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The Body in Question: Representing Transgenderism in Contemporary Art

In Summer 2000, two weeks before I was scheduled to have some potentially complicated surgery, I was contacted by MAKE magazine and asked to write a piece about recent representations of the transgender body in art and film. I eagerly agreed thinking that the assignment would take my mind off my impending appointment to go under the knife. But the images that MAKE sent me, by Jenny Saville, Del LaGrace Volcano and Brian Dawn Chalkley, actually immersed me in the elaborate geometries of the relations between the body and the violence it both endures and seeks out at the hands of the medicine and the law. Jenny Saville's work in particular, her epic scale oil paintings of scarred and surgically altered female bodies from her collection *Territories*, took me deep into the nightmare of having one's body opened up. More than that, the enormous and vivid painting of Del LaGrace Volcano's transgender body brought me in line with the surgical gaze, a point of view that is blind to bodily ambiguity and one that sees only male or female, healthy or sick, reproductive or non-reproductive. Del's willingness to pose naked for his portrait struck me as both incredibly courageous and as part of his ongoing aesthetic project to perform within his own body the many bodily mutations that he photographs in the body of others. Brian Dawn Chalkley's intensely disturbing video, *I Probably Want Perfection in Everything And a Little Bit More. Maybe That Will Be My Downfall*, described and depicted the inert transgender body and the ways in which it is literally spoken and narrated with or without its own consent. Each artist represented transgenderism as a space, a territory, a location or matrix and this spatial definition left the body (a body I increasingly identified as *my* body as my surgery date approached) vulnerable to the unsympathetic gaze.

These disturbing but precious depictions of the transgender body when considered in conjunction with the surprisingly successful transgender film *Boys Don't Cry* (2000) imply that the transgender body represents something particular about the historical moment within which it suddenly and spectacularly becomes visible. While the transgender body has been theorized as an in-between body and as the place of the medical and scientific construction of gender, when it comes time to picture the transgender body in the flesh, it nearly always emerges as a transsexual body. In the images I consider here, the transgender body is not reducible to the transsexual body and it retains the marks of its own ambiguity and ambivalence. If the *transsexual* body has been deliberately reorganized in order to invite certain gazes and shut down others, the transgender body performs self as gesture not as will, as possibility not as probability, as a relation – a wink, a hand shake, a determinate misrecognition. Representations of transgenderism in cinema, photography and video offer us a particular narrative about embodiment in the twenty-first century and, studied together, they pose some answers to the riddle of why transgenderism becomes such a potent site within postmodernism for remapping relations between body, identity, labor, desire and capital.

The fact that transgender figures have emerged in a wide variety of sites in recent years prompts the question of what transgenderism captures about this particular transitional moment between centuries, between new technologies, between stages of capital. What has been called late capitalism or postmodernism must surely be somewhat more identifiable to us by now than the terms "late" and "post" imply; but, in fact, there persists, as Frederic Jameson's essay on "the cultural logic" of postmodernism intimates, an uncertainty about where we are in time and space in relation to the emergence of global capitalism, the breakdown of the primacy of the nation state and the development of new forms of digital culture. Some of this uncertainty finds expression and re-circulates through the cultural production of paradigmatic forms of ambiguity and ambivalence. The transgender body is just one such paradigm and it takes its place amongst a wide ranging pantheon of figures representing instability, uncertainty, the indefinite and the undecidable. In the 1980's Donna Haraway pointed to the cyborg as a figure of monstrous conglomeration and in the 90's we could discuss any number of such figures in Euro-American culture including hybrid and diasporic identities, and various other bodies in motion.

In his classic essay on postmodernism, Jameson referred to postmodern architecture as an example of the momentous changes within late capitalism which have unsettled relations between subjects and objects. Postmodern architecture, Jameson claimed, constitutes a "mutation in built space itself" which "stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions."[1] It is tempting to argue that not all subjects find themselves as lost in postmodern space as Jameson does; it is even more tempting to claim that Jameson's evident nostalgia for an earlier moment of cultural production, modernism, makes him particularly ill suited for postmodern cultures of space; and so, while Jameson found himself unable to negotiate, say, the lobby of Portman's Bonaventure hotel or Disneyland, other subjects, subjects already equipped with what he calls "new organs", can navigate that space and other spaces like it (the world wide web for example) with their eyes closed. New generations – generations x and q – have already expanded their sense of space, body, time and identity such that they are able to map their position in the territories that challenged Jameson and left him wandering in circles in the balconies and elevators of a new and bewildering landscape.

I want to claim for the art that I examine here an aesthetic of "turbulance" which inscribes abrupt shifts in time and space directly onto the gender ambiguous body and then offers that body to the gaze as a site of critical re-invention. Within this turbulence we can locate a transgender gaze, a mode of seeing and being seen which is not simply at odds with binary gender but which is part of a wholescale process of reorientation of the body in space and time.

The texts considered here conjure up something like a transgender gaze by rearticulating the classic "shot reverse shot" sequence of Hollywood cinema so as

to force the spectator to acknowledge and confront her role in the process of suturing. In the classic Hollywood film text, the camera looks from one position/character and then returns the gaze from another position/character thereby suturing the viewer to a usually male gaze and simultaneously covering over what the viewer cannot see. By taking the shot/reverse shot sequence apart, the male gaze and the female spectacle are fragmented and the viewer herself becomes the camera.

The dismantling of the shot/reverse shot can be identified as the central cinematic tactic also in Kimberley Peirce's transgender film *Boys Don't Cry*, the tragic story of a young woman who passes for male (Brandon Teena) in rural Nebraska and is murdered because of his trans identity. One remarkable scene, about half way through the film, clearly foregrounds the power of the transgender gaze and makes it most visible precisely where and when it is most threatened. Brandon's persecutors have become suspicious about Brandon's gender and they corner him in order to make him reveal his "true" gender: Brandon is shoved into the bathroom, a hyper real space of sexual difference, and he is violently depantsed, and then restrained by one man while the other roughly examines his crotch. The brutality here is clearly identified as a violent mode of looking and the film identifies the male gaze with that form of knowledge which resides in the literal. The brutality of the male gaze however is more complicated than simply a castrating force; John and Tom not only want to see the site of Brandon's castration, more importantly they need his girlfriend Lana to see it. Lana kneels in front of Brandon, confirming the scene's resemblance to a crucifixion tableau, and refuses to raise her eyes, declining, again, to look at Brandon's unveiling.

At the moment when his attackers assert their heteronormative will most forcefully upon Brandon's resistant body, however, Brandon rescues himself for a moment by finding an alternative space of reality. A slow motion sequence interrupts the fast and furious quasi-medical scrutiny of Brandon's body, and shots from Brandon's point of view reveal him to be in the grips of an "out of body" experience. Light shines on Brandon from above and his anguished face peers out into the crowd of onlookers who have gathered at the bathroom door. The crowd now includes a fully clothed Brandon, a double, who returns the gaze of the tortured Brandon impassively. In this shot/reverse shot sequence between the castrated Brandon and the transgender Brandon, the transgender gaze is constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked. The clothed Brandon is the Brandon who was rescued by Lana's refusal to look; he is the Brandon who survives his own rape and murder; he is the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines momentarily the activity of looking with the passivity of the spectacle. And the naked Brandon is the Brandon who will suffer, endure but finally expire.

Kaja Silverman has called attention to cinematic suture as "the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack."[2]

Here in *Boys Don't Cry*, the inadequacy of the subject's position has been presented as a pre-condition of the narrative and so this scene of the split transgender subject, which would ordinarily expose "the inadequacy of the subject's position", actually works to highlight the *sufficiency* of the transgender subject. So, if usually the shot/reverse shot both secures and destabilizes the spectator's sense of self, now the shot/reverse shot involving the two Brandons serves both to destabilize the spectator's sense of gender stability but it also confirms Brandon's manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed as female/castrated.

For a very different example of manipulations of the shot/reverse shot sequence, we can turn to an experimental video which also constructs and explores the possibilities of the transgender gaze. In his video *I Probably Want Perfection in Everything and a Little More: Maybe That'll be My Downfall*, Brian Dawn Chalkley uses a combination of immobility and voice to reorganize space and subjectivity in relation to bodily ambiguity. Relying not at all on the trickery of visual gender attribution, Chalkley deliberately makes his gender work voice activated. Chalkley effectively splits his selves between Brian and Dawn and allows them to dialogue; and the dialogue becomes an auditory equivalent to the shot/reverse shot sequence in *Boys Don't Cry* which splits Brandon in two and allows one self to remain whole while the other is brutally and violently disassembled. Chalkley supplements the image track of a bulky woman/ transvestite lying lifeless in a floodlit forest while night creatures fly back and forth in front of the camera light with a soundtrack of a conversation between a transvestite and a john in a transvestite pick up bar (fig. 1). The spooky combination of the inert body and the lively insects makes it hard to concentrate on the banter between "Brian" and "Dawn" or the john and the tranny, all of which is rendered in one male voice.

As so many transsexuals will attest, the voice can be a powerful gender marker for the person trying to pass and the "wrong" voice can confuse or even anger an unsuspecting listener who may have already made a confident gender attribution

1 Brian Dawn Chalkley, „I Probably Want Perfection in Everything and a Little More, Maybe That'll be my Downfall", 1998-99 (video still)

which must now be reversed. Chalkley does not attempt to make his voice higher when speaking as Dawn or lower when speaking as Brian, instead he just patters on at an even and banal clip as the transvestite and her john exchange irrelevant information before deciding to leave the bar together. The ominous figure laid out on its bed of leaves in the background of the shot, however, suggests that the subsequent encounter slipped violently from desire to rage. As in *Boys Don't Cry*, violence is almost an inevitable outcome when the gender ambiguous subject inspires not disgust but desire; the desire directed at the transgender body is a turbulent desire, a desire that must be paid for in blood. Because *Boys Don't Cry* is very much a narrative film with only a few experimental moments, it is not, in the end, entirely successful in sustaining a transgender gaze; but Chalkley's piece is more critical in its depiction of the parameters of a transgender gaze. This work violates genres as well as genders by using video to create a *still life* as opposed to a moving picture and by calling attention to the violence which literally stills the shot/reverse shot sequence of transgender reality. Nothing moves in *I probably want perfection*, the camera remains fixed upon the immobile body and the voices that criss cross the surface of the text cannot call the body back to life.

The fluctuation and indeed turbulence of what I am calling the transgender gaze works somewhat differently in relation to painting and photography where the viewer is both more constrained by the field of vision outlined by the artist but also more at liberty to look in different ways. The artists I want to consider next all use the still image of a gender ambiguous figure to alert the viewer to the unreliability of visibility on the one hand and the shock of hybrid bodies on the other.

Like a sly pun on the meaning of "inversion", Jenny Saville's painting of transgender photographer Del LaGrace Volcano turns the body inside out, upside down and forces the viewer to contemplate the image of a man trapped *outside* a woman's body (fig. 2). First you see the genitals, splayed out like a slab of meat on the butcher's block, and then, as your eye travels up the scary and distorted landscape of an ostensibly female body, you come face to face with the ruddy and

2 Jenny Saville, „Matrix", 1999

bearded visage of the model and, inevitably, you must now travel back down the pink slopes of breast and belly to see if this head belongs to this vagina. The body is just barely draped over the platform, half on and half off, the head slumped and lifeless, one breast endlessly falling to earth pulled downward by gravity and the other breast seemingly moving in some other direction. Body parts hang and droop, smudge and blur into an approximation of ambiguous flesh; the model looks uncomfortable, the viewer shares in his discomfort and the artist deliberately frames the whole as a study in body dysphoria calling the picture of the man with a vagina simply *Matrix* meaning, of course, womb.

In his essay *On Being a Jenny Saville Painting*, transgender photographer Del LaGrace Volcano discusses the strange "out of body experience" that he had while posing for another artist as a woman. As Saville took pictures of what LaGrace Volcano calls his "naked and corpulent hybridity", he feared that her photographs and then the final painting might "dislocate and/or diminish my transgendered maleness."[3] Having carefully created and sustained his own "mutant maleness", LaGrace Volcano feels threatened by the sheer excess of the Saville portrait, its curves and crevices, its gynecological, intrusive gaze. And yet, Del's mutant maleness does survive the painting, indeed it becomes the very point of the painting, highlighting the drama of a disidentification which can only ever be imperfectly realized. The imperfection of the body is precisely what Saville is drawn to; and in its flawed balance between maleness and femaleness, LaGrace Volcano's body offers a map of the loss and longing which tinges all transgender attempts to reorient.

Del LaGrace Volcano in his own work makes tends to glorify bodies that might otherwise be read as freakish or ugly. His photographs of drag kings and female-to-male transsexuals as well as his self-portraits over the last fifteen years make use the body as a canvas for spectacular and often highly aestheticized gender transformations. Del literally allows his subjects to return the gaze in a mode which challenges the primacy of the viewer's gaze. In his collections *Transgenital Landscapes*, LaGrace Volcano lovingly fetishizes the testosterone enhanced clits, the "dick-lits," of FTM's daring the viewer to laugh at or reject the hormonally managed genitalia. In the *Mutantselves* series, he makes and remakes his own look through a manipulation of the mug shot; these photographs express minute changes in gender registers through facial expressions and casual gestures and they allow the subject of medical scrutiny and experimentation to return the gaze rather than to remain transfixed like insects on a pin.[4]

While LaGrace Volcano may squirm under the photographic gaze of another artist, he seems perfectly at ease being the auto-biographical, indeed auto-erotic subject of his own camera. In new work in *Sublime Mutations* under the heading of "Gender Optional", LaGrace Volcano performs what Jay Prosser has cleverly called a cross between photography and auto-biography: "ph/autography".[5] In one of these ph/autographs he gives his newly minted female-to-male transgender persona a good tweak and appears now as *Debby Would*, a mutation of his old femme self from way back, Debby Wood (fig. 3). As Debby, a manic, wanna be

3 Del LaGrace Volcano, „Debby Would", *The Mutating Self Portrait*, 2000

4 Del LaGrace Volcano, „Balding Del", *The Mutating Self Portrait*, 2000

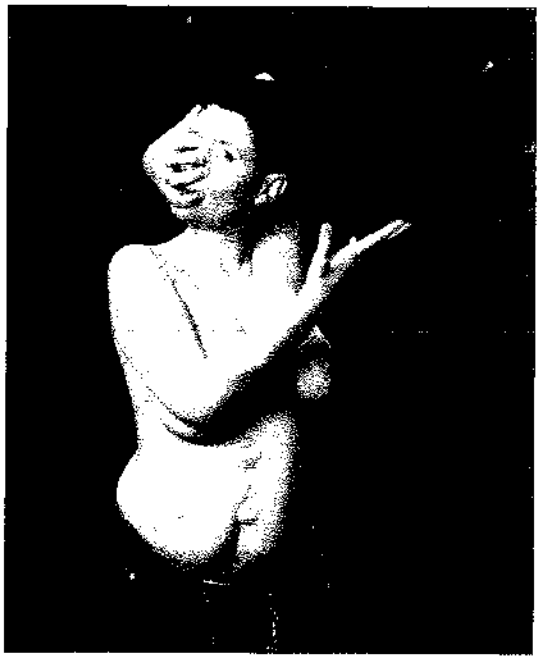
5 Del LaGrace Volcano, „Androskin", *The Mutating Self Portrait*, 2000

glam diva, Del grimaces and glares at the camera, supermodel one minute, super suburban mum the next, super tranny the next. As Prosser comments in the introduction to *Sublime Mutations*, LaGrace Volcano takes on Debbie Wood as a way of both looking back at the camera but also looking back in time and marking the mutability of the body in time, space, personal history.

Del leaps from one creation to another and in the same *Mutantselves* series, Del morphs back into a gay boy, an older balding man and an "androskin" clone. As *Balding Del* (fig. 4), LaGrace Volcano looks sinister, grey and oddly sick. This photograph belies the myth of testosterone as the wonder drug which imparts sexual energy and new life to the FTM. Here the testosterone has worked its magic only into a male balding pattern and the slight sneer on the mutant man's face hints at the "side-effects" of becoming male. In *Androskin*, gender markers are literally removed from the flesh as a platinum head leaps out from a checked background and returns the gaze with a fearful intensity (fig. 5). While *Androskin* refuses to suggest maleness or femaleness in any explicit way, it is not beyond gender or genderless. Indeed, *Androskin* captures the instability, the turbulence of the transgender body as it shuttles back and forth between the wholly inadequate poles of male and female; gender becomes a skin effect and here it is whiteness in particular which marks the spot where distinct gender has been lost in a photographic flash. LaGrace Volcano seems to be quoting Robert Mapplethorpe's similarly featureless, hairless head of *Ken Moody* (1983) in this piece as well as his own earlier marble like photography of the hairless and bald bodies of *The Three Graces*. While LaGrace Volcano's work turns the whiteness of his models into androgynous alabaster body molds, Mapplethorpe never loses sight of the over-determined relations between blackness and masculinity and his photograph shows that even the frozen features of the black male face cannot block out the gender that has been rendered as excessive. And yet, there is something that eludes Mapplethorpe's gaze here. Moody has his eyes conspicuously closed rendering

his bust corpse like and mimicking the action of the camera's shutter over the lens. By refusing to look back, Moody keeps his own secrets, ignores his audience and keeps something back from the camera. To the extent that LaGrace Volcano *is* the camera, is viewer and spectacle, he keeps his eyes wide open, wide to the point of madness, and in the *Mad Debby* shot, he calls for another kind of vision, one not governed by the rational and the scientific but by a daring leap into the sublime.

In the same book, *Sublime Mutations*, that houses his transgender self-portraits, Del explores the multiple mutations of a wide range of trans-subjectivities from what are now being called "transensual femmes" (women who desire trans bodies) to "lesbian boys" and "hermaphrodykes". At the end of the book in a section titled *Simo 2000*, Del photographs a butch who has appeared in other photographs in the same collection with Del as his hermaphrodyke double. Simo, in her solo portraits bares a body twisted by intense scarring, the aftermath of a brutal accident. While the *transgenital landscapes* in this book show bodies which have morphed elegantly, almost seamlessly, from female to male, bodies budding micro-penises, bodies with neat surgically constructed chests, Simo's torso is contorted and twisted, a turbulent field of trauma, and it appears transformed by its new features, at once new and old (*Trauma*, fig. 6). Simo emphasizes her own sense of Baconian grotesqueness in this shot by pulling her face away from the camera with her own hand, marking the ways in which her body has been knocked off its pivot. In another shot, a fetishizing close-up of the scarred belly, a line of sewn flesh



6 Del LaGrace Volcano, „Trauma", *Simo 2000*

proceeds around a distorted navel giving the impression of a rail road curving around a bleak landscape. The navel sits now atop the distended belly like a new genital, far more compelling, in many ways, than the micro-penises, a rude protuberance that in no way mimics the phallus but which marks this body as literally an assemblage, a rough draft or skin and tissue pulled together around a very literally decentered self. It is in these portraits more than any others in *Sublime Mutations* that the transgender body approaches sublimity: "Her scars are my scars" says LaGrace Volcano when asked about these images, noting a kind of turbulent twinning, which links LaGrace Volcano's whole but transgender body to Simo's patchwork flesh. In this act of identification, LaGrace Volcano refuses the traditional divide between artist and object, refuses to take up the position of the look and allies himself firmly with the damage, trauma, scar. As Amelia Jones notes about Hannah Wilkes grueling self-portraits taken when Wilke was undergoing treatment for Lymphoma, these acts of radical narcissism "de-objectify" the body and allow it to express something through pain and sickness.[6] The self that pain expresses is in trauma and in doubt; but it is also in the grips of a visible process of self-negotiation that can then stand for the many ways in which the flesh roughly encounters a technology which extends, supplants and distends it.

Brian Dawn Chalkley's transvestite showed no marks of trauma as she lay quietly in the forest seemingly dead to the world, her back to the camera, her gender in doubt. And in his images of Simo's scarred body, Del LaGrace Volcano brutally marks the transgender female body with the impact of social expectation. Like Brian Dawn Chalkley's mute mound of transvestite, the hilly females in Saville's painting and the zipper flesh in LaGrace Volcano's photographs of Simo all seem to "want perfection in everything" and for all of them, they know that this will be their downfall.

When all was said and done last summer, my time spent communing with Saville's bloated bodies and Del LaGrace Volcano's chameleon photo forms and Brian Dawn Chalkley's still transvestite images, actually provided me with the visualization of transgender embodiment that I needed to go through my surgery. The operation was successful, my tumor was benign, my body was patched back together. My experience under the gaze of medical scrutiny however helped me to understand life on the other side of the camera; how things look from the perspective of the medicalized object and what reversals of vision are made possible by postmodern imaginings of the body otherwise. The work we have looked at here recognizes also the day to day violations that threaten the integrity of the transgender body, the blows of indignity and humiliation that make a carefully constructed self-image look and feel as if it cannot hold together for much longer. But the power of this work, in the end, is that by visualizing the nightmare of the body coming undone, the flesh spilling over its boundaries, the well wrought identity slipping out of place, it allows the body to carry on, flawed, imperfect, tremulous and turbulent.

Der vorliegende Beitrag ist die erweiterte und veränderte Version eines Artikels von Judith Halberstam, der in der Zeitschrift Make – The Magazine of Women's Art, H. 88, Juni-August 2000, S. 37-38 erschienen ist.

1 Frederic Jameson: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. In: F. Jameson, Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham, NC (Duke University Press) 1990, p. 39.
2 Kaja Silverman: Suture. In: K. Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics. New York (Oxford University Press) 1983, p. 236.
3 Del LaGrace Volcano: On Being a Jenny Saville Painting. In: Del LaGrace Volcano, Jenny Saville Territories. New York (Gagosian Gallery) 1999, p. 25.
4 Del LaGrace Volcano: Sublime Mutations. Tübingen 2000.
5 Jay Prosser: The Art of Ph/Autography. Del LaGrace Volcano. In: Sublime Mutations (see note 4), pp. 6-11.
6 Amelia Jones: The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art. In: A. Jones, Body Art. Performing the Subject. Minneapolis, MN (Univ. of Minnesota Press) 1998, p. 192.

Abbildungsnachweis
Fig. 1, 2, 4, 5: Make 88, 2000, S. 37-38; Fig. 3, 6: Del LaGrace Volcano: Sublime Mutations. Tübingen 2000.