figure 32). This narrative reflects a long lineage of trans pathologization that has become part of trans vernacular. It perpetuates a necessitating of a trapped-in-the-wrong-body story and trajectory of fixing.¹¹²

Tobia’s mad lib reflects Appiah’s observation and warning that “Collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves; it is not that there is one way that blacks

¹¹¹Micha cárdenas, “Dark Shimmer,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 170.

¹¹² Jacob Tobia, *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story* (New York: Putnam, 2019). 12-13.

should behave, but that there are proper black modes of behavior.”¹¹³

Appiah’s insightful observation about the politics of respectability and visibility outlines that which all should remain wary of, one must be careful not to close down what is possible or plausible. In bringing transmasculinity into broader cultural consciousness, it becomes crucial to not over-determine one particular way of being trans, one trope of intersectional trans identity, or one overwhelming narrative of trans experience. In thinking about the relationship between who is viewed and the parameters and expectations of said constituencies, we should take Appiah’s anxiety to heart and reflect on how bringing trans masculinity into view risks closing down which trans masculinities can come into view.

Since *OP*’s first issue, Mac and Kayiatos have consistently featured self-images. Kayiatos, a prominent musician in the American queer scene of the early 2000s, was one of the first public figures to openly transition from butch-identified lesbian to male. Since then, he has also become a prominent cultural figure in the trans male community; his likeness has become (perhaps) synonymous with trans masculinity. Likewise, due in large part to his continued self-imaging alongside Kayiatos in *OP*, Mac has also become a symbol of trans masculinity.

¹¹³ K. Anthony Appiah, “Racial Identity and Racial Identification,” in Les Back and John Solomos, eds., *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 613.

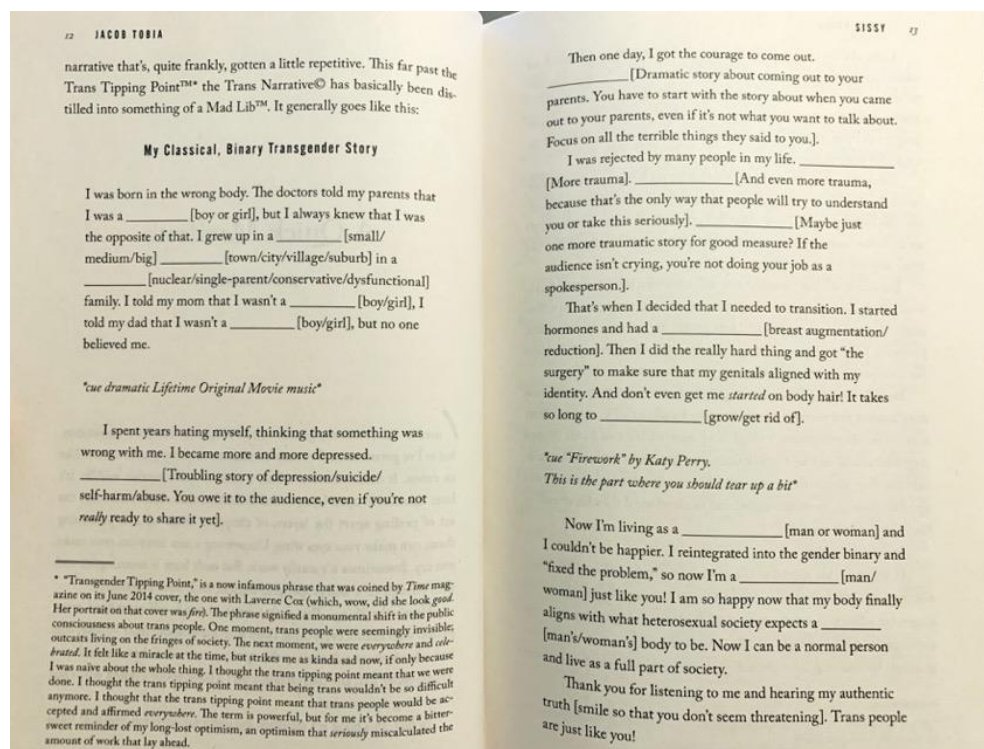


Figure 32. Image of Jacob Tobia's gender mad lib,¹¹⁴ Photograph courtesy of the author

Over the last ten years, not only have Kayiatos' and Mac's commitments as editors of the zine shaped its direction, its inclusions, and exclusions, but their self-images have anchored the visual aesthetics of trans masculinity.

¹¹⁴ Jacob Tobia, *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2019), 12-13. mad lib reflecting the dominant transgender narrative.



Figure 33. Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos on p. xii of *OP: The Best Ten Years of Trans Male Culture*, photograph courtesy of the author

For example, on page xii of *OP: The Best Ten Years of Trans Male Culture* (June 2019), a full-page photograph features Mac and Kayiatos. (See

Figure 33). Mac sits on a chair, feet leaning outward, hands dangling in between splayed legs, his cardigan unbuttoned halfway down to reveal his tattooed chest and thin, pale physique. His head is cocked to the side and his tongue licks the corner of his mouth beneath a dark mustache. Behind him, Kayiatos stands on one leg, arm behind his head in an awkward and ironically sexy pose; he, too, reveals a tattooed chest beneath a cardigan sweater. Both figures look to the right of the frame, eyes averted; both wear dark jeans and seem to playfully perform hunky masculinity, inviting us to continue looking at them. In front of a hot pink backdrop, their studliness seems slightly campy and queer.¹¹⁵ The images appear early on in the book; thus, the editors anchor the images and the way we view subjects that appear after them. Mac's tongue licking the corner of his mouth, for instance, and Kayiatos' arm behind his head, coupled with the teasing reveal of torso, suggest that the subjects campily invite a desiring gaze. Their averted eyes also invite us to peruse their physiques unchecked. Frontal, still, no setting save for the hot pink behind them, the image recalls studio portrait photography and traditions of the portrait paintings of monarchs, or Catherine Opie's studio photographs of the queer community made to aesthetically reference the history of Western portrait painting. Mac and Kayiatos appear multiple times throughout the publication and often in such a self-aware performative manner. As the

¹¹⁵ The photo is credited to Lydia Daniller. See: <https://lydiadaniller.com/about>.

editors, their physicalities become intertwined with the visual aesthetics of the zine.

With these portraits, Mac and Kayiatos become the “ego ideals” that readers of *OP* potentially measure themselves against and perform themselves to reflect. By this, I mean to build on Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage, wherein the subject sees a representation of himself that is more perfect and more desirable than himself, and at this moment he recognizes that which “he would like to be.”¹¹⁶ The significance of Mac and Kayiatos’ repeated appearances in *OP* serves to make themselves visibly knowable as the editors and as the founders—not that they are the arbiters of taste, but rather as the editors and poster boys they are: the embodiments of and master signifiers of trans masculinity.

Slavoj Žižek has noted the recurring instance in which subjects are sutured to such a master-signifier that interpellates them. His discussion of interpellation suggests that the *point de caption* both calls the individual and fixes their identification to it.¹¹⁷ In creating the first significant cultural intervention of trans-masculinity and forwarding themselves as the faces of *OP* or the ego ideals of trans-masculinity, Mac, Kayiatos, and *Original Plumbing* encapsulate the complex and nuanced issue of creating a field while

¹¹⁶ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Radical Thinkers 9 (London; New York: Verso, 2005). 177. Also see: Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: Norton, 2006).

¹¹⁷ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Phronesis). (London; New York: Verso, 1989),101.

attempting not to overdetermine who will identify under its sign. In interpellating the trans-masculine community, *OP* may also effectively circumscribe trans-masculinity. As important as the notion of the ego ideal is in establishing a sign under which communities can galvanize, such images also create social pressure among trans men to perform their masculinity in ways that reflect the ideal(s). In turn, readers of *OP* may feel success or failure regarding their trans-masculinity, based on how well they replicate Mac and Kayiatos' corporeal aesthetics.

Mac and Kayiatos are likely aware that, as two relatively youthful, hip, artsy Caucasian transmen, their look impacts the folks interpellated by them, but as such they at least attempt to be inclusive.¹¹⁸ Coming from queer, feminist communities in the Bay Area, Kayiatos and Mac came of age in social spaces that were daily politically invested in intersectional queer, trans, and feminist politics. They approach the project of *OP* with a politically minded, inclusive, DIY ethos and have worked intentionally to create a space that could be inclusive of multiple voices, even though as founders, they were going to (inadvertently or not) shape the publications' inclusions and exclusions.

The political ethics undergirding the approach to *OP* as a cultural intervention can be fleshed out along with Devon W. Carbado's writing on

¹¹⁸ The ethos of *OP* is to include as many trans-masculine people as possible by soliciting content from readers. As seen in above discussion at note 52.

privilege. Carbado proposes a rethinking of discrimination and privilege, insightfully articulating that we have a “privilege-centered understanding of discrimination.”¹¹⁹ Rather than focusing on the perpetuation of discrimination, our language situates the perpetrators in a position of privilege. This falsely seems to suggest that discrimination is an act that requires intentionality on the part of the perpetrator. Carbado attributes this to the desire to be “politically palatable,” and forwards that it enables those of us who do not critically engage our privilege concerning “racism, sexism, and homophobia” to continue to be perpetrators of discrimination.¹²⁰ To develop his thinking further, I suggest that the concept of the palatable politic belies that we are not only engaging in discrimination without admitting or being aware of it, we are *benefitting* from systems that are racist, sexist, and homophobic, and in fact benefitting from racism, sexism, and homophobia. This positioning is different than discriminating. Depending on the social interaction, we may not always engage in discriminatory acts, but socially we are likely (to greater or lesser degree, depending on our identities) to consistently benefit from racism, sexism, and homophobia—as well as transphobia, classism, ableism, ethnocentrism, and cis privilege. Carbado makes the cogent point that such systems create an “obligation on the part of those of us with privileged identities to expose and challenge them.”¹²¹ His call to arms is moral as well

¹¹⁹ Devon W. Carbado, “Privilege,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 191.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

as pragmatic, in that we cannot change systems without changing personal and interpersonal relations. If we do nothing, he suggests, we will continue to perpetuate the systems. He traces a few types of privilege in efforts to disrupt them, and focusing specifically on male and heterosexual privilege.¹²²

Mac and Kayiatos work to de-center themselves as Caucasian, male poster boys of *OP*—primarily by expanding the archive of who is included in the zine. The tension that arises around bringing trans masculine identities into view while working to not close down its potential expansiveness parallels the question of the archive itself. To create an archive, some delineation is necessary; otherwise, there can be no boundary between content (i.e., archive) and exterior information. In creating *OP*, even as a zine dedicated to trans-masculine culture and issues, it quickly proves an archive of portraiture and reveals galvanizing trans-masculine aesthetics. Nearly every single cover image is a photographic portrait in the traditional, Western Art Historical sense, each filled by either a waist-up image of a single trans-masculine person or a close shot of torso or face. The majority of trans men occupying these covers appear to be between twenty and thirty years old and relatively

¹²² Devon W. Carbado, “Privilege,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 192. 194. As has been widely observed by scholars, the concept of neutrality is a farce. Nothing can be neutral when it comes to identity, ideas, or visual culture; everything is highly ideologically informed, specifically situated, and any suggestion otherwise must be challenged and de-centered. Carbado refers to Caucasian status as having a “transparency phenomenon.” This is also discussed in the first chapter and the work of artist Wynne Neilly.

thin, fit, and able-bodied; many have tattoos, and most are scantily clad or shirtless.

Such images might, in Derrida's thinking on archives, lead to questions regarding the complex and often fraught ways in which trans-male visibility is delimited. Because of the relative newness of the visual field of trans masculinity, the icons and parameters of established representational tropes, aesthetics, and regimes we pull from are fewer than the visual repertoire of masculinity writ large. Nevertheless, *OP* represents a growing archive of trans-masculine representations, and as such, these images create representational ideals.

Within the discourse of archival scholarship, there has been much work done concerning different modes of recuperation, reparation, reproduction, and revision of colonial archives. These efforts have intervened in the exclusionary practices of colonial archives and have changed our understanding of the past. Subaltern archives are often excavated through the reworking of existing colonial archives, but what is transpiring with *OP* lies outside of these modes. The significance of *OP* is not found in its proposal of a new model of the archive, but in its gesture toward the possibility that in the future, the presence of alternative archives will be understood as possible, and thus marginalized knowledge and histories will not necessarily need excavation from the rubble of colonial sites. *OP* thus points us to consider

how we might see the archive as malleable and to question the traditional model of the closed archive as complete and comprehensive.

Now in its tenth and final year of publication, *OP* constitutes an archive of a particular moment that transpired along with the rise of recognition of trans people by mainstream culture. The impulse to document an extensive and diverse community as *Original Plumbing* does is in a sense the same drive that prompts one to continue creating a comprehensive understanding of an already existing archive. The archive of transmen already exists in the world in plentiful diversity, but the process of recording the entirety of it in a form of a zine (and a website) remains an impossible task; yet the founders are compelled to try. In an effort to make this archiving task easier and to embrace the dedication to being inclusive, *OP*'s editors have continued to change how they include content, as articulated below:

After years of growth and interest we have expanded the content to reflect the larger trans community. *Original Plumbing* Online is comprised of writers and readers from around the world that are trans male, trans female, non-binary trans and their allies. We offer content that is timely and relevant, dealing specifically with issues that are important to the trans community.¹²³

Archives, as traditionally understood, have been discussed and critiqued by the likes of Derrida and other archive scholars in terms of the ways in which knowledge formation is built and housed, constructed, and curated. This discourse has also considered the ever-present exclusions of

¹²³ Ibid.

certain other types of knowledge formations. Hence the creation of an archive necessitates some type of exclusionary practices in order to delineate a boundary between the given archive and everything else. Within the relatively recent discourse and production of and around archives, an impulse to move away from the hermeneutic and cloistered forms of exclusionary historicities has been explored, and along with it, there has also been a call to action that archives be created in the present and embody different practices of knowledge formation. Historically, it seems that archivists, scholars, and archive visitors were uninterested in the method and authority of an archive's construction. With the event of Derrida's *Archive Fever*, a palpable shift and reflection of interest occurred in the relation between the archive and the future, which emerged in scholarly discourse. Derrida argues that the current notion of the archive is neither "unified" nor "a given," as archivists contend, and that instead, the archive remains in a state of transition of pluralism and in-between-ness:

The question of the archive is not ... a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal, *an achievable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow.¹²⁴

Derrida suggests that we begin to unpack how archives have structured and reflected the thinking of the societies they delineate and document.

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 36.

Derrida's thinking might raise questions regarding the complex and often fraught ways in which trans-male visibility is delimited. In creating an archive in the present, we structure how a society or culture will one day know its foundation and its history, and we also mark what we give significance to in the present.

Similarly, concerned with the function of the archive to society and its relationship to history and power, Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls on his readers to become more critically engaged with history, both as we encounter history through text and as we shape it in the present moment.¹²⁵ He urges us to recall and recount history from a critical stance. Not only does he ask that we become acutely aware of how history has been created in the past through processes of exclusions, erasures, and disavowals, but he also suggests we become vigilant about the ways we are creating history in the present. This notion of critical engagement with the temporality of the archive as produced in the present is not unique to Derrida and Trouillot; the position has been articulated by other scholars considering the archive but perhaps most poignant to the issue of creating an archive of trans-masculinity in *OP* is the thinking of trans studies scholar Mel Chen.¹²⁶

Chen has observed that, in the contemporary moment, it is necessary to rethink the archive, particularly as it pertains to queer and trans

¹²⁵ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Beacon Press, 1995).

¹²⁶ Trouillot, Anthony, *The Ethics of Identity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 3.

communities. Chen proposes archives as being about community and self-creation rather than as “static repositories,”¹²⁷ as they are often viewed. Chen’s observations are insightful when applied to *OP* as an archive and about the opening up of how we think of archives more broadly. *OP* as a publication seems to demonstrate precisely what Chen observes: archives, are in fact repositories, housing quantities of information or, in this case, images and information about trans-masculine people. But they are also about the formation of community. Chen contends that archives for trans people are about their future selves. For Chen, the archive is not about collecting the past—as we once believed archives were concerned with, and indeed some archives still are—but for trans folks, archives are about the present *and* the future.¹²⁸ His observations challenge us on how to view archives, removing the onus off of collecting relics and emphasizing instead how archives structure what will be. *OP* has been dedicated to structuring the present and future of trans-masculine community since its inception. As the *OP* founders put it:

When we first started *Original Plumbing*, it was [...] to create something that was a necessity. Virtual platforms for self-representation didn’t exist then like they do now. The trans male community was basically invisible. We knew there was a need for

¹²⁷ Mel Y. Chen, “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and The Internet” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 150.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

something like *OP*; that, at its simplest, it would be entertaining, and, at its best, it could save lives.¹²⁹

When Mac and Kayiatos began dreaming up a transmale quarterly over a decade ago, they had no idea the impact it would have. *OP* has succeeded in its role as a cultural intervention and space of community forming. It has also structured the future of trans masculinity by interpolating trans-masculine-identified people *and* the co-creation of a trans-masculine archive.

Chen has also stressed that community-specific archives help to facilitate individual self-actuating.¹³⁰ In collectively producing representations of trans masculinity, the production of the archive has necessitated signs coming into being under the heading of “Trans masculinity.” In the spirit of considering archives that are actively attempting to be nontraditional, inclusive, accessible rather than sequestered, and embracing of multiple viewpoints, *OP*’s archive points us to consider how we might see *any* archive as malleable and thus to question the traditional model of the closed archive as “complete and comprehensive.” As we move forward with the discourse of archive scholarship and archivization, we might ask: How does an archive

¹²⁹ Amos Mac, Rocco Kayiatos, and Tiq Milan, eds., *Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture*, xiii. The founding editors state that they were beginning the project for personal creative freedom.

¹³⁰ Mel Chen, “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 147-160, 151.

committed to changeability and openness change our relationships to knowledge in general? To answer such a question requires changing existing power structures and enabling a multiplicity of voices, examples, and methods.

Concluding Note

Trans is predicated on the disjuncture of the outward physical appearance of self and an invisible interior feeling of self, which ostensibly will be something achieved in the future. Trans proposes a complex relation to temporality, drawing attention to the relation between past and future in the present. As many trans scholars have observed, trans rejects the truth of the visible in favor of a commitment to how one identifies; trans as a method offers us a reminder that the surface in view need not have any correlation to what we should assume or expect about the subject.¹³¹ A trans visual studies perspective and/or gaze directed at photographic representations or a human subject, then, will unfix the surface representations from the subject and view the body as an image contingent on aesthetics, place and time, perception, and ideological framing of the viewer. The trans gaze will view the subject as a

¹³¹ Micha cárdenas, “Dark Shimmer” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017). Also see Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 96. Also see Sidney Cunningham, “How the ‘Non-Duped’ Pass,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4291520>.

performative representation of a version of a subject but will recognize the limitations of the surface and view skeptically any attempt to offer an assumption or essentialization while always locating the subject temporally.

CHAPTER FOUR

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MATRIX OF VISUAL APPREHENSION: THE GENDER-NON-CONFORMING SELFIES OF ALOK VAID-MENON

“I would not exist if I hadn’t created the image of myself. And that “I” is a collaborative I, one that comes from interlocutors both online and offline imagining ways to exist outside of the Western colonial gender binary.”¹

- Alok Vaid-Menon

A search on Instagram for #transgender reveals over 9.6 million images.² These images are predominantly selfies, and even a quick perusal of the search results reveals myriad intersectional, radical corporealities of self-identifying trans-self-image makers. The massive proliferation of images represents a plethora of non-binary gender identities, including a vast array of ethnic and racial identifications and a wide variety of body types, abilities and self-image makers who reside in numerous geographic and subcultural locations and offer a variety of self-representations of many sexual orientations, ages, and self-imaging aesthetics. The images reflect a myriad of ways to be trans and constitute a broad

¹ Personal interview with Alok Vaid-Menon on Jan 10th, 2018.

² This figure is as of May 2020, which is up from 8.7 in August 2019, and up from 7 million in September of 2018. A search for “#transgenderwoman” reveals 143 thousand images as of May 2020 up from 94.6 thousand in August 2019 and a search for “#transgendermale” yields 51.1 thousand tags as of May 2020 up from 43.5 thousand as of August 2019.

and continually growing visual field of trans self-representations.³ Trans selfies are significant because they allow trans people to picture themselves how they want to be seen and they counteract misrepresentations and reductive ways that dominant culture depicts trans people. Trans selfies are also mobilized to raise critical questions about the intersections of hybrid identities, to build community, and to mobilize politically.⁴ The diversity of self-images found when searching #transgender and #trans reveals that selfies are being used to create self-representations that are exponentially diverse, and often visually and ideologically disruptive of mainstream culture while also critically and creatively engaging with the politics of aesthetics of representation. The growing genre of trans selfies demonstrates the radical potential of selfies –that they facilitate the visualization of new identity constituencies, challenge the indexicality of the photograph and illustrate how gender and racialization are articulated and regulated in the visual encounter.

When trans femmes and non-binary, trans people deploying femme aesthetics create self-representations, the very act of self-imaging is an intervention in the visual field. These representations push back against dominant

³ This figure is as of May 2020, which is up from 8.7 in August 2019, and up from 7 million in September of 2018. A search for “#transgenderwoman” reveals 143 thousand images as of May 2020 up from 94.6 thousand in August 2019 and a search for “#transgendermale” yields 51.1 thousand tags as of May 2020 up from 43.5 thousand as of August 2019.

⁴ Chris Roney, “Trans Teen Snap 1,400 Selfies to Document His Transition,” in *Passport Blogs*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.passportmagazine.com/blog/archives/45378-trans-teen-snaps-1400-selfies-to-document-his-transition/> (accessed December 22, 2018).

James Michael Nichols, “#WeJustNeedToPee Trans Bathroom Selfies Campaign Goes Viral,” in *Huffpost Gay Voices*, March 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/12/trans-bathroom-selfie-campaign_n_6855430.html (accessed April 20, 2015).

visual culture, asserting their lives as intersectional, shifting, and unlike the trans stereotypes prevalent in mainstream culture. In efforts to create self-representations otherwise unseen, and to explore identities and corporealities otherwise unimaginable, trans and gender non-conforming individuals prolifically develop self-representations and co-constitute new identity categories via social media. These political, artistic acts transpire most prolifically on social media.

Selfies are a potentially radically disruptive form of self-imagining. They challenge established modes of production, circulation, and consumption.⁵ Producing representations within the relatively democratized space of the Internet, selfies defy established systems of power. Art historian and visual studies scholar Jennifer A. González has observed that increasingly, contemporary forms of activist art utilize the Internet and mass media while also interrogating “the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze.”⁶ Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, unprecedented trans and non-binary self-images of radical intersectional subjectivities circulate prolifically on social media. Enacting what González observes, trans selfies are intervening in the

⁵ Circulation, production, consumption, and regulation are the concerns of Cultural Studies, the underlining methodology I employ for this project. For a fuller discussion on cultural studies see Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, Media and Popular Culture 7 (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

⁶ Mary Flanagan et al., “Feminist Activist Art, A Roundtable Forum,” 24-31, August 2005, *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1, Feminist Activist Art, John Hopkins University Press Spring, 2007, 1-22.

politics of representations, corporeality, the gaze and more as will be discussed in the coming pages.

Looking at the proliferation of self-imaging by trans femmes and gender non-conforming folks on social media today one cannot help but to recall the now decades long debates in feminist scholarship and artistic practice that have contended with art historical exclusions, power dynamics, critiques and interventions made by feminist scholars and artist alike. Indeed, in their prolific self-imaging trans selfie-makers enact what feminist scholars have noted as unifying disparate interdisciplinary methods of feminist scholars, activists, and artists --a shared commitment to understanding theory as most significant when it relates directly to daily lives.⁷

⁷ Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, eds., *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Is a collection of key texts on feminist thought from a variety of key scholars of the time working with feminist ideas. A key driving force of feminist scholars and practitioners alike is an investment in striving for social change. Generally speaking, from its inception feminist theory has existed at the intersection of three distinct schools of thought. On the one hand, feminist theory is indebted to liberalism, but it is also profoundly influenced Marxism as well as studies in human sexuality. Liberalism developed in the 17th and 18th centuries is mainly indebted to the philosophies of Locke and Rousseau. As a concept it is invested in securing the “rights of man,” these concepts, lead to the very real-life manifestations in the French and U.S. revolutions and when adopted by feminists were applied to mobilize for the rights of women. The second school of thought that influenced feminist thinking was that of Marxism. For as Marxists have argued, there can be no real social justice without economic equality. Thirdly, feminist thought was highly informed by studies in human sexuality of the late 19th century and in particular the work of Wilhelm Reich, Margaret Mead, and Erik Erikson. It must be noted as well that Frankfurt school thinkers especially Herbert Marcuse were crucial for feminist discourse, as feminist thought embraced sexual freedom as being key to women’s liberation.

Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, eds., *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). feminist scholarship by authors Kate Millet, Shulamith Firestone and the ensuing works of Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow and Mary Daly, relied heavily on the writing of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedman. The notion of “feminine Consciousness” comes out of a reflection of women’s position in society in relation to patriarchy. Critical to the feminist project was a rethinking and reshaping of women’s social lives. However, these early works of feminist scholarship rely heavily on

Trans selfies enable self-image-makers to see themselves in visual culture, an affirmation of one's existence. These image producers also explore how their self-imagined corporealities trigger responses informed by "matrixes of intelligibility"⁸ and "racializing assemblages."⁹ The physical remove of the image-maker is critical. If such representations provoke acts of aggression, the distance of social media shields the bodies of their makers from bodily harm. Many selfies are also in critical dialogue with art historical traditions and contemporary photographic practices, and indeed are changing what contemporary photography is and how it functions.

While initially the interventions that selfies make may seem to be a radical break with art history, they in fact sit in a long lineage of artistic interventions and build on a legacy of intersectional feminist, queer praxis of self-imaging. The question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics, canonized methods and respected media, have remained constant points of contention throughout Western art history and discourses of self-portraiture. Although not always explicitly stated, in the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been associated with the work of canonized artists made within specific media-based, aesthetic and conceptual frameworks, and visual traditions. In Western art this translates

Beauvoir's conception of the "Other" and an impulse to reposition the woman as the center of her destiny, and move women out of their position of, what Beauvoire referred to as "the second sex."

⁸ For more on Butler's discussion of the "Matrix of intelligibility," see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁹ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

into the canonization of self-portraits by recognized artists produced using traditional and established materials.¹⁰ Beyond building on a lineage of radical feminist interventions into visual culture, trans selfies are also in discourse with post-feminist photographic practices, as trans and non-binary self-imaging practices today reflect what Derek Conrad Murray has observed transpiring with young woman's practices of self-imaging on social media. In "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media" Murray offers insightful theorization of what he views as a post-feminist movement reflected in the ethos of many young women self-imaging on social media. The selfies of the post-feminist movement are characterized by a disinterest in taking on the problems of mainstream depictions of one's constituency in favor of self-imaging in ways that mobilize the self as sexual, empowered and intersectional subject engaging in imaging practices in discourses with others from one's community.¹¹ The post-feminist ethic moves beyond earlier feminist projects and rather than offering a critique of dominant media representations creating new aesthesis via viewing

¹⁰ The art-historical tradition of the canonization of self-portraits of Caucasian, masculine corporealities is highly disproportionate and suggests that these subjects should be deeply considered and understood as infinitely nuanced, complicated, and revered. Sidelining and erasing representations of other subjects from the canon of self-portraiture in this art-historical tradition symbolically marks non-imaged constituencies as not valuable to said culture. Cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, and visual studies scholars Mieke Bal and Richard Dyer, among others, have observed that it is in the visual field that identity constituencies and livable subjectivities are negotiated. See Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular.'" R. Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

¹¹ Derek Conrad Murray, 'Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,' *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2 November 2015): 490–516, doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967.

perspectives disinterested in debates about the “dominant male gaze” and investing in projects of worlding.¹²

Trans Femmes in Mainstream Media Today

To more fully apprehend the significance of trans self-imaging praxis today it is necessary to sketch out the visual field into which these trans self-representations intervene. The deployment of trans femmes in dominant visual culture is intertwined with heteropatriarchal systems, which both objectify women and demean femininity. In her text *Trans-Misogyny Primer*, trans scholar and activist Julia Serano observes how mainstream culture mobilizes trans femmes in ways that depict them as sexualized bodies in “titillating and lurid fashion.”¹³ The heightened sexualisation and exploitation of trans femmes in dominant visual culture works to dehumanize them in ways that go beyond even the exploitation of cis women. In locations where heteropatriarchal, Caucasian supremacy and cis aesthetic standards remain dominant ideologies, trans femmes continue to be highly fetishized and objectified.

Rarely imaged in mainstream culture, trans femmes of color, when depicted, are overwhelmingly seen as working in dangerous professions, marginally housed, and often victims of sexual assault and various hate crimes.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Julia Serano, *Trans-misogyny Primer*, <http://www.juliaserano.com/av/TransmisogynyPrimer-Serano.pdf> (accessed 19 October 2016); Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

These representations reflect mainstream culture's beliefs about trans women of color. Mobilizing minimal representations of trans women of color, when depicted they are repeatedly imaged as stereotypic caricatures, demonstrating trans women of color as only ever tragic, unfulfilled victims. A particularly poignant version of this problem came in the form of the feature film *Tangerine* (2015).



Figure 34. *Tangerine* (2015) promotional image

Lauded for starring two trans women of color as the protagonists, the 2015 feature, *Tangerine* was the most recent and widely popular representation of trans

women of color in mainstream media. The two protagonists, Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra are played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor, both African American trans women. On the one hand, lauded for casting actual trans women of color, not men, to play starring roles (as is often the practice in cinema), the characters and plot of the film reinforce and reify racist, transphobic expectations, and stereotypes about trans women of color.¹⁴ (See Figure 34). The protagonists are both sex workers. Sin-Dee Rella has just been released from jail to find her pimp boyfriend cheating on her with a cisgender woman. As described by the movie's widely circulated tagline, "A hooker tears through Tinseltown on Christmas Eve searching for the pimp who broke her heart," the promotional rhetoric and plot of the movie both simultaneously forward the notion that tragic and tumultuous narratives are to be expected of trans femmes' of color's lives, and mobilize the story in a way that makes light of the hardships they face. Writing about the 2015 feature-length film, Morgan Collado observes, "trans women of color are almost always seen as objects to be controlled, held and exploited."¹⁵ Such visual logics are reminiscent of colonial anthropological photographs

¹⁴ Popular discourse on problematic representations of trans femmes in mainstream culture has appeared in: Steve Friess, "Don't Applaud Jared Leto's Transgender 'Mammy,'" in *Time*, February 28, 2014. <https://time.com/10650/dont-applaud-jared-letos-transgender-mammy/>. Also See: Paris Lees, "Jared Leto in Dallas Buyers Club: Why Ca't we cast trans people in Trans Roles?" in *Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/jared-letto-in-dallas-buyers-club-why-cant-we-cast-trans-people-in-trans-roles-9099704.html> also see Kristy Puchko, "Eddie Redmayne Talks Backlash, Trans Representation and the power of the Male Gaze in 'The Danish Girl,'" in *IndieWire*, November 14, 2015. <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/11/eddie-redmayne-talks-backlash-trans-representation-and-the-power-of-the-male-gaze-in-the-danish-girl-50373/>

¹⁵ Morgan Collado, "A Trans Woman of Color Responds to the Trauma of Tangerine," *Autostradle*, 26 August 2015, <https://www.autostraddle.com/a-trans-woman-of-color-responds-to-the-trauma-of-tangerine-301607/>, (accessed December 8, 2018).

framing colonized people as less than human and deserving of ill treatment.¹⁶ At first glance, *Tangerine* seems to be a breakthrough in forwarding trans women of color as the stars of their own narrative, but on further assessment the representations mobilized by *Tangerine* also shore up transphobic, racist perceptions about trans women of color.¹⁷

Julia Serano trans woman and trans feminist scholar and activist has written that transmisogyny has resulted in the “Sensationalization” “demonization” and “construction: of trans feminine people in mainstream media.¹⁸ It is also transmisogyny that has led to media depicting “the trans revolution in lipstick and heels.”¹⁹ The coupling of both transphobia and misogyny directed at trans femmes objectifies them, their bodies and demeans their personhood. Positioning trans femmes as objects of fascination to be perused, exploited and discarded. Embodying feminine aesthetics trans femmes employ aesthetics associated with those we have been trained to both devalue and

¹⁶ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, Fourth edition (Boston: Pearson, 2015). Notable contemporary intersectional feminist photographers like Carrie Mae Weems and Pushpamala N. Have used photography to speak back to these damaging photographic traditions partially in Weems’ project *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried* (1995) see: Carrie Mae Weems, audio interview for *MoMA 2000: Open Ends*, The Museum of Modern Art and Acoustiguide, Inc., 2000. <https://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/207/2012>, also see the artist’s website <http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html> also see Pushpamala N.’s *From The Ethnographic Series Native Women of South India: Manners & Customs*, 2000-2004. See Saatchi Gallery site https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/pushpamala_n.htm

¹⁷ Not insignificantly, the film was lauded as well as being entirely shot on smart phones (the same technology that selfies are made with), but the image maker in this case was a cis white man and the final venue was the film-making circuit. See: J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 79-82.

¹⁸ Julia Serano, *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism & Trans Feminism* (Oakland, CA: Switch Hitter Press, 2016), 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

consume while being something other than cis femininity they become object of fascination. While broadly speaking cis femmes represent aesthetics that have been conflated with perusal and consumption to the point of banality trans femininity spectacularizes femininity in a way that presents the visual objectification of femininity anew. Just as media culture of prior decades objectified the Caucasian female body while largely ignoring female bodies with darker skin tones, today mainstream visual culture reflects similar commitments to those of the past and the intersection of racialization and gender continues to create uneven, problematic and often dangerous intersections.

Jack Halberstam has argued the incorporation of Caitlin Jenner by neoliberal establishment has been part of facilitating the backlash against trans femmes of color and people who do not readily pursue fitting themselves into binary gender structures.²⁰ In other words those trans femme identified people who are not interested in or who cannot follow the transition and life trajectory of Caitlyn Jenner are at risk. Caitlyn Jenner, for example, has repeatedly appeared as an exemplary trans subject because she embodies key aspects of dominant culture norms—including Caucasian-ness, a high femme gender presentation, capitalist values, and an urge to perform within frameworks of objectification. (See Figure 35). Jenner's appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in June 2015, photographed by renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz, underscores this concern. The image

²⁰ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 53.



Figure 35. Annie Liebovitz, “Caitlin Jenner,” *Vanity Fair*, cover June 2015

not only masks the political and social struggles that continue to face trans people on a daily basis, but it narrowly prescribes acceptable trans corporeality. Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* cover represents a trans stereotype wherein mainstream culture reifies its investments, visually demonstrating the exemplary trans subject: performing cis normative tropes of femininity, posing passively, scantily clad, thin, and

Caucasian. Assessment of this can be apprehended through the methods of visual studies scholar, Mieke Bal. Bal eloquently argued, “the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow, and it is barely an exaggeration to say this interest is visible in the cult of portraiture.”²¹ Bal’s formulation outlines portraiture as a means for dominant culture to reify its belief systems and to articulate which subjectivities are valid and viable. Cover features like the legendary Annie Leibovitz’s shot of Jenner visually exemplify what the goals of all trans subjects should be, or which trans corporealities will be accepted by dominant culture, those that fit within already established frameworks of normativity as dictated by current power structures in spite of being trans. Jack Halberstam has argued that the new “wave of neoliberal incorporation” of trans people into dominant culture seeks to “keep radicalism at bay.”²² Halberstam observes that the new “trans-incorporative movement is one that often aims to fit trans people into normative structures of binary gender.”²³ This phenomenon is not new and is traceable through art historical examples. In fact, oppressive systems of racism and gender oppression are observable originating with the brief (documented) history of trans people in the West.²⁴

²¹ Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 2003): 5-32, 22.

²² J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁴ What I mean to stress here is that trans and gender non-conforming people have always existed, that it is binary gender that is new and that for multiple complex reasons the documented history of trans people is relatively brief. Due in part to the intended erasure of trans and gender non-conforming people and due the shifts in language that have made such documentations difficult.

In Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity C. Riley

Snorton traces the interconnections between racism and gender as regulating apparatus. Snorton sets Jenner in an established canon of trans representations traceable back to the first widely celebrated trans woman to appear in visual culture – Christine Jorgensen. Snorton observes that the canonization of Jorgensen as the “good transsexual” set up a framework in which Caucasian trans women gained an “acceptable subject position” but it was contingent on their Caucasian-ness and their commitment to embodying and reflecting narrowly prescribed cultural norms associated with Caucasian womanhood²⁵ --tropes that are observable in the multiple visual examples we see today of Caitlyn Jenner. Passivity, venerability, inviting the gaze and being Caucasian. Building on the scholarship of Emily Skidmore Snorton furthers that it was through “whiteness” that trans woman were “sanitized” in dominant culture and thus became visible. What Snorton goes on to suggest is that in making a narrow fraction of trans femmes acceptable via sanitized, whitewashed and rigidly bound gender category, Jorgenson set up a mold against which other trans femmes would be compared. Those who did not reflect Jorgenson’s precedent were outside the bounds of acceptable trans embodiment either be it due to gender outside of the binary or due to racial appearance other than one that reads as Caucasian.²⁶ This narrowly defined visualization set the tone for the aesthetics of the acceptable trans

²⁵ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, 140-143.

²⁶ For more on Jorgenson please see preface.

corporeality. Which marginalizes, erases and puts those in danger who do not reflect this archetype, intimately understanding the nuances of this predicament micha cárdenas observes there is no one way to be trans “there is nothing about being trans that binds trans people together as a singular identity group.”²⁷ Each trans representation can only ever be just that, a representation of a moment in time of one particular trans person. To have only one version of transness be sanctified by mainstream culture presents a gross aesthetic over-simplification of trans visualities.

The frameworks that oppress and marginalize trans women of color are the same that uphold certain factions of society as remaining in positions of power. Misogynist, sexist, transphobic, and racist frameworks are maintained by continually demonstrating that trans women of color will consistently be viewed and treated as deserving of disenfranchisement, injustice, exploitation, dehumanization, violence, murder, and criminalization. Representations of trans women of color go hand-in-hand with the erasure of and violence perpetrated against trans women of color in daily life. Representation and visibility are not the solutions or end goal of struggles for justice and trans human rights; however, they are part and parcel of how expectations are set up about what corporealities are valued and which bodies will be targets of racist and transphobic aggressions and acts of violence. As Richard Dyer has insightfully argued, the psychological

²⁷ micha cárdenas “Dark Shimmer” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), p.161-182, pp.171.

significance of stereotypes is that they “delimit what people can be in society at a given time.”²⁸ What trans femme stereotypes translate into when it comes to depicting trans people and trans characters in dominant culture is deeply fraught. Mainstream representations of trans people narrowly present acceptable ways of being trans, demonstrate which trans constituencies are impermissible, and sideline the majority of actual, trans corporealities and experiences.

Looking at the contemporary moment of trans femme representations via visual culture and art historical perspective highlights how contemporary iterations of trans femmes in visual culture are bound up with issues similar to those which feminists have been contending with for decades. However, the nuances of trans femme representations tease out some of the issues to more nuanced degrees.

A Lineage of Feminist Interventions

Over time, due to innovations in technologies, artistic and conceptual shifts, and artists pushing the limits of materials, aesthetics, and the very ontology of self-portraiture, the genre has changed. As self-portraiture and the discourse around it has evolved, the complexity of self-portraits and the boundaries of the genre have been revealed, challenged and complicated.

Initial criticisms of Western art historical exclusions were leveraged by Caucasian feminist scholars and artists in the 1970s, the critique centered around

²⁸ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

thinking through the binary and unequal relations between men and women and self-proclaimed feminists (primarily located in the U.S. and the U.K.) were interested in recuperating art history and re-inserting women into the canon. These scholars, activists, and artists critiqued the patriarchal systems that had removed women's contributions from art history and rallied against the systems that had excluded them from art, to begin with.²⁹

During this proliferation, feminist artists turned away from traditional media in favor of using their bodies as raw material, while at the same time there was no unifying aesthetic of feminist artistic practice rather a shared set of concerns or "feminist artistic practices."³⁰ In the mid-1970s during the rising wave of feminist art and scholarship an interrogation of the ways hegemonic order and ideologies were perpetuated via production of representation and meaning made by signification.³¹

²⁹ See Griselda Pollock *Women, Art and Ideology: Questions for feminist art Historians* 1987. Rozsika Parker, ed., *Framing Feminism: Art and Women's Movement 1970-85*, Reprinted (London: Pandora Press, 1992). In the 1960s and 70s, scholars began to recognize, theorize and challenge the various ways ideologies frame us and interpellates us and in doing so perpetuates racist and sexist social systems. Feminist scholars and artists were influenced by these contributions and in 1971 feminist art historian Linda Nochlin published the groundbreaking "why have there been no great women artists" in *Art News* tackling precisely these issues but specifically as they pertained to women artists. A massive proliferation of Feminist Art History and artistic practices ensued. By the mid-1970s in the U.S. and Europe, there was a great emergence in feminist artistic practices. Women's collectives, centers, and art spaces emerged like never before and served as institutional places for women artists to congregate and organize. Also see: Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Feminist scholars of the 1970s explored and critiqued the erasure of women from Art History as enmeshed with ideological systems that aligned female qualities with debased attributes.

³⁰ Rozsika Parker, ed., *Framing Feminism: Art and Women's Movement 1970-85*, 78-80.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

The impact of feminist theories of the visual is perhaps nowhere more far-reaching than in the case of Laura Mulvey's radical "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Originally published in *Screen* (British film journal) in 1975. Mulvey's methods combined post-structuralism, feminist theory and psychoanalysis to consider the way cinema structures women as an objectified and passive object of the masculine cinematic voyeuristic gaze. Mulvey argued the male gaze was mobilized to control the object, woman, in order to construct women as a category as object, so that the male filmmaker might become "phallic" in opposition. By "phallic" Mulvey refers to a process by which woman's lack [of a phallus] produces the phallus [of man] as a symbolic presence" using Freud's model in this way Mulvey unpacks the cinematic structure and its relation to the perpetuation of sexual inequalities and ideologies of domination. In Mulvey's schematic through viewing cinema, movie-goers are subconsciously indoctrinated with the heteropatriarchal ideologies of the male gaze. The reach of her intellectual contributions cannot be overstated, the ensuing ripple effects have influenced numerous disciplines and her contributions continue to be revisited, critiqued and revised. Mulvey's contribution to theorizing the complexity of ideology as transmitted through mass media and the questions and debates she raised about the agency of the objectified subject have

had a massive impact.³² What Mulvey observed transpiring in dominant culture in the 1970s is still observable in mainstream cinema today.

Cindy Sherman: Feminist, Post-Modern Interventions in Visual Culture

Perhaps the most impactful and far-reaching feminist intervention in art and photography dealing specifically with issues around representations is Cindy Sherman's now-canonical *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980).³³ Dealing in the visual realm with the concerns overlapping with those articulated by Mulvey in her 1975 essay, Sherman's images from 1977-1980 reflect an artistic interrogation of the construction of femininity in visual culture. Using photography to aesthetically and conceptually speak directly to cinema and mainstream representations of women in visual culture, Sherman's images call attention to the parameters and expectations put on Caucasian women by dominant cultural norms.

³² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed, Language, Discourse, Society (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Also see Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2. ed., reprinted (twice), In Sight (London [u.a]: Routledge, 2010).

³³ For more on Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* see Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003). Also see Amelia Jones *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (Routledge: 2006), 43-55. Also see Anna Kérchy, "The Woman 69 Times: Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills,"" *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 9, no. 1 (2003): 181-89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41274221>. Also see Marvin Heiferman, "In Front of the Camera, Behind the Scene: Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills,"" *MOMA*, 25 (1997): 16-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4381356>. Also see Barry Schwabsky, *On Paper* 2, 2 (1997): 44-45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24555162>. Also see Barry J. Mauer, "The Epistemology of Cindy Sherman: A Research Method for Media and Cultural Studies," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 38, no. 1 (2005): 93-113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030370>. Also see Peter Childs, "Photograph(er): Cindy Sherman and the Masquerade: Approach: Feminism," *Texts: Contemporary Cultural Texts and Critical Approaches*, 85-94. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r1zbd.11>.

Untitled Film Stills (1977-1980)³⁴ is a series of 70 black and white 8x10 photographic prints that aesthetically mimic film stills and depict Sherman in a variety of stereotypic Caucasian, feminine roles. Appropriating the visual language of film noir, 1950s and 60s Hollywood, B movies, and art-house films, Sherman's self-images appear in constructed scenes that reflect the look of stills but do not correspond to any films ever made.³⁵ Sherman's deft attention to observing and mobilizing very specific mise-en-scene, framing, lighting, costume, gesture and pose to convey the feel of cinema, coupled with her ambiguous and minimally emotive performances (rather than the over-acting often emphasized in actual films stills),³⁶ lends an uncanny, feeling to the images that is as though the images are trying to express their very constructedness. Thus, heightening the fictive and highly orchestrated nature of the picture.

³⁴ See above.

³⁵ "Many Guises, Many Helpers: The Making of Untitled Film Stills," Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/cindy-sherman-untitled-film-stills-1977-80/ also see: "Dodie Kazanjian on Untitled Film Still #48, 1979," Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, Jan 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kei22XS7qsI>, also see: "Cindy Sherman: Characters," Art 21 "extended Play" April 1, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiszC33puc0see>, also see: Hal Foster, "Under The Gaze: The Art of Cindy Sherman," Heni Talks, May 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ED6QhmRchZI>.

Also see Amelia Jones "Beneath This Mask Another Mask," in *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006). Also see Derek Conrad Murray's discussion of Sherman's work in Derek Conrad Murray (2015) "Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media," *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 18:6, 490-516, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967.

³⁶ "Many Guises, Many Helpers: The Making of Untitled Film Stills," Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/cindy-sherman-untitled-film-stills-1977-80/



Figure 36. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #2* (1977)

Laura Mulvey observed that cinema often imaged the female subject as a passive consumable body for the enjoyment of the male gaze.³⁷ Such insights are made visible in Sherman's photographs, from one image to the next Sherman's performances suggest that she is creating characters that mimic filmic tropes of the passive femme fetal. Sherman performs a variety of subtle disempowered moments in each photo from, anticipatory, afraid, apprehensive, distraught,

³⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual and Other Pleasures." Mulvey's methods combined post-structuralism, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis to consider the way cinema structures women as objectified and passive objects of the masculine cinematic voyeuristic gaze.

pensive, demur, inquisitive, and passively lounging. In all of Sherman's pictures her gaze is averted, and the viewer is invited to peruse her body and the scene. The images are primarily empty save for Sherman and a few props which creates pictorial space allowing us to visually enter the image, without obstruction. There is only one image out of all 70 photographs in which Sherman's character looks at the camera directly, number 17, from 1978.³⁸ This suggests that Sherman inserts herself into these quiet spaces to offer moments in which to reflect on the construction and consumption of the young, thin, able-bodied Caucasian woman as a product to be consumed and the parameters in which she is encouraged and permitted to construct herself and perform. Sherman's performances underscore the rigidity with which female roles have been constructed not only in cinema but in visual culture at large, while the level of artifice and performativity facilitate recognition on the part of the viewer that these expectations are highly constructed.³⁹

³⁸ There are a few other images where perhaps Sherman's character is looking at the camera lens, but it is either from behind sunglasses in #7 1978 or from shadow #33 1978 and #51 from 1979 or in an image where it is too bright to tell precisely where she looks as in #62 from 1977.

³⁹ Mulvey's observations, along with work of other second wave feminist scholars and artists like Sherman, prompted a reworking of systems of representation mainly in regard to how the female subject was portrayed in mainstream visual culture. Laura Mulvey, "Visual and Other Pleasures." Mulvey's methods combined post-structuralism, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis to consider the way cinema structures women as objectified and passive objects of the masculine cinematic voyeuristic gaze.



Figure 37. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #8* (1978)



Figure 38. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #27* (1979)

While Sherman plays out countless iterations of Caucasian femininity from being fresh out of the shower in #2 (1977) (see Figure 36), to standing on a slightly overgrown, brightly lit beach in #8 (1978) (see Figure 37), to crying over a cocktail in #27 (1979) (see Figure 38), she demonstrates that while there is a seeming multitude of roles and archetypes laid out for Caucasian women to

embody, they are all actually very narrowly prescribed, in effect, what at first seems a multiplicity of personas on further inspections becomes quite limited, suggesting a critique of the manner in which visual culture (and cinema in particular) proposes women exist, completely erasing women that are not Caucasian and narrowly prescribing the roles of Caucasian women, thin able bodies, middle class, vulnerable and to be perused. Sherman's project calls attention to the various tropes of Caucasian femininity, scantily clad, helpless, and emotional; the project overall highlights how mainstream media culture creates expectations about women. Amelia Jones has forwarded that Sherman's images "position the represented female body as an object of the empowered male gaze."⁴⁰ Jones goes on to suggest that the image is a double fetish in that the photo is a fetish of the subject and the performing subject herself is a fetish.⁴¹ Jones makes the further point that Sherman's stills, on the whole, demonstrate the impossibility of us ever gleaning anything of the subject that the work "testifies to the impossibility of our attaining access."⁴² Indeed, Sherman's images seem to elide the viewer ever knowing anything about the performer but rather inundating the viewer with the hollow shell of mainstream ideas about femininity. Offering a critique of the art historical and ideological way that we have come to conceive of photography as indexical, unmediated tool of documentation and as what Barthes

⁴⁰ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

has referred to as “that-has-been” before the lens.⁴³ Sherman’s images show precisely how photographs are always imaging *performances* and always constructed in relation to media and iconography.

Reflecting what Amelia Jones’ has articulated to be “representations condition our experience of ourselves.”⁴⁴ Sherman’s intervention makes plain the way that media culture has produced the femme archetype, which in turn structures ideas about how femininity is expected to appear. Or as Hal Foster has observed Sherman’s subjects appear to be under multiples gazes, seen by the camera, the world and a gaze of self-surveillance.⁴⁵ The deployment of performance for the camera in this case collapses the gaze of cultural ideologies, self-actualization and the awareness of the audience in a way that offers a complex perusal of processes of identity formation in the context of media culture and self-surveillance, ahead of its time.

Sherman was part of a loose grouping of young artists in the late 1970s often called the “Pictures Generation” who were interested in investigating the function of media images. The first generation raised with Television and Cinema these artists were critically reflecting on the impact media culture was having on the construction of identities, their lives and culture. In the late 1970s Sherman’s images intervened into the construction of Caucasian femininity but today the

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Pbk. ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 77. See also Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁵ Hal Foster, “Under The Gaze: The Art of Cindy Sherman.”

pictures bear the look of a particular era and read as nostalgic. The Caucasian femme fetal has perhaps been edged out in some places by the newfound appeal of trans femme as spectacle of mass cultural fascination (at least in some locations). Sherman's images still make plain the cultural construction of the femme subject as to be looked at and exemplify how we have been trained art historically in the West to look at and visually consume the female form, without actually seeing the femme subject. Viewing *Untitled Film Stills* today Sherman's once highly visible icons of femininity have become almost invisible. Sherman disappears before her lens and the tropes of femininity once spectacularized in media and critiqued by Sherman may now seem passé. The cis normative Caucasian able-bodied femme has become so over-consumed that mainstream media culture requires a new femininity to produce as spectacle, something that can make femme aesthetics newly visible. As mainstream visual culture in the Western art historical tradition has trained viewers to peruse feminine aesthetics – trans femininity has now been slotted in, to the category of spectacularized, objectified female form to behold.

Post-Feminist Trans Feminism

Contemporary practices and methods of feminist analysis of visual culture and theories of viewership now embrace the notion that identity is both fluid and intersectional. Feminist scholarship and practices often borrow from various methods engaging in intersectional approaches sharing commitments to being

anti-racist, queer, post-colonial, and often Marxist.⁴⁶ Post-feminist image-makers today are exhausted by feminist investment in critiquing dominant culture's representations of women and instead create self-representations about body positivity, embracing sexuality, and rejecting the male gaze. These post-feminist imaging practices reflect new constituencies of young women making space for their inclusion within feminism, particularly young women of color.⁴⁷

Some of the key facets of gender non-conforming trans femme self-imaging praxis include a critique of ideology, rethinking oppressive frameworks, a critical look at histories of erasure, viewing politics and theory as intersecting with lives lived, attention to intersectionality and self-imaging that often use the body as raw material while intervening critically in discourses of representation. Much of this approach seems to be shared with feminist scholarly and artistic projects of the past. However, unlike earlier feminist interventions that were concerned with offering a much-needed critique of dominant visual culture and the problematic representations women, trans feminist praxis of femmifesting or bringing into being via self-imaging creates trans feminist intersectional, expansive anti-essentialist, de-colonial performances of self, disinterested in

⁴⁶ Jennifer Doyle, and Amelia Jones, "Introduction: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture." *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 607-15. doi:10.1086/499288.

⁴⁷ Derek Conrad Murray, "Notes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media," 2-6. Derek Conrad Murray argues that self-imaging practices of young women on social media work to reclaim the female form and reassert agency over their bodies, noting that the insertion of these images into culture constitutes "radical forms of community building – and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation's."

directly taking on critiques of reductive and stereotypic imaging in mainstream culture.

Over the last decades, there has been a consistent tension between so-called –feminists and trans women / trans feminists. Moreover, trans feminists have pushed feminist discourse to attend more complexly to issues of oppression. Sara Ahmed has noted that currently within feminism trans feminists and trans women are often excluded based on biology. “Biology” Ahmed writes, has become “weaponized in feminism.”⁴⁸ Ahmed contends that the rhetoric deployed and false logics used to police the category of woman will shift as soon as there is a viable rebuttal of the current rubric of trans exclusion.⁴⁹ It is necessary to restate that a key promise of feminism is a commitment to challenging oppressive and unjust hierarchies. So when some so-called-feminists invest in maintaining arbitrary exclusions, these people are in fact betraying the core tenets of feminism under the guise of being feminists.⁵⁰ Particularly to this point, it is helpful to heed

⁴⁸ Sara Ahmed “An affinity of hammers” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 221-234, 229.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 221-234.

⁵⁰ Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2. ed., reprinted (twice), In Sight (London [u.a]: Routledge, 2010). The application of feminist theory to visual culture has been part and parcel of the feminist movement since its inception. Culture producers, activists, and scholars’ hand in hand have pushed feminist discourse to where it is today. Which can be understood as a multifaceted and shifting set of methods embraced by artist, theorists and in social life, which all have at their core a commitment to thinking through cultural inequities as they relate to heteropatriarchy and interconnected oppressions and their effects on daily lives. Over the last few decades, feminism has continually been challenged to attend more thoroughly to problems at hand via deploying increasingly radicalized methodologies and has reinvented itself in efforts to attend to its own practices of exclusions inherited from the methods on which feminism initially was built. It can now be said that the aim of feminism is to addresses each individual case study and/or concern from the framework of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality and to continually remain vigilant when it comes to any tendencies toward myopicism

trans feminist micha cárdenas’ urging that we need to continue to think and act critically when it comes to essentialism. Not only do we need to express a variety of trans stories but cárdenas furthers that it is necessary to recall women of color feminism and situate gender oppression in conversation with the larger colonial project.⁵¹ Indeed the intersection of racialization and gender regulation—two oppressive systems set up in the colonial period to hierarchize categories of people—still impacts trans femmes of color most brutally. Thinking through the increased hostility and violence exhibited against trans femmes of color C. Riley Snorton contends that visual representations are always about creating and maintaining systems by which we learn to evaluate and value humanity.⁵² Eva Hayward has made the dovetailing point that trans is not about notions of authenticity but rather reveals how we are constituted socially.⁵³ Current debates in regressive feminism maneuver to position trans as outside of the category of woman while trans feminists work to decolonize feminism and femininity attending to the complexity of gender oppression and its intersection with racialization.

⁵¹ micha cárdenas “Dark Shimmer” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), p.161-182, pp.172.

⁵² Snorton forwards that African American women of the past could only mimic Jorgenson, and while Jorgensen’s transition was framed as a personal triumph black trans femmes were framed as female impersonators. C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 157-160.

⁵³ Eva Hayward “Spiderwoman” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 255-273, 255.

It is on these post-feminist, and trans feminist methods and allegiances of trans feminists that Alok Vaid-Menon's work builds and into which it intervenes. Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized numerous constituencies, trans femmes and trans non-binary femmes of color fruitfully insert their intersectional subjectivities into circulation via social media.

In copiously self-imaging, femmifesting brown, non-binary, trans-femme iconography, embodying, complex, changing and intersectional identities, trans femmes of color produce a variety of new visual culture exemplars for others to model themselves after, creating urgent and necessary interventions into visual culture that otherwise demeans and eradicates their existences. Furthermore, the ways in which they mobilize Instagram as a media of bringing into being, while continually augmenting, undoes the ideological conceptions of portrait photography we have inherited in Western contexts.

Alok Vaid-Menon

Alok Vaid-Menon is a gender non-conforming trans femme, Indian American writer and performance artist.⁵⁴ Vaid-Menon has been featured on HBO, MTV, the *Guardian*, BBC, CNN and the *New York Times*, they have

⁵⁴ Ariana Marinin, "This Trans-Feminine Poet Shares What It's Like to Exist Outside the 'Gender Binary,'" *A Plus News*, 29 (June 2015), http://aplus.com/a/alok-void-menon-trans-feminie-poet-gender?no_monetization=true (accessed December 22, 2018). See also "The Pain & Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender: Alok Vaid-Menon," in *The What's Underneath Project*, StyleLikeU presents, 22 (June 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7Gh2n9kPuA&spfreload=1> (accessed December 22, 2018).

presented their work in over 500 venues in over 40 countries around the globe.⁵⁵ As a young person growing up in rural Texas Alok Vaid-Menon constantly had to deal with the threat of “erasure, invalidation and hostility.”⁵⁶ Growing up Vaid-Menon was met with daily reminders of their outsider status due to being Indian American and non-binary, Alok turned to creativity as a mode of survival.⁵⁷ Today they are a prolific selfie maker with over 313 thousand Instagram followers, (their account has grown by over 100 thousand followers in the last few years that I have been researching and writing about them). Their images are emblematic of critical shifts transpiring in culture, are reflective of the complexity of trans identities, and exemplary of the mobilization of selfies as contemporary art.⁵⁸

Alok Vaid-Menon describes their selfie making praxis as “showing the world that it is possible to claim space as a visibly gender non-conforming transfeminine person of color.”⁵⁹ Through their use of self-imaging on Instagram,

⁵⁵ See the about them section on their website: <https://www.alokvmenon.com/about>, also see the press section on their website: <https://www.alokvmenon.com/press>,

⁵⁶ Dakota Smith, “How Art Created Alok Vaid-Menon,” in *Wussy*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.wussymag.com/all/2019/6/19/how-art-created-alok-void-menon>, (accessed August 5, 2019).

⁵⁷ Ibid. Also see: Monica Sarkar, “Life as a Transgender Person of Color: I Erased A Part of Me,” in *CNN*, May 22, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/20/india/india-diaspora-series-alok-void-menon-intl/index.html?no-st=1558461739>, (accessed August 5, 2019). Jeena Sharma, “Alok: ‘Beauty Is About Looking Like Yourself,’” in *Paper*, March 1, 2019, <http://www.papermag.com/alok-beauty-2629993229.html>

⁵⁸ In addition to their live performances Vaid-Menon’s Instagram presence is another perhaps even more prolific way that they intervene in culture. With 181 thousand followers at the time of writing this it is by far the venue of their cultural production that reaches the largest audience at one time. For a scale comparison as of March 10, 2019, Cindy Sherman’s Instagram account has 241 thousand followers and Nikki S. Lee’s has 2,455 followers.

⁵⁹ Personal interview with Alok Vaid-Menon on Jan 9th, 2018.

deploying a process they describe as “femmifesting” Alok Vaid-Menon not only brings into being a visual commitment to self-conscious self-creation, but they continually and consistently intervene in the visual field of trans representations, and engage a praxis that redefines understandings of contemporary self-portraiture. Through performative iterations of self, their Instagram feed pushes open non-binary trans femme of color representations.⁶⁰

Currently based in NYC, Vaid-Menon graduated from Stanford University and uses the non-binary pronoun “they.” They have collaborated with fellow Stanford alumni, Janani Balasubramanian, as the performance/poetry duo Dark Matter. Together they performed at La MaMa Experimental Theatre, the Brooklyn Museum, Nuyorican Poets Café, and the Asian American Writer’s Workshop.⁶¹ Vaid-Menon now performs solo. In 2017, in conjunction with winning the Performance Act Award at Centrale Fies,⁶² Vaid-Menon toured 27 countries performing their recent poetry chap book “Watching you / Watch Me.” Vaid-Menon’s performances are evocative, instructive, and a radical and pertinent form of cultural production. Vaid-Menon’s performances are a mixture of spoken

⁶⁰ In addition to their live performances Vaid-Menon’s Instagram presence is another perhaps even more prolific way that they intervene in culture. With 181 thousand followers at the time of writing this it is by far the venue of their cultural production that reaches the largest audience at one time. For a scale comparison as of March 10, 2019, Cindy Sherman’s Instagram account has 241 thousand followers and Nikki S. Lee’s has 2,455 followers.

⁶¹ Vida Weisblum, “Dark Matter(s): Meet One Half of the Trans Performance Duo College Kids Love,” *Observer*, 24 August 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/08/dark-matters-meet-one-half-of-the-trans-performance-duo-college-kids-love/> (accessed December 22, 2018). See also “DarkMatter Poets: Moving Past Trans and Gender Nonconforming Stereotypes,” in *Mashable News*, 25 March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kT_pNzqxDZI (accessed December 22, 2018).

⁶² Alok Vaid-Menon, personal interview, 10 January 2018.

word and performance art, often using personal experiences of living as non-binary and brown to critically, humorously, and emotionally engage with issues of trans-misogyny and racism.⁶³ Meg Zulch comments:

Their intersectional feminist themes about queerness, race, trans identities, and colonialism effectively point out the ugliness of a cis and heteronormative society while delivering gut-wrenching anecdotes about their experiences growing up as queer/trans South Asian people in America... But being a fashion and beauty writer, I also couldn't help but take note of their amazing outfits.⁶⁴

Their prolific use of self-imaging (on average a selfie a day) is having great impact on contemporary art and culture. In both their performance work and in their Instagram feed, Vaid-Menon mashes up retro fashions, loud, color-blocked and boldly patterned thrifted looks, and Indian American aesthetic sensibility that is creating an oeuvre of much needed complex, nuanced intersectional, ever-augmenting, Indian America trans femme, non-binary self-representations and movement.

Vaid-Menon demonstrates that selfies can, in fact, be sophisticated, performative self-portrait photographs and critical art. Vaid-Menon has a prolific selfie-making practice. They fully control and produce their images, engaging critical questions of representation and performativity. Vaid-Menon's work also intervenes in the trans visual field, opening up how we think about intersectional

⁶³ Alok Vaid-Menon, "You Don't Need to Be a Boy or a Girl/ Get Real," *Refinery29*, 7 October 2015.

⁶⁴ Meg Zulch, "Nine Times Dark Matter Proved Their Non-Gender Conforming Fashion Is As Strong As Their Poetry," in *Bustle*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/90450-9-times-dark-matter-proved-their-non-gender-conforming-fashion-is-as-strong-as-their-poetry>

identity formations while challenging assumptions about binary gender, and underscoring how matrixes of gender and racialization are affixed to bodies via visual encounters. Vaid-Menon's selfies are emblematic of critical shifts transpiring in culture and exemplary of the mobilization of selfies as significant intervention in Contemporary Art.

Often reflecting on intersectional oppressions faced by trans people of color, creating trans community especially for femmes of color and working to decolonize femininity and unseat Caucasian supremacy Alok Vaid-Menon's prolific selfie making practice and use of Instagram constitutes a significant, and radical intervention. (See Figure 39). Alok Vaid-Menon's praxis as an image-maker and a performer engages in the lineage of women of color feminism, queer of color critique and forwards gender-non-conforming trans femme of color praxis.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Alok Vaid-Menon's oeuvre is in a lineage of artists and scholars including the likes of Cherríe, Moraga, Cherríe, Anzaldúa, Adrian Piper, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, in discourse with queer of color scholarship and creative work by noted scholars including José Esteban Muñoz and Roderick Ferguson, and artists such as Vaginal Davis, Kalup Linzy, and Juliana Huxtable. While Vaid-Menon's work is also in conversation with their contemporary queer trans femme of color creatives including Travis Alabanza, Jacob Tobia, Fatima Asghar, and Vivek Shraya to name a few.



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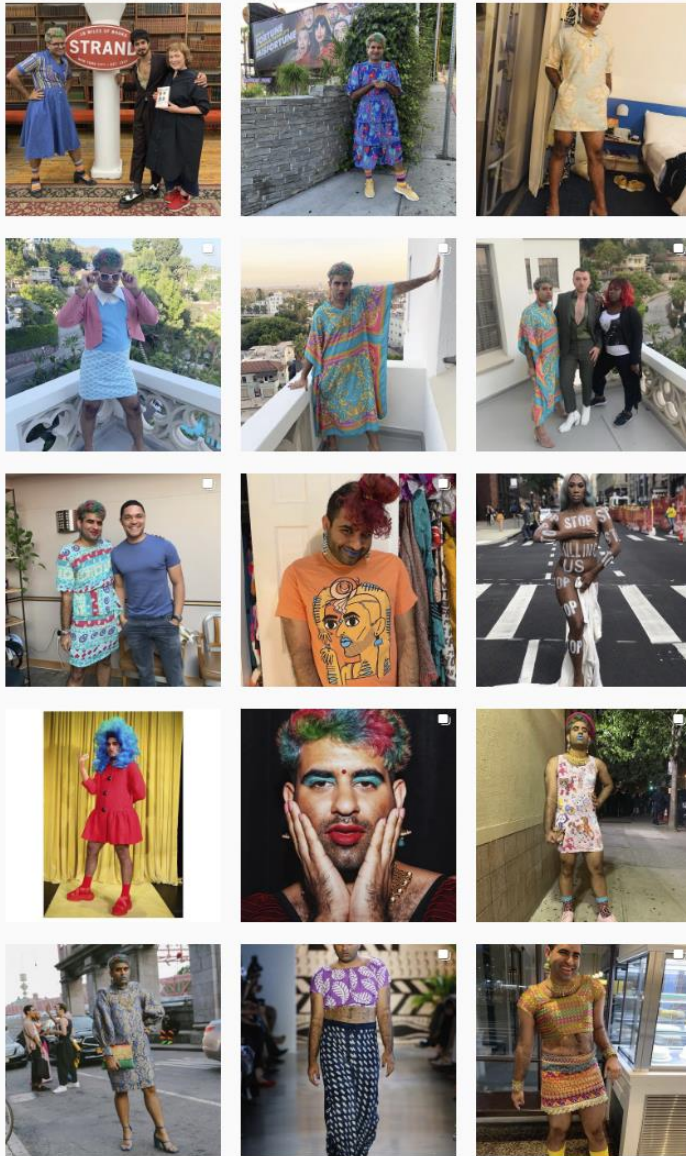


Figure 39.
Alok Vaid-Menon's
Instagram feed, as of
September 26, 2019,
screen grab courtesy of
the author

Selfie Debates

Due in large part to the advent of the selfie, self-imaging has become a defining factor of globally networked contemporary life. Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via a social media platform, the popularity of online users sharing selfies on social media sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram led Oxford Dictionaries to proclaim “selfie” as its 2013 word of the year. Since then there has been a continued proliferation of self-imaging and great popular and intellectual interest in selfies. Not only are they a ubiquitous part of contemporary life, selfies are a complex form of social interaction, an emerging aesthetic, and they are having an irrevocable impact on self-portraiture.⁶⁶ While there is increased scholarship on selfies, the complexity of selfies remains under-articulated. Many selfies for example are in a rich lineage of radical performative self-portraiture committed to challenging representational politics, canonized aesthetics and the parameters of portraiture,

⁶⁶ For more on recent scholarship on selfies and their interrelation with visual culture see Tim Gorichanaz, “Self-Portrait, Selfie, Self: Notes on Identity and Documentation in the Digital Age,” *Information* 10, no. 10 (September 26, 2019): 297, <https://doi.org/10.3390/info10100297>; also see Mehita Iqani and Jonathan Schroeder “#selfie: Digital Self-portraits as Commodity Form and Consumption Practice,” *Consumptions Markets & Culture*, 19, no 5 (2015): 405-415 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10253866.2015.1116784?scroll=top&needAccess=true>. Also see Ana Peraica and Institute of Network Cultures (Amsterdam), *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture*, 2017. Also see Mehita Iqani, “Picturing Luxury, Producing Value: The Cultural Labour of Social Media Brand Influencers in South Africa,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (March 2019): 229–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877918821237>. I am currently editing a book dealing with the topic of the relationship between self-portraits and selfies entitled *From Self-Portrait to Selfie: Contemporary Art and Self-Representation in the Social Media Age*, forthcoming from MDPI Books.

but this is an area as of yet that is yet to be significantly explored.⁶⁷ In its very definition, self-portraiture is both specific and amorphous. It is a representation, a production, and a creation of someone made by that same individual, but the specifics of how and why are unarticulated. The advent of the selfie has highlighted the problematic politics of this fickle definition. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a self-portrait as “a portrait of oneself done by oneself,” while Oxford Dictionary defines self-portrait as “a portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist.” What a self-portrait is and what its aims are remain up to the maker. The distinction about who is authorized to create a self-portrait - “oneself” or an “artist” - is at the core of the contention around self-portraits and selfies. Through an art-historical perspective, questions around the ontology of self-portraiture do not seem so new. While not definitively stated, the question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics and artistic intent of the self-portrait have remained constant points of contention throughout art history.⁶⁸ Scholarly discourse around selfies have moved these contentions to the fore.

⁶⁷ Scholarship on selfies continues to proliferate for example there see Derek Conrad Murray’s book *Visual Culture Studies: Approaches to the Selfie*, forthcoming from Routledge. Also see Derek Conrad Murray, ‘Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,’ *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2 November 2015): 490–516. Also see Richard Kedzior, Douglas E. Allen, and Jonathan Schroeder, “The Selfie Phenomenon – Consumer Identities in the Social Media Marketplace,” *European Journal of Marketing* 50, no. 9/10 (September 12, 2016): 1767–72, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-06-2016-0363>. Adál Alberto Maldonado, Ilan Stavans, and Project Muse, *I Love My Selfie* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/70151/>. Also see Mehita Iqani, “Performing Post-Feminist Wealth: The Intersectional Aesthetics of Irene Major’s Instagram Profile,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 33, no. 96 (April 3, 2018): 209–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2018.1517246>.

⁶⁸ See Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Critical Introductions to Art (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997). See Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford History of

Selfies are a potentially radically disruptive form of self-imaging. They challenge established modes of production, circulation, and consumption.⁶⁹ The massive impact selfies are having across a vast array of aspects of contemporary life is illustrated by the growing corpus of research on selfies from scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology, to anthropology to art history and beyond. A significant portion of the research on selfies deploys intersectional methods to unpack their indelible impact on art, self-portraiture, social life and visual culture. The establishment of the Selfies Research Network, conferences like the Kern, which is based out of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), and research focusing on the complexity and specificity of selfies reflect the growing interest in selfies. Art historian and visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray argues that the power of selfies lies in their ability to enable new forms of self-representation and their redistribution of the power of self-imaging. Looking predominantly at selfies made by women, he observes, “taken en masse, it feels like a revolutionary political movement—like radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body.”⁷⁰ The radical potential of selfies for

Art (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies*, (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2016 also see: James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, 2015.

⁶⁹ Circulation, production, consumption, and regulation are the concerns of Cultural Studies, the underlining methodology I employ for this project. For a fuller discussion on cultural studies see Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, Media and Popular Culture 7 (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

⁷⁰ Derek Conrad Murray, ‘Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,’ *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2 November 2015): 490–516, doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967. Murray thoroughly demonstrates that selfies disrupt dominant traditions in Art History and visual culture that privilege representations of and by Caucasian men.

Murray can be seen to build on the work of artists like Sherman and to continue the legacy of changing representations of otherwise objectified subjects.⁷¹ Ana Peraica takes an art historical and psychological approach to consider how selfies utilize pictorial space and how they are deployed to work through conceptions of self.⁷² Edgar Gomez Cruz and Helen Thornham theorize selfies from an ethnographic perspective, finding selfies to be interstices of contemporary communication.⁷³ For Media Studies scholars Mehita Iqani and Communications scholar Jonathan E. Schroeder, the selfie is both an “object and a practice”,⁷⁴ providing significant insight into the workings of people’s psyches as well as our relationship to consumer culture and art history.

Social media provides a venue that is relatively unregulated and, as such, it has become the arena in which nuanced and expansive trans and non-binary trans people—particularly those of color—produce self-representations. These

⁷¹ Overall selfies are facilitating the exponential circulation of a diversity of subjectivities in visual culture. Several subgenres of selfies have fostered watershed moments of change in the politics of representation. For example, it has been widely observed that representations of women in visual culture in the Western Art tradition have produced subjects without agency as viewed through the consuming gaze of heteropatriarchal ideologies. Women’s bodies have primarily been subjected to display and perusal. Moreover, the artistic merits of women artists have been sorely undervalued and their perspectives overwhelmingly sidelined. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?” *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (New York: Basic, 1971).

⁷² Ana Peraica and Institute of Network Cultures (Amsterdam), *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture*, 2017.

⁷³ Edgar Gomez Cruz & Helen Thornham, “Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(r)ictions of a Practice,” Lilie Chouliaraki. *Symbolic Bordering: The Self-representation of Migrants and Refugees in Digital News*. *Popular Communication* 15, 2 (2017): 78-94. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/jac.v7.28073?src=recsys>.

⁷⁴ Mehita Iqani and Jonathan Schroeder “#selfie: Digital Self-portraits as Commodity Form and Consumption Practice,” *Consumptions Markets & Culture*, 19, no 5 (2015): 405-415 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10253866.2015.1116784?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

performative photographic self-portraits push the boundaries of how we understand gender identity, intersectional, non-binary identities and various relations between the aesthetics of gender, race, and class. Currently the most image-driven of social media platforms, Instagram, has become the go-to venue for visual communication and image circulation. It is via Instagram that image-makers whose constituencies and likenesses have been eradicated from mainstream media insert their corporealities and aesthetics into visual culture. Due to their ubiquity, immediacy and relative democratization, selfies have become the primary means of producing intersectional and hybrid trans and non-binary representations. Not all selfies are created equal, yet as a form they can be mobilized to different ends—just like any self-portrait. In our current cultural climate, the inclusion of marginalized voices that selfies facilitate has become increasingly urgent. While the aesthetics of selfies may be different than those of art historical self-portraiture, and the act of taking pictures of oneself and sharing them on social media may seem so vernacular as to become banal, what selfies represent is, in fact, the most widely used form of visual communication today. But beyond this, they are a new genre of portraiture in which new practices and aesthetics of self-portrait photography are rapidly evolving.

Narcissism: Reactionary Rhetoric

Selfies have been chastised by several scholars for ostensibly being made by narcissists and people with other personality disorders. Articles like

Gwendolyn Seidman's "What is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?"⁷⁵ and Fiona Keating's "Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction, and Mental Illness, Say Scientists"⁷⁶ reflect the ethos of such articles focusing on the negative impacts of selfies on the image-maker's self-esteem and subjects' alleged psychological shortcomings. Much of this type of research on selfies predominantly focused on girls and young women, arguing that selfies were damaging and reflective of a fragile psyche, and ignored male and non-binary identities.⁷⁷ In "Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance," Henry A. Giroux argued that selfies are part of a "narcissistic consumer culture"⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Gwendolyn Seidman, "What is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?" *Psychology Today*, August 6, 2015. Last accessed March 26, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201508/what-is-the-real-link-between-selfies-and-narcissism>

⁷⁶ Fiona Keating, "Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction and Mental Illness, Say Scientists," *International Business Times*, March 23, 2014. Last accessed March 24, 2017. 23 <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/selfies-linked-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness-say-scientists-1441480>

⁷⁷ This rhetoric is also understandable. When scholarship and research regarding selfies is conducted by researchers who are invested in looking at the world through the framework of diagnosis and medicalization it should come as no surprise when their findings pathologize. For more examples of articles deriding selfies, see Carolyn Gregoire, "Selfies to Narcissism and Psychopathy," *The Huffington Post*, January 12, 2015. Last accessed September 12, 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/12/selfies-narcissism-psychopathy_n_6429358.html; Gwendolyn Seidman, "What is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?" *Psychology Today*, August 6, 2015. Last accessed September 12, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/close-encounters/201508/what-is-the-real-link-between-selfies-and-narcissism>; Fiona Keating, "Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction, and Mental Illness, Say Scientists," *International Business Times*, March 23, 2014. Last accessed September 12, 2017, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/selfies-linked-narcissism-addiction-mental-illness-say-scientists-1441480>. Through an art-historical approach with consideration for the ways in which women have appeared throughout history as the subject to be perused rather than revered as serious image makers, the gendered dimension of the writing off of selfies seems quite political. Similarly, representationally marginalized subjects such as those discussed by Pinney had to use collaborative and non-traditional means to self-image. The derision of selfies seems more to be a reaction to the changing landscape of who has the power to self-image than a reaction rooted in their aesthetics or conceptual dimensions.

⁷⁸ Henry A. Giroux, "Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance," *Third Text*, 29, no. 3 (September 11, 2015): 155-164, 156.

and part and parcel of a rampant “anti-intellectualism” sweeping Western culture. While I agree there are problems with our rampant consumer culture and a current anti-intellectualism sweeping the U.S. in particular, as evidenced by the current state of U.S. politics, selfies are no more related to these phenomena than any other part of contemporary life. In fact, selfie-makers are often critically and astutely engaged with art, culture, and representational politics.⁷⁹

These defamations themselves are rooted in misogynist ideologies and, in fact, in our current social climate one is hard pressed to find something outside the “narcissistic consumer culture,” suggesting that selfie-makers suffer from low self-esteem and personality disorders is deeply troubling when one considers the sexist connotations of such beliefs. As Anne Burns observes the current disdain aimed at selfies as having a “disciplinary effect,” which not only ridicules, devalues, and feminizes selfie-makers, but also reinforces sexist attitudes and “justifies” the “denigration” and “punishment” of selfie-makers as “socially accepted.”⁸⁰ Suggesting that selfie makers suffer from low self-esteem and personality disorders is deeply troubling when one considers the sexist connotations. Derek Conrad Murray observes, the main targets of the narcissism

⁷⁹ For example, one politically engaged use of selfies is discussed in James Michael Nichols, “#WeJustNeedToPee Trans Bathroom Selfies Campaign Goes Viral,” in *Huffpost Gay Voices*, March 12, 2015. Last accessed September 10, 2018, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/12/trans-bathroom-selfie-campaign_n_6855430.html, as well as in Derek Conrad Murray, “Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media.” Of course, how the selfie is used is up to the image maker and, like all art forms - and especially photographs- it is contingent on the image maker, their ideology, and their intent.

⁸⁰ Anne Burns, “Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015), Feature 1716-1733, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3138/1395>.

debate are young women. Murray suggests that the derision of selfie makers is a “more benign counterpart to political, legislative, and ideological attempts to manage women’s physical and mental health.”⁸¹ The attempt to pathologize selfie-makers reflects art-historical tradition rooted in patriarchal impulses to regulate who has the power to self-image, the maintenance of self-imaging aesthetics, and the means of circulation. Attempts to discredit selfie-makers are impulsive reactions to representationally disenfranchised constituencies taking control of how they are represented in visual culture. Murray’s work is instructive in that he frames selfies as a visual culture phenomenon and in relation to art history.⁸² Offering an art historical analysis of selfies reveals that if any broad claim is to be made on their behalf it would be more accurate to say selfies overall are radical self-representations made by otherwise visually marginalized constituencies.

Postcolonial scholar Ray Chow’s research demonstrates that calling others narcissistic in an attempt to discredit them is a common reaction from people in positions of power who are feeling threatened by marginalized folks gaining some modicum of agency.⁸³ Chow’s reading of narcissism is crucial to how we think about the discourse surrounding selfies. In efforts to maintain

⁸¹ Derek Conrad Murray, “Selfie Consumerism in a Narcissistic Age,” *Consumption Markets & Culture*, (2018) doi: 10.1080/10253866.2018.1467318 p. 7.

⁸² Derek Conrad Murray, ‘Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,’ *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2 November 2015): 490–516, doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967.

⁸³ Rey Chow, ‘Male Narcissism and National Culture: Subjectivity in Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children*,’ in *Male Trouble*, eds. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993): 108-109.

power, dominant culture seeks to discredit the intervening image-makers by mobilizing derogatory discourse against them. Across the board, the scholarship that focuses on mischaracterizing and debasing selfies as being part and parcel of personality disorders fails to engage in any visual analysis of selfies.

Significantly, however, beyond the facilitation of the visualization of a wider variety of identity constituencies, selfies forward emergent aesthetics, radically pushing for the necessity of new visual studies and art-historical methods to be developed in order to apprehend and articulate precisely what they are doing and how they function. To neglect to engage in visual analysis of selfies is to run the risk of missing out on understanding new methods of visual culture, contemporary art and attending analysis. Viewing selfies from a broader photo-historical perspective reveals that they may be more accurately viewed as a necessary extension of interventions in contemporary art photography.

Photographic Debates

In the recent decades artists have been increasingly interested in photography, and photographers have turned to portraiture for its sophisticated ability to rework concepts behind representation, to engage in different types of power dynamics, and to explore self and identity both critically and intimately.⁸⁴ Vaid-Menon's work is in stride with a burgeoning movement in contemporary

⁸⁴ Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 19-21. This also relates to Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 7. And her discussion of power imbalances in photography.

photography that utilizes the self-portrait as a means of conceptually interrogating identity formations. As many scholars have observed in recent years, artists have increasingly turned to the portrait to interrogate both the limits and advantages of working with photographs in investigating the complexity of identity formations.⁸⁵ Writing about contemporary art photography Charlotte Cotton claims:

Rather than offering an appreciation of virtuoso photographic practice or distinguishing key individuals as “masters” of photography, conceptual art played down the importance of craft and authorship [. . . .] It took in a distinctly “non-art,” “deskilled,” and “unauthored” look and emphasised that it was the act depicted in the photograph that was of artistic importance.⁸⁶

Conceptual art photography purposefully tries to look de-skilled and to emphasize what or who is imaged, rather than emphasizing the technology through which the subject is pictured. Cotton also forwards “the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject.”⁸⁷ Image-makers using selfies are not necessarily invested in the technologies of art world hierarchies. Instead, they represent vulnerability while contemplating the space photography occupies

⁸⁵ After the emergence of Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* 1977-1980 and ensuing feminist and queer artistic and scholarly practices attending to how visual culture constructs and reinforces processes of subject formation and expectations about various constituencies. For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations see Cotton’s *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. Also see Bright’s “Portrait”; Maggia, “Banzai! Banzai! Banzai! Banzai!”; Wells, “Image and Identity”; David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, “The Vertigo of Displacement”; Noel, “Putting on a Bold-Face”; Qualls, “Performance/Photography.”

⁸⁶ Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, 21.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

between index and performativity. The resulting images are highly complex and distinctly vernacular in the service of the conceptual underpinning of the work, which speaks to intimacy, issues of authenticity, community, cultural negotiation and hybridity, belonging, racialization and the complex constitution of identity.⁸⁸

Selfies like those made by Vaid-Menon build on the interventions mentioned above and engage in practices of performative portraiture un-interested in aesthetic hierarchies, foregrounding intimacy, vulnerability, and a critical eye toward self-performance and the politics of representation. In Vaid-Menon's own words they found power and agency in self-imaging:

From a young age I learned that I didn't have access to the power to be granted nuance, subjectivity, complexity, narrativity. There was a narrative ascribed to me on the basis of my skin and on my gender presentation. Fashion became the space that I could disarticulate the stereotypes and narratives mapped on me—to say actually there is something more complicated going on here. I am more than you think that I am. I use fashion as a tool. I don't think it's an end-all-be-all, but it's a tool to communicate a selfhood beyond/outside of/unmediated by white supremacy and transmisogyny. Like any tool it is flawed, but I believe it is still doing something.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Such practices can be observed in the work of Nikki S. Lee, a now canonical conceptual photographer who herself is imaged in her *Projects* series but is not the person depressing the shutter. For many years in the late 1990s through the early 2000s Lee, a Korean Born NYC based conceptual art photographer embarked on a series of projects where she embedded herself in various subcultures adopting their aesthetics and ways of life and had herself imaged with members of given constituencies via a point and shoot camera replete with time stamp photographed by someone else. Derek Conrad Murray. "Hip-Hop Vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle." *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (2004): 5-19. Doi:10.2307/4134516. Danny Lyon, "Nikki S. Lee: Projects." *Aperture*, no. 167 (2002): 6-8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24473136>. Also see Allison, Amanda. "Identity in Flux: Exploring the Work of Nikki S. Lee." *Art Education* 62, no. 1 (2009): 25-31. Doi:10.2307/27696316.

⁸⁹ Vaid-Menon, personal interview, 10 January 2018.

Vaid-Menon's choice to continually self-image in a venue where all past self-portraits are visible concurrently creates a new form of self-portraiture that disrupts how we have come to conceptualize photography and portraiture. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed confounds an easy collapsing of image and subject by continually shifting their self-representation.

Amelia Jones has observed that our current conceptions of portraiture can be traced back to the European Renaissance and that within such culture we tend to “conceive of representation as both collapsing and maintaining the gap between subject and object.”⁹⁰ Jones further discusses our cultural tendency—especially when it comes to portraiture—to collapse the representation for the *thing itself*.⁹¹ It is much easier to fall into the trap of collapsing a representation and the person it represents when there is only one image of the subject. We have been taught in the Western European and North American art historical tradition to see through the photographic image, rather than view it as a surface. As such it becomes almost easier to see the photographic portrait as the subject than to remain critical of the fact that it is a two-dimensional object representative of the subject imaged, but indeed a highly specific construction. Instagram feeds, in contradistinction to the singular isolated iconic portrait photograph, are made up of countless images, always augmenting and showcasing subjects as nuanced, malleable, and continually reinventing themselves. Non-binary selfies like those of Alok Vaid-

⁹⁰ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, 13.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 2-5, 13-14.

Menon, directly challenge how we have defined portraiture in Europe and North America since the Renaissance.⁹²

Completely controlling gesture, style, lighting, fashion and mise-en-scene, selfie-makers fully control and produce their images, engaging critical questions of representation and performativity. Due to the speed of their dissemination, exchange, and ubiquity, social media self-portraits are quickly reshaping art and proposing new forms of communication, new aesthetics, and new identity categories. As a new aesthetic form full of cultural and artistic potential.

Pattern Jamming

The self-presentation of trans femmes of color challenges the reductive and problematic depictions of members of said group in mainstream media. Trans and gender non-conforming selfie-makers not only radically redefine who has the power to image whom and how, but they also exemplify why selfies are perhaps the most innovative form of contemporary art today. The aesthetics of Instagram as a platform present their viewer/user with the option of viewing one image after another in a linear top-down feed, or of perusing a set of images three-square pictures across and a variable number down (depending on the size of one's device). The frame of the viewing device almost always contains another partial image (or images) and text. Even on the few occasions that the device frames a

⁹² For more on the European and North American conception of portraiture as rooted in the Renaissance see Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2012), 23-24.

solo image, the interactive capacity to “heart” or make comments, coupled with the understanding of the feed as continually scrollable, suggests ever more images to peruse. By its very design, Instagram lends itself to the production of multiple versions of oneself, a constantly shifting representation of the image-maker. This capacity offers a radical break from how we have conceptualized portrait photography up to this point, and with what portraits can do and how we understand them. (See Figure 40).

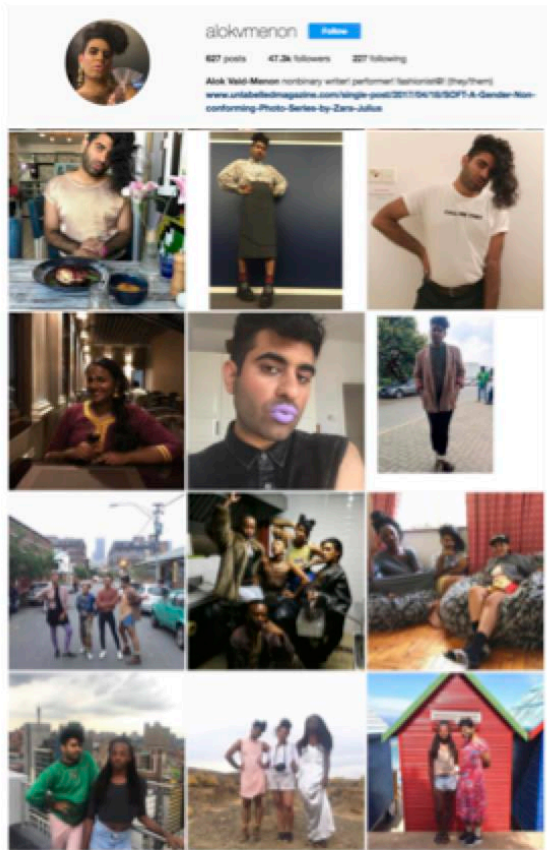


Figure 40. Alok Vaid-Menon’s Instagram feed, screen grab courtesy of the author

From pursed purple lips to the coy tilt of their head, from a sassy hand on a hip to color-blocked retro outfits, from street-style femme poses to night time kitchen voguing, from desert femmes' fashion shoots to the captions below them, Vaid-Menon's steady stream of self-representations demonstrate that they are aware of their physical appearance and the impact of forwarding colorful, patterned, detailed aesthetics and creating a self-portrait, composed of multiple self-portraits, that is uncontainable and always in flux. Vaid-Menon's imaging praxis reflects tactics similar to those deployed in post-colonial contexts which have engaged a different relationship between the surface of the picture, and the conceptual relation to that which is imaged. Offering a vastly different notion of photographs these images challenge what we have come to take for granted about pictures in the West—that is to say the ideologically constructed, “indexical” relationship between the surface of the picture to the thing itself.⁹³

Nicole Archer has noted that contemporary trans artists, often use a technique that she describes as “pattern jamming” in discussing the art of several contemporary trans visual artists Archer notes that pattern jamming is a successful tactic that deploy patterns to defray the ability to read through the image keeping viewers interests on the aesthetics of the surface of an image.⁹⁴ As artists use loud,

⁹³ As discussed in the introduction Christopher Pinney argues that in postcolonial locations, as colonized communities seek to reaffirm their agency and self-fashion their constituencies, they use photographs intentionally to refuse the depth of the image in favor of calling attention to the surface of the photograph. See Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2003.

⁹⁴ Nicole Archer “Dynamic Static,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 293-319. P 314.

intricate, nuanced, visual aesthetics that reinforce the flatness of two-dimensional artworks the artists create images that continually focus viewers' attention to the two-dimensional surface of an image rather than encouraging viewers to believe they are looking through the image at a subject. The way that Vaid-Menon mobilizes their likeness in conjunction with fashion enables a continually augmenting self-articulation that keeps our attention on the surface of the image. In the space of each photo, Vaid-Menon deploys fashions and compositional aesthetics that call attention to the surface of the picture plane, visually reminding us that the photo does not and cannot contain depth, that it is both two dimensional physically and conceptually.

Scrolling through Vaid-Menon's feed, one views their gender shift from high femme donning full makeup and duck-lips to wearing short shorts, topless bearing a hairy chest. Vaid-Menon presents themselves as a hip fashion visionary wearing edgy, retro fashions full of color and attitude, not only countering stereotypic representations, but providing a plethora of non-binary and brown corporealities that push open the trans visual field. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed creates new representations that radically challenge simple, flat stereotypes, they represent a multi-faceted self-portrait of a subject continually evolving—a self-portrait in a state of perpetual production.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1991. Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, 2. ed (London: Routledge, 2002).

Visually assessing Vaid-Menon's feed, a new understanding and definition of gender and racialization emerges. Gender becomes unfixed. Shifting their gender from one image to the next, the stream of performative iterations of self suggest that gender has no necessary correlation to biological sex or sexual orientation. Femininity is unfixed and exists in relation to bodies, people, place, time, class, ethnicity, racialization and various other identity categories and subcultural affiliations. Racialization can be seen as necessarily connected to gender and cultural conceptions of both are contingent on one another. Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed consists almost entirely of self-images. From one image to the next Vaid-Menon always appears as a new iteration of gender non-conforming femininity, dressed in brightly colored and loudly patterned outfits, sometimes posing with friends and on occasion they post a political poster or message instead of their face, full outfit shot, or short videos intelligently ranting against the binary gender paradigm. On the whole their Instagram feed confounds an easy collapsing of image and subject by continually shifting their self-representation. Rather than seeing one image as demonstrative of the subject and believing that through the iconic picture we can know Alok Vaid-Menon, their Instagram feed suggests that even with a seemingly endless flow of self-representations there will never be enough images to depict Vaid-Menon in their entirety, and identity and gender are continually morphable.

To try to evacuate the visual, social, and political significance of selfies by linking them to personality disorders is problematic in many ways, to say the

least.⁹⁶ For trans and gender non-conforming selfie-makers the work that selfies do is significantly impactful: for trans and gender-non-conforming subjects, the bathroom-mirror selfie has become a significant form of performative self-portraiture.

Bathroom Mirror Selfie:

Performative Self-Portraiture and Dysphoria

Being visibly discernible as Indian American and a non-binary trans femme, Alok Vaid-Menon sits at a dangerous intersectional zone of two powerful visual matrixes that mark their body as dually at risk. To think of racializing assemblages alongside the matrix of gender is crucial to understanding the visual regimes that create value structures into which Alok Vaid-Menon intervenes. It is precisely interventions like those of Vaid-Menon's that are radically pushing for a shifting of the matrix of gender and the values ascribed to bodies via the hieroglyphics of the flesh. Vaid-Menon's bathroom-mirror selfie creates a complex conflation of private self-fashioning and public perusal, underscoring the ways our corporealities intersect with visual culture and visually based regulatory regimes. (See Figure 41). This highlights how not all corporealities are valued equally and there are complex systems of evaluation in place that are upheld via visual culture.

⁹⁶ There is an entire critique that needs to be made here unpack the problematic forwarding of "personality disorders" as a means of discrediting selfies.

The now ubiquitous mirror selfie, a photograph in which the photographer takes a picture of themselves in a mirror with their hand-held mobile device and posts it to social media, has become a staple of selfie culture, offering a unique venue in which image-makers push the aesthetics and conceptual underpinnings of self-portraiture. Intentionally fashioning and performing self-representation in an intimate moment of solitary self-reflection, Vaid-Menon collapses the space of the bathroom mirror—with its palpable privacy—into the possibility of mass audience perusal the moment the work is posted online. Vaid-Menon uses mise-en-scene, pose, gesture, and self-fashioning to construct an image of themselves for social media. They frame themselves from the thigh up, wearing a striped three-quarter-length 90s-esque top with gold buttons down the front, tucked into a black-and-white, polka-dot skirt; they don red lipstick, gold earrings, and a gold septum ring. Beneath the poof of dark hair on their head is a round reddish-orange bindi. The setting is a small faux-marble-tiled bathroom, replete with toothbrush and hand towel. Vaid-Menon does not meet our gaze, deciding instead to watch their pose in the LCD screen of their smart-phone, intent on considering how their corporality will appear when posted on social media.

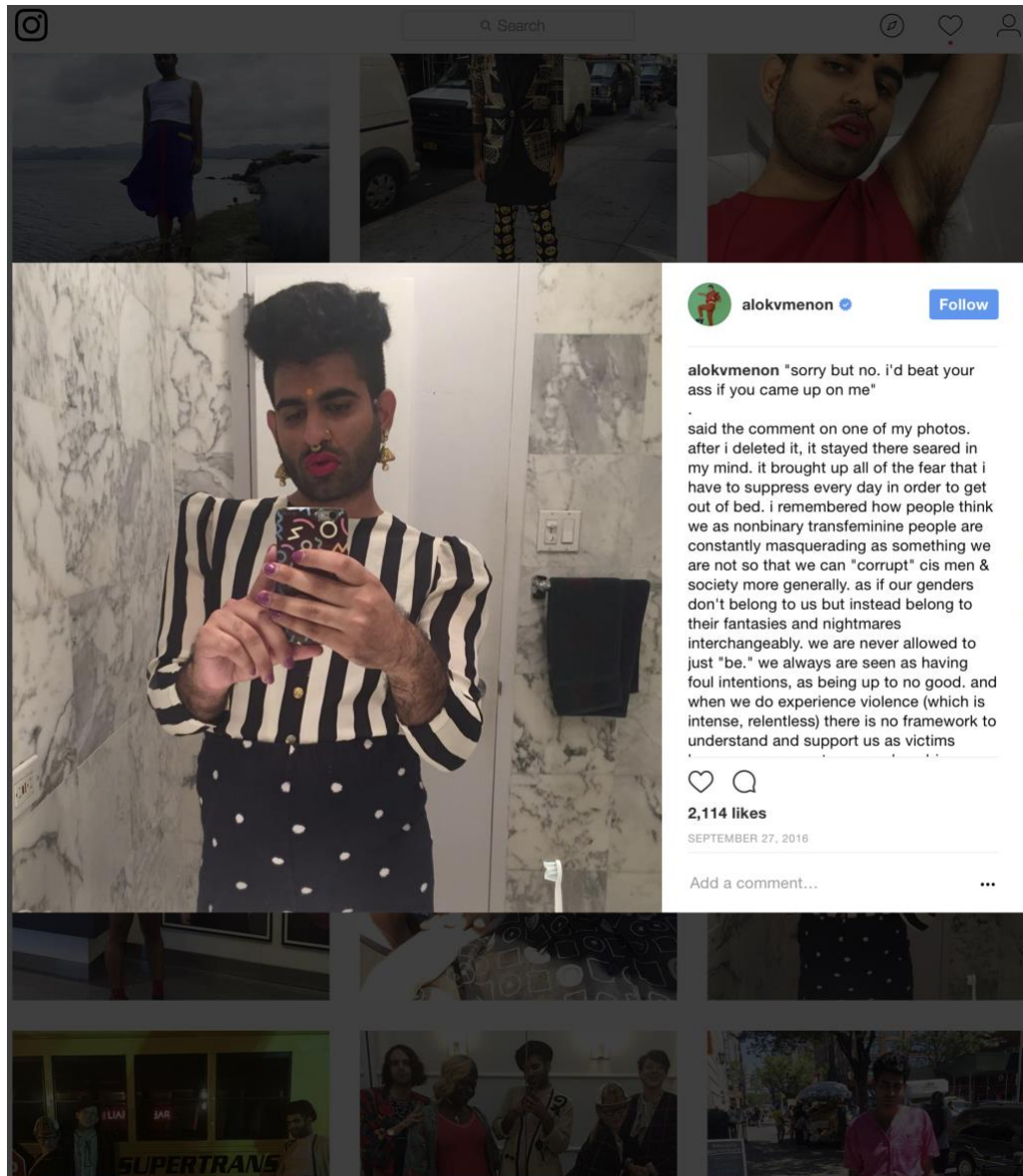


Figure 41. Alok Vaid-Menon, Bathroom Mirror Selfie, posted to Instagram September 27, 2016, screen grab courtesy of the author.

The attention to performance within the picture reflects photography scholar Susan Bright's observation, "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to

deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions.”⁹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of periperformativity proves useful in understanding the cultural significance of this type of trans selfie. Sedgwick described periperformativity as performative utterances “whose complex efficacy depends on their tangency to, as well as their difference from, the explicit performances.”⁹⁸ Sedgwick’s periperformativity is exemplified by events and acts engaged in queer-world making that exist outside normative structures. Such acts do not seek to be legitimated by normative social relations. In the case of selfies, the performance itself lies in the moment the shutter is clicked. Thus, the performance always exists in a place and time removed from audience reception; as such it constitutes a periperformance. But it also functions as a mode of self-imagining that self-protects simultaneously. As Vaid-Menon states:

I can fashion myself online without the (immediate) risk of physical violence. That’s not the case for the public where when I step outside, I am under the very real risk of attack. I’ve written about this in the past, but I often worry that my Instagram contributes to the false notion that I can look like I do in all of my photos everywhere that I go. That’s just not the case—many times I have to go “stealth,” pass within the binary to avoid very real danger. So, my self-portraiture becomes a sort of idyllic space too—an imagination on what I could look like/become without fear of harassment.⁹⁹

Imaging the culturally disruptive corporeality from a place of remove, the periperformance inserts Vaid-Menon’s likeness into culture without putting their

⁹⁷ Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now* (New York, Aperture Foundation, 2005), 19-21.

⁹⁸ Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 5, 68-69.

⁹⁹ Vaid-Menon, personal interview, 10 January 2018.

body in (possible) physical danger. Vaid-Menon is well aware that their likeness and their corporeality may prompt aggression from some viewers. Such aggression is evidenced by a comment posted below the bathroom-mirror photograph that reads: “sorry but no, I’d beat your ass if you came up on me.” This statement, made by a viewer/commenter of Vaid-Menon’s image, exemplifies just how aggressive and violent reactions to brown non-binary trans people can be. The reactive comment reflects what often occurs in physical space when a viewer is confronted with an inability to reductively categorize Vaid-Menon within their ideological identity frameworks. In turn, Vaid-Menon frequently experiences acts of aggression perpetrated against them.¹⁰⁰

Vaid-Menon’s periperformances expose how their corporeality triggers responses informed by assumptions about them based on the visual encounter. The stakes of Vaid-Menon's work are made clear in this bathroom-mirror selfie and the accompanying comment made by the enraged viewer (“sorry, but no, I’d beat your ass if you came up on me”): the complex ideologically-informed process of making meaning based on the visual encounter becomes clear. The

¹⁰⁰ Vaid-Menon’s performances frequently describe the personal experience of aggression enacted and spoken against them in public. See Alok Vaid-Menon, “When I Wear Women’s Clothing, I Am Harrassed,” *Huffpost*, 13 July 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/transfeminine_b_7788560.html (accessed 12 September 2017). For more scholarship on the violence enacted against trans women of color see: Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Cece McDonald in Conversation with Toshio Meronick “Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 23-37. Also see: Mel Chen “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 147-9.

reactive comment reflects what often occurs to Vaid-Menon in physical space and online when a viewer is confronted with Vaid-Menon's corporeality, one that embodies a manifestation of the inability of gendered and racialized systems to contain us.¹⁰¹ Creating this representation, Vaid-Menon intervenes in systems of gender and racialization. Systems which, otherwise, unchallenged, mark Vaid-Menon's corporeality and performance as inhuman, and suggesting that their life as unliveable.

According to Judith Butler gender is highly governed by visuality, and there is a point when certain gendered subjects fail to fit into culturally sanctioned gender performances. Butler illustrates this process via a scene in a mirror, when the subject in question sees their reflection as something "nameless" and "freakish," what she refers to as "something between norms." In this visual moment of self-reflection, Butler asks, is this subject not "the specter of the freak?"¹⁰² Vaid-Menon's bathroom-mirror selfie captures an intimate moment of self-reflection and performativity that showcases visual signifiers that when taken together create a gender performance that is not easily understood via binary gender. Vaid-Menon has visible stubble on their face, and dark hairy arms (physical traits often associated with masculinity in the north American binary gender structure), while they stand in a contraposto stance, hip thrust out gently to

¹⁰¹ Vaid-Menon's performances frequently describe the personal experience of aggression enacted and spoken against them in public. Vaid-Menon, "When I Wear Women's Clothing," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/transfeminine_b_7788560.html (accessed 12 September 2017).

¹⁰² Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 69.

the side, they purse their painted lips, and wear retro femme fashion, all aesthetics associated with femininity in the binary gender system. In Butler's framework, such an embodiment of disparate gender signifiers converging on one body, might cause the subject to see themselves as a "freak" due to their inability to fit into one of two gendered categories. Butler's "freak" can also be understood as dysphoria—which may occur in front of the mirror or may come in daily life.¹⁰³

Dysphoria is a term forwarded by physicians and psychologists to name the trans subjects feeling of discomfort in the body they inhabit -ostensibly because they do not identify with the biology and anatomy of that body. However, I would like to suggest that the subject actually feels dysphoria because they are not receiving the gendered treatment and social interaction that they desire. In other words it is not their body that does not fit so much as the way society is treating them, based on viewers' perception of them.¹⁰⁴ Looking at Alok Vaid-Menon's self-image, considering their pose, stance and self-perusal the picture does not appear to be one in which Vaid-Menon views themselves as a "monstrous parody of femininity."¹⁰⁵ No, the viewing of Vaid-Menon via the lens of transmisogyny comes from the external world, from abusive and aggressive comments made by hostile viewers who interpret the juxtaposition of their

¹⁰³ *The Transgender Studies Reader* has more information on experiences and theorization around dysphoria as a pathologizing discourse. See Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ([pub city: pub date]), 18-19, 263, 275, 500, 515-16, 645, 647.

¹⁰⁴ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 47.

¹⁰⁵ Sara Ahmed forwards that trans women often face trans misogyny and are viewed as a "monstrous parody of femininity" Sara Ahmed "An affinity of hammers," 228.

corporeal aesthetics to be a disruption of norms that is not acceptable. Vaid-Menon's mirror selfie materializes Butler's scene, but Vaid-Menon's selfie makes clear that it is not the subject that self-inflicts dysphoria, but rather that dysphoria is thrust upon the gender non-conforming subject through acts of gender policing perpetrated by others. In Vaid-Menon's mirror scene it becomes clear that dysphoria is an act of binary gender regulation inflicted on the non-binary or trans subject by the external world. Alok Vaid-Menon's bathroom mirror selfie not only demonstrates dysphoria as a shortcoming in observers' abilities to process complex, hybrid gender identities, but it also reveals how gender and racialization are intimately intertwined. And how it is in the visual encounter with photographs and people that meanings are ideologically assigning.¹⁰⁶

Racialization and Gender Regulation

When encountering trans femmes of color in physical space people have already been ideologically informed via visual culture as to how to treat them based on stereotypic representations. Via assessing the bodies of trans femmes of color some viewers ascribe them statuses of less-than-human based on the relative

¹⁰⁶ For discussion of looking being an ideologically saturated process see: Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2001). It is also worth mentioning that the bathroom itself has been a place of contention for trans folks and in an of itself the binary bathroom structure is an extension of gender as regulatory apparatus see; Halberstam's discussion of the bathroom as "a technology of gender" in J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 133. This could also be taken up further in conversation with what bell hooks has discussed regarding the way systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy are maintained by all of us who "internalize and enforce the values of the regime." bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995). p. xii

darkness of their appearances and on non-normative gender characteristics.¹⁰⁷ The implications of the assigning of statuses of “human,” “less-than-human” and “non-human” to people, based on their corporeal markers, is often unconscious, reified through visual culture and detrimental to those marked through visual encounters as less than human. This process is exponentially dangerous when the subject sits at an intersecting point on two visual matrixes that position them as unworthy of life. Alok Vaid-Menon, Cece McDonald and the characters of Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra seen in *Tangerine* all live in a similar intersectional location in the fields of racialization and gender. Their dark brown skin places them all in danger in the U.S., as their flesh and phenotype¹⁰⁸ are often translated through socio-political process into the category of less than human. Related to this all of their gender presentations disrupt binary gender aesthetics and expectations marking them doubly in peril.

Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra seen in *Tangerine*, Cece McDonald and Alok Vaid-Menon, all exist in similar intersectional locations in the field of racialization and the matrix of gender. The characters of Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra in *Tangerine* were created from the ideological perspective of

¹⁰⁷ The concept of colorism may also be discussed in relation to the hieroglyphics of the flesh and racialization as a related and similarly operating phenomenon. See: Ya Azibo, Daudi Ajani. “Teaching the Mulatto Hypothesis to Combat African-U.S. Colorism: Just Knowing Can Cure.” *Race gender & Class* 21, no. ¾ (2014): 88-100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496986>

¹⁰⁸ Mel Chen “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 149. J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 58.

dominant visual culture as deployed by author and director Sean Baker and reflect dominant cultural ideologies and expectations about the types of lives trans femmes of color can live. Cece McDonald is a survivor of the ways the operation of the ideological processes of racialization and gender regulation play out in physical space and impact the lives of trans femmes of color. Alok Vaid-Menon experiences implications of the matrix of gender and racializing assemblages in their daily life and uses selfies to expose how their corporeality triggers responses informed by “racializing assemblages”¹⁰⁹ and the matrix of gender, demonstrating the interconnection between racialization and gender regulation and how we assign meaning to people in the visual encounter. Vaid-Menon’s visual culture intervention into processes of racialization and gender actively works to disrupt these regimes and continually assert themselves as human and their life as liveable. Mobilizing themselves as a multiplicity speaks back repeatedly to systems of racism and gender oppression that would visually erase them eradicating their existence and removing the possibility of their life from view.

Redefining how we view processes of identification and racialization Alexander G. Weheliye writes about alternative ways of thinking about race as racialized assemblages the politics of which Weheliye argues are implicated in global power structures and should be understood as being defined by intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism. He states further that if we want to understand and abolish our

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

extremely uneven global power structures that we need to challenge the creation and maintenance of systems of domination, criminalization, exploitation, and violence. Moreover, we must see how all of this is predicated on racial, gender, sexual, and political inequities. He articulates that this thinking is indebted to the work of Hortense Spiller and Sylvia Winters for their corrective to Agamben's and Foucault's considerations of racism and biopolitics. Some of the questions motivating Weheliye's rigorous inquiry are about subjection, agency, and resistance. Arguing that all the foundational Western thinkers of post-structuralism have ignored race, Weheliye asks what different modalities of human come to light when we do not take the liberal humanist figure of man but consider a different center of humanness such as those who have been excluded from this domain?

Weheliye's scholarship on the complex interconnectedness of violence, racialization, and corporeality proves instructive in thinking through the specificity of visual culture, life, and ideological processes of racialization. The notion of assemblage (French for arrangement), building on Deleuze and Guattari, considers networks and shifting relations that exist in horizontal and vertical axis. Weheliye's conception of "hieroglyphics of the flesh"¹¹⁰ mark and include some bodies in the realm of the human based on the aesthetics of their corporeality, while demarking other bodies based on their aesthetics as outside the realm of

¹¹⁰ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 39, 113, 124, 126.

human.¹¹¹ Weheliye's formulation of the process of racialization is instructive and revelatory when it comes to the relationship between visual culture and real life encounters with trans femmes of color. His formulation highlights how this is an active process linked to the physiology of individuals and ideologically sutures culturally specific concepts of humanity to constituencies as necessarily tied to visual appearance. Relying on stereotypes, racial assemblages ultimately naturalize the expulsion of some humans from the category of human. This visual and cultural process works to sediment racializing assemblages into political relations, normalizing racism and racial injustice. Weheliye fervently urges that race be viewed as a socio-political relation and not assumed to be a de-politicized visual descriptor. Weheliye is concerned with the ways that visible human difference has been considered within black studies to better understand the political, economic, and social exploitation of noticeable human difference. Visuals and aesthetics often mark signifiers of difference and belonging. Racializing assemblages, however, rely on the permanent fixing of identification to the body. The use of this concept of difference as attached to the body is informative in thinking through the political and social situation surrounding trans women and trans femmes of color.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid. Weheliye acknowledges that this thinking is indebted to the work of Horten Spiller and Sylvia Winters, for their corrective to Agamben's and Foucault's considerations of racism and biopolitics. Some of the questions motivating Weheliye's rigorous inquiry are about subjection, agency, and resistance in extreme situations. Arguing that all foundational Western thinkers of post-structuralism have ignored race, Weheliye asks what different modalities of human come to light when we move beyond the liberal humanist figure of man to consider different centers of humanness, such as those who have been excluded from this domain. That being said he locates

One cannot fully understand and articulate the spectrum of the ways in which racialization is enmeshed with visual culture unless one considers the ways in which gender regulation is enacted. When trans femmes of color like Vaid-Menon present gender options beyond the narrowly prescribed iteration of femininity we have come to take as a given in our cultural context, these performances and corporealities become living examples of how binary gender is unable to contain us. But often, rather than being viewed as liberatory for us all, trans people who's genders disrupt binary gender systems (which often equates to trans femmes and gender nonconforming and non-binary people) are met with violence enacted by those who seek to keep intact the binary gender system proposed and perpetuated largely via mainstream visual culture.

Judith Butler's research investigating regulatory practices that govern gender and culturally intelligible notions of identity is particularly useful here. Her scholarship reveals that some identities must *not* exist for the system of gender to exist. For example, she writes, identities where "gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender,"¹¹³ threaten to expose limits of the regulatory system.¹¹⁴ Those who live outside the domain of the matrix, she articulates as abject and describes these

his text within black studies as he sees this field as a non-disciplinary field defined by foregrounding both blackness and racializing assemblages.

¹¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 24.

¹¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 67 and 42.

lives as “unlivable.”¹¹⁵ She sees what she coins as the “heterosexual imperative” as enabling certain sexed identifications and disavowing others. She calls this phenomenon an exclusionary matrix.¹¹⁶ For the binary gender system to remain intact, those people whose identities are viewed as challenging the system must be punished and made examples of—as offenders of the system. This idea is also demonstrated in visual culture when we see trans subjects who most fully reflect dominant cultural ideologies as being marginally accepted, while subjects existing too radically outside sanctioned genders become demonstrable as not only expendable but necessarily eradicateable, as exemplified by the countless acts of violence and aggression perpetrated against trans femmes and trans women of color.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹¹⁶ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.” Butler’s personal situatedness and allegiance to philosophy and semiotics frames her argument in that she roots her observations in the way these practices are played out in language. This is interesting but, more fitting for this project is to apply visual culture as a means of applying Butler’s observations rather than language. Butler observes that, via language, identities are brought into being, while at the same time also inscribing us into discourses of gender and sex. Thus naming delimits also reinforces the norm while granting the quality of humanness. This observation is deeply informed by speech act theory, traces the performative as a practice that enacts and produces at the same time. Butler then cites Derrida to elaborate on how these utterances are successful only because they reiterate what is already known within the discursive framework. Furthermore, Butler famously argues that performativity (building on Lacan) is a citational practice. In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler works to critique pervasive heterosexism in feminism and to think about how to live at “some distance from gender norms.” She saw French feminism as reproducing essentialism and reproducing differences between masculine and feminine (with the exception of Monique Wittig). This text deals with asking questions about undoing gender and sex regarding normative ways of being. Significantly in the is text Butler observes that gender is a historical category and terms like masculine and feminine are notoriously changeable and contingent on time and place. Gender is social that it is “for others” and observing that gender is about social negotiation and desire for recognition.

¹¹⁷ See Introduction and also see appendix.

Usies: The Group Self-Portrait

In the space of group selfies or “usies,” Vaid-Menon’s images demonstrate a variety of femme gender presentations in the frame of one image. In usies, or photos where Vaid-Menon images themselves with other brown, non-binary, gender non-conforming femmes, they create a multi-subject disruption of binary gender and racialized aesthetics of beauty. (See Figure 42). With their hand on their hip, Vaid-Menon wears a polka-dot top, black platforms, a high bouffant hairstyle and deep red lips. They gently touch the shoulder of another figure to their left who wears a sheer fitted dress over a dark sports bra and dark denim shorts. In the right-hand side of the frame, two other femmes stand together on a shared city sidewalk, their looks embody a mixture of athletic-wear and street-style. Taken together, these four femmes propose multiple ways of being non-binary and brown. Such interventions are critical.¹¹⁸ Collectively, they embody various aspects of femininity and self-assuredness, while wearing flashy, fashion-forward looks. Vaid-Menon and crew demonstrate their lack of interest in presenting within frameworks of binary gender. Instead, they unapologetically disidentify with femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with both masculinity and femininity.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ K. Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 22.

¹¹⁹ José Esteban Muñoz developed the indispensable concept of disidentification in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999). The term describes acts wherein queer performers adopt parts of dominant identificatory categories while perverting and jettisoning other parts of those identities with which they do not identify.

In a particularly poignant observation about the complexity of gender performances and negotiation as they intersect with nationalism, racialization and privilege, Marcia Ochoa observes that glamour is often invoked as a “form of power” that enables “legibility,” “affirmation” and “survival.”¹²⁰ Ochoa observes that glamour, beauty, and femininity function within transnational economies of desire and identification. Within these economies, glamour allows its practitioners to draw down extra-local authority, to conjure a contingent space of being and belonging.”¹²¹ Noting that glamour is also not “redemptive” and can be “crushed by the power of the state, patriarchy, normativity, or colonialism.”¹²²

¹²⁰ Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, *Perverse Modernities / a Series* Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 89-90. A longer comparative engagement could be made with Ochoa’s project for there is a significant amount of overlap to confer when dealing with the construction and negotiation of gender as it intersects with various regimes and facets of people’ lives. For example, Ochoa argues that media and beauty pageants both transmit and materialize National ideologies, her work is invested in thinking through how her subjects have agency to interact with the representations that are ubiquitous in media. Her text considers how Transformistas and Misses participate in the larger discourses about Nationality, femininity and racialization. Here we see that ways in which discourses of nation, race, market and media are “sutured” together on the bodies of the Misses. Misses become the national brand of Venezuela, mediating racial ideology through their embodiment. The various and changing racial categories as exemplified in the body of the Misses is exemplary of national identity and racial ideals of Venezuela.

¹²¹ Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, *Perverse Modernities / a Series* Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 89.

¹²² Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, *Perverse Modernities / a Series* Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 89. Ochoa’s definition and discussion of Glamour relate specifically to the Venezuelan Context and her study of the negotiation of femininity in Venezuela through beauty pageants and Transformistas. Her framing of glamour builds on the work of Stephen Gundle (2008).



Figure 42. Alok Vaid-Menon, Usie, Posted to Instagram May 24, 2015, screen grab courtesy of the author

While Ochoa is speaking about glamour as she observes it being deployed in Venezuela by beauty pageant contestants and Transformistas, the deployment of glamour as a strategy of survival, legibility, and affirmation is mobilized by trans femmes and gender non-conforming feminine people in other contexts as well. Ochoa's definition of glamour views it as a gesture of self-making, a performance of style that is deployed to tranifest identity in dialogue with mass

media and nationalism.¹²³ Ochoa's interest lies in "glamour as a technology of intimacy" invoked in "everyday practices."¹²⁴ Alok Vaid-Menon and other non-binary trans femmes deploy glamour as a subversive strategy and as a means of signaling their identities to one another. Femme aesthetics are often contingent on and viewable by a deployment of glamour as a gender non-conforming person and glamour is commonly used as a tactic of protection from hostility and as a signifier to others of the community. Glamour is performative and citational; it is gestural as well as contingent on aesthetics and corporeality. Glamour is an embodied aspect of femme gender performances that signifies fabulousness as a means of being that speaks back to worlds that would otherwise oppress; it is a method of bodily exclamation that "I exist!" Alok Vaid-Menon's prolific self-imaging disrupts gender's binary citational existence creating an entirely new visual rubric that disrupts the matrix of gender while often using glamour to articulate new versions of femininity and sometimes as a tactic deployed to try to avoid hostility.

¹²³ Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, *Perverse Modernities / a Series* Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014). For tranifest see: Tranifestig is discussed in *TSQ* by Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison who trace it's origin to a conference in Durham North Carolina where the term was deployed as art of an "experimental lexicon" as they refer to it used in effort to create community across differences in June of 2011 at a conference called Indigo Days. See Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison, "Tranifest," in Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, eds., *Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1-2 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 222-225, 223.

¹²⁴ Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, *Perverse Modernities / a Series* Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 88.

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist transphobic notions of beauty, Vaid-Menon and crew demonstrate gender as performative, but also as a free signifier, contingent on aesthetics, gestures, and glamour. The photograph visually asserts femme-ness as not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics. By creating a multiplicity of non-binary, brown, trans corporealities, the field of representations mobilized by Vaid-Menon expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being.¹²⁵ This work begins to create space for a new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very transgressiveness.¹²⁶ Vaid-Menon uses their Instagram channel, replete with critical, collaborative performances of a variety of trans femmes, to assert radical alternatives to current genders and advances complex intersectional subjects, not only as viable options but also as beautiful, nuanced, expansive, and loved members of communities. Vaid-Menon describes the significance of community and collaboration as:

Everything I am is because of the people (and non-people) in my life! The photos of my peers help me femmifest myself, and I hope mine help them. I think this is all part of a trans feminist ethic—we support each other because no one else supports us. Often the only people who defend me from harassment on the streets are other transfemme people, and I think that extends to how we relate to one another’s work and livelihood. So

¹²⁵ Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, Nachdr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 21-22.

¹²⁶ For more on creating new aesthetics of trans beauty that is not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very transgressiveness, see Riki Wilchins “Is Trans Beautiful?” *Advocate* 7 (March 2017), <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2017/3/07/trans-beautiful> (accessed December 27, 2018).

much of the experience of enduring transmisogyny is one of social isolation, so it's so beautiful and generative to be part of a larger community and movement of trans artists.¹²⁷

In their prolific self-imaging, using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of a continually evolving self, Vaid-Menon's work directly contradicts our cultural belief in the ability of the photograph to render truth. We are unprepared to comprehend a portrait made up of multiples. This complexity of visually marginalized or stereotyped subjects is particularly difficult for some to comprehend particularly when it comes to women, femme-identified people, people of color and youth, precisely because dominant culture has produced our cultural understanding of these constituencies as fixed and flat rather than dynamic, nuanced, and expansive.

The production of brown, non-binary, trans-femme iconography with complex, changing, and intersectional identities not only produces new visual culture exemplars for others to model themselves after but is also a necessary intervention into a visual culture that otherwise demeans and eradicates non-binary trans femmes of color. Vaid-Menon's work as praxis visually pushes

¹²⁷ Vaid-Menon, personal interview, 10 January 2018. On the one hand, while Vaid-Menon articulates their gratitude for being part of a trans community, their comment also demonstrates the gravity of the continued amount of street harassment, and social media harassment that trans femmes face daily, and that it is often permitted by other non-trans people who witness it. It is not enough to accept trans and non-binary people and to use terms like tolerance; what is needed is for cis people to actively work to protect the lives of trans and non-binary people, rather than simply leave other trans and non-binary people to stand up for each other. With the lack of trans and non-binary representations, and most cis people not knowing (or not aware of knowing) trans and non-binary people, trans and non-binary self-images often become their only interface with the broader culture. Thus, social media provides a massively significant venue in which to self-image and circulate one's trans femme identity in visual culture.

gender in ever augmenting directions. Perusing their Instagram feed Vaid-Menon's gender is continually shifting from one image to the next and is always contingent on where they are, who they are with, and what they are doing. They deploy various visual signifiers, including posture, gesture, stance, mise-en-scene, outfit, costume, makeup, body all in the service of visually manifesting countless iterations of non-binary femme genders. In conversation with Vaid-Menon's Instagram feed and taking it as a form of praxis and an intervention into gender discourse, I propose that we redefine gender in the following terms. Gender is a matrix. It is not binary. It is multiple; it is vast in both visual and corporeal iterations. It is governed by aesthetics. It is performed through language, gesture, fashion, association, and it is corporeal. Gender is also perceived through visual encounters, and in the encounter, gender is understood, read, unpacked, articulated, and ascribed to corporeality. Gender has no necessary correlation to biological sex or to sexual orientation; it is a free agent that is sometimes uninformed by biological sex and sometimes related to one's sexual orientation. It is more accurate to conceive of gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation as three separate spinning wheels on a conceptual, never-ending slot machine that can line up in any number of infinite ways. Gender is not fixed. It is always being constructed and reconstructed and subverted and perverted, played with, and regulated. Gender is always in tension with regulatory regimes and biopower. Gender is ever-evolving as a field, and within each of us. Gender is part of the way each of us expresses ourselves to the world around us and the people around

us. There are more genders than there are people. No gender is derivative; there is no originary form of any gender. All genders are related to visual culture. Gender is always in relation to bodies, to place and time and to class, ethnicity, racialization (and various other identity categories), and cultural ideologies. One may change their gender at any moment in any location and with any group of people. Regardless of this, even if one intends to keep their gender the same, it will be understood differently, contingent upon place, time, ideological, corporeal, locational viewing position of whomever one encounters.

Selfies: Contemporary Self-Portraiture

As trans selfies proliferate on social media, they galvanize around specific themes. Selfie producers self-select and self-submit to particular identity categories or sub-visual fields; for example, Instagram channels like #transisbeautiful, #transandshirtless, #genderbender, #transandinked, #girls like us, and various YouTube channels, are devoted to particular trans topics and corporealities. Trans selfies are also used as political actions as evidenced by the trans bathroom selfies movement, which galvanized around #WeJustNeedToPee. These selfies pictured trans people in public restrooms that visibly clashed with their gender, and were made in direct response to legislation being passed to prevent trans people from using restrooms that matched their gender identity. Selfies thus represent a significant shift, not only in our image-driven culture, but also in the discourse of contemporary art. The accessibility of social media and its

ability to widely disseminate imagery has redefined the arena of visual art and culture, effectively allowing representationally marginalized people to insert themselves into popular visual culture by instantaneously accessing large audiences. Selfies also challenge the way that visual culture and the art world has worked for years by potentially providing a radically disruptive way for self-imaging to be produced, circulated, discussed, and consumed. Selfies should not be denigrated, but rather sustained, and critical scholarship must be undertaken around how this form changes visual culture and art.

What has yet to be discussed historically in art discourse and is particularly apparent in observing Vaid-Menon's use of selfies on social media, is that selfies provide a unique type of portraiture that can be viewed as evolving, self-curated solo exhibitions of self-representations. This view not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define photography and photographic practice, but also confounds the way stereotypes of marginalized constituencies are established. Rather than creating static and reductive representations, which narrowly demonstrate flat ways of being an acceptable trans subject, Vaid-Menon's selfies present a diversity of potential ways of being non-binary and brown. Discussing their work and the necessity to proliferate so many self-images Vaid-Menon notes:

I would not exist if I hadn't created the image of myself. And that "I" is a collaborative I, one that comes from interlocutors both online and offline imagining ways to exist outside of the Western colonial gender binary. The story feels trite but that doesn't make it any less true: I didn't have access to representation that looked like me from anywhere and so I turned to the Internet to find it and then recognized it was less about finding and

more about creating. I have been an Internet kid for a long time—at the age of 13 I started to post graphic designs online and had a vibrant digital art life. From a young age I learned the power of the Internet for self-birthing and creation. Instagram (which I started to use early 2014) feels like a continuation of what I’ve been doing for over a decade: becoming.¹²⁸

Self-portraiture is a human impulse bound up with the pursuit of self-introspection and the interrogation of one’s likeness in relation to the visual field and culture at large.¹²⁹ Self-introspection is precisely the characteristic that makes a photograph art. According to preeminent photography scholar Abigail Solomon-Godeau, art photography is defined by a commitment to being both self-reflective and critically engaged. She stresses that “self-expression, and subjectivity have functioned, at least since romanticism, as the very warranty of art.”¹³⁰

While I am particularly interested in Vaid-Menon’s Instagram feed, for all the unique and specific ways that they engage with opening up identity categories and challenging how we understand contemporary art photography, it must also be stated that plenty of other selfie-makers engage in similar practices and processes. Therefore, it is critical that we remove the stigma around selfies and redefine self-portraiture to include selfies. The assessment of the success of photographic portraits is ever warranted, but the terms by which such works are evaluated need to change. The aesthetic hierarchy we have come to accept based

¹²⁸ Vaid-Menon, personal interview, 10 January 2018.

¹²⁹ Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 9, 19-21. Also see James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

¹³⁰ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 109. These notions are historically bound up with modernist definitions of art as rooted in self-expression.

on a method of creation, venue of the exhibition of the work and the artist's relative situatedness in art world hierarchies are outmoded and lead to critical blind spots which we need to remedy to keep art history and visual studies relevant. Assessing the success of a portrait or self-portrait is more productive when based on its conceptual underpinnings, intellectual rigor, and intervention into various visual matrixes. In other words, questions I propose we ask when assessing photographic representations are: how does the image challenge various ideological structures? How does it intervene in visual culture? How does it disrupt previous established aesthetics, methods and hierarchies? It behoves us then to change our assessment of contemporary portraiture and self-portrait photography to move beyond archaic methods of analysis. Not all portraits are successful or significant, and not all selfies are either, but many of them are. In writing off contemporary works made using social media because they are made in a relatively new and widely accessible means is akin to writing off earlier forms of photography like vernacular photography, color photography, Polaroids, and slideshows, all of which have been inducted into the canons of Art History. To not engage in similar shortsightedness, we need to expand the category of photographic portraiture and self-portraiture to include works in emergent forms regardless of previous exclusion based on material hierarchies.¹³¹

¹³¹ Jessica Evan "Photography," in Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds., *Feminist Visual Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), p 106-107. Evans observes the advent of Kodak's democratization of photography and the ensuing proliferation of vernacular image photography bumped photography from the ranks of cultural elite framing the understanding of photography as a commonplace deskilled and thus less significant and less important form of cultural production. We see this same issue transpire in the case of social media images and particularly with selfies

Closing with a Redefinition

The term, self-portraiture is both specific and amorphous. It is a representation, a production, and a creation of someone made by that same individual, but the specifics of how and why are unarticulated. The advent of the selfie has highlighted the problematic politics of this fickle definition. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a self-portrait as “a portrait of oneself done by oneself,” while Oxford Dictionary defines self-portrait as “a portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist.” What a self-portrait is and what its aims are, remain up to the maker. The distinction about who is authorized to create a self-portrait - “oneself” or an “artist” - is at the core of the contention around self-portraits and selfies.¹³²

In all their ubiquity and potential democratization of the creating representations, selfies have faced a profound backlash. At the core of this, I

today. But as vernacular photography was initially maligned it regained its cultural significance and place in the canon of illustrious art soon thereafter. My anticipation with selfies is that this will soon too be the case but, in the meantime, we are wasting time define he emergent cultural form when much cane/could be learned from them in terms of both contemporary photography and photographic practices, and shortcomings of photographic scholarship.

¹³² The massive impact selfies are having across a vast array of aspects of contemporary life is illustrated by the growing corpus of research on selfies from scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology, to anthropology to Art History and beyond. A significant portion of the research on selfies is deploys intersectional methods to unpack their indelible impact on art, self-portraiture, social life and visual culture. The establishment of the Selfies Research Network, conferences like the Kern, which is based out of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), and research focusing on the complexity and specificity of selfies reflect the growing interest in selfies. Art historian and visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray argues that the power of selfies lies in their ability to enable new forms of self-representation and their redistribution of the power of self-imaging. See: Derek Conrad Murray, ‘Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,’ *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (2 November 2015): 490–516, doi:10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967.

would like to suggest is the shift in imaging power that they have facilitated. And while there may be some need for distinctions between self-portraits and selfies, I want to suggest that we should view it as technological and not as evaluative. That is to say, selfies may be made via smartphones and tablets, while self-portraits are made by a variety of other media; it is necessary to realize that the derision of selfies is precisely about their mass culture appeal and accessibility to numerous people, not necessarily about their quality. I want to redefine the terms by which we articulate the distinctions of self-portrait and selfies and view them both as under the heading of self-imaging. I believe that this will enable a more productive and more rigorous study of what is transpiring with the visual culture of self-imaging today. Furthermore, I want to stress that some selfies may be categorized as self-portraits and that self-portraiture needs to be more defined. I propose a slightly more nuanced definition of self-portrait: A self-portrait is an image representing oneself made by oneself, engaged in a critical practice reflecting on and expanding established definitions of identity categories. In redefining self-portraiture in this way, a direct effort is made to emphasize critical engagement with representational politics and to avoid a hierarchy of equipment used to produce the images. I will move that some selfies are also self-portraits made using social media.

Vaid-Menon's selfies are, in fact, the definition of a self-portrait. They are "portraits of oneself done by oneself." However, based on the discussion of Vaid-Menon's oeuvre, I propose a slightly more nuanced definition of self-portrait. A

self-portrait is an image representing oneself made by oneself, engaged in a critical practice reflecting on and expanding established definitions of identity categories. In redefining self-portraiture in this way, direct effort is made to emphasize critical engagement with representational politics and to avoid a hierarchy of equipment used to produce the images. Due to the speed of their dissemination, exchange, and ubiquity, social media self-portraits are quickly reshaping art and proposing new forms of communication, new aesthetics, and new identity categories. As a new aesthetic form full of cultural and artistic potential, selfies are indeed contemporary art. The relationship between viewing photographs of people and looking at people in life is inextricable. The picture is not a simulation of the lived world, but a place where ideology is significantly tied to visual culture and bodies. And for these reasons, the photograph is precisely the place where these systems can be challenged.

For art history and visual studies to continue to only examine works that have been sanctioned as existing within the confines of “High Art” is to engage in exclusionary practices that are not only politically problematic but also limit the potential observations, methods, and interventions transpiring in visual culture today. Beyond opening up new methods and pushing intellectual rigor further, engaging in a serious discussion of selfies is not only politically necessary but also the only way to fully participate in a thorough understanding of trans representations today, as the majority of trans representations occur on social media. An intersectional, interdisciplinary method of attending to trans and

gender non-conforming selfies facilitates a nuanced investigation of how racialization and gender come together in relation to the visual encounter and offers new insight into thinking through contemporary issues in representation, photography and portraiture.

APPENDIX

A BRIEF CONTEXTUALIZATION OF TRANS VISUAL CULTURE

“Transsexuality is not about authenticity or originality, but reveals how bodily feeling and desire are constituted socially and spatially.”¹

- Eva Hayward

Recently trans representations and identities have been proliferating in visual culture, forwarding a variety of new aesthetics and genders. While trans studies has been a burgeoning field since the 1990s, the majority of trans studies has neglected visual culture, and meanwhile, art history and visual studies have primarily ignored trans visualities. When discussing trans visual culture, the majority of trans studies discourse has embraced sociological, political, and cultural studies methods and has by and large ignored visual studies and art historical approaches to addressing trans visual culture. Similarly, art history and visual studies have been negligent of trans visualities. Building on methods established by both visual studies and trans studies, *Trans Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* produces much-needed scholarship on trans visual culture, establishing a field of study and a method of

¹ Eva Hayward “Spiderwoman” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 255-273, 256.

analysis. Viewing instances of trans visual culture as praxis in and of themselves, the methods forwarded in this project are co-informed by objects of analysis and model much-needed new methods for apprehending trans visual culture and potentially self-representations, photography, and contemporary art.

The interconnection between looking, interpreting, and assigning value to queer and trans bodies has been a facet of Western civilization since modernity when, with the establishment of psychiatry, LGBTQ+ people began to be pathologized and targeted. The categorization of LGBTQ+ was often based on detecting a visual disruption of morphological expectations and phenotypic judgment.² When gay men appeared effeminate or flamboyant, and when women appeared butch or masculine, their homosexuality was presumed. There was no conception of or space for non-binary or gender-non-conforming people. This is particularly salient for my research in that it was in the visual manifestation of gender disruption that “deviant sexuality” was presumed. What this early scholarship and assumptions about corporeal aesthetics did was set up -a now still entrenched- belief in the exterior of a person signifying gender identity and by extension, sexual orientation. Such assumptions are pervasive and made about queer and trans subjects as well as cis and heterosexual people. However, when

² See discussion of morphologies in J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 58. See the discussion of phenotypic judgment in Mel Chen “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 149.

people visually disrupt expected, normative gender aesthetics the limits of the underlying systems are exposed.

While this is a visual studies project, the specificity of the emerging field requires a bit of contextualization outside the purview of the visual culture analysis, and thus this section attempts to fill in some gaps. This section is in no way exhaustive, but rather is a brief aside to provide further contextualization for the project. In terms of giving context to readers, I will also add that my knowledge of this material comes not only from research, but also from life experience. I am a non-binary, trans person, a gender-non-conforming person, and an artist often working in photographic representations. As such, I am intimately familiar with the ways that images of queer and trans folks intersect with lives and identity formations.

The Politics of U.S. Trans Visual Culture: An Abridged History

Trans scholars have been predominantly situated in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and medicine. Early trans scholarship was often conducted in tandem with research on homosexuality conflating trans identities and same-sex sexual identities. Scholars including Magnus Hirschfeld, Heinrich Ulrich, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing made pioneering inroads for LGBTQ scholarship, often using science to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ constituents. However, their research also shaped understandings of trans identities and set parameters for comprehending trans subjects as sexual deviants and as the visible

manifestation of homosexuality. Via this research, homosexuality and trans identities were conflated and scientifically pathologized. Via popular discourse and legislation, trans people were legally and socially framed as criminally insane.³ This early scholarship has continued to overshadow popular discourse and understanding of trans constituencies and individuals for decades.⁴

The interconnection between looking, interpreting, and assigning value to queer and trans bodies has been a facet of Western civilization since modernity when, with the establishment of psychiatry, LGBTQ+ people began to be pathologized and targeted. The categorization of LGBTQ+ was often based on detecting a visual disruption of morphological expectations and phenotypic judgment.⁵ When gay men appeared effeminate or flamboyant, and when women appeared butch or masculine, their homosexuality was presumed. There was no conception of or space for non-binary or gender-non-conforming people. This is particularly salient for my research in that it was in the visual manifestation of gender disruption that “deviant sexuality” was presumed. What this early

³ Patrick Califia-Rice, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif: Cleis Press, 1997), 10-14. Also see Ralf Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014). Also see: R. von Krafft-Ebing et al., *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Classic Study of Deviant Sex* (New York: Arcade Pub./Skyhorse Pub., 2011), Also see: Hubert C. Kennedy, *Karl Heinrichs Ulrichs: Pioneer of the Modern Gay Movement*, 2. ed (Concord, Calif: Peremptory Publ, 2005).

⁴ Mieke Bal, ‘Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,’ *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 2 no. 1 (April 2003): 5-32, 22.

⁵ See discussion of morphologies in J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 58. See the discussion of phenotypic judgment in Mel Chen “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 149.

scholarship and assumptions about corporeal aesthetics did was set up -a now still entrenched- belief in the exterior of a person signifying gender identity and by extension, sexual orientation. Such assumptions are pervasive and made about queer and trans subjects as well as cis and heterosexual people. However, when people visually disrupt expected, normative gender aesthetics the limits of the underlying systems are exposed.

Heterosexuality or the attraction of males to females and females to males is reliant on a binary gender structure and the conflation of gender and biological sex. Heterosexuality, in its rigid definition, relies on the logic that people with vaginas are considered biological females, and these biological females are women. Conversely, there must be a binary pair in which a person with a penis must be considered biologically male and must embody preconceived notions of “masculinity”. Then everyone must fit into and stay within their prescribed group and must necessarily be attracted to someone from the other group. Then and only then can heterosexuality remain an unquestioned norm. Any variation of this formulation disrupts the social order of heteropatriarchy, threatening to expose social systems and potentially throw social order into question.⁶ As this system stems from the colonial project, the echoes and permutations of the deployment of these systems are uneven and contingent on a multiplicity of factors. I center on

⁶ Richard Dyer has written that the queer types of the “queen” and “dyke” are most popular “gay types.” That is to say masculine women or effeminate men are *the most visible types of queers*. He uses the examples of Romiane Brooks and Quintin Crisp. Dyer cites Magnus Hirschfeld who had photos to prove gays as “biologically indeterminate” (Dyer, Richard. *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. 2. ed. London: Routledge, 2002 p 30- 31). Sees gay people themselves deploying such types, cites Magnus Hirschfeld who had photos to prove gays via visualization.

the study of gender in this geopolitical context as it is from this context that binary gender structures and their conflation and construction along with binary sexuality was initially formulated. However, the conflation of gender and sexuality that permeates today, and the resulting relationship of people to visual assessment, can be more fully understood when one considers that it was only in the 1950s that the concept of gender began to be challenged in Western European and North American contexts.⁷

Christine Jorgensen and The Canonization of Trans

Up until Christine Jorgensen published her autobiography in 1967, trans people were still popularly confused with cross-dressing homosexuals.⁸ Wanting to change one's assigned gender was viewed as "pathetic, doomed and neurotic."⁹ *Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* had an introduction penned by Harry Benjamin M.D. who was the first doctor to actively reject the typical pathologizing of trans people and was known instead for working with trans people to help them achieve a corporeality that best fit their self-identification. Benjamin prescribed the use of newly developed synthetic hormones and was influential in the early disentangling of gender identity and sexuality. Benjamin's

⁷ B. Preciado has traced a brief history of the evolution of early sex and gender studies citing the emergence of gender as a term and concept in 1957 with John Money. See Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

⁸ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 3.

⁹ Patrick Califia-Rice, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif: Cleis Press, 1997), p. 14.

medical work and his text *The Transsexual Phenomenon* published in 1966 modeled radical change to the treatment of trans people.¹⁰ With the forwarding of Christine Jorgensen as the “good transsexual,” a sanitized trans citizen other trans folks were by erasure, marked as outside the category acceptable trans person.¹¹

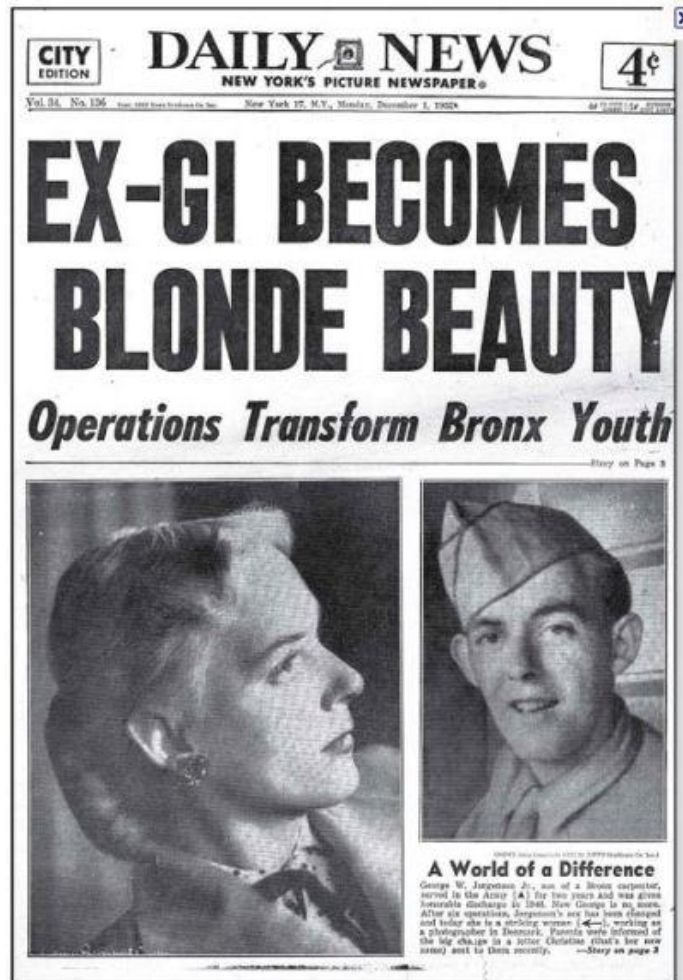


Figure 43: *Daily News* cover, December 1st, 1952, photographer unknown

¹⁰ Patrick Califia-Rice, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif: Cleis Press, 1997), p. 14.

¹¹ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 141-3.

The favorable photographic style of the Jorgensen image, soft lighting, expensive-looking accessories, soft clothing, and the aversion of her gaze visualize how a trans woman should be and how a trans woman must appear if she is to be socially accepted. The title above Jorgensen proclaiming that she is a “Blonde Beauty” highlights how her transformation has led to her cultural acceptance. (See Figure 43). The cover of the daily news makes bold Jorgensen’s previous life as an all-American military serviceman, which further situates her as an exemplary American citizen. The Jorgensen cover from 1952 demonstrates that dominant culture expects trans femme appearing male assigned at birth people to procure a feminine looking physique (one that fits neatly into binary gender norms). Jorgensen and Benjamin’s collaborative work was instrumental in making inroads to what is still being pioneered in trans health today: patient-based models invested in empowering trans people rather than pathologizing, and thereby disentangling gender, biology, and sexuality. Jorgensen’s public transition marks the canonization of specific trans aesthetics and expectations of trans people that persist today.

While this occurrence in many ways helped lead to the removal of homosexuality from the DSM, it established early regulations for diagnosing and treating trans people, which reinvested in binary gender structures and visual compliance with binary gender aesthetics that perpetuate today. In the period following Jorgensen’s very public transition, an unfortunate and problematic

situation arose from the disarticulation of homosexuality and transgender identities. In the process of de-conflating gender and sexual orientation, trans people were required by the established medical model to articulate disgust at their bodies and repulsion at the notion of deriving sexual pleasure from them in order to obtain trans services, including sex reassignment surgeries and hormone therapies.¹²

The removal of homosexuality from the DSM III in 1973 positioned visual culture at the center of debates around the regulation of LGBTQ lives. The logic behind homosexuality being de-pathologized was its de-essentialization from visual disruption of normative ways of being. That is to say, gay people can look just like everyone else. Visual culture has been and continues to be linked to and a vital part of the cultural perception of identity constituencies, and significantly impact identity formations. For trans constituencies in particular representations remain a critical component of identity negotiation.¹³

¹² David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19, 15- 29, and 46-55. See also: Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Beatriz Preciado *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*. (Perverse Modernities / a Series Edited by J. Halberstam and Lisa Lowe. (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014), 155-159.

Building on the scholarship of Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs, in the text mentioned above, Marcia Ochoa has written extensively about the complexities of fitting in to nationally and medically recognizable embodiments of gender. Ochoa observes, “the capacity to submit (or not) to medical authority defines the boundary between “sanitary citizens” and “unsanitary subjects.” I will take up this line of thought more fully to think through the ways *Original Plumbing* presents a diversity of unsanitary transmasculine citizens.

¹³ For more on the history around the de-pathologizing of homosexuality and the pathologizing of gender identity disorder see David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a*

The Ubiquity of Binary Gender

Trans studies scholars have observed that the narrative of one's life as a trans person is perpetually entangled with the medical industry and it has also been noted that this was set in place so as to ensure behaviors in accordance with binary gender norms.¹⁴ All of us - not only trans subjects - feel massive pressure to perform within the binary gender system.¹⁵ We all feel the internal pressure that occurs due to the indoctrination of cultural ideologies about gender and the social belief in a binary gender structure, in addition to the external pressure exerted by the medical establishment, governmental agencies, and culture at large. The trans visual artists and the works I discuss in this project reveal and challenge the narrow ways that gender is prescribed and how pressure is exercised on all to perform within certain corporeal, aesthetic, and performative registers of gender.

Category (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Also see Patrick Califia-Rice, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif: Cleis Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19, 15-29, and 46-55. See also: Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Beatriz Preciado *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

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¹⁵ Public restrooms, government-issued identification cards, department store clothing sections, sports and sporting equipment: all of these arenas are structured by the binary gender system and the conflation of binary gender and biological sex. Through these and other aspects of culture, we collectively make binary gender seem as though it is natural, and a given.

In locations where gender has been conceived of and regulated as binary and conflated with visual and biological characteristics, it also perpetuates the assumption that there are proper embodiments of binary gender. Judith Butler has explored gender extensively in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, wherein she observes that in our society sex produces the bodies that it "governs," arguing that biological sex is one of the norms through which bodies "become viable" within the "domain of cultural intelligibility."¹⁶ The very attribution of masculinity to male bodies with penises as if it were natural or necessary takes place within a culturally created framework in which the assignment of one of two genders to all bodies is one mechanism for the production of gender. Butler also observes that terms such as "masculine" and "feminine" are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term. Their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints.¹⁷ By culturally producing and reifying a belief that there are two biological sexes, that these body types necessarily correlate to one of two gender identity options, and that all people fall into one of these two categories, we culturally erase and eradicate any and all ways of being outside of or in excess of these identity constituencies.

We see and feel the real-life implications of how gender is regulated from a young age. The social pressure to perform within the rigid binary structure that

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 10.

is socially and culturally reinforced is pervasive. By pathologizing trans people as being trapped in the wrong body or the wrong one of two choices, the trans subject can be “fixed” through the expertise of the medical practitioner. Via pathologizing, “correction,” and buying into the dominant medical systems and the binary gender structure, trans people can change their gender to more properly reflect the gender they feel more aligned with. Rather than expand gender structures to fit all of us and recognize that each of us is entitled to a livable life in any gender embodiment, the binary gender structure self-prioritizes at the expense of the lives of those who do not fit into binary gender categories. In lived experiences this is highly challenging to many trans individuals as the way that hormone replacement therapies impact trans physiology means that trans people often have a difficult time embodying binary gender norms. Even if trans people may pass within binary genders after years of therapies and expensive surgical procedures, they often spend years living in corporealities that do not readily reflect binary gender aesthetics. Furthermore, the ability to transition relies on privilege, and moreover the system presumes that fitting into the binary is the end goal of the trans person, which is often not the case. Personally, in my daily life, I am much more interested in taking up space as a non-binary person, working to push open the field of gender and make space for non-binary and gender-non-conforming individuals and identities. My praxis builds on queer identity, community and methods that question and challenge essentialisms, assumptions and norms, about identity and representation working to unpack the inequities and

injustices that underly such systems. Proposing queerer, transier alternatives that forward new ways of being, thinking and doing.

Trapped in the Wrong Body:

A Limiting and Pervasive Narrative of Trans Experience

Part and parcel of perpetuating the binary gender system is the pervasive narrative popularly referred to as being "trapped in the wrong body." This idea has been prevalent since the initial pathologizing of trans people. The idea that a trans person is "trapped in the wrong body" comes from the medical establishment's requirements that in order to gain services trans people had to articulate disgust at their current biology at the time of seeking services. This was established by early formulation of trans identities as a diagnosable condition in need of a cure. It was then necessary to demonstrate a lifelong desire to be what was viewed as the opposite gender from the one someone was assigned. Historically and in many places still today, a trans subject would need to self-identify as one gender but desire to be what has traditionally been thought of as the *opposite* gender, thus upholding a two-gender system. For example, someone would have to have been assigned female at birth and reject this gender to completely identify with being male. Thus, *he* would express that *he* felt trapped in *his* female body and that *he* needed to transform the female body into a male body. Seeking the direction and services of a medical professional and in some

cases psychiatric support the subject could then via hormones and surgeries, transform his body in order to feel more fully like himself.¹⁸

The belief that a trans person is trapped in the wrong body and needs medical intervention to be “corrected” has long overshadowed trans health care and cultural assumptions about trans people. It has been reinforced and perpetuated through health care, legislation and visual culture. At the root of the pathologizing of trans folks and the perpetuation of the “trapped in the wrong body” narrative is the deep hold that the belief in gender as a binary system has on our cultural imagination. Visually, medically and legally reinforcing the binary gender structure alienates anyone who feels their gender is non-binary or more complicated than the narrowly prescribed binary gender structure. The cultural reinforcement of gender as a binary is so pervasive that within the trans community, there is pressure to self-actualize within this structure and to perform genders that reflect ideals of binary gender.¹⁹ When our culture makes us feel

¹⁸ Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19, 15- 29, and 46-55. See also: Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Beatriz Preciado *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, 155-159.

Building on the scholarship of Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs, in the text mentioned above, Marcia Ochoa has written extensively about the complexities of fitting into nationally and medically recognizable embodiments of gender. Ochoa observes, “the capacity to submit (or not) to medical authority defines the boundary between “sanitary citizens” and “unsanitary subjects.” I will take up this line of thought more fully to think through the ways *Original Plumbing* presents a diversity of unsanitary trans masculine citizens. Also see *Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” Signs, Winter 2014, available online at: <http://philpapers.org/archive/BETTIT.pdf>, (accessed March 25, 2016).*

¹⁹ Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 19, 15-29, and 46-55. See also: Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Beatriz Preciado *Testo*

alienation toward our bodies through visual culture, advertising, media, and the ascribing of status and value to bodies based on how they look, it results in complex relationships to our bodies that often make us feel at odds with them. Or as Eva Hayward has observed, “we all belong to our bodies, but they don’t belong to us trans or not.”²⁰ Hayward continues that “Transsexuality is not about authenticity or originality, but reveals how bodily feelings and desire are constituted socially and spatially.”²¹ In reality, it is the visual, cultural, and ideological systems that inform and indoctrinate how certain bodies signify and how certain assumptions relate to certain bodies. All of this is culturally and ideologically constructed and reinforced through discourse largely via visual culture. It is not a necessary given or natural order of things.²²

This set-up not only reinforces the belief in and perpetuation of the gender binary, it is also deeply problematic in that it invests in the notion that we each have one binary gendered and unchangeable gender identity, and that it is framed as either correct or incorrect in how it fits our authentic self. These numerous layers of binary assumptions and essentialism are problematically conflated,

Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013).

Marcia Ochoa, *Queen for a Day: Transformistas, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*, 155-159. No one is trapped in the wrong body, but bodies and genders are created via discourse that functions mostly beyond our control, and while gender can change to some degree, bodies are often not as malleable as one may like.

²⁰ Eva Hayward “Spiderwoman” in Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 255-273. pp 255.

²¹ Ibid. 256.

²² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage books edition (New York NY: Vintage Books, 1994).

oversimplified and inaccurate, further reinvesting in binary structures and ideologies. We each may contain multiple genders - changeable genders, and gender itself is multiple, flexible, and always changing. Furthermore, such pseudo-logics put the subject in the place of the pathologized rather than critiquing the system that is causing them to feel disease in their body and the treatment of them based on other's perceptions of their body. It is not the subject that is sick and trapped in their body; it is the system of gender that is inaccurate and oversimplified in its rigid commitment to binary structures and regulation of people. Pressuring trans and gender-non-conforming (GNC) people into transitioning into one of two narrowly prescribed gender roles and corporealities erases non-binary and GNC people while upholding the binary gender structure.²³ It is in this cultural matrix that the projects I study in my chapters intervene.

Medical and Political Shifts

In the wake of the 1973 Stonewall uprising and during the infancy of the LGBTQ civil rights movement, homosexuality was finally removed from the DSM III. Moreover, it was done in large part due to the distinction between homosexuality and trans identities. Significantly, visual culture was at the crux of the argument. Trans people visually disrupt ideology. Thus, it is the potential

²³ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 1. Also see: J. Halberstam "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, Donald E. Hall, ed., Routledge Literature Readers (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 464-487. Also see Sandy Stone "A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2. ed., reprinted (twice), In Sight (London [u.a]: Routledge, 2010), 221-224 p. 221.

disruption of binary gender in the visual field that has garnered trans identities their pathologized status and their inclusion in the DSM.²⁴ Alarminglly, as late as the 1980s trans people were still considered mentally ill. I would argue that this legacy still lingers strongly in the U.S.²⁵ It was only as recently as 2013 that trans was declassified as an identity disorder in the DSM-V, officially marking a turning point in the de-pathologizing of trans people, at least in the clinical setting.²⁶

In the recent past, the transgender standards of care have radically shifted due to the tireless work of trans health advocates, allies, and political work done by various groups and individuals. With the shifts in medical understanding and medical treatment, there have also been great strides made in the procurement of trans people's self-determination. A significant step forward for trans rights and trans health came in 2010 when the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) released a statement urging the de-psychopathologization of gender-nonconformity worldwide. WPATH is an

²⁴ for more on the history around the de-pathologizing of homosexuality and the pathologizing of gender identity disorder see David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Also see Patrick Califia-Rice, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*.

²⁵ The author argues that there is a plethora of genetic, hormonal, chromosomal, genital etc. configurations. See: Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013). As I write this the U.S. Supreme court is deciding whether or not it is legally permissible to fire someone from their job due to their gender. October 8, 2019.

²⁶ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, Seal Studies (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press: Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008), 195. Also see: resources on tracking trans legislation, identities and issues: Legislative tracker: <https://www.freedomforallamericans.org/2019-legislative-tracker/> The National Center for Transgender Equality: <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration> The Transgender Law Center: <https://transgenderlawcenter.org/>

“international, multidisciplinary, professional association whose mission is to promote evidence-based care, education, research, advocacy, public policy, and respect for transgender health.” In a statement released that year by WPATH it articulated that, “The expression of gender characteristics, including identities that are not stereotypically associated with one’s assigned sex at birth is a common and culturally-diverse human phenomenon [that] should not be judged as inherently pathological or negative.”²⁷ The WPATH instituted the Transgender Standards of Care (SOC), which provides clinical guidance for health professionals to assist transsexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people with safe and effective pathways to achieving lasting personal comfort with their gendered selves, to maximize their overall health, psychological well-being, and self-fulfillment.²⁸

In 2013 trans was declassified as an identity disorder via the DSM-V, officially dropping gender identity disorder from being used as a diagnostic.²⁹ Gender dysphoria is still listed in the DSM. The continued pathologizing of trans identities indicated by the continued inclusion of dysphoria in the DSM misconceptualizes what is the cause of trans peoples’ discomfort. Feeling uncomfortable in one’s gender is due to the external world misreading the person based on visual assessment of them. Such misgendering often leads to

²⁷Direct downloadable link to trans standards of care available here: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/amo_hub_content/Association140/files/Standards%20of%20Care%20V7%20-%202011%20WPATH%20\(2\)\(1\).pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/amo_hub_content/Association140/files/Standards%20of%20Care%20V7%20-%202011%20WPATH%20(2)(1).pdf). Link to WPATH online site available here: <https://www.wpath.org/>.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, 195.

mistreatment, social exclusions, or worse, rather than recognizing the need for the trans subjects' ability to self-identify.³⁰

With the advent of social media there has been a facilitation of connectivity and transformation of the visual culture of trans representations, and with this has come a significant increase in the transmission of information about trans people. Trans and non-binary people are increasingly at the forefront of trans health care (in certain settings), as trans healthcare professionals are increasingly supporting and facilitating trans and non-binary folks in procuring the services that meet individuals' goals. This has facilitated a shift in that, even within the medical establishment, practitioners are now beginning to understand that biology does not equate to gender, gender is not binary, and people often are not seeking to fit neatly into a rigid, hermetically sealed gender category. With these changes in treatment protocol and the increased agency over their own lives, there has been an increase in the outpouring of trans people seeking services and in people identifying as non-binary.³¹

A major achievement in the fight for trans rights in the United States came in 2014 when, under the Obama administration, Medicare no longer banned coverage for gender-affirming surgeries and many private insurance plans soon

³⁰ J. Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 47.

³¹ The changes transpiring in the treatment of trans people wherein they are granted more agency over their lives, coupled with the advent of social media and the interconnectedness of trans communities around the globe, along with the ability to self-image and self-document, has galvanized increasing numbers of various subcultures within the trans community. (I will talk more about how social media has had a major impact on trans communities and trans visual culture in the chapter dedicated to trans selfies.)

followed suit. The Affordable Care Act was also a major achievement in this realm, for it prohibited withholding gender-affirming surgeries for trans folks, and several U.S. states soon began covering trans health care thereafter. In 2016, this was followed by legislation enacted by the Obama administration that allowed people to change the gender on their passport to better suit their identity, and banned discrimination against trans students for using the bathroom that felt most comfortable to them based on their gender identity.³² With the increased legislation and protection of trans people comes a cultural valuing of trans lives. By creating a culture that demonstrates a commitment to valuing trans folks, the result is that more trans people feel safe and empowered to engage in transitioning and gaining access to options to do so, while non-binary people begin to take up space by forwarding non-binary pronouns and self-imaging non-binary gender options. Partly due to these shifts, there has been an increase in seeking services and a diversification and augmentation in the way gender is understood, visualized, and embodied.

Sociological Perspective

Sociologist Aaron H. Devor researched trans masculinity extensively from a sociological perspective via interviews with 45 trans men. Devor's book *FTM: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society* is a comprehensive sociological study of

³² Arlene Stein, *Unbound: Transgender Men and the Remaking of Identity* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018).

what it is like to be Female to Male. Through extensive interviewing on a wide variety of topics, Devor's discussion of the subject of men having been socialized as girls and in many cases as young women is particularly insightful to the concerns at hand.³³ Trans men in general, according to Devor, are "committed to being the finest men they could be,"³⁴ and they self-articulate and demonstrate a deep "judiciousness with which they selectively accepted the masculine socialization which was directed at them."³⁵ Opening up masculine socialization and being a conscious collaborator with one's process of creating the gender in which one is self-articulating is precisely a means by which the matrix of gender is manipulated and augmented.

In the contemporary moment, the questioning of masculinity is particularly salient, for an emerging trope of masculinity has been to perform within what has been described by some scholars as toxic masculinity.³⁶ In *Psychology Today* article entitled "Toxic Masculinity as a Mask for Anxiety: Gendered expectations and the raising of boys," Ruth C. White thinks through how boys and girls have been socialized and the problematic outcome of the rigid policing of male and female expectations and behaviors. White defines toxic masculinity as follows:

³³ Aaron H. Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³⁴ Ibid. 529.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Samuel Veissiere, The Real Problem With 'Toxic Masculinity: Why our culture needs strong and nuanced gender archetypes," *Psychology Today*, February 16, 2018. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culture-mind-and-brain/201802/the-real-problem-toxic-masculinity>).

Toxic masculinity refers to the social expectations that men, and thus also boys, should be sexually aggressive, physically violent, unemotional, homophobic and should also devalue women. It is the kind of behavior that is stereotypically referred to as 'locker room behavior' or 'frat-boy behavior'. It is also the type of behavior that emphasizes competition based on physical power, risk-taking and sexual prowess and promiscuity. The research shows that these expectations of boys are damaging to both men and women, and society at large. Toxic masculinity has been discussed as a cause of mass shootings and violence.³⁷

Her discussion of toxic masculinity centers on how boys and men are socialized to perform and to behave in ways that reflect her definition as cited above while stressing the need for broader definitions of masculinity. Her point is that opening up masculinity will enable men to feel less pressure to perform stereotypic, rigid and hostile ways of being which is necessary in our contemporary moment, as problematic traits like those associated with toxic masculinity are becoming increasingly dangerous. Trans men have spent the majority or at least a significant portion of their childhood and adolescence being socialized as female and taught to perform and behave in feminine ways. Thus their versions of masculinity cannot help but bring their intimate knowledge of a feminine socialization and the oppression and social treatment of women into their masculine adulthood.

³⁷ Ruth C. White, "Toxic Masculinity as a Mask for Anxiety: Gendered expectations and the raising of boys" in *Psychology Today* Dec 22, 2017, (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culture-in-mind/201712/toxic-masculinity-mask-anxiety>), accessed January 3, 2019.

Lived Implications of Trans Representations and Backlash

The ability to transition in and of itself highlights issues of privilege. There are often many barriers to gaining access to information about trans identities, resources, and services, and there are often great social and economic costs associated with transitioning. As we have seen, social and cultural support and the ability to advocate for oneself and feel a sense of community during transitioning is often challenging to come by due to the cultural stigmatization of transitioning. There is usually a tremendous financial burden associated with undergoing hormone replacement therapies and surgeries. Beyond overcoming these obstacles, there is the visual and social component of what people regularly face in their body daily as they transition into another gender.

Trans people whose genders lie outside the binary gender system, and those who are visually marked as non-Caucasian, have been extremely sidelined by dominant visual culture, appearing almost exclusively in mainstream media as victims of either murder or hate crimes.³⁸ The visual culture and real life erasure of trans femmes of color is disproportionate to any other constituency. Each year the number of violent hate crimes perpetuated against trans femmes of color, and the lack of political and judicial retaliation is obscenely high. The disruption to

³⁸ The most recent and widely viewed instance of trans bodies of color appearing in mainstream media as expendable is the instance of the mass murder hate crime that took place at *Pulse* nightclub in Orlando Florida in June of 2016. See Meghan Keneally, Morgan Winsor, and Gillian Mohny, "The List of Orlando Nightclub Shooting," Victims," *abc NEWS*, June 13, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/orlando-nightclub-shooting-victims-named/story?id=39799005> (accessed June 16, 2016).

the binary gender system coupled with the social interpretation of their skin color marks them as doubly endangered.

Trans women of color experience violence, aggression, sexual assault, and murder at rates far disproportionate to any other faction of society, and these occurrences do not seem to be abating any time soon.³⁹ Significantly, even when trans women are attacked and fight back, the systems that regulate judicial systems are so ideologically enmeshed with Caucasian supremacy, transphobia, heteropatriarchy, and binary gender that surviving is only part of the battle. Such is the case with the African American trans woman and social justice activist, Cece McDonald.

On June 5th, 2011 on a late Minneapolis night, then 23-year-old CeCe McDonald was walking to buy groceries with some other African American friends who did not conform to binary gender norms. As they passed Schooner Tavern, a group of white-supremacist bikers outside of the bar began calling CeCe and her friends the N-word and “faggots,” telling them to “go back to Africa.” More hate-speech was directed at them as they tried to continue on their way. The next thing they knew a woman (since identified as Molly Flaherty) hit

³⁹ “Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2018.” In HRC.org <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2018>
also see: Nicole Pasulka, “The Case of CeCE McDonald: Murder –or Self-Defense Against a Hate Crime?” *Mother Jones*, May 22, 2012, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/05/cece-mcdonald-transgender-hate-crime-murder/>,(accesses, December 29, 2018)
According to Transgender Europe’s Trans Murder Monitoring Project, 325 transgender and gender-diverse people were reported murdered between Oct. 1, 2016 and Sept. 30, 2017, James Michale Nichols, ‘CeCe McDonald Reflects On Life And Activism Since Her Release From Prison,’ *HUFFPOST*, October 3, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/cece-mcdonald-reflects-on-life-and-activism-since-her-release-from-prison_us_560ed826e4b0dd85030bfab2 (accessed January 3, 2019)

McDonald in the face with a glass of alcohol, slicing her face. The injury later required stitches. McDonald tried to leave the scene, but a member of the harassers followed. CeCe turned around, seeing a man (later identified as Dean Schmitz) was running after her. At the time Cece was a fashion student at a nearby community college and happened to have fabric scissors in her purse. She frantically fished them out of her bag and held them out just in time, as the assailant reached her. She stabbed him in self-defence, but was arrested later that night and charged with second-degree intentional murder. She held fast that what she had done was in self-defence. It was later revealed that Schmitz had a swastika tattoo on his chest.

Billy Navarro, Jr. of the Minnesota Transgender Health Coalition, who helped found the Free CeCe campaign, stated that he believed she was “prosecuted for having the audacity to survive.”⁴⁰ She was nevertheless tried, convicted, and sentenced to serving time in a men's prison.⁴¹ While McDonald defended herself as innocent, she did not want to risk the potential decades in prison that often follow a guilty verdict, taking a plea bargain of forty-one months.⁴² She was released from the Minnesota Correctional Facility in St. Cloud

⁴⁰ Sabrina Rubin Erdley, “The Transgender Crucible,” *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/the-transgender-crucible-20140730>, (accessed January 1, 2019).

⁴¹ Nicole Pasulka, “The Case of CeCe McDonald: Murder-or Self-defense Against a Hate Crime?” *Mother Jones*, May 22, 2012. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/05/cece-mcdonald-transgender-hate-crime-murder/> (accessed January 2 2012);

Sabrina Rubin Erdley, “the Transgender Crucible,” *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/the-transgender-crucible-20140730>.

⁴² “In that time, though, the news media and the people picked up her story, splashing the Internet with ‘Free CeCe’ and garnering over 18,000 signatures on a petition for her release. After her release, #BecauseOfCeCe trended on Twitter, and a documentary titled ‘Free Cece!’ came out in

in January 2014 after nineteen months—her sentence reduced for good behavior and for the 275 days she'd served before her trial.⁴³

What is particularly significant about McDonald's case is that she survived and has since become an activist because of her experience. The majority of trans women of color who are victims of hate crimes end up silenced, losing their lives to hate crimes. They become statistics, and representations of them reinforce the idea that trans women of color are victims and their lives thus not livable. In McDonald's words:

You rarely hear of a trans woman just living a long life and then dying of old age. You never hear, "She passed on her own, natural causes, old age," no, no, no, she's either *raped* and killed, she's *jumped* and killed, *stalked* and killed—or just killed. My story wouldn't have been important had I been killed. Because it's like nobody cares.⁴⁴

Erasures of trans women of color are not only problematic but obscene. "We see the cases of trans murders, and how people do not take that serious is because we [transgender people] are seen as ultimately disposable," McDonald said. McDonald, along with her fellow activist Joshua Allen, founded #BlackExcellenceTour and #BlackExcellenceCollective, in 2016, to fight issues of violence faced by trans and GNC people of color. They tour, leading

2016," Selena Qian, "Activist CeCe McDonald takes allies to task in public talk," in *The Chronicle*, November 29, 2017, <http://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2017/11/171129-qian-cece-mcdonald>.

⁴³ *Rolling Stone*, August 14, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/the-transgender-crucible-20140730>. (Accessed January 2, 2019)

⁴⁴ Sabrina Rubin Erdley, "the Transgender Crucible," *Rolling Stone*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/the-transgender-crucible-20140730>

workshops and panel discussions, and advocating for social justice and political change.⁴⁵

As McDonald's story illustrates, stereotypical representations of trans women of color are not merely problematic, limiting, and inaccurate. Beyond these problems, they create reductive, fixed, and pervasive representations of trans women of color as victims of hate crimes, as criminalized, freakish, less than human, and not warranting of rights and respect. Such repeated mistreatment suggests that this behavior is not only acceptable, but also expected.

Trans people, who exist outside of the realm of acceptable trans subjectivities, appear in mainstream culture as expendable, or what Judith Butler described as beyond the 'heterosexual imperative' which encourages certain sexed (I would add certain gendered) identifications and disavows others. She calls this phenomenon an exclusionary matrix. Butler articulates those who live outside the domain of the matrix as 'abject' and describes these lives as 'unlivable.'⁴⁶ Trans subjects who do not reflect dominant cultural gender ideals are often at great risk for acts of violence being perpetrated against them and are often depicted in visual culture as meeting tragic deaths or suffering acts of aggression. Richard Dyer has insightfully observed the psychological significance of such a phenomenon in his assessment representations 'delimit what people can

⁴⁵ Selena Qian, "Activist CeCe McDonald takes allies to task in public talk," in *The Chronicle*, November 29, 2017, <http://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2017/11/171129-qian-cece-mcdonald>

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

be in society at a given time.’⁴⁷ What this translates into when it comes to depicting trans people and trans characters in dominant culture is deeply fraught. Mainstream representations of trans people narrowly present acceptable ways of being trans. They demonstrate which trans constituencies are impermissible and sideline the majority of actual, lived trans experiences.

⁴⁷ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p 3.

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