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Title

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Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 1(1)

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Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/R71141462

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The Double Edge of Visibility and Invisibility: Cassils and Queer Exhaustion

Jamee Crusan

Introduction

I realized the power of gender identity after a slow-pitch softball game. I was eight. My hair was cut short; I had pierced ears but was not wearing any earrings. I had on shorts and a baggy yellow T-shirt with my name across the back in big black fuzzy iron-on letters: J-A-M-E-E. While shopping after the game with my mother, I noticed two girls following me around. I would go down an aisle, and they would come with me. Racing through the aisles trying to find my mother and trying to lose these two girls, I was panicked, embarrassed. I was standing in the middle of an aisle when the two heads poked around the end of the lane. Their gazes locked on me. “Jamee, that is the name of the hunk! There’s the hunk!” one screamed. They both giggled and ran away. I ran up to my mother horrified, disoriented, and begged her for her earrings. My mother looked at me strangely, asking “Why?” “I need them,” I answered. “Please just give them to me.” After a few minutes of going back and forth, she finally pulled the gold balls out of her ears and gave them to me. I put them on and remember feeling a wash come over me. I was now a girl. I was now recognizable as a girl. Those earrings were the only way in which I was confident to be recognized as the gender I was assigned at birth and desired to be known as: female.

Culture produces a visual field as a system of power to help create normalized ideas of gender, sexuality, and desire seen in advertisements, film, and television. The visibility of images standardizes and romanticizes the male and female forms by showing straight, white, skinny, muscular, and cis-gendered individuals, thus painting a “real” picture of the way many view not just gender identity and gender performance, but desire. Trans-masculine, gender-non-

conforming artist Cassils creates contemporary conversations within visual arts around gender, sexual identity, and transphobic violence. Their body disrupts normalized gender ideals and adds to the trans landscape in the realm of performance-based visual practice while testifying to the struggle and endurance it takes to exist outside the hetero/homonormative structure of the gender binary.

In chapter one, I look at six of Cassils's works and their interaction with the history of photographic and performance-based art, in order to consider how these works intertwine with queer exhaustion. First, I analyze Cassils's earliest photographic works: *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011), *Lady Face//Man Body* (2011), and *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011), in comparison to works by Eleanor Antin, Linda Benglis, and Robert Mapplethorpe, to consider the struggle LGBTQI+ bodies undergo to be recognized. I also consider how Cassils uses tactics of revealing and concealing to convey agency in the struggle for trans or genderqueer individual equality and visibility. In chapter two, my analysis moves on to Cassils's *Becoming An Image* (2012-present) and *Powers That Be* (2015), where this study begins to link trauma and memory with visibility and invisibility located in queer exhaustion while exploring the physical ways Cassils activates disorientation in the viewer. I also tie in the importance of being witness to another's experience with trauma and how historically feminist performance artists, in particular Marina Abramovic and Yoko Ono, have engaged with witnessing. The epilogue analyzes *103 Shots* (2016), a film by Cassils that explores loss, love, and resilience within queer desire. Additionally, themes of loss and love are tied to queer exhaustion while showing ways in which Cassils speaks back to Robert Mapplethorpe.

Chapter One

Revealing and Concealing Trans-Masculine Identity— The Early Works of Cassils

The ongoing subordination of homosexuality to heterosexuality allows for heterosexuality to be institutionalized as the normal relations of the sexes.

—Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*

In attempting to understand the divisive power of gender and sexuality, one can begin by pointing out that certain genders have more social and political visibility than others. Feminist post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler reminds us that only in the naming or recognition as boy or girl can we become viable. Butler says, “Desire is always a desire for recognition and [...] it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us become constituted as socially viable beings.”¹ To be viable, one must be recognized, and this battle for recognition within the power structures of gender and sexual identity catalyze queer exhaustion.

The term queer exhaustion appeared in the vernacular of queer art discourse in 2016 in Tina Takemoto’s *Queer Exhaustion: Queers of Color Performance* (2016).² I adapt the term to outline a theory of queer exhaustion that names the stressful dialectic of social and political visibility and invisibility as experienced by queer, trans, and intersex individuals in contemporary culture of the United States. I consider queer exhaustion a product of the struggle between self-erasure and self-abnegation driven by continually negotiating hegemonic histories, desires, and experiences. In self-erasure, one erases parts of themselves; in self-abnegation, one

rejects parts of themselves. The negotiation between invisibility and visibility requires those outside heteronormative constructs to pivot on a dime for their safety. This continual swivel and whirl creates disorientation. This article uses queer exhaustion as a theoretical framework to examine the work of Cassils and think about disorientation as put forward by Butler and Sarah Ahmed. Ahmed writes in her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, “It is by understanding how we become orientated in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place.”³ The theory of queer exhaustion highlights ideas of recognition and disorientation founded in queer theory, feminist theory, and trauma studies. This includes Butler, queer scholars like Ahmed, Douglas Crimp, and David Getsy, and those in trauma studies, including Cathy Caruth, Ann Cvetkovich, and Dori Laub.⁴

Cassils disrupts normative ideas of gender by allowing their body to become sculptural material. Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah write in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*:

Transgender people (self-identified or designated as such by others) can be subjects of knowledge as well as objects of knowledge. That is, they can articulate critical knowledge and body positions that would otherwise be rendered pathological, marginal, invisible, or unintelligible within dominant and normative organizations of power/knowledge.⁵

By looking at Cassils through the lens of queer exhaustion, this article considers the power of gender identity, the struggle to become recognizable, and the dangers that synonymously arise with that visibility. This sought-out recognition can come in many forms, recognition from the self, from a lover, or from the cis white patriarchy. Both Cassils’s work and queer exhaustion explore the possibility of inhabiting the space of disorientation. According to Ahmed, “Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one’s place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body.”⁶ The space of queer exhaustion does not simply include queer identifying people making endurance based art, which involves both physical and emotional ideas of labor. It also encompasses the emotional labor required in the continuous fight for fundamental human rights. More so, queer exhaustion questions what comes after we have failed queerly, and queer failure becomes recycled and co-opted into popular forms of art making and capitalizing on by the heteronormal. After we have fought and bled for visibility, our bodies and minds are continually confronted with violence and now our struggles are commodified

and summed up in a rainbow flag. Queer exhaustion challenges the psychic and physical double bind of visibility and invisibility. It is here we find ourselves in this double bind, in this in-between space, in the disorientation.

Carving and Cuts

Cassils utilizes the disorientation located within queer exhaustion by acknowledging iconic feminist artists who came before them and then complicating ideas of second wave feminism and previous ideas of the ideal female body. An early feminist work, Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), is a series of 148 black-and-white photographs that documented Antin on a crash diet, losing ten pounds of her body weight over 37.⁷ The serial nude self-portraits of Antin are shot in front of a white background, showing four different sides of her body each day, repeated for the duration of the project. *Carving* makes visible the unhealthy ways in which women sculpt their bodies to be considered the ideal feminine form. To create the perfect form, Antin mimicked "removal" through visibly extreme and unhealthy weight loss. *Carving* comments on the drastic measures women take to become the ideal form, yet simultaneously shows that Antin is in control of her body because she is the sculptor of it. The image of women reclaiming not only their bodies, but their desirability was, at the time the piece was created, considered radical.

Carving and Cassils's *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011) express the contrasting strategies of the reductive and the additive, of revealing and concealing. Forty years later, Cassils reversed the logic of Antin's piece in *Cuts* (2011) by adding twenty-three pounds of muscle to their body over a period of twenty-three weeks (Figure 1). During this transformation, they began to "cut" their body into the ideal masculine figure. Cassils's photographic documentation of their bodily transformation speaks back to Antin's photographs in a few ways, first of all in style composition. Both artists utilize front, back, and side views for the camera. The second is the contrast between Cassils's short hair and Antin's long, which traditionally is a signifier of man/woman, boy/girl, male/female. Lastly, Cassils's concealment of their genitals by wearing brief-style underwear suggests a strong emphasis on which reproductive organs one must have to be considered man or woman while simultaneously de-emphasizing the genitals, forcing further disruption of the gender nonconforming body.

The reductive nature of dieting or carving away of Antin's body to become recognizable as the ideal female form opposes Cassils's manipulation of their body, adding muscle to get a "cut" masculine physique. With any dieting, whether adding

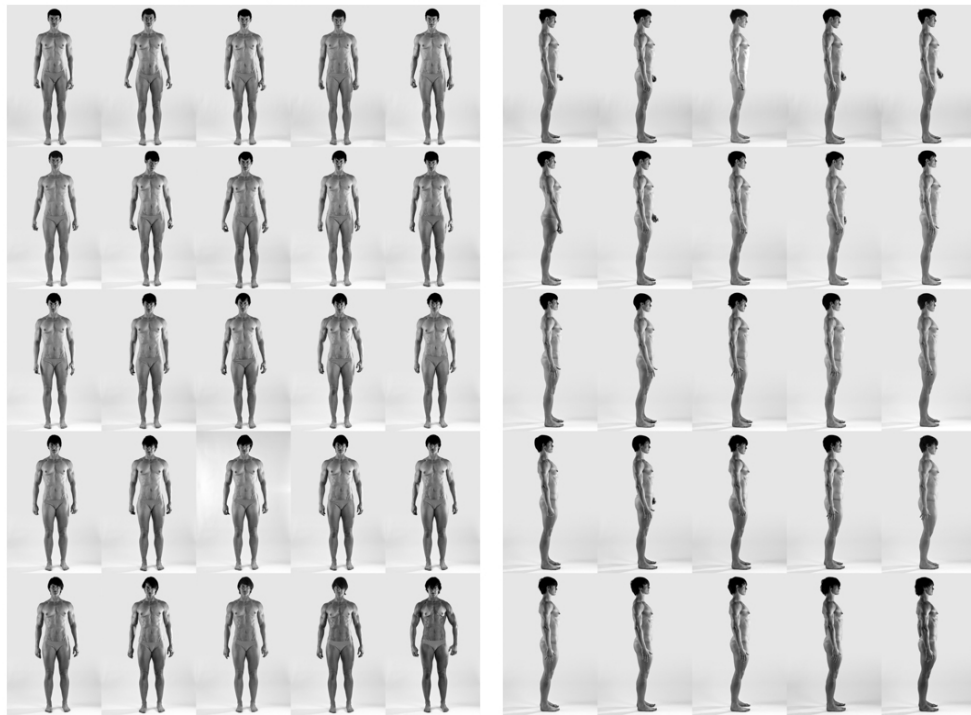


Figure 1 Cassils, *Time Lapse (Front and Right)* from *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, 2011, archival pigment print, 60 x 40 inches, edition of 3. Image courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

or subtracting, the body is stressed via fluctuations in caloric intake; Antin was cutting calories, while Cassils was adding, eating as many as 3000 calories a day. This dramatic increase in calories, along with doses of injected testosterone, allowed Cassils to gain the necessary muscle.

The performance of these works ultimately allowed both artists to act out the societal standards of a represented gender ideal. By putting these works side by side, questions can be raised of what ideal feminine and masculine forms might be while questioning what it looks like to be constituted as the ideal man or woman. Moreover, it must be considered: How are bodies that disorientate the gender binary recognized as such? The powers that be, which reside in places of influence such as the medical industry and the media, promote the power of the phallus and the heteronormative cis white patriarchy, continuing to fragment the body into reproductive organs and perpetuating those binaries.

Here, the term “reveal,” regarding Cassils’s trans-masculine body, may be used to comment on the moment when the “truth” is exposed. Danielle M. Seid writes in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, “The reveal is a moment in a trans person’s life when the trans person is subjected to the pressures of the pervasive gender/sex

system that seeks to make public the ‘truth’ of the trans person’s gender and sexed body.”⁸ Cassils is claiming agency, controlling the reveal throughout most of their work. The presence of penis or vagina often determines how a person is categorized as man or woman. Hidden by their briefs, which conceal the possibility of bottom surgery, Cassils’s genitals remain covered. Cassils’s photographs also show tan lines from a bathing-suit top, traces of a traditional garment used to conceal female breasts but, in Cassils’s case, it covers pectorals because of their low body fat percentage. This act functions as a disruption that pushes against the binary of how gendered bodies are categorized by what they wear or how they wear it. However, this tan also mimics how bodybuilders tan their bodies before taking the stage for a competition to highlight and define cut figures. “Getting ripped” or “cut” are terms used in weightlifting as ways of talking about developing extreme muscle definition by “leaning out” one’s body.⁹ Cassils challenges the notions of the trans-masculine form by pushing against the belief that to have a trans-masculine body one has to be “cut” by a surgical blade while undergoing top or chest surgery. The six-month durational performance of *Cuts* generated a series of pendant artworks including *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011) and *LadyFace/ManBody* (2011).

Cassils leaves visible traces of the gender from which they are attempting to break free in the form of the tan lines while concealing their genitals. Antin reveals her breasts and genitals and offers her body as an object to be looked at. David Getsy writes, “Cassils remixes these methods as a means to demonstrate the potential for bodily transformation and to remake the sex body according to self-determination rather than existing codes of dimorphism.”¹⁰ Cassils transforms or cuts their female yet highly masculine body to a less curvy more androgynous trans-masculine body. Their neck thickens, and breasts become pecs, only revealed as breasts through the traces of the tan lines. Breasts can change because of age, body fat, chest binding, or implants. Since breasts are visible in these works, they don’t carry the weight of gender identification that the power of the phallus does.

Bikini Tops, Dildos, and Jockstraps

Linda Benglis’s *Artforum Ad* (1974), much like Antin’s *Carving*, emerged from the feminist art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Additional feminist and endurance-based artists from that time that impacted Cassils’s works include Yoko Ono and Marina Abramovic. While making *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, Cassils also created *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011) and *LadyFace/ManBody* (2011), which I will



Figure 2 Cassils, Advertisement: Homage to Benglis, 2011, c-print, 40 x 30 inches, edition of 3, photo: Cassils with Robin Black. Image courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

discuss later on in this chapter. In *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*, Cassils is exposed as they stand in front of a white background wearing a stark white jockstrap and bright red lipstick, with both nipples pierced (Figure 2). Cassils's gaze is passive as they stare off into the distance while standing like an erect statue, hands by their side, disclosing a scar on their abdomen while their chest oscillates between breasts and pectoral muscles. This fluctuation occurs when what you are looking at confronts and disrupts societal norms. Stark red lipstick and breasts contrast with defined pectoral muscles and a jockstrap. Although alluded to in the form of the jockstrap, their genitals once again remain masked. Cassils's photograph pays homage to Linda Benglis and the advertisement she placed in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. This image presents a nude Benglis with stark tan lines wearing sunglasses and holding a double dildo near her genitals. Benglis stares directly into the camera confronting those who are looking at her while her eyes are concealed behind sunglasses. Her body posture and position show movement and fill the frame up almost entirely. In Cassils's homage, their stoic masculine figure and red

lipstick substitute for the double dildo in Benglis's photograph, and the stark white jockstrap mimics the tan lines in Benglis's *Advertisement*. Both images are shot utilizing a bright and highly contrasted photographic aesthetic, activating a commercial feel of product and high fashion photography. In both instances the artists offer their image for consumption. Benglis's image is shot with flat lighting as a way of proposing no real dimensionality to the viewer while Cassils's image shows a shadow in the background provided depth within the subject. Tan lines again refer to what is revealed to the public, which otherwise would be kept hidden behind a bathing suit, or jockstrap, and rendered visible and revealed during intimate encounters. Evidence of the tan lines seen in *Cuts* demonstrates that Cassils typically conceals their breasts in public through the means of a bikini, as Benglis conceals her genitals.

The works ask, what does one need to do to get noticed? Benglis paid *Artforum* \$3,000 to run this photograph as an advertisement to promote her upcoming show at Paula Cooper Gallery; in the process, she commented on the lack of visibility for women in the art world and how sexuality equated to power. Benglis and Antin simultaneously show the struggle to be recognized, and call out the divisive power of gender identity. Antin must either starve herself to obtain the desired feminine body or, as Benglis shows unabashedly, pay for an ad to advertise her body instead of her art, knowing one of the only ways to get recognized as a serious artist is to appear in *Artforum*. Benglis's infamous attempt, bypassing editorial censorship and creating more visibility for women artists, backfired when it was immediately pulled by *Artforum* in 1974.¹¹ During the summer of 2015, Cassils's *Homage to Benglis* was similarly pulled in Germany for an exhibition called *Homosexuality_ies*¹² in which the gallery had made Cassils's homage an advertisement to promote the upcoming show. According to the Schwules Museum, one of the organizers of the exhibition, they claimed the image was too "sexualized" and "sexist."¹³ Cassils wrote a statement to *ARTnews*,

While Benglis's original *Advertisement* acted as a commentary on sexist gender-based limitations in the art world, Cassils's *Homage* uses the same strategies to intervene in the gendered policing of trans and nonconforming bodies in the world at large [...] This faux-feminist opposition to the display of the image is a glaring incident of transphobia, not just homophobia. The phobic response to Cassils's image here calls to mind broader instances of transphobia which seek to prohibit the presence of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies from public spaces.¹⁴

In the shifting sea of the gender-binary, bodies that cannot fit neatly into an either/or category are continually negotiating terms of recognition that do not include them. To increase conversations about trans visibility, Cassils created the zine *LadyFace/ManBody*, which includes several pin-up-style images. Complicating the traditional gender-based representation of passive and desirous female forms found in pin-ups such as short shorts, lipstick, and flirtatious looks, Cassils inserts their trans-masculine gender non-conforming body confronting the viewer to question if they are looking at the face of a lady or the body of a man.

In comparison, in Benglis's advertisement, she stares unapologetically from the centerfold of *Artforum* into the camera, confronting the gaze of the viewer, proposing a sort of "double fucking": "you're fucking me, while I'm fucking you."¹⁵ The idea of the "double fucking" asks, "Who is the one really being fucked here?" Is it Benglis because of the lack of visibility given to woman and their work? Or is it Benglis "fucking" the editors at *Artforum* by bringing to light the sexist ways in which women are negated? As Benglis provokes a double fucking with a two-headed dildo, she questions the duplicitous nature of the power of having a penis, but even though she wields a two-sided penis she is still without power, leaving the power only to those who can claim the power of a phallus.

In *Homage to Benglis* and *LadyFace/ManBody*, Cassils's body acts as the stand-in not of the dildo but that of the phallus. With their chiseled physique and jockstrap, one must question if the trans-masculine body has a "real" cock in that jockstrap. Both Benglis and Cassils respond to the mediated imagery of advertisements that continually propose to constitute what a real man or woman might be. Although the struggles located in the feminist movement speak to issues around visibility and gender equality, one can also question where LGBTQI+ bodies were in the 1970s. Cassils creates their own history by inserting a trans-masculine, gender nonconforming body between two feminist icons who follow a strong feminist legacy.

With this direct tie to Benglis and Antin, Cassils enters a conversation with second-wave feminism. Feminist criticism and feminist art practice became closely aligned in the 1970s and highlighted the ways women have been hidden from history and left out of an ever-changing canon.¹⁶ Feminist art generates agentic possibilities for the female body. However, with Cassils's tactics of revealing and concealing, they are also talking back to the feminist icons claiming their own place and agency, demanding new conversations surrounding what constitutes *woman*.



Figure 3 Cassils, *Pin Up* from the Magazine *Lady Face/Man Body* no. 2 and 3, 2011, c-print, 18 x 14 1/8 inches, edition of 10, photo: Cassils and Robin Black. Image courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Cheesecake, Beefcake and Thinghood

Cassils's *LadyFace/ManBody* plays with the notion of “revealing” a “true” gender. The photographs in *LadyFace/ManBody* show Cassils utilizing various narratives found in pin-up images. Cassils appears with and without lipstick donning pectoral muscles rather than voluptuous breasts, short hair, and either a jockstrap, daisy duke style shorts or their hands masking their genitalia (Figure 3). Their flattened chest illustrates a chest after continual binding has damaged and flattened the muscle tissue, and in combination with the nipple rings, black BDSM jockstrap and harness, both pleasure and pain are alluded.

Gender nonconforming bodies push against not only the binary of cis white patriarchy but also binaries found in queer communities; it would be remiss not to call out the fact that standards exist in homonormative dialogues as well. When one does not identify as strictly man or woman, the spectrum between the binary pushes back on modes or operations of desire. The binary dictates that man should want a woman or woman should want a man, and the butch and femme dynamic is just as dangerous. If the binary is always a dynamic that one strives for, whether queer or straight, where does the non-gendered person or the lady

face/man body reside? *LadyFace/ManBody* allows us to see the way in which Cassils chooses to be positioned in a gendered conversation that remains binary-centric while commenting on the active role of looking, the passive role of being looked at, and the interplay between them. The trans imagery Cassils creates in *LadyFace/ManBody* shakes the structure of both the heteronormative and homonormative binaries.

LadyFace/ManBody comments on the notion of the ideal woman by titling each image using the words “pin-up.” This idea of the pin-up has been around since the turn of the last century, and in a pop cultural sense, exemplifies the perfect woman. Pin-ups started off as illustrations emphasizing characteristics of the ideal woman. These drawings, typically made by men, led to pin-up or “cheesecake” photography.¹⁷ The poses drawn in pin-ups were mimicked in the photographs, and used for Hollywood starlets like Marilyn Monroe, and referenced in Benglis’s pose in her *Artforum* ad. As in the work of Antin and Benglis, ideas of sexed bodies, ideal forms, and what constitutes female or male continue to be confronted and questioned in the work of Cassils, while continually being complicated by their body, which renders the trans-masculine body *cheesecake* or *beefcake*?¹⁸

Cassils complicates this notion of the cheesecake and beefcake image positing their body in an in-between state, never truly occupying either gender. It is precisely because of this in-betweenness that Cassils disorients the viewers’ ideas of not only gender but also desire. Cassils is not the first to complicate the gender binary or push ideas of the erotic in a photograph. Robert Mapplethorpe’s use of erotic objectification is seen in *Lisa Lyon* (1982), where the cropped nude photograph renders Lyon anonymous, her hands positioned to conceal her biological sex. The lack of facial identification forces us to confront the simultaneously masculine and feminine body. Kobena Mercer writes, “Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre as a whole: through his cool and deadly gaze each found object—‘flowers, S/M, blacks’—is brought under the clinical precision of his master vision, his complete control of photo-technique, and thus aestheticized to the abject status of thinghood.”¹⁹ Mapplethorpe’s utilization of the tightly cropped square frame and hard lighting isolates and fragments the subject, rendering them objects—a set of body parts—and transforming the body from model to sculpture.

The cis white male imaginary designates man or woman by what is beneath the hands or inside the jockstrap. *LadyFace/ManBody* destabilizes the gendered binary and its relationship with desire by employing stark red lipstick and a chiseled physique, complicating the conversation of the fragmented gaze of the cis white imaginary while the full frame of the portrait reclaims agency for the trans-masculine body.

Both Lyon and Cassils pose for the camera as if for a body-building competition. The clasping of the hands is traditionally understood as the most muscular pose, meant to increase definition so the judges can evaluate accordingly. The hands act as stand-ins to cover the one thing that for most of society makes one “truly” man or woman. Unlike Mapplethorpe’s *Lisa Lyon* photograph, which shows a decapitated and fragmented body, Cassils occupies the full frame as a portrait. Cassils does not highlight specific parts of themselves, but owns themselves as a subject while combining the commercial formal aesthetics employed by Benglis with the coded aesthetics of BDSM culture and the gay male aesthetics of Mapplethorpe. Cassils merges dualistic tropes, plays with duality in the single frame, and thus forces a destabilization of the image. The use of bodybuilding techniques, black leather, and the starkly lit commercial photo shoot creates an interplay between cheesecake and beefcake that complements and disorients ideals of gender (Figure 3).

Mapplethorpe’s black and white photograph *Patrice N.Y.C* (1977) depicts a man wearing a black leather jacket and a black leather harnessed jockstrap made of cotton. The frame is tightly cropped, isolating and fragmenting the genitals from the body, creating an erotic objectification. *Patrice N.Y.C* shows the ridge of the head of the penis as it is embraced by the almost translucent cotton package of the jockstrap and its two leather straps. Both images, *Patrice N.Y.C* and *LadyFace/ManBody*, allude to the high sexual power of what is contained in the jockstrap. The black leather suggests that, although one may not know what is underneath the jockstrap, you will enjoy it, if you dare. The alignment between fist and penis as seen in *Patrice N.Y.C* suggests a fist as a stand-in for a penis, as in the act of fisting. The sexual act of fist fucking can be both pleasurable and painful and commonly renders one submissive and the other dominant. This use of fist and genitals recurs in *Lisa Lyon* and *LadyFace/ManBody*, where the fists or hands replace the tools used to fuck or finger. Benglis also uses the double ended dildo as a stand-in for the real cock. However, she invites the viewer to partake in the erotic act of fucking where the active penetrator and receiver is shared between partners and in continuous flux.

The idea of revealing and concealing is double-sided. There is both danger and freedom in concealing or revealing the “truth” of one’s sexed body. This double edge is shared with how visibility and invisibility function in queer exhaustion. In either case, the subject can claim agency over their body, but sometimes it comes with a cost. The precarity of remaining invisible holds sway whether a transgendered person passes or not. When one remains invisible, that helps stabilize the norm. Passing as one’s desired gender offers safe visibility; however, there is a part that remains hidden. In passing as a female-to-male or

male-to-female transgendered person, or even passing as a straight individual, the body may be safer, but queerness or transness is not visible, rendering one a part of the hegemonic system one may choose to oppose. In understanding the struggle some have with being recognized, and how revealing and concealing or the visible or invisible are exhausting, one can start to understand how gender identity acts as catalyst for queer exhaustion.

Conclusion

Cassils's tactics of revealing and concealing as seen in *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, *Advertisement: Homage To Benglis*, and *LadyFace/ManBody* claim agency for a trans-masculine gender nonconforming body. Cassils self-positions between Benglis and Antin, two feminist icons creating a feminist discourse and challenging the definition of what a gendered body is. Cassils uses gendered aesthetics such as bikini tops, jock straps, stark-red lipstick, and bulging biceps to confront the viewer with their gendered expectations. So much of what Cassils advertises is countered with a shroud of secrecy, continually covering the one place on the body where society constitutes manliness or womanliness. Never revealed, this space leaves the viewer in a state of flux. Cassils makes things visible and invisible, creating an inbetweenness that never allows the viewer to land on what sex or gender this person is or is not; this creates spaces for disorientation.

I position Cassils in a conversation with Mapplethorpe as well, considering images that are fragmented and binary while commenting on the active role of looking, the passive role of being looked at, and the interplay between them. While Mapplethorpe fetishizes the male *beefcake* body through tight square cropping, Cassils places their trans-masculine body in the full frame not to be fetishized as a set of body parts, but to provide a platform to explore the whole body. These works consider the importance of recognition, and question the ideal feminine and masculine forms mediated by dominant powers. Gender categories like gender queer, gender nonconforming, gender fluid, non-binary, agender, cisgender, and transgender all pertain to the ways in which one refers to man/masculine or woman/feminine on a spectrum including both or neither. This new set of categories complicates and challenges the hetero/homonormative ideals of the confines of gender and how it desires.

The photographic works of these artists confront the invisibility of gaze and how this way of looking implicates all those involved in looking at a photograph or advertisement. Laura Mulvey writes about the complexities of the gaze in her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,"

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.²⁰

Forty years have passed since Mulvey wrote her essay and since then a multitude of writers have come along to complicate the gaze including bell hooks' *Oppositional Gaze* (1992), and Kobena Mercer's *Welcome to the Jungle* (1996). Their writing complicates the dualistic spaces of the gaze to include black and brown bodies as well as queer and trans bodies. When Mulvey wrote about the gaze, she was specifically speaking about the white male heterosexual gaze and what that means for the passive positionality of white women.

A photograph creates a visual representation of a figure or a body that is simultaneously used as either an instrument for liberation from stereotypes or a means to cement them into hardened facts rendering them constructed fictions. Antin, Benglis, Mapplethorpe, and Cassils depict bodies—trans bodies, female bodies, dead and dying bodies—to challenge ideas of gender and desire through representation. Cassils creates agency for themselves by constructing the photograph and positioning themselves within the frame. In this decision, they are occupying both the invisibility of the gaze and the visibility of the represented body. There is an exhaustion and disorientation created in navigating the in-betweenness or the back and forth of what it means to become an image and how one perpetuates or subverts both gaze and representation. Photographic images allow us to make visible the otherwise invisible blind spots within our social failures so we understand what we have set into hard fact is the very thing we must work to undo.

* * *

Notes

¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2009).

² Queer exhaustion has been used in multiple platforms such as Tina Takemoto's Performance *Queer Exhaustion: Queers of Color Performance* (July 2016); "Queer Exhaustion," *Reddit*, accessed September 9, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/genderqueer/comments/5ekzgz/queer_exhaustion/. and Australia's LGBTIQI website <http://www.samesame.com.au/>, in their "2016: The Year of Queer Exhaustion" (Dec 2016).

³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 1st ed. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006), 6.

⁴ Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 1st ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2003); Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, eds., *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

⁵ Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "Postposttranssexual - Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2014): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2398540>.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 160.

⁷ Eleanor Antin is an American artist who uses a feminist lens in her performances, photographs, and installations while exploring histories and contemporary culture.

⁸ D. M. Seid, "Reveal," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2014): 176–77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399947>.

⁹ The term leaning out is used when trying to obtain little to no body fat while retaining muscle mass.

¹⁰ Julia Steinmetz and David J. Getsy, *Cassils* (Mu, 2015), 2.

¹¹ Kriston Capps, "Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris: 1973-1974," *Art in America*, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/lynda-benglisrobert-morris-19731974/>.

¹² The exhibition was presented in two locations: the Deutsches Historisches Museum and the Schwules Museum. The first section documented 150 years of historical, political, and cultural oppression in Germany that criminalized homosexuals.

¹³ Maximiliano Durón, "Ad for LGBTQ Show With Photo by Trans Artist Cassils Is Banned by German Rail, Then Allowed," *ARTnews*, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/05/12/ad-for-lgbtq-show-with-photo-by-trans-artist-cassils-is-banned-by-german-rail-then-allowed/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Laura Barnett, “Lynda Benglis: ‘Now You Are Ready,’” *The Guardian*, February 22, 2012, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/feb/22/lynda-benglis-uk-retrospective-interview>.

¹⁶ David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 125.

¹⁷ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁸ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 435-436.

²⁰ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

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Chapter Two

Grappling with Transphobic Violence—*Becoming an Image and Powers That Be*

A fundamental fact of psychic life: violence is also self-inflicted.

—Douglas Crimp, *Melancholy and Moralism*

Flashing back to the story where I was recognized as a “hunk” and misgendered at the age of eight, this failure to be seen as “normal,” or as the gender I was assigned at birth, traumatized me completely. I could in no way tell this story to my mother because I was ashamed that someone would not see me as a girl. I was unable, at that moment, to authentically witness myself. Trauma, Cathy Caruth says, “can be experienced in at least two ways: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one’s own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others.”¹ Trauma disorients, it paralyzes, it fragments and traps all those caught in its wake whether or not we can authentically witness ourselves. It is precisely this, trauma’s stealthy invisibility that requires us to have a witness to our grief and pain; we need a witness to the loss of ourselves. In Cassils’s performance *Powers That Be* (2015), I finally witnessed my trauma. Writing about it and watching it still causes me tremendous anxiety and dread. I eventually realized it is not the brutality of the performance that triggers my body, but that I am witnessing one person fight themselves: the same person occupying a dualistic

role as the oppressor and moved by the oppressed, the aggressor and the victim of both psychic trauma and physical violence, the powerful and the powerless. The invisible scar that trauma leaves takes time to heal and often remains in flux.

As chapter one explored the tactic of revealing and concealing to emulate both visibility and invisibility within queer exhaustion, chapter two explores visibility, invisibility, and disorientation created through both physical and psychic forms of trauma. By examining Cassils's two performances, *Powers That Be* (2015) and *Becoming An Image* (2012-current) through the lens of queer exhaustion we start to focus on the invisibility of trauma, the visibility of violence, and the disorientation created when bodies are in continual negotiation of hegemonic systems.

Held by Traumatic Memory

During a time when violence takes transgender lives at an increasing rate, encouraging visibility for trans individuals makes Cassils's work achieve a monumental quality. Cassils brings visibility into a system of hetero/homonormativity that historically imposed invisibility upon queer and trans bodies. Cassils makes experiences of violence visible by recreating situations in which queer and trans lives are brutally taken. Mimicking what a back-alley brawl might look like while walking home from the club on a Friday at 3 a.m., Cassils uses fighting techniques and staged stunt choreography to create these performances. In this section, we will look at how the performances *Powers That Be* and *Becoming An Image* utilize the power of invisibility and visibility as sensation that refers to psychic forms of trauma. *Powers That Be* forces one to confront the precarious duplicity of exhaustion while *Becoming An Image* engages viewers to consider the violence of traumatic memory.

Powers That Be debuted in the United States in 2016 at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles, where it was included in the "Tip of Her Tongue" series.² Curated by Jennifer Doyle and inspired by Barbara Kruger's 1983 photo-montage *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*, the program featured feminist performance artists who work with language and embodiment. These performances explored the politics of representation and how stories circulate and move through, against, and with the body.³

A video clip of *Powers That Be* that Cassils posted on YouTube opens with the artist in the parking garage of the Broad Museum surrounded by an audience, and illuminated by headlights from parked cars.⁴ Cassils stands naked, head down, right arm across their chest, left arm wrapped behind the head as if in a headlock.

Their face remains hidden until radio sounds and static begin to come from the stereo speakers of the surrounding cars. Cassils uses sound in *Powers That Be* to invisibly exhaust the senses. The carefully constructed audio track combines and overlaps reports of oppressive struggles as they play out in the media. While watching the video, you hear the static sounds produced as the radio dial is turned back and forth, interrupted by a guitar riff from a heavy metal band. The audio track never quite fully stops long enough for you to understand or orient your hearing to what is being said or heard. You struggle to hear fragments of a woman's voice saying, "Detectives are investigating the murder of a man who was dressed as a woman when his body was found." This intertwines with sounds of Latin American music, rap beats, and voices speaking. This soundtrack alludes to histories that are being intertwined, overlapped, and rewritten—histories excluded by the "powers that be," or the white heteronormal patriarchy. The soundtrack continues as a masculine voice says, "imperialist, racist, hetero-patriarchal society," then becomes overlaid with music radio static a myriad beats and Cassils grunts and groans. Simultaneously, Cassils's naked body is throwing itself against the hood of a vehicle. You hear metal bending and bowing, combined with a Beatles song from the 1950s.

With an abrupt movement, Cassils's face is finally revealed. It is in anguish, pained, and reddened from the rush of blood to the head. Their right arm slowly moves back as the left arm still holds their head down. The arm fully extends, the wrist is cocked as if in a wristlock. Another abrupt movement, and their head is released, followed by vicious elbowing intended for the unseen assailant behind them, the person holding them in a wristlock. Cassils swings around to get out of the wristlock and topples to the ground, landing on their back. They begin kicking and screaming for their life in an effort to ward off the relentless invisible attacker seeking to kill. *Powers That Be* oscillates between the visible and invisible or mental and psychological struggle associated with living a LGBTQI+ life. This performance makes evident an internal state continually at odds with itself, as in the struggle of internalized homophobia under the hegemonic gaze. Cassils wrestles with themselves and what it means to occupy the dualistic role of oppressor and the oppressed.

During the performance, Cassils's body continuously fluctuates between being the oppressed and the oppressor, even though they appear to be isolated and alone. This continual pivot makes visible the disorientation and isolation the subject encounters. This sense of disorientation and isolation mirrors the internal state that is in continuous flux with trauma which never allows the individual to reclaim their agency in some situations. Traumatic memories can create a fissure constructing a massive sense of disassociation, splintering one's mind and body.

For some, these memories can bind one in a closer relationship with their body while for others this separation alters their bodily relationship. Splintering created by such traumatic events can create two different selves for the survivor: one confident and ambitious and the other separated from their emotions, angry and even self-sabotaging. Many survivors describe surviving these events as experiencing their own deaths and in turn there is someone or something to grieve. This fissure and disassociation can alter the once solid and defined line between life and death making blurry and even obliterated it. This boundary forces the person into isolation and disorientation while raising the question of if they are of the land of the living or the dead.

Cassils stands isolated yet surrounded by onlookers. Isolation is a divisive form of control used to further the oppression of the raced or gendered body in systems of cis white patriarchy. At times, Cassils is the victim of the chokehold or headlock, and at other times they are the one applying the violent maneuver. This performed split positionality creates disorientation when the trans masculine body oscillates between the privilege of passing as a white man and the complexities faced when your same body has been violently marginalized by the very gender you are now recognized as: cis, white, and male. American writer Dorothy Allison writes in her essay “A Cure for Bitterness,”

If I live in a world in which my experience is not reflected back to me, then maybe I’m not real enough; maybe I’m not real at all. Maybe I’m fiction. When our children read only fictions that reflect nothing of themselves back to them, we cripple them. That is a trauma: to see yourself never in the world. To feel yourself so unspeakable, forbidden, dangerous.⁵

The inability to have someone act as your witness to the trauma of missing histories, physical violence, or one’s sexual desire is one reason why the internalized gaze of the heteronormal is so powerful and exhausting.

In Cassils’s work, witnesses are not hidden by masks but revealed and held accountable in their roles as witnesses: the audience surveils the struggle between oppressor and the oppressed.⁶ Audience members are implicated; this act of witnessing through looking and recording the event via cell phones blurs the lines between surveillance and witnessing. During *Powers that Be* the audience was encouraged to record the performance and to make visible what would have otherwise been invisible acts. The watcher and the watched, the oppressor and the oppressed, elicit points of power between the performer and audience. This duality



Figure 4 Installation view of Cassils's exhibition *Melt/Carve/Forge: Embodied Sculptures* by Cassils at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 2016. Image courtesy of the author.

functions between audience and artist while simultaneously allowing the viewer to witness Cassils's violent struggle. Cassils's question of what it means to simultaneously occupy the role of the oppressor and the oppressed depicts both an internal and external struggle. There is a price one pays to become an image as it is both self-affirming and exhausting. The desire to be recognized or visible by those who oppress you causes psychological torment when, in that recognition, you can be killed.

Bodies in the Dark

When I first saw Cassils's performance *Becoming An Image* in the fall of 2016, I flew to Philadelphia to attend the one-night show at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art (PAFA) where Cassils also had a solo exhibition, *Melt/Carve/Forge: Embodied Sculptures* (Figure 4). The show included performance stills from *Becoming An Image*, one bronze and one concrete cast of different "clay bash" sculptures titled *Resilience of the 20%* (2013–2016), and a sound piece, *Ghost* (2013), consisting of the grunts and groans, slaps and kicks heard in the performance of *Becoming An Image*.⁷ These

artifacts act as memorials to lives lost while bringing attention to recurring violence. *Resilience of the 20%* and *Ghost* represent the actions undergone by the clay and the body. As Ann Cvetkovich writes in *An Archive of Feelings*, “Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all.”⁸ Trauma is something that is experienced, felt, and internalized.

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts was founded in 1805 and is the oldest art museum and art school in the United States, known for its nineteenth- and twentieth century American paintings, sculptures, and works on paper. Founded by Charles Wilson Peale, a painter and scientist, and William Rush, a sculptor, the academy has historically offered both exhibitions and classes. In her book *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013), Jennifer Doyle points out that museums and art galleries are spaces in which we usually encounter culture on someone else’s terms. Doyle then goes on to quote Jennifer González: “The museum as a whole, as an ideological home, does not welcome us equally.”⁹ By “us” she is talking about those outside the cis, straight, white, patriarchal system. One example is the most famous professor of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts: Thomas Eakins, who is best known for his painting *The Gross Clinic* (1875). This history is of importance because Cassils is a trans-masculine artist who would not have been welcomed in the space 200 years ago, let alone invited to perform in earlier periods.

At the outset of the performance, I stand in a room with about 60 other individuals who, like me, are waiting. A woman gets up and begins to explain the dos and don’ts for the audience. Absolutely no use of cell phones is allowed. They must be completely turned off, and we have to show our phones before we can enter the performance space. Then the woman states something that, once I hear it out loud, almost stops me from continuing: “Once you enter, you will not under any circumstances be allowed to leave. Also, the area you are entering is completely dark; you will be ushered in, placed by your escorts, and in no way are you to move from the location you were placed. Lastly, you will be standing in complete darkness for 40 minutes.”

As someone who is mildly claustrophobic, I feel my chest tighten and my heart rate increase, and I realize that the prospect of being disoriented causes me anxiety and fear. There is something about being in a light-tight room, unable to see or leave, that does not sit well with me. I feel trapped and bound by someone else’s rules, and I find myself trying to figure out ways to get out of the room in case I have a panic attack. Maybe I can count steps? I am part of the first group of five to go into the room. We are instructed to reach out and grab the shoulder of the person in front of us. This action itself is extremely uncomfortable. I need to

interact physically with some person I do not know, relying on them to lead me through the dark. Entering the space in a single-file line, participants are placed according to height and pressed together practically on top of one another. In darkness, one can feel just how close bodies are to one another. One can hear and feel individuals breathing while becoming aware of one's own body along with the bodies of others.

The experience of bodies in the dark can stimulate both desire and danger. This strategy helps Cassils to intensify the viewer's sense of embodiment and what we are all about to witness. As more and more people are ushered in, the sound of the audience increases. I think most people are conversing out of nervousness. In darkness one is vulnerable; one's senses heighten if left long enough, but one's eyes never fully adjust. Perhaps the scariest part of the dark is that it allows for a place to be emotional with no risk of anyone seeing emotion occur. After all, fear, like desire, is an emotion that cuts across audiences. Perhaps darkness offers a place for both pleasure and pain—the pleasure of witnessing art and the pain it can bring.

With no warning, I hear a loud grunt, and a flash from a camera bombards me. I hear a sound of a scene I later can barely see: the sound of a fist meeting clay (Figure 5). The performance has started, and a hush comes over the audience. A fight seems to take place between Cassils and a monolithic block of clay. The flash, which occurs every few seconds, is disorienting. I think I know what I am seeing, but I cannot be certain because the only image left is from the retinal burn of the flash. In this exhausting performance, the viewers' eyes become unreliable. Eliza Steinbock writes, "The performance creates a nervous system, literally making them nervous, on edge waiting for the next series of blows delivered with punches in the eye."¹⁰ One's senses are exhausted and drained. Questions arise regarding what is real. What does Cassils's body actually look like, what does the clay look like, the audience, the surrounding space?

Cassils is completely naked during the performance, exposed to the clay, to the gaze, and to the camera. A full-sized replica of Michelangelo's *David* looks down on the performance, nude and larger than life, with a chiseled chest and sculpted biceps, as if peering down from the heavens into the arena where Cassils fights. *David* stands in as the representative of hetero/homonormative constructs, and of gay male aesthetics.¹¹ Images from the performance allow us to compare *David's* rock-solid biceps to Cassils's bulging fleshy ones, and the *David's* perfectly sculpted legs next to Cassils's. By superimposing the *David* onto Cassils, and Cassils onto *David*, one questions who the ideal man is. *David's* physique was created by Michelangelo through a removal of marble, while Cassils created their physique by



Figure 5 Cassils, Becoming an Image Performance Still no. 5 (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Historic Casting Hall), 2016, color photographs, plexi mounted with aluminum backing, series of 6 images, 20 x 30 inches, edition 1/6, photo: Cassils with Zachary Hartzell. Image courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

adding muscle to themselves. Cassils exemplifies the male form, from their ripped six-pack abs to their shredded shoulders, despite their breasts or the difference in their genitals compared to *David's*. This reclamation renders Cassils the master, not Michelangelo (Figure 6).

If the *David* represents the perfect masculine figure; Cassils's body not only mimics the body of *David*, but surpasses it. Since it is Cassils that sculpts their own form out of flesh and blood, not marble, they render themselves subject, not object, transcending *David*. There is an interesting juxtaposition of scale that occurs when thinking about the story of David, the Biblical character. David is small in stature compared to his infamous nemesis, the giant Goliath. However the *David* becomes a stand-in for Goliath, because of its monstrous size, and as Cassils fights below the feet of *David*, Cassils becomes David from the story, small in comparison fighting someone or something much larger than themselves. The way Cassils hands are wrapped suggests MMA-style fighting and suggests battle. Cassils's ripped biceps and stamina recall what they have been preparing and training for: this fight. However, unlike an MMA fighter, whose rounds only last five minutes, Cassils's single continuous round of struggle lasts over 20 minutes.



Figure 6 Cassils, Becoming an Image Performance Still no. 3 (Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Historic Casting Hall), 2016, color photographs, plexi mounted with aluminum backing, series of 6 images, 20 x 30 inches, edition 1/6, photo: Cassils with Zachary Hartzell.. Image courtesy of artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Cassils is beating into submission a minimalistic form and commenting on the gendering of the minimalist movement centered on artists like Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and Richard Serra. Minimalism rejected abstract expressionism and aimed to remove ideas of the self, or of biography. The distance that once separated viewer and the art object becomes dismantled in minimalism. Cassils inserts themselves physically onto the clay, not only through the expression of violence but via the violent account of their gender nonconforming body. With fist and trans body Cassils dismantles the minimalistic characteristics and form of the monolith, creating a new object conceived from violence.

At the performance I attend, the sound of fists meeting the clay, or a thrusting knee slapping the clay block combined with the artist's groans, grunts, and screams. It makes me feel as though I am witnessing a BDSM scene, fully combining pleasure and pain, sex and violence with intimations of both life and death. Cassils's head is thrown backwards as they plunge their knee deep into the clay; their muscles tighten while their teeth clench. One thing made clear was the decimation of the once erect smooth clay monolith that stood the height of Cassils's body. Fists and knees create indentations on the fleshy structure holding memories of enacted violence.

When the flash goes off, the audience becomes illuminated along with massive reproductions of Grecco Roman and Renaissance sculptures surrounding Cassils. One moment, I can see Cassils, the audience, the plaster replicas surrounding the space as giant spectators, and the clay monolith, and the next moment, I can't. This continuous bombardment of the flash creates both a before-and after-image that is burnt into the retina. One begins to fill in the gaps created in their vision with preconceived notions or memories. According to Nietzsche, "If something is to stay in the memory, it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory."¹² In *Becoming An Image*, there is no time for eyesight to recover. The gaps between flashes provide momentary relaxation for the eyes, but gaps disrupt any attempt to restore what is seen, mirroring the fissures in memory.

This idea of the before-and-after is a theme used throughout Cassils's work and is notable in chapter one through *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, which shows the drastic change in their body after 23 weeks (Figure 1). This can be seen through the "before" and "after" depicted in the photographs of the remnant "clay bash." In *Cuts* and *Becoming An Image*, Cassils is the master of sculpting, whether with clay or their own body. During the performance of *Becoming An Image*, my sight is disrupted, but I can always hear: I can hear Cassils moving around the space, grunting and groaning, punching and kicking and sculpting the clay. Cassils is surrounded as if in an arena, not only by an audience of living human witnesses but also by the towering classical sculpture replicas. Steinbock writes, "The fight between trans-masculinity and a hunk of clay is a fight to sculpturally define each other."¹³ Cassils gains muscle mass, gains power and strength, while the clay is beaten and destroyed.

The performance *Becoming An Image* ends as abruptly as it began; the house lights come up, revealing the monolith and Cassils's body is no longer present. There, in the center of the room, sits the once-erect geometric clay. It now appears lopsided and broken. The material of the clay absorbs and receives the blows. These kicks and punches act as markers of the physical trauma delivered and become scars: proof of survival. The clay becomes the ultimate receptacle of violence containing all that was delivered upon it. The area around the clay looks like a murder scene. There are broken pieces of clay scattered from the beating while all around smears of clay on the hardwood floor act as markers locating where Cassils's foot pushed and dragged the chunks during the assault. With Cassils absent from the scene the performance continues as the audience tries to come to its senses, quite literally. The sensory deprivation mixed with the assaulting flashes force the audience into a state of disorientation, where the world has acquired a new perspective. The audience stands quiet attempting to

comprehend what just happened, and what they just witnessed. Piecing the fragments of the performance back together is a near impossible endeavor. This moment holds a sense of solitude, of grief, of loss. The photographs of Cassils performing *Becoming An Image* are the only evidence of what we just witnessed, freezing Cassils in time. This concept of frozen time transcends across not only the photographic image but of what is experienced by those who have suffered horrific traumatic events. For survivors of such things, for the undead, or those incapable of living or dying, reorganizing the fragments of violence are a Sisyphean task of hard emotional labor that will never be finished.

By inflicting physical violence upon the clay, *Becoming An Image* recreates violence against LGBTQI+ bodies. The clay acts as visible evidence of a crime by representing a suffering body beaten down, mutilated, and scarred for life. In *Pink Labor on Golden Streets*, David Getsy states, “The history of queer practices in art have [sic] been wrapped up with a desire to testify to the existence of those who love and live differently.”¹⁴ This embodied sculpture or clay bash becomes memorialized in bronze while acting as a testimony of lives lost due to violence. The clay never recovers, it simply changes. Forever (Figure 4).

Vulnerable Bodies in The Gap

In the 1960s and 1970s, endurance art became known as a style of performance art that was marked by extreme time durations, and typically involved some hardship, pain, or exhaustion. Artists like Eleanor Antin, Marina Abramovic, and Yoko Ono deliberately put their bodies in dangerous situations and challenged roles of agency or lack thereof. Performance art allows the body to become a medium for living sculpture.

In Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, performed for the first time in 1964 in Kyoto, Japan, the artist sits motionless and dressed in black. *Cut Piece* invites viewers to engage with the artist’s body by cutting pieces from Ono’s clothing during the performance. Ono examined power relations by evoking the oppression of gendered and minority bodies. In this work and those by related artists from the 1960s on, there is the potential not only to destroy an object but also to cause injury to the human body. Abramovic’s *Rhythm 0*, for instance, comprised 72 objects and audience participation. The audience was invited to use any of the objects on the artist in any way they wanted. Abramovic states, “The instructions read, ‘I’m an object, you can do whatever you want to do with me, and I will take all responsibility for six hours.’”¹⁵ Some of the objects available for use included knives, razor blades, a loaded gun, a feather, a rose, and honey. Someone in the

audience did put the loaded gun to Abramovic's head, and at that moment the gallerist grabbed the gun and threw it out the window. Similarly, Ono made herself vulnerable to the touch of the audience by entrusting her safety into their hands.

The responsibility placed on the audience allows participants to either see the artist as a person/subject or have the artist remain an object. This tactic of offering up the artist as a vulnerable body to be stripped or abused, as seen in *Cut Piece*—or even killed, as in Abramovic's *Rhythm 0*—is carried through in much performance art. This exchange of agency in *Cut Piece* and *Rhythm 0*, which renders the artists unable to control what is revealed or concealed by audience participation, is diametrically opposed to the agency Cassils is claiming through their performance work.

Although their aesthetic methods differ, Antin, Benglis, Ono, and Abramovic all reference the idealized figure, the power of the gaze, and the vulnerability of a female body. These women investigate power dynamics while inhabiting the double position of both object and subject. Cassils disrupts the feminist critique by challenging the idea of sameness, or the uniformity of the female ideal. They flip the idea of sameness on its head with a lady face and a man body, making the viewer question whether this person is a *man* or a *woman*. In the first iterations of *Becoming An Image* and *Powers That Be*, Cassils starts by binding their breasts and concealing their genitals.¹⁶ In this case, chest binding indicates a trans body. However, over time, Cassils has veered away from the binding and allows for more of an unapologetic introduction to transness. By removing the strips of cloth that double for a chest binder and underwear, their body can remain gender non-conforming.¹⁷

Ono and Abramovic offer their vulnerable bodies to the other, and replace agency with trust that the audience will treat their bodies with care. I argue that this surrender of agency and control to reveal their most intimate parts to strangers renders the performers powerless. Abramovic and Ono challenge the viewers to see their female bodies as either object or subject. *Rhythm 0* offers up Abramovic's female body as a sacrifice to those around her, causing either pleasure or pain. A boundary dissolves between the performer and the audience when the performance finally ends, and she moves of her free will. The threat of death allows for the barrier between artist and viewer to be dissolved. At that moment, the performer is a puppet, without agency, able to be killed, cut, or caressed.

Yet, the beating that the clay undergoes is suggestive not only of violence toward and death of LGBTQI+ bodies, but also of the violent, disruptive struggle of bodily transformation as a trans or gender nonconforming person. According to Judith Butler, "Violence against those who are already not quite lives, who are living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no

mark.”¹⁸ The individual fighting of someone or something that cannot be made visible in *Powers That Be* represents the trauma of this continual struggle. Butler writes, “Trauma is, by definition, not capturable through representation or indeed recollection; it is precisely that which renders all memory false, we might say, and which is known through the gap that disrupts all efforts at narrative reconstruction.”¹⁹ Since trauma is an invisible attacker that cannot be represented, the invisibility of the attacker in *Powers That Be* reminds the viewer of trauma. There is great danger in making your queer, trans, intersex, or gender nonconforming body visible. It is necessary, however, to be recognized as a viable being. Through witnessing these performances, one can start to understand the disorientation that occurs while negotiating the visible and invisible forces of queer exhaustion. The disorientation created in the in-betweenness of Cassils’s performances creates a sense of embodiment in the viewer, which in turn leads to empathy.

“Embodiment” can mean many things across many theoretical discourses; however, I use the term in the most basic sense: by noticing and feeling your body, you can become aware of how different sensations create certain types of feeling located in the body. What I am proposing is that, in the noticing of the body, Cassils’s performances evoke empathy. Again, empathy has multiple meanings across many discourses; however, I speak of empathy in its most basic sense: sharing the feelings of the “other,” by providing a feeling of oneness.²⁰ We can acknowledge that everyone’s experience is unique. But I am considering the act of engaging in embodiment through violent acts as seen in *Becoming An Image* and *Powers That Be*.

I propose that in Cassils’s performance, their body is presented as subject, forcing the viewers’ empathy to be activated. Acting as witness to the struggle between subject and object is how the viewer can participate in empathy. Butler states, “Specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives, or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense.”²¹ Cassils willingly offers their body up to symbolic acts of violence, allowing for the activation of empathy within the audience.

I have been using the term disorientation in two ways: first, as a bodily feeling; second, as an effect of loss and feeling affected by trauma and physical violence.²² Empathy as defined by Edith Stein suggests a switching of orientations: “When I now interpret it as a sensible living body and empathically project myself into it, I obtain a new image of the special world and new zero point of orientation.”²³ Once someone can understand that the precondition of human life is what connotes a living body and that I, a trans person, can identify as a living

body we can begin to change our orientation to trans life, being conceived as other. Once we recognize ourselves in another we can start to change how we orient ourselves to one another. This transformation in perspective, or disorientation, can create room for empathy which begins to create new points of orientation.

Conclusion

In control of what is concealed and revealed of their body, Cassils claims agency, as does Antin in *Carving* and Benglis in *Artforum*. I argue that Cassils operates as an active subject throughout their performances, while Ono and Abramovic fluctuate between passive object and subject. Cassils's role as active subject causes disorientation in the audience simply because they are witnesses and not active participants. The importance of the audience bearing witness to the performances is seen in the wallpaper lining the exhibition space for *Melt/Carve/Forge: Embodied Sculptures*. When your beloved or someone you love is a survivor of traumatic acts of violence the only thing you can do, at times, is sit and wait. Wait from a distance, wait in solidarity, wait until they stop grieving—if they ever do—and if they don't, wait with patience and reassurance and make sure that they are seen and that their experience is honored. The walls are covered with enlarged photographs of the audience showing their reactions to *Becoming An Image*. The audience is made larger than life not only to show the importance of the witness, but also to indicate how much power *and* disorientation bearing witness to another's trauma holds (Figure 7).

Disruption or disorientation occurs when people see a trans-masculine body, a body not “universal” like the *David* or a “normal” gendered body. Forms of disassociation and fragmentation separate one from the other, or an “I” from a “thou.” We feel our body jolt when Cassils throws their body to the ground, or puts their head in a lock. Is it possible to get past the issue of what kind of body is being beaten; to seeing a human body being violently assaulted; to recognizing, “I am a human body therefore I can be assaulted”? Cassils uses a staged fight between themselves and the clay as a stand-in for a beating.

These ideas of concealment and revelation are also utilized in Cassils's earlier works *Cuts*, *LadyFace/ManBody*, and *Advertisement*, and suggest the artist's strict adherence to keeping the genitals covered as a specific strategy to disorient the viewer. Cassils continues to not only disrupt the ideas of gender within the heteronormative binary but also to queer and transgender ideas of what it means to be trans, gender queer, or nonbinary. These notions of disrupting the binary are carried over from the photographs into the performances. Cassils's work



Figure 7 Installation view of Cassils's exhibition *Melt/Carve/Forge: Embodied Sculptures* by Cassils at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 2016. Image courtesy of the author.

exemplifies the traumatic and exhausting existence of queer and trans people by allowing viewers to witness brutality while bringing to light what it means simply to become recognizable and exposing the struggle to become an image as a gender nonconforming individual. Cassils's body only becomes visible during the flash. Only in a blinding instant does Cassils finally become an image.

The indexical nature of the photograph mimics the indexical nature of the clay and trans body as subjects that hold a history. The return to the photograph or the image continually reminds the viewer of how hard it is to become an image, and the violent struggle one must endure to become not only a viable being, but a body with a story and a history in the world. History is made by solidifying a physical moment. The photographs document physical signifiers of pain and exhaustion. Cassils's sweaty brow, red face, straining and quivering muscles: all are ways we see physical distress. Whether emotionally or physically, we are activated through our bodies, which carry both painful and pleasurable memories. The photographs of both performances and earlier works (*Cuts*, *LadyFace* / *ManBody*, *Advertisement*) are recovered fragments, snapshots, stills, and stopped memories of the exhausting struggle. These photographs reveal to the witnesses certain parts of the violent acts, or in some cases, as with the live performance of *Becoming An*

Image, do not present what is revealed only for the performance-goers. New language and canons start to take shape to place these performances in an art historical context. The entanglement and overlapping of histories resemble the layered audio in *Powers That Be*. Cassils's performance, sculpture, photography, and sound art offer ways to provide testimony about LGBTQI+ experiences. Lives memorialized within art allow for the creation of new histories.

In the attempt to reconstruct the fragmented memories of such trauma it proves an almost fruitless endeavor especially since trauma itself cannot be represented. Debra Jackson writes in *Critical Trauma Studies*, "Language also fails because traumatic experiences are incredible. That is, the events are so horrible that they elicit disbelief. At, best, we say that they are indescribable, unspeakable, or inexpressible."²⁴ In many cases there are no words to describe the feelings after surviving such events. Not only are some people incapable of describing these feeling to others but more so they are unable to describe the feelings to themselves. If trauma cannot be represented and language most certainly breaks up and falls apart when held under the weight of such experiences how does one survive such disorientation where everywhere you try to orientate yourself you are met with such failure? Hitting this wall of continual failure while contending with what spaces to feel safe or not safe in, or more so contending with where your body is safe or not can create feelings of exhaustion. Since nowhere can ever really feel safe, one can become isolated, much like Cassils standing alone surrounded by onlookers in the middle of the room in *Powers that Be*. For some who have suffered under severe oppression or survived traumatic events such as violence one can start to believe that death is preferable to life, after all, exhaustion dies with death.

* * *

Notes

¹ Jeremy Tambling, Cathy Caruth, and Michael S. Roth, "Trauma: Explorations in Memory," *The Modern Language Review* 94, no. 1 (January 1999): 256, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3736129>.

² Cassils was the recipient of the ANTI International Prize for Live Art in 2016. *Powers That Be* was a site-specific work created for this award and first performed in Kupio, Finland.

³ "The Oculus Hall at The Broad," The Broad, 2017, accessed April 05, 2017, <http://www.thebroad.org/programs/tip-her-tongue-martine-syms-misdirected->

kiss. Additional artists in the series include Xandra Ibarra, Dynasty Handbag, and Martine Syms.

⁴ Cassils, *Powers That Be*, accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=7Zs-EjffEVs>.

⁵ Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, eds., *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 246.

⁶ Cassils's work recalls Edward Kienholz's installation *Five Car Stud* (1969) which was shown in Germany in 1972 and resurrected in the United States in 2011. *Five Car Stud* addresses civil rights, lynchings, and violent levels of intolerance. *Five Car Stud* depicts the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, where the oppressor is clearly the power that reigns supreme, the cis white patriarchy. Headlights reveal the brutal beating and lynching of a black body as masks conceal the identities of the assailants and the witnesses to the atrocity.

⁷ This installation also included video footage from a durational piece called *Tiresias* (2010–2013).

⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 7.

⁹ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁰ William J. Simmons and David Getsy, "Appearing Differently: David J. Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons," in *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, ed. Christiane Erharter et al., Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, volume 17 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 143.

¹¹ If you choose to believe Michelangelo was a homosexual.

¹² Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 38.

¹³ Simmons and Getsy, "Appearing Differently," 143.

¹⁴ Simmons and Getsy, "Appearing Differently," 39.

¹⁵ Marina Abramovic Institute, "Marina Abramovic on Rhythm 0 (1974)," Vimeo, accessed September 9, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/71952791>.

¹⁶ *Becoming An Image* was first performed in 2012 as a site-specific work for the ONE archives in Los Angeles, California, which is the oldest LGBTQ archive in the United States.

¹⁷ It is important to note there is a difference between gender non-conforming and transgender. Gender non-conforming simply means one's gender expression does not subscribe to the stereotypes or conventional ideas of masculine/feminine. While transgender simply means one does not identify with the gender one was

assigned at birth. Just because someone is transgender does not mean they are non-conforming. These two terms are not mutually exclusive.

¹⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁰ Waltraut Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy: the Collected Works of Edith Stein Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Discalced Carmelite Volume Three* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1989), 16.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 182.

²³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

Epilogue

Embracing disorientation in queer exhaustion: Pulse and Cassils's *103 Shots*

It is the realization that the lost ones are not coming back; the realization that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer—that someone can be there as your companion—knowing you, living with you through the unfulfilled hope, someone saying: I'll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness.

—Dori Laub, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*

When living in a world where one's desires are treated as abnormal and deviant, a club like Pulse offers a safe place away from those who choose to condemn our desires simply because we love and desire differently. The film *103 Shots* (2016) by Cassils was made in response to one survivor's statement: "You're sitting there having a great time at a club and you hear what sounds like fireworks and balloons popping, and you assume it's part of the show, and then you realize it's not the celebration you thought it was."¹ *103 Shots* responds to the Pulse massacre of 2016 and to the disorientation created when fear and anxiety impede expressions of love under the eye of violence. Peggy Phelan writes in *Mourning Sex*, "Queers are queer because we recognize that we have survived our own deaths. The Law of the Social has already repudiated us, spit us out, banished us, jailed us, and otherwise quarantined us from the cultural imagination it is so anxious to keep

clean, pristine, well-guarded.”² Unfortunately, the labeling of queer love as deviant has not been exhausted.

On June 12, 2016, a shooter entered Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and killed 49 people and injured 53 others. When I heard, what had happened in Orlando, I was sitting at my parents’ home in a small coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania, where my partner at the time and I were visiting. My partner sat on the couch watching MSNBC, panicked. I had no words to console her, simply because I had not understood what had just happened. She felt horrified, saddened, scared, and completely disoriented in rural Pennsylvania with a partner who was unable to offer her any emotional support. She excused herself and went upstairs.

My mother looked at me and asked, “What’s wrong with her?” At that moment, I felt as though I had been punched in the stomach. I felt numb, had nowhere to turn—my mother was inadvertently confronting me with my invisibility as a trans identifying person and the invisibility of my love. Simultaneously, I realized that those people in Orlando could have been me, my friends, or my lover.

Queer exhaustion names the stressful dialectic of social and political visibility and invisibility as experienced by queer, trans, and intersex individuals. Queer exhaustion is the endless struggle between self-erasure and self-abnegation driven by continually negotiating hegemonic histories, desires, and experiences. The negotiation between invisibility and visibility requires those outside the heteronormative constructs to pivot on a dime for their safety. This continual swivel and whirl creates disorientation. Desiring queerly proves to be an exhausting endeavor when revealing your love for someone can lead to your death and in turn the concealing of your love produces psychic trauma because of the lack of recognition. For some people, they will never know what it is like to be afraid to kiss your lover in public for fear of verbal or physical violence. For some they will never know the unease of being both visibly and invisibly different from the rest of the world you encounter daily. We live in a world that uses categories to make meaning as a survival tool from our reptilian brain that questions, “What are you?”, “Do I run from you or eat you?” Somehow, knowing whether someone is man or woman, straight or gay, of Thai or Caribbean heritage, helps us categorize our personal safety, but as we know, we are more than our gender, our sex, or our skin color. In this fast-paced society where we are categorized by how many followers, or “likes” we have, how can we ever have time to sit with our feelings, let alone empathize with one another? How can art provide this momentary relief as a sanctuary to feel? So, I ask, can an entrance for empathy be created by examining disorientation in queer exhaustion and *103 Shots*? By empathy I mean in the most

basic sense, sharing feelings of the “other,” by providing a feeling of oneness. I suggest Cassils activates empathy in *103 Shots* using sharp cuts and assaulting sound as a tactic to disorient the senses.

After returning to San Francisco, weeks passed and Pride season was quickly underway. Pride was not usually an event I attended but that year I made an exception. Pride is historically a celebration inundated with rainbow flags, parades, music, drag queens, voguing, dykes on bikes, and the leather contingent. However, that year also consisted of the gaze of snipers perched atop the buildings surrounding Dolores Park. Amongst the snipers and wonderfully colored festivities I watched as one person got onto their knee, held up a tiny box, looked to their beloved and asked, “will you marry me?” In this moment I could hardly believe I was watching two people get engaged under the “protection” of those guns. Being “protected” by the same weapons of war used to kill our companions creates disorientation. Both psychic and physical distresses are implicit in the idea that people need to be protected to celebrate and proclaim their love. Also, under the watch of those snipers during Pride was Cassils, filming participants for *103 Shots*.

103 Shots is a little over two and a half minutes in length. The use of black and white as an aesthetic strategy evokes the past struggles with violence and loss within the LGBTQI+ community, while the infinite gradations of gray could also allude to expanding the black-and-white binary of male/female, boy/girl, and man/woman.³ The first time I saw *103 Shots* was on YouTube a week after its release by the artist in 2016 but most recently I saw the film in the exhibition *A History of Violence* curated by Rudy Lemke at SOMArts in San Francisco, CA in June of 2018.⁴ When the viewer approaches the larger than life projection they are engulfed in the action of the couples participating in this film. These couples were asked to stand facing one another and far enough apart for a white balloon to occupy the space between them. The weight of the couples’ bodies provided just enough resistance so the balloon did not fall. The flexible rubber structure and malleable nature of the balloon, when filled with the oxygen from individuals’ lungs, allows for pressure to be applied. Once positioned face to face in front of the stark white background, the couples tighten their embrace in an attempt to pop the balloon (Figure 8). The gesture of an embrace encourages one to hold tight. The expression of an embrace implies crossing a distance to visibly show love’s existence, romantic or otherwise.

The audience who witnesses this specific installation of *103 Shots* sees clearly the rise and fall of people’s chests during an embrace. It signals a violent loss of breath—or even loss of life—while simultaneously indicating the act of kissing or sexual excitement. The burst balloon ejects from in between the couples



Figure 8 Cassils, 103 Shots, 2016, single channel video with sound, 2:35 minutes. Image courtesy artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

like a bullet from a gun. With the absence of the balloon the couple's bodies slam into one another, causing skin to vibrate similarly to when someone is shot. In that case, flesh vibrates from the impact of the bullet passing through the body, and the body falls. The rise and fall hold a duplicity that signals a violent loss of breath or life while simultaneously signaling sexual excitement.

The sound of the bursting balloons causes the viewer to blink hard and recoil, like when one hears a gunshot. After a barrage of clashing bodies, a black screen appears, and the cadence of the exploding balloons plays in the background. The cadence quickens as though someone is firing a semiautomatic weapon, creating a pulse that runs through the film. The viewer becomes increasingly aware of their body as their chest tightens and fills with fear due to the loud pops occurring during each embrace.

When the couples in Cassils's film make the choice to embrace, bodies come together, bursting the fragile balloon that was keeping them apart. The quick cuts mimic a blink, a breath and a heartbeat. Unsure of when the balloon will burst, the participants' reactions in *103 Shots* vary from play and pleasure to pain and apprehension. Grimaces, closed eyes, tense jaws, and indirect gazes are visible as some embrace quickly, some slowly, others reluctantly. Mimicking feelings of sexual orgasm and falling in love, the bodies are in flux between a subtle beauty and a violent clash. The uncertain explosiveness that occurs when a balloon is suddenly put under too much pressure is both exciting and frightening.

The white balloon is an object of celebration usually added to party décor and appears harmless. The action of the embrace implies affection or love, so when the embrace or loving gesture causes a pop, mimicking a gunshot, disorientation occurs. Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “We are affected by what we come into contact with. In other words, emotions are directed to what we come in contact with: They move us toward or away from such objects.”⁵ In this movement toward or away we are essentially analyzing risk. The risk of crossing a distance, of a bursting balloon, of living and loving. After all, love is just a word until someone crosses over and provides it with meaning. As the participants come in contact with their person there is potential for the balloon to burst or not to burst depending on the force that is generated during the embrace.⁶ If to embrace your beloved you must endure the anxiety of whether or not a balloon will bust, one asks, *is the pleasure worth the possible pain?* Does the opportunity to gain pleasure or joy equal the risk of AIDS, loss, living, loving, and dying? Falling in love poses these same questions, are you willing to risk a part of yourself for the chance to be with another?

A minute into *103 Shots*, an image in the film allows the viewer’s gaze to rest on the back of someone’s head with their arm stretched out across a white background. Their gender is unidentifiable. The outstretched arm and white background recall Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Self Portrait* (1975) in which the smiling artist appears with his arm stretched out across a white photographic background, fingers spread, looking directly at the camera. Eventually, Mapplethorpe crops the self-portrait to create *Arm (Self-Portrait)* (1976) in which his arm appears almost lifeless, while blue veins spread over his stark white translucent skin. *Arm (Self-Portrait)* serves as a *memento mori* to Mapplethorpe, as his life would be taken by complications with HIV/AIDS thirteen years later.⁷

Grappling with passing away into memory and the possibility of such tragedy becoming forgotten is why *103 Shots* functions as an important reminder not only to the LGBTQI+ community, but to society at large. Cassils brings together homophobic and transphobic violence throughout their work, which allows the LGBTQI+ community to come together to grieve the violence we have collectively suffered through while at the same time celebrating our love, desire, and pleasure.

Another Mapplethorpe image, *Embrace* (1982), was taken at the beginning of the AIDS pandemic and shows a black and white couple embracing. They’re naked from the waist up, wearing jeans, and their heads, pressed together, press their faces into one another’s shoulders. The couple is deeply entwined, as if afraid to let go. The intensity of this embrace shows a deep need in both parties and speaks to the fear and anxiety created during the AIDS epidemic. The pain of loss

and the grief created during the AIDS epidemic is one we are all still dealing with as a LGBTQI+ community. The lives lost in the arts community alone are staggering and included Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz, Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and many others. Rebuilding a community after such losses and reconstructing sexual relations while reinvesting in sexual pleasures is indeed an exhaustive endeavor.

In Mapplethorpe's *Embrace* we do not know if these two are a couple, or friends, or to which community they belong. There is no latex, no condom, and no protection between their bodies, allowing them to meet skin to skin. This photo was taken at the height of the AIDS pandemic and therefore it is a radical act of love, shared loss and grieving for bodies that were not seen as even human. Their embrace is tight, it is sure and strong, it is the kind of embrace that appears to hold the bodies together by some magnetic and invisible bond. Short of ripping these two bodies away from one another, they will remain in this embrace, heads buried not letting go of one another. In comparison, a still from *103 Shots* reveals a couple embracing, naked from the waist up, wearing jeans, but they do not bury their heads; rather, they militantly gaze directly at the camera. The power of the gaze, as explored through much of the film, suggests that it allows participants to claim a sense of forcefulness, which makes them fearless in their love, and confronts the viewer.⁸

Cassils claims the same unapologetic confrontational gaze. There can be immense pleasure in being visible—after all, recognition determines viability. Ideas of pleasure tie into visibility in a club or social setting, where one not only desires recognition but simultaneously desires to be desirable, as in the case of the Pulse nightclub or at SF Pride. Individuals gather in what they have understood to be a safe place not only to come together, but also to allow themselves to be desired in a sexual way. We desire to be desired; we desire connectivity. Desire makes the pulse quicken and the heart beat hard. Whether it's a wink from across a crowded room or the prospect of your beloved's touch, our bodies are continually aware of desire.

The bodies in *103 Shots* represent a spectrum of gender and sexual identity. There are multiple ways one can desire, and this film underlines the beauty and tragedy, or the pleasure and pain, of queer desire. Cassils's and Mapplethorpe's works depict lost lives, utilizing death as the greatest leveler while confronting the viewer not only with recognizing these bodies, but also the desire and death they hold. Many demonized our desire as the cause of our deaths, rendering AIDS deaths and those in Orlando unable to be grieved by the public at large. Death does not see color, sexuality, or gender; death comes for us all.

Fragility in the balloon creates a point at which it does break. The balloon ruptures, it breaks, it breaks up, and breaks apart. Grief, trauma, and loss seemingly break apart all in its wake, especially after the loss of a loved one via a breakup, breakdown, or death. Through disorientation, one gains another, and the empathy created within *103 Shots* allows people witness the testimony of queer love and loss.

The balloon stands in for a multitude of things keeping lovers or families apart: belief systems, fear of loss, miscommunication, etc. To explain or understand the barrier, one must break apart and relinquish the most familiar parts of oneself to truly know someone. If one is to truly know the other, one must embrace the disorientation that comes with these things. Cassils's *103 Shots* and Mapplethorpe's *Embrace* show the struggle that occurs when fighting against what normalized modes deem the right way to love or to come into being. To quote Judith Butler:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you' by trying to translate but finding that my language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human being comes into being again and again as that which we have yet to know.⁹

Language must break up and yield, leaving one speechless, for there are no words to encompass trauma, loss, or grief. Perhaps it is empathy; perhaps it is exactly this, knowing there will be moments with unfulfilled hope and incomprehensible pain. Tremendous importance lies in having someone show up as your companion, someone who is allowed to witness your exhaustion, your pain and disorientation. This kind of grief and loss can create a tectonic shift where pieces that were no longer needed are broken off, allowing other things to pass through and attempt to fill the giant hole created when language is lost and silence is shrapnel. There is a space beyond grief, beyond sadness, and beyond heartbreak where language ceases to exist in its functionality and time stands still. Sometimes there is no getting past or through the other side of that place with no name: attempting to go past it simply brings it to light. There is no direction or true north to navigate these experiences because everything is frozen.

We will fail each other, we must fail each other so we can be witnessed as human, vulnerable and raw. We must become undone because in our own undoing we come face to face with ourselves and with our own failures, or what we feel are

our failures. However, they are not failures, they are our humanity, they are us at our most human, our most vulnerable. For some it is not easy to find someone who sees them, who sincerely sees who you are as a person in all your imperfections. So, when you finally find someone who sees you, and then that someone is lost, the overwhelming feeling of that absence and invisibility is beyond words. *103 Shots* asks the couples to walk through what they believe are their own failures and go toward one another in hopes of finding their own humanity and being witnessed as such. There are no right or wrong ways of tackling the loss of oneself or the absence of a loved one or a beloved despite what Western ideologies say.

Pulse, Pride, and a family's home are supposed to be safe places, but it is exhausting when you have nowhere you can truly feel safe and seen. Returning to the story of when I first heard about the Orlando shooting: I needed my partner. But I also needed to *be* a partner. I needed to bear witness to her pain and disorientation. I needed to *see* her struggle to finally come face to face with the invisibility of my desire and love to my family. I failed to fully witness my partner, just as my mother failed to see *us*, see *me*. By making our way through disorientation, we find where and who we come to feel at home with, and in witnessing the pain and trauma of others, we come to know our own.

The dilemmas of love and desire don't yield simple answers, for they create feelings of attachment. In these feelings of attachment and love, one realizes there is potentiality for great loss. The couples in *103 Shots* stand within reach of one another, yet the distance between threatens to divide, the chance to embrace slips away. *103 Shots* asks us to hold tight to one another in the face of fear, suffering, and great loss. The idea of embracing through the giant, unexpected "pop" is asking us not to let go but in fact squeeze harder. The realization that the lost ones are not coming back becomes the most disorienting, painful, and exhausting thing to navigate. How does one let go of someone when life without them is brutally exhausting? When unfulfilled hope is the only option one has, how can one ever really let go?

* * *

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writing practices are inspired by life events and encompass queer exhaustion, queer theory, trauma studies, and loss.

Notes

¹ Cassils, *103 Shots*, video, directed by Cassils, June 27, 2016, <http://cassils.net/portfolio/103-shots/>

² Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 2009), 33.

³ Simultaneously, Cassils also pays homage to the AIDS artist collective, Gran Fury's, 1989 New York City bus posters titled *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed And Indifference Does*. Gran Fury (1985-1996) is a collective of AIDS activists retaliating against government and social institutions that make those living with AIDS invisible. Their most well-known graphic is the Silence = Death. Gran Fury's 12 x 3-foot poster depicts three different sets of interracial couples facing one another caught in the act of kissing: a man and woman, two men, and two women. These full color images are shot against a stark white background and sit below the blue text that reads, "KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DOES."

⁴ *A History of Violence* was a multidisciplinary exploration of the social and political context of violence against and within queer communities. Some artists included in this show were Cassils, Angela Hennessy, Xandra Ibarra, and David Wojnarowicz.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

⁶ The term "person" is used as a more accessible, less co-opted term instead of terms such as "partner," "girlfriend," or "boyfriend."

⁷ Kobena Mercer talks about Mapplethorpe's images as *memento mori*. "In this mourning, there was something horribly accurate about the truism that death is the greatest leveler, because his pictures have now become *memento mori*, documentary traces of a style of life and a sexual ethics of the '70s and early '80s which of now largely disappeared and passed away into memory." Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 197.

⁸ The underpinning of the homage is a thread throughout Cassils's work nodding to both Benglis and Mapplethorpe. Benglis and Mapplethorpe were critical in moving the erotic into the mainstream. The agency of women reclaiming their

own sexuality combined alongside Mapplethorpe's use of homoeroticism called attention to the ways both artists were censored during this time. Cassils acknowledges both artist and history; the feminist movement and the AIDS epidemic. Cassils complicates conversations and representations around feminism and the gendered body while highlighting the militancy of LGBTQI+ bodies and the celebration of our community.

⁹Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 49.