

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the forsa Institute for Social Research and Statistical Analysis released an opinion poll whose title translates as *The XXL Report: Opinions and Views on Heaviness and Obesity* (fig. 1). The cover shows a young, white, fat woman in a white one-piece bathing suit with long, loose brown hair swimming alone in a public pool as if sunken by her own weight after a dive. Her position is reminiscent of a literal fish in



// Figure 1
Cover of *The XXL Report, Opinions and Views on Heaviness and Obesity, 2016*

the water as well as the current trend of “mermaiding,” underwater swimming courses popular with children and teens. The title of the awareness campaign, *Schwere(s)los*, reinforces the image’s melancholy that goes beyond its color palette. It is a pun on the German word for weightless (*schwereelos*) and an idiom (*schweres Los*) meaning a heavy burden, a raw deal, or a hard lot in life. The wordplay is reinforced by the aquatic setting. To viewers, the young woman is made to appear confined—in the pool, in her body, and on the cover of the report. Despite its intention as an image of fat self-empowerment, the cover ultimately establishes a gaze that transmits norms and normalcy and visually conflates the swimmer with a zoo animal.

Visual references between marine mammals and generous female bodies appear to be ubiquitous and quite popular in the advertising industry. One example is PETA’s misogynist 2009 ad campaign *Save the Whales: Lose the Blubber, Go Vegetarian* (fig. 2). The animal rights organization adopts a provocative strategy for its ad imagery. They portray the torso of a white woman who is far from embodying classical or contemporary body norms. Wearing a red-and-white polka-dot bikini, she holds her hand at her waist and gazes out to sea. Her body is cut off on the billboard and only partially visible, reducing the woman to her body. The text produces and certifies a visual link between the woman and a whale. The representation of this



// Figure 2
PETA’s ad campaign, *Save the Whales: Lose the Blubber, Go Vegetarian, 2009*

bikini-wearing woman becomes an anonymous, deindividualized “headless fatty” – Charlotte Cooper’s name for this type of image (2007) – who is now bidden to adopt a vegetarian diet. Proposing the term “hyper(in)visible” and the concept of the “hyper(in) visible fat woman” in particular, Jeannine H. Gailey examines the interplay between fat women’s views of their own bodies and what society expects of their bodies and how it labels them (Gailey 2014). Her investigation grapples with a paradox that is central to visual fat studies: although the fat female body is *hyper*-visible in one sense, at the same time mainstream visual culture scarcely offers any examples of positively connoted, respectful visualizations of bodies that depart from contemporary body norms.

— In this field of inquiry, we must keep in mind that the treatment of bodies itself is inherently linked to the linguistic frame of reference and is often reduced to the language’s descriptions, classifications, etc. On that basis, it is vital that we examine pejorative words, hateful invocations, and their effects. In her book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler situates the term “perlocutionary speech act,” as popularized by J.L. Austin, in the context of insulting and injurious speech:¹⁾ “To be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are. Indeed, it may be that what is *unanticipated* about the injurious speech act is what constitutes its injury, the sense of putting its addressee out of control. The capacity to circumscribe the situation of the speech act is jeopardized at the moment of injurious address. To be addressed injuriously is not only to be open to an unknown future, but not to know the time and place of injury, and to suffer the disorientation of one’s situation as the effect of such speech. Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one’s place ‘place’ within the community of speakers; one can be ‘put in one’s place’ by such speech, but such a place may be no place.” (Butler 1997: 3–4)

— It is a challenge to extend Butler’s theses about hate speech to visual language and the developing discourses around fat bodies. If images can injure, if they land like a punch—but representations of fat bodies are absent or faceless in the discourse,²⁾ marking a visual gap—then we are compelled to ask what preconceptions and fears this is linked to. Is there an underlying fear that representations of high body weight might be contagious?³⁾ (Visual) hate speech is, “in the very speaking of such speech, the performance of the injury itself, where the injury is understood as

1) Perlocutionary acts are speech acts “that produce certain effects as their consequence; by saying something, a certain effect follows. The illocutionary speech act is itself the deed it effects; the perlocutionary merely leads to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself.” (Butler 1997: 3).

2) One example of this visual vacancy is the 2017 website of the newly established German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, whose images completely exclude representations of fat people. See www.bmel.de/DE/Ernaehrung/_Texte/BZfE_Eroeffnung.html (Juli 2017).

3) For more on the concept of contagiousness, see Lorey (2011).

social subordination.” (Butler 1997: 18). Extending Butler to the visual realm therefore promises to deliver rewarding and insightful perspectives on the discourse around fat bodies.⁴⁾

— Today the public display, imposed invisibility, and devaluation of fat bodies goes along with a discourse that exhorts the population collectively to lose weight. This discourse – which is produced by politicians and society and peddled by diverse media, all declaring war on fat in the name of (public) health – is now coming up against a growing chorus of protest from academics and activists. Since the late 1960s, various groups (such as the *fat acceptance movement*, *Health at Every Size*, and Susie Orbach’s “fat is a feminist issue”) have challenged the stigmatization and patronization of people who do not comply with prevailing body norms as unhealthy, inactive, lazy, etc. Since the mid-2000s, fat studies has emerged as an independent, transdisciplinary research field.⁵⁾ In questioning norms, forms of knowledge production, and (state) mechanisms of regulation during discussions of the treatment and visibility of various body types, fat studies ties into the questions and assumptions of feminist and queer research fields. Since the 1970s or earlier, feminist art, film, and media scholars have been problematizing not only the positions of women in a patriarchal visual system, but also beauty ideals and labels. Researchers have observed that standardizing codes regarding the size, weight, and circumference of human bodies always coincide with labels of categories of difference such as gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, social origin, etc. In recent years, researchers in sociology, gender studies, and queer studies in German-speaking countries have begun investigating self-directed technologies and strategies of self-optimization in the context of a neoliberal gender regime (e.g. Villa 2008; Kreisky 2008; *Body Politics* 2015; Rose and Schorb 2017). However, the topics of art and visual culture have thus far remained marginal. The volume *Lookismus. Normierte Körper. Diskriminierende Mechanismen. (Self-)Empowerment* (Lookism: Standardized bodies, discriminating mechanisms, [self-] empowerment; 2017) makes initial observations about how today’s body positivity movement reflects critically – and sometimes through a (queer) feminist lens – on the topics of fat empowerment, fat acceptance, and the diet industry in blogs, social media, and other online spaces. The scholars question even the declaredly empowering paradigm of “riot not diet” because it requires a “strong, independent, cool ideal” of radical self-acceptance and self-love without

4)

For examples of what extending Butler to the visual realm might look like, see Linda Hentschel’s conception of visual ethics (2008) and Andrea Seier’s media studies research (2007).

5)

One central figure is Esther Rothblum, who co-edited the *Fat Studies Reader* with Sondra Solovay in 2009 and has been editor of the *Fat Studies Journal* since 2012. The significance to the field of issues of visual representations of fat and fatness was already apparent in the second issue of the journal, which contained a special sub-issue edited by Stefanie Snider (*Fat Studies Journal* 2013).

giving voice to the pain – and sometimes failure – caused by “(sexist) lookist norms and [instead] developing collective modes of behavior based on shared experiences of suffering” (Schmechel 2017: 79). In their recent edited collection *Fat Studies in Deutschland* (Fat studies in Germany, 2017), Lotte Rose and Friedrich Schorb contend that advocates of “fat agency” use the “stigmatizing term ‘fat’ very consciously” and consistently reject “productions of knowledge about the ‘harmfulness of being overweight’” and optimized techniques of weight loss (Ibid.: 9). Instead, they ask how and when supposed “facts” about high body weight and, by extension, measures of bio-political regulation and government are scrutinized, fact-checked, and justified (Ibid.).

— Issue 62 of FKW engages with these debates in fat studies as well as debates over contemporary systems of beauty from a gender studies perspective as it deconstructs the visual representations and absences of fat bodies, whose very definition implies standardization. This issue will consider in greater detail how fatness is addressed in various visual fields; the consequences of these depictions; and how art, visual culture, and techniques of media and self-regulation intersect.

— The first article makes clear that the idealization of the slender body and the concomitant devaluation and prejudice against the fat body have deep historical roots. In *The Faces of Fatness in Early Modern Europe*, **Sara Benninga** shows that the fat body in northern Europe of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was portrayed negatively as a religious and societal symbol of transgressed moral and social boundaries. By reading a variety of Christian visual portrayals in parallel with written theological sources, Benninga identifies the symbolic meaning ascribed to the corpulent body, the other sins and vices it was linked with, and these images’ embeddedness in social structures and notions of body and soul. Through portrayals of gluttony as a sin, the figure of the large-bellied farmer (sometimes shown with his wife), female figures with exposed full bodies, and images of food sellers, aristocrats, and friars, Benninga gives evidence that corpulence was considered a negative symbol of various vices and a sign of inadequate control over one’s bodily needs.

— While Benninga explores the devaluation and stigmatization of the fat body in the Early Modern period, **Brittany Lockard** discusses two paintings by the contemporary artist Jenny Saville. Saville’s large-format works on the female body have been

interpreted almost universally as fat-positive. Lockard is skeptical about this interpretation; her essay rereads both the paintings themselves and their art-historical reception. She demonstrates how the literature on Saville's opulent women's bodies perpetuates gender norms, at least implicitly, as the writers often juxtapose them against the viewer's bodies, which they imagine as "thin," or confuse the size of the canvas with the size of the body. The difficulty of describing or classifying bodies becomes clear here, raising the question of whether familiar and established art-historical descriptions are pejorative. Using the paintings *Plan* (1993) and *Propped* (1992), she discusses whether this presumptive fat positivity bears out. Lockard argues that merely portraying the fat body does not, on its own, challenge its stereotypes. She goes on to show that the attitudes demonstrated by the images towards generous bodies are ambivalent at the least. Although Saville's representations are intended as critical, the author contends that they counter the constant measurement and social control of the female body inadequately, if at all, and might even freshly evoke such measurement and control.

— **Evangelia Kindinger's** essay '*I Wanna Be Fat: Healthism and Fat Politics in TLC's My Big Fat Fabulous Life* examines a reality TV series whose protagonist, Whitney Thore, consciously sets out to be fat and healthy. In an age that idealizes slender, muscular bodies, this is a surprising goal, especially when voiced on reality TV, which is notorious for formats focused on makeovers and self-optimization that corroborate the perennially proclaimed obesity epidemic. The author therefore pursues a double strategy. She asks to what extent *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* advances and practices fat politics or agency in liberating ways or whether, in fact, the fat politics and fat pride the show represents only serve to transmit into viewer's heads, via lifestyle TV, the neoliberal discourse of a subject who is constantly demanded to optimize herself. Through the examples of melodrama and horror films, media studies has shown that less-reputable genres, programs, and formats have an advantage: they can air positions that are not (yet) accepted or remain controversial in wider society. Thus Kindinger's essay lends fascinating insight into the "politics of media" on television (Stauff 2005).

— By contrast, **Lucienne Auz** discusses artworks that deal with a more direct form of fat shaming. Fat shaming – a term that, interestingly, still lacks a German equivalent – refers to pejorative

and usually prejudicial language about fat bodies. The fact that pejorative statements about fat bodies are especially articulated under the shelter of the Internet's presumed anonymity has been discussed in a variety of ways, including by the artist Haley Morris-Cafiero. Auz's essay *Staring Back: A Response to Body Shamers in Haley Morris-Cafiero's Self-Portraiture* analyzes the photo series *Wait Watchers*, for which Morris-Cafiero styles herself as a tourist in various places and has her picture taken without passersby noticing. In her art, she is less interested in her own representation than in other people's looks and gestures reacting to her body. The various attitudes towards her body become clearest when the photographer publishes her photographs on various online media outlets. In another work, *In the Time of Trump*, Morris-Cafiero takes on the comments that express the most vehement hatred and resistance toward her portrayal of her body, which departs from the ideal of thinness. She looks through their user profiles, constructs a character based on them, and photographs it together with her posts. Auz discusses how Morris-Cafiero's artistic practice goes beyond opening up a space for negotiating assumptions and attributions about a body classified as fat, but also pursues the question of how identities are manufactured socially on the Internet through gazes, gestures, comments, and staged images.

— What do coloring books have to do with fat positivity, queering, and intersectionality? **Cat Pausé** explores the answer in her article *Candy Perfume Girl: Coloring in Fat Bodies*. Beginning with the history of the coloring book as a normative element of a white British middle-class upbringing and childhood recreation, she asserts that coloring books in wide-ranging manifestations – whether as “serious” printed books or homemade, home-produced zines – are currently undergoing a Renaissance as an adult pastime, and to subversive effect. The idea that a coloring book, which calls for repetitive and normative behavior, could be subversive and revolutionary calls for an explanation. Taking many recent coloring books as examples, Pausé demonstrates how these can provide and popularize positive representations of fat bodies. She also elaborates on how much of the line art pokes at the boundaries of so-called good taste by offering up abundant skin, flesh, double chins, sex, etc., for people to color in – always in conjunction with categories of difference such as gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, social origin, age, and ability. In view of the

absence of images of “super-fat bodies” or bodies with disabilities, however, the author acknowledges that these coloring books are still the exception and not the rule.

— In addition, the 62nd issue of FKW includes three reviews presenting recent publications on current research topics in the area of cultural gender studies. Birgit Haehnel reviews Irene Below and Burcu Dogramaci’s co-edited volume *Kunst und Gesellschaft zwischen den Kulturen. Die Kunsthistorikerin Hanna Levy-Deinhard im Exil und ihre Aktualität heute (Art and society between cultures: The art historian Hanna Levy-Deinhard in exile and her relevance today)*. Levy-Deinhard escaped the Nazis in 1933 and went into exile in Brazil by way of Paris. This ninth volume in the series *Frauen und Exil (Women and Exile)* does more than remember the life of a woman researcher whom Germany has forgotten. It also identifies how Levy-Deinhard’s research into the colonial art of Brazil holds the seeds of a vision of global art history.

— Katrin Köppert discusses the essay collection *un/verblümt. Queere Politiken in Ästhetik und Theorie (un/abashed: Queer policies in aesthetics and theory, 2014)* edited by Josch Hoenes and Barbara Paul, which explores a range of queer aesthetic strategies. Köppert explores the potential productiveness of contemplating various un/abashed expressions of anti-authoritarian politics, particularly in view of the commonness of statements like “I’ll say what I want.”

— Forms of speech or, more precisely, types of cultural representation are also the subject of the third review. Jonas Diekhans writes about Insa Härtel’s book published in collaboration with Sonja Witte and titled *Kinder der Erregung. “Übergriffe” und “Objekte” in kulturellen Konstellationen kindlich-jugendlicher Sexualität (Children of arousal: “Assaults” and “objects” in cultural constellations of childhood and teenage sexuality; 2014)*. The subject here is not childhood sexuality itself, but its presentations in Western societies. Diekhans posits that the authors use an extensive corpus of texts and images and an analysis of psycho and analytic theory to elaborate on intriguing dimensions of social discourse around childhood and teenage sexuality, which they submit for public discussion.

— For the FKW issue on visual fat studies, we have the pleasure of working with the Austrian choreographer and performance artist Doris Uhlich, who invites us to a “fat dance” featuring the

sounds of the media artist and DJ Boris Kopeinig. In the booklet accompanying the CD exclusively produced for FKW, she offers Tips and Tracks for *Flesh Dancing*: “Start with clothes. Or half naked. Or a little naked. Or naked. Soon you will enjoy being more than naked” (Uhlich 2017: Booklet).

— On that note, FKW wishes you an enjoyable read and a fantastic dance.

Translated by Jake Schneider

// Image Credits

Fig.1: Cover of *The XXL Report, Opinions and Views on Heaviness and Obesity*, 2016, in: www.dak.de/dak/bundes-themen/xxl-report-so-werden-dicke-menschen-ausgegrenzt-1846124.html (Juli 2017)

Fig. 2: PETA's ad campaign, *Save the Whales: Lose the Blubber, Go Vegetarian*, 2009, in: www.nutritionunplugged.com/2009/08/lose-the-blubber-ad-is-low-blow-from-peta (Juli 2017)

//References

- Bartky, Sandra Lee (1990): *Feminity and Domination. Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York / London, Routledge
- Bordo, Susan (1993): *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, University of California Press
- Butler, Judith (1997): *Exitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. New York / London, Routledge
- Cali, Davide / Bougaeva, Sonja (2010): *Wanda Walfisch. dick und rund*, Zürich, Atlantis Verlag
- Cooper, Charlotte (2016): *Fat Activism. A radical social Movement*. Bristol, HammerOn
- Cooper, Charlotte (2007): *Headless fatties*. <http://charlottecooper.net/publishing/digital/headless-fatties-01-07/> (Juni 2017)
- Erdman Farrell, Amy (2011): *Fat Shame. Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*. New York / London, New York University Press
- Forth, Christopher E. / Leitch, Alison (eds.) (2014): *Fat. Culture and Materiality*. London / New York, Bloomsbury
- Gailey, Jeannine A. (2014): *The Hyper(in)visible Fat Woman. Weight and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Society*. London / New York / Shanghai, Palgrave Macmillan
- Gilman, Sander L. (2008): *Fat. A Cultural History of Obesity*. Cambridge, Polity Press
- Guthmann, Julie (2011): *Weighing in. Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, University of California Press
- Hentschel, Linda (ed.) unter Mitarbeit von Caroline Schubarth (2008): *Bilderpolitik in Zeiten von Krieg und Terror. Medien, Macht und Geschlechterverhältnisse*. Berlin, b_books
- Kipnis, Laura (1995): *Die kulturellen Implikationen des Dickseins*. In: Marie-Luise Angerer (ed.), *The Body of Gender. Körper. Geschlecht. Identitäten*, Wien, Passagen Verlag, S. 111–130
- Kreisky, Eva (2008): *Fitte Wirtschaft und schlanker Staat. Das neoliberale Regime über die Bäuche*. In: Schmidt-Semisch, Henning / Schorb, Friedrich (eds.), *Kreuzzug gegen Fette. Sozialwissenschaftliche Aspekte des gesellschaftlichen Umgangs mit Übergewicht und Adipositas*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, S. 143–162
- Levy-Navarro, Elena (2010): *Historicing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*. Columbus, The Ohio State University Press
- Lorey, Isabel (2011): *Figures des Immunen. Elemente einer politischen Theorie*. Zürich, Diaphanes
- Mackert, Nina / Martschukat, Jürgen (ed.) (2015): *Fat Agency. Body Politics*. *Zeitschrift für Körpergeschichte*, 5, 3

- Mendible, Myra (2016): *American Shame. Stigma and the Body Politic*. Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press
- Richardson, Niall (2010). *Transgressive Bodies. Representations in Film and Popular Culture*, Farnham: Ashgate
- Rose, Lotte / Schorb, Friedrich (eds.) (2017): *Fat Studies in Deutschland. Hohes Körpergewicht zwischen Diskriminierung und Anerkennung*. Weinheim / Basel, Beltz
- Rothblum, Esther / Solovay, Sondra (eds.) (2009): *The Fat Studies Reader*. New York / London, New York University Press
- Saguy, Abigail C. (2013): *What's wrong with Fat?*. New York, Oxford University Press
- Schmechel, Corinna (2017): *Riots not Diets? Normenreproduktion und Eigennormen von Empowermentstrategien*. In: Diamond, Darla / Pflaster, Petra / Schmid, Lea (eds.), *Lookismus. Normierte Körper – Diskriminierende Mechanismen – (Self)Empowerment*. Münster, UNRAST-Verlag, S. 75–79
- Seier, Andrea (2007): *Remediatisierung. Die performative Konstitution von Gender und Medien*. Berlin, Lit Verlag
- Snider, Stefanie (Hg.) (2013): *Visual Representations of Fat and Fatness*. In: *Fat Studies. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, Vol. 2
- Stauff, Markus (2005): *Zur Gouvernementalität der Medien. Fernsehen als ‚Problem‘ und ‚Instrument‘*. In: Gethmann, Daniel / Stauff, Markus (eds.): *Politiken der Medien*, Zürich / Berlin, diaphanes, S. 89–110
- Villa, Paula-Irene (2008) (ed.): *schön normal. Manipulationen am Körper als Technologien des Selbst*. Bielefeld, transcript Verlag
- Villa, Paula-Irene / Zimmermann, Katharina (2008), *Fitte Frauen – Dicke Monster? Empirische Exploration zu einem Diskurs von Gewicht*. In: Schmidt-Semisch, Henning / Schorb, Friedrich (eds.), *Kreuzzug gegen Fette. Sozialwissenschaftliche Aspekte des gesellschaftlichen Umgangs mit Übergewicht und Adipositas*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, S. 171–190
- Wann, Marilyn (2009): *Foreword. Fat Studies. An Invitation to Revolution*. In: Rothblum, Esther / Solovay, Sondra (eds.), *The Fat Studies Reader*. New York / London, New York University Press, S. XI–XXVI

// About the author

Anja Herrmann is an Assistant Professor at the Institut für Kunst und visuelle Kultur at Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg. Recent publications: Louise Stomps, *Das Paar, 1938*. In: *Ausst.-Kat. Die schwarzen Jahre. Geschichten einer Sammlung 1933–1945*. Hg. v. Dieter Scholz / Maria Obenaus, Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Verbrecher Verlag, 2015, S. 219–221; *Das Fotoatelier als Ort der Moderne. Zur fotografischen Praxis von Marie Bashkirtseff und der Gräfin von Castiglione*, Saarbrücken, Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften, 2016; *Reclaim Defloration. Überlegungen zur visuellen Entjungferung feminisierter Bildräume*. In: Renate Möhrmann (Hg.) unter wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeit von Anja Herrmann, „Da ist denn auch das Blümchen weg“ (Faust). *Die Entjungferung – Fiktionen der Defloration*, Stuttgart, Kröner, 2017, S. 572–598.

// FWK WIRD GEFÖRDERT DURCH DAS MARIANN STEEGMANN INSTITUT UND DAS INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE ARTS DER ZÜRCHER HOCHSCHULE DER KÜNSTE

Sigrid Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Maike Christadler / Hildegard Frübis / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Anja Herrmann / Kristina Pia Hofer / Marietta Kesting / Marianne Koos / Kea Wienand / Anja Zimmermann / www.fkw-journal.de

// License

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

