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VOLUME 7 ISSUE 2, 2022

SPECIAL ISSUE: GLOBAL QUEER AND FEMINIST VISUAL ACTIVISM

Guest Editors

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Editorial

Global Queer and Feminist Activism: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Queer and feminist visual activism has various origins across the globe and has emerged in a fluid cultural field of visual arts, popular culture, and protest aesthetics. Given the current context of gender backlash, these forms of activism have become urgent, and so too has scholarship that engages with global queer and feminist visual activism. In this special issue, we engage with the richness of activist aesthetics at the intersections of popular culture, subculture, art and activism, and other forms of visual political communication, not by attempting to contain these manifestations, but by offering a set of navigational tools. We conceive of three primary forms of queer and feminist visual practice – protest, process and product – each with its own histories and epistemologies. Each of these forms offers the capacity for resistance and collaboration. By opening up cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives, and conversations across diverse global contexts, struggles and possibilities, we aim to expand on existing scholarship both geographically and conceptually. A central motivation for this work has been to think beyond the image; to be able to capture and engage with the activist communities (and the activism) behind and alongside the image and produced through the image. Taking the notion of social practice as an integral part of the ‘process’ of visual activism, we identify three emerging themes across the articles in this special issue: refusal, care, and thriving.

Keywords: visual activism, feminist and queer activism, aesthetics of protest, social movements, global south

INTRODUCTION

Feminist and queer visual activism ranges from individual everyday expressions of visual disruption and dissent to collective, organised events such as direct action and protest. In using visual language and strategically employing aesthetics to gain attention, to contest, to amplify, to cross linguistic barriers, to mobilise, to unite, to affect emotions, to document gendered social injustices, to produce counter-narratives or to simply document one’s existence, a radical act in a climate where you are deemed dispensable – queer/feminist visual activism both expands beyond, and transgresses, the neat categorisations of visual political communication and activist art.

Renowned art critic Lucy Lippard joked about the Trojan Horse as the first activist artwork; ‘based in subversion on the one hand, and empowerment on the other’ (1984: 341). Certainly, both registers – a challenge to existing social structuring and a strengthening of individuals that facilitates political claims – are present in many visual acts.

Rancière's (2006) 'distribution of the sensible' ('partage du sensible'), is useful to think through the ways in which the visual might intervene in the political. 'Partage' is both what is shared, and how it is divided; what is 'sensible', that which is available to our senses, the way in which we access the political. Artistic practices have the capacity to visibilise power structures and expose existing hierarchies, and in so doing the potential to disturb or overturn them (the 'distribution of the sensible'). Rancière views artistic practices as inherently democratic modes of being, with the capacity to institute practices of equality, to 'inscribe a sense of community' (2006: 14). Within the current global context of populist backlash against the post-WWII rights consensus, in which gender and sexuality are positioned as a central political fault line (Goetz, 2020: 12), practices that both build queer/feminist communities and disrupt (unjust) norms are vitally important. So too, in this context, is scholarship that documents these practices (Lewin, 2021; Nazneen and Okech, 2021).

In this special issue, we seek to critically engage with the richness of activist aesthetics at the intersection of art and activism, and other forms of visual political communication, not by attempting to contain these manifestations, but by offering a set of navigational tools. By opening up cross- and inter-disciplinary perspectives, and conversations across diverse global contexts, struggles and possibilities, we aim to expand on existing scholarship both geographically and conceptually. While most elements of visual activism are clearly visible, others (such as the relationships built and sustained through this work) tend to remain unseen. A central motivation for this work has been to think beyond the image; to be able to capture and engage with the activist communities (and the activism) behind and alongside the image, and produced through the image. For example, in this issue, authors address how activism extends to community-building and worldmaking energised by art spaces. This includes an elucidation of how, in the aftermath of the devastating 2020 explosion in Beirut, visual practitioners reorientate in the 'terrains of material loss, traumatic grief, reclamation, and resistance through their art and activism' (Skinner, this issue).

Another ambition of the present special issue is to foreground scholarly work beyond Anglo-American perspectives. However, as middle-class, white cis queers, working in Western academia, our positionality produces particular limitations. We have tried, where possible, to mitigate against this, by engaging scholars from diverse contexts as contributors to this special issue and implicit in this collection, is a politics that advocates for a trans- and intersectional feminist approach, against a gender-restrictive world view, and in strong support of cross-movement coalition building.

ACTIVISM ACROSS CULTURAL SPHERES

Queer and feminist visual activism has emerged in a fluid cultural field of visual arts, popular culture, and protest aesthetics. It deliberately transgresses established demarcations of the political sphere. We see this reflected, for example, in the feminist insistence that the 'personal is political'; a framing which links individual experiences of oppression, abuse and discrimination, to systemic structures of patriarchal norms, inequalities and violence. This claim has been key to breaking oppressive silencing. It features across numerous feminist uprisings, not least the #NiUnaMenos ('No One Less') movement in Latin America (López, 2020) and the #MeToo movements (Mendes et al., 2018; Huang and Sun, 2021). These movements encourage participation through the public sharing of (often kept private) experiences of gendered abuse and sexual violence.

A fluidity across cultural spheres is also strikingly present in queer activism. Queer visual protest evokes and expands across popular culture, art and activism, often blurring the boundaries of each. In his book *Queer China*, Hongwei Bao (2020a) picks up on this and points to the entwinement of community-based cultural and artistic production with queer political activism. He demonstrates the centrality of artistic culture to social, political and legal change. This understanding points to the 'soft power' potential of cultural and artistic production not only to transform social attitudes but also to impact on social, political and legal change.

Popular culture aesthetics are frequently integrated into queer and feminist protest repertoires (see [Figure 1](#)) (Lewin and Jenzen, 2023), and the visual iconography of queer and feminist activism is sometimes integrated into popular culture¹. Traversing these realms completely is the visual activism of internet memes. As a form of bricolage and citizen creativity, memes often incorporate popular culture visuals (from film, tv, cartoons, ads etc), and offer us a good illustration of how popular culture references and visual language are recontextualised in digital visual activism, a practice that facilitates access to political discourse. Although existing literature predominantly associates memes with online misogyny and alt-right politics (Drakett et al. 2018), memes are also extensively used

¹ See for example drag performance contestant Cheddar Gorgeous on the mainstream tv show *Drag Race UK* (2022) wearing a pink triangle outfit featuring the ACT UP slogan SILENCE=DEATH wrapped around it, which sparked a conversation about HIV/AIDS stigma on the show. See: <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/life/cheddar-gorgeous-praised-for-vital-hiv-discussion-on-drag-race-uk/>



Figure 1. A Lesbian Avengers poster featuring blaxploitation star Pam Grier. Courtesy of Carrie Moyer and DC Moore Gallery, New York.

to speak back to sexism and conservatism (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015; Brantner et al., 2020) and feminist memes are produced and shared in many places across the globe (Horvath, 2021; Parahita, 2019).

Feminist memes, Rentschler and Thrift (2015: 329) argue, ‘create online spaces of consciousness raising and community building’ where laughter is mobilised as a critical tool, often evoked by visual absurdism’ (342). Such use of humour is also effectively used in many other forms of feminist and queer visual activism. For example, humour, Leng (2020: 109) writes, ‘was central to the “imagination and vision”’ of the 1990s lesbian direct action group The Lesbian Avengers, formed in New York and later spreading across the US and Europe. Similarly, Melissa Wilcox (2018) in their book about the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an activist group of queer drag queen nuns, proposes ‘serious parody’ as an activist strategy, which ‘simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalised groups’. But of course, humour is not exclusive to progressive critiques, and can equally be utilised in backlash responses to feminist or queer campaigns, as demonstrated in Maja Brandt Andreassen’s (2021) study of memes that seek to ridicule the #MeToo campaign.

The polysemic and semiotically unstable nature of image-based activism, including memes, is illustrated in the much-debated example of the ‘Gay Clown Putin’ meme². Originally the photo montage artwork depicting Putin in pop-art style make up was used on a protest sign to draw attention to a new law in Russia, banning so called ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’. However, since the image became an internet meme it has been recontextualised to carry variously homonationalist, anti-Russian, pro-LGBTQ+ as well as homophobic messaging in contradictory ways (Baker et al., 2019; Cooper-Cunningham, 2022; Wiedlack, 2020). Other visual artefacts have played similarly ambivalent roles in terms of international politics and gender and sexuality rights (e.g., the ‘OneLove’ armband during the 2022 men’s FIFA World Cup in Qatar; the 2021 PR campaign by the Swedish Armed Forces featuring a squad of combat clad armed soldiers carrying a rainbow flag³).

Similarly, the visual repertoire of LGBTQ+ ephemera and iconography, such as the rainbow flag, has been widely integrated – captured you could argue – into the visual language of corporate marketing. This is generally speaking a less contested form of appropriation as it is widely regarded as a positive embrace of the LGBTQ+ community and a visual shorthand to signal associated values such as inclusion and diversity. However, increasingly, critical voices are raised about ‘pinkwashing’ (Puar, 2007) and corporations’ surface engagement with social values. We argue there are numerous problems with the marketisation of the visual language of queer

² See for example <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gay-clown-putin> or do a search engine image search.

³ See <https://www.qx.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/svd.jpeg>

activism. First, in corporate activism, we are, fundamentally, interpellated as consumers, not citizens, to pursue LGBTQ+ rights. This, we think, changes not just the tenor of activism, but significantly curtails the conditions on which we act. Second, imbued in the many adverts incorporating rainbow visuals is the fundamental neoliberal and capitalist message that the free market will bring about social good, and that acts of consuming goods will bring gender and sexual liberation. When corporations position themselves as the drivers of gender and sexuality social change this works to limit the space for queer activist expressions and excludes messages that don't align with the corporate agenda. A further obvious issue arising here is that only a very narrow and normative version of queer life can be evoked in the incorporation of gender and sexual diversity in the marketing of consumer goods and services: it has to be palatable, relatable and interesting to mainstream audiences.

Another form of digital visual activism distinctly framed by neoliberal ideologies and particular technological and affective visual economies is selfie activism. As Jenzen (2022: 2) points out 'for LGBTQ+ youth, self-expression, identity formation, and social interaction often mesh with activism and other forms of political discourse', and selfies, TikToks and YouTube vlogging are part of these practices (Raun, 2016; Tortajada et al., 2021). Social media visual and audio-visual testimonials are embodied forms of activism, often originating in the individual, personal experience or expression, but with the potential to create online counter publics (Jenzen, 2017), or 'affinity spaces' (Wargo, 2017) supporting community formation and social media activism around global LGBTQ+ rights.

Vivienne (2017) highlights the ways in which feminist and queer selfie cultures demonstrate a particular investment in the notion of 'empowerment' as linked to both the act of producing and sharing images that challenge normative (e.g., hetero and homo normative, cis and trans normative, racially and ableist normative) beauty and body ideals and producing affective affirmations by celebrating authenticity (in self-expression), difference and individuality. Simplistic notions of 'empowerment' via self-expression feature centrally in depoliticised forms of (post)feminism (see Thomas, this issue). Yet, producing alternative visual representations for marginalised communities who have historically been subjected to disciplinary visual regimes and damaging stereotypes, is a form of visual activism that ultimately aims for social change. This is clearly illustrated by articles in this special issue, such as Lucie Fremlova's writing on the queer Roma activist intervention of producing new visual representations of queer Roma people, and by Ace Lehner, offering insights into how selfies by trans people can become a powerful way of challenging the very narrow and deeply normative mainstream visual field of trans corporeality. Vivienne's critique (2017: 130) notes how cultural practice relating to selfies is both generated in and generative of tensions between 'compliance with mainstream norms and claiming difference by defining new categories'. For some groups, who are extensively denied self-representation, and political voice, and who are routinely challenged at an ontological level, or subjected to necropolitical targeting (Butler, 2020), producing selfies becomes a practice of evidencing one's day to day existence, which, we argue, takes on a particular political meaning, for example in the case of trans youth. Mirzoeff (2020: 12) suggests contemporary prolific digital visual culture of self-expression 'is not global narcissism but a symptomatic response to the experience of rupture and the crisis of the representation principle, from politics, to mental health and the possibilities of appearance. What people are trying to create are not just images but a just image of their own situation'. Selfie activism thus offers a corrective, but considered collectively also speaks loudly of new social possibilities; the possibility of living differently, seeing differently and loving differently.

Visual communication has been central to Western feminist activism from suffragette poster art and fashion, to the mid-20th century new social movements' (Habermas, 1981) protest repertoires. These have incorporated tactics such as performance, cultural jamming, craftism (Fountain, 2021) and other forms of cultural creativity. Visual communication remains central, across the many diversifications of feminisms, with visuals centring women's (dissident) bodies and intersectional oppression. The history of global feminist and queer activism has often been dominated by Western perspectives. However, feminist direct action has a long history in the Global South, often incorporating performance, visuals and embodied protest. Writing about reproductive rights activism in Argentina, Sutton and Vacarezza (2020: 731) comment that 'political disputes around abortion are paradigmatic of the crucial role that images can play'. Very recently in the *Zan, Zendeji, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom) uprising in Iran, we have seen striking documentary images of state violence, and poignant images of defiance and solidarity. These speak both to the state control over women's bodies, and its inability to repress the significant resistance to this control. The Shaheen Bagh protests in Dehli, in 2020, saw thousands of women protesting the discriminatory Citizen laws imposed by the Indian government (Chopra, 2021). In both instances, the visual power of bodies appearing in alliance, creating 'movement, congregation, persistence' (Butler, 2015: 75) was mobilised. As Çağatay et al. (2021: 230) discuss, in feminist and queer 'bodily practice[s] of collective assemblage' and 'corporeal and affective solidarities', the 'body is not only an object of oppressive powers but also a site of resistance' with implications that involve complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and hyper-visibility, and vulnerabilities (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Shaheen Bagh – soft power: The library at Shaheen Bagh protests brought protestors together in a unique setting of discussion and deliberation © Deepta Chopra.

Queer activism and community building have pronounced visual and performative styles and modes of expression, from the movement’s appropriation of the pink triangle to the many variations of the colourful Pride flag, originally designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978, and later the Progress Pride flag developed in 2018 by non-binary artist and designer Daniel Quasar⁴, and to the glittery and fierce unicorn gifs of the internet. Pride parades, one of the best recognised collective expressions of LGBTQ+ activism, simultaneously enact visual spectacle, protest and prefigurative enactment, also exemplifying how global and local visual expressions enmesh. The rich repertoire of visual outputs by queer AIDS activist organisations in the 1980s and 90s, such as ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation⁵, features many examples of striking visual art and graphic arts, including some by well-known artists such as Keith Haring or the artist collective Gran Fury. Their very prolific output of artwork comprised billboards, stickers, fliers, adverts, and posters to go in public spaces including a large banner in the style of fashion advertising to be placed on the side of buses, featuring same and different gendered ‘couples’ of different ethnicities kissing, accompanied with the slogan: “KISSING DOESN’T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO”⁶. This artwork exemplifies a multi-purpose strategy that visually references promotional culture yet contains a public health message and reverberates the anger felt in the community toward the health authorities and drugs industry. The example also illustrates a wider interest and expertise in early queer AIDS activism to adopt a considered media strategy using video and other techniques, thus shaping the aesthetics of queer activism to follow. There is a further body of writing on LGBTQ+ visual responses to the everyday trauma of HIV/AIDS (Burk, 2013; Cvetkovich, 2001; Gott, 1994), including the AIDS memorial quilt project (Capozzola, 2002; Fountain, 2021) that we suggest also should be included in the remit of feminist/queer visual activism.

Another key characteristic of much queer activism is the aesthetic sensibilities of LGBTQ+ subcultures, incorporating not just the semiotics of shared subcultural references, but the energies of the club scenes, the ball rooms, the streets, and erotic spaces, mixed with subcultural rebellious visual language of dissident desires⁷. Often

⁴ See <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-progress-pride-flag>

⁵ Some of these have been archived and featured for example in the 2009 exhibition *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993*. See: <https://carpenter.center/program/act-up-new-york-activism-art-and-the-aids-crisis-1987-1993>; See also The ACT UP online archive: <https://actupny.org/index.html> and The POC voice in ACT UP and Gran Fury (2015): <https://documentsofresistance.com/2015/07/18/the-poc-voice-in-act-up-gran-fury/>

⁶ The poster is from 1989. See <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76239/kissing-doesnt-kill-greed-and-poster-gran-fury/>

⁷ See for example the recent Rebel Dykes exhibition: <https://www.rebeldykeshistoryproject.com/rebel-dykes-art-and-archive-show>

marked out as ‘trespassers’ (Puwar, 2004) in dominant culture and cultural institutions, queers invent their activist strategies in response. This may involve ‘invading’ (ibid) spaces that are not meant for you, or sabotaging a particular aesthetic order by introducing excess, or eruptive humour where there should be seriousness, or by insisting on communication where there should be a blank space. Queer street art and graffiti, exemplifying such interventions, have recently drawn more scholarly attention (Tsilimpounidi et al., 2022; Smalls, 2022) as well as community led initiatives to document these ephemeral forms of activism⁸. In this special issue, Flavia Meireles’s piece on activists hacking Rio de Janeiro street signs relates to this theme⁹. We think here also of madison moore’s (2018) book *Fabulousness* which speaks to an intimate relationship between fashion and queerness and foregrounds dramatic forms of self-styling as part of activist aesthetics. moore defines fabulousness as ‘an embodied queer aesthetic practice’ that employs creativity and spectacle to work against social exclusion (moore, 2018: 22). Echoing moore’s work, we suggest that fabulousness, understood as an expression of the will to radiate joy, flourish, and thrive in the face of homophobia, transphobia, racism and misogyny can be understood as a form of cultural and visual activism from below.

It is important to note that feminist/queer activism is not limited to identity politics and gender and sexual identity based civic rights issues. In today’s global struggles it is important to recognise that inequality rooted in colonial structures cannot be separated from inequality based on gender, sexuality and class. Relatedly we see feminist and queer involvement in a range of different social movements and protests, including the peace movement (Kokoli, 2022), anti-austerity movements such as Occupy and the Indignadxs (Trujillo, 2018), environmental movements, anti-authoritarianism movements such as the 2013 Gezi Park protest in Turkey (Unan, 2015), and solidarity coalitions such as the UK based Lesbian and Gays Support the Migrants, and before that, during the British miners’ strike in 1984-5, the formation of the London Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (Kelliher, 2014). A key area for feminist/queer activism beyond identity-based mobilisation remains sex workers’ rights. The visibilising of stigmatisation and discrimination affecting sex workers’ lives and safety (Waring, 2020), through visual activism across the globe, provides very urgent counter narratives rooted in queer and feminist sex-positive ethos. Examples include Kat Mansoor’s documentary short *A Vida Política*, which documents the fashion label ‘Daspu’ (das=‘of’, pu-from puta=‘whores’), created by the NGO Davida, in Brazil; a visual intervention that works to end discrimination against sex workers, and Robert Hamblin’s work with the black trans women sex worker support group Sistaaz Hood (Lewin, 2020a).

Queer and feminist visual activism has various origins across the globe. Closely linked to individual and collective self-representation, visual communication is central to feminist and queer activists’ claiming of political voice. Bao (2020b: 299) points to how, ‘for sexual minorities in the Global South, instead of waiting passively to be represented—or misrepresented—by mainstream media and heteronormative societies, or by their counterparts in the West and the Global North, they have learned to use digital video cameras to represent themselves’. In a forthcoming book, Juana María Rodríguez, foregrounds Latina sex workers’ self-representations and problematises how images shape perceptions of sexual labour. Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s (2015) point that the undervaluing and obscuring of ‘epistemologies of the South’ leading to an implicit predisposition of prioritising knowledge emanating from Western perspectives is true also in gender and sexuality activism and related scholarship. Such epistemologies, as highlighted by Munro and Pérez-Sánchez (2017) tend to position Western feminist and LGBTQ+ activism as ‘liberating’ women and sexual minorities in the Global South, without acknowledging the ‘deep, ongoing entanglement of the Global North in the creation of homophobia and gender policing around the world’ (ibid). In this special issue, we seek to explore feminist and queer activism from across the globe, foregrounding gender and sexuality activism in the Global South.

The South African activist and photographer Zanele Muholi deliberately articulates their practice as visual activism. In so doing, they foreground the political nature of their work, in which their activist intent is not located exclusively in the subject matter, representation or content but in the multiple activities created around it (Thomas, 2017: 270; Lewin, 2020b). The wide-ranging and comprehensive nature of Muholi’s activism, as someone who has built and sustained queer communities, serves as a powerful demonstration of how much can be missed by an epistemology that limits itself to a focus on image or artefact. Their work opens up dimensions of the politics of form as well as the aesthetics of politics and, as such, offers an ideal place to begin exploring feminist and queer visual activism.

⁸ See for example The History of Queer Street Art exhibition <https://thei-i.com/projects/a-history-of-queer-street-art-group-exhibition/> and Daniel Albanese’s Twitter & Instagram @queerstreetart; and the Pansy project by artist Paul Harfleet <https://thepansyproject.com/>

⁹ NB: This article has been withdrawn at the author’s request.

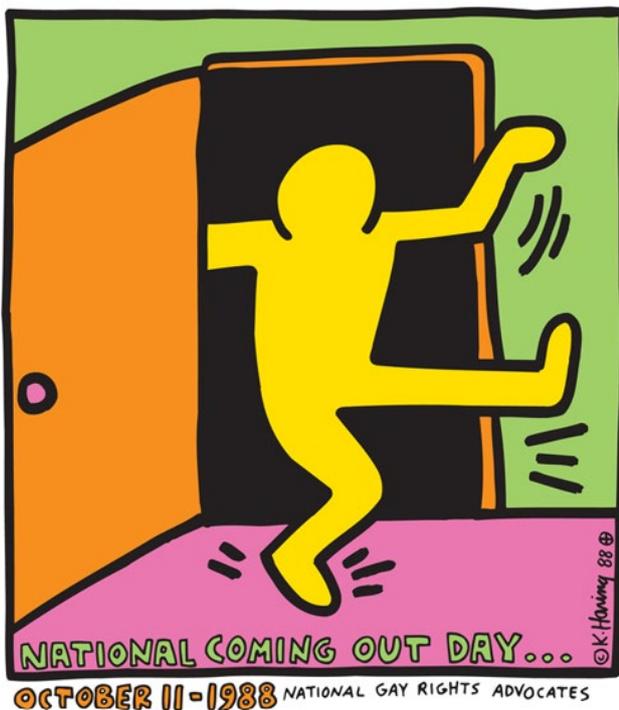


Figure 3. National Coming Out Day 1988 artwork by Keith Haring © Keith Haring Foundation.

THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

In this special issue, we are interested in expanding the notion of visual activism beyond the image. We will go on to offer some frames for conceptualising feminist and queer visual activism located outside the image later in this introduction, but here we will start by thinking epistemologically, beyond the image, by considering the politics of visibility, as central to these liberation movements.

The symbolic act of ‘coming out’, making oneself visible, constitutes one of the master frames of LGBTQ+ activism (Saguy, 2020) and draws our attention to the centrality of both individual and group visibility to the movement (see [Figure 3](#)). Visual activism is a political struggle over presence and over visibility, through which gender and sexual identities are discursively constructed and maintained. The ‘explicit assertion of presence’ (Berlant and Freeman, 1993: 199) that characterises Pride events, a mix of street protest, spectacle and party, can be traced through LGBTQ+ activism more broadly as it has developed since the 1960s and is epistemologically linked to the notion of visibility and the visual (see [Figure 4](#))¹⁰.

Visibility is also linked to the creation of community, by creating a sense of belonging and collectivity; recall Rancière’s articulation of art as ‘inscrib(ing) a sense of community’ (2006: 14). Increased visibility of a marginalised group is not, of course, the same as increased rights or the end of discrimination. Rather, visibility is often compromised, and can even bring increased victimisation. Currier (2012) and Tucker (2009) have both shown how queer Namibians and South Africans strategically shift between visibility and invisibility to protect themselves. Jones (2020) notes that lesbian communities in South Korea prioritise safety over visibility, due to an ever-present threat of homophobic and misogynist violence. Metzger and Ringelberg (2020: 162) highlight, that an increased ‘visible materiality – especially of Black transgender bodies – also gets many among us killed’. So, it is important not to naively link ‘visibility’ to ‘acceptance’ (Jackson et al., 2018). As Jones (2020: 273) points out, there is a power dimension to the Western LGBTQ+ movement’s visibility politics, that has ‘shape[d] global LGBTQ politics by normalizing high visibility strategies’ often casting community formations that don’t pivot around visibility and outness as priorities as ‘backwards’. Also questioning the taken for granted benefits of increased visibility, Nelanthi Hewa (2021) highlights how ‘stories of sexual violence in the media operate within a capitalist system of visibility’, with a detrimental impact on how survivors are perceived with disbelief and hesitation. Visibility has, despite these tensions, evolved as a central trope around which much feminist and queer activism has been conceptualised.

¹⁰ For critiques of the de-politicization and lifestylisation of Pride events, see for example Conway, 2022.



Figure 4. Istanbul Pride 2008. An enormous Pride flag covers the entire street in an ‘explicit assertion of presence’. Image by Turkish Flame via Wikimedia Commons.

The political importance of visibility and the ‘freedom to be public’ (Queers Read This manifesto, 1990 cited in Brown, 2015: 76) were central to action groups formed in response to the AIDS crisis, like ACT UP and later to queer and trans activist groups such as Queer Nation, Transgender Nation, Lesbian Avengers and OutRage!, not least because of mainstream society’s purposeful invisibilising of people living with HIV and AIDS. Their strategies included visually impactful direct action to claim public space, sometimes in the form of angry confrontation and sometimes in the form of more quiet intimate acts such as public kiss-ins (see Brown, 2015). Similar inventive direct actions have been staged by feminist activists, for example, the Guerrilla Girls’ interventions in art spaces (see Perry and Krasny in this issue), FEMEN, Sisters Uncut, #LasTesis flash mobs and various reproductive health rights demonstrations. Dress has been a key semiotic resource for some of these performance protests, for example, the many assemblies featuring protestors dressed in the characteristic red robes and white bonnets worn by the women in the tv drama *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a visual reference to the dystopian drama’s patriarchal rule over women and their reproductive rights. The visual impact of these red robes and white bonnets is powerful beyond the popular culture intertextuality: the anachronistic dress is stark and simple, cloaking protestors, who form a united mass, in blood-red anonymity (Jenzen, 2018).

STUDYING VISUAL ACTIVISM

Approaches to studying visual activism, broadly speaking, fall into three main categories: the study of visual culture from within the discipline of art (history and theory); the study of visual political communication from within the fields of political science and social movements studies; and the study of visual communication from within media studies. We find strengths and weaknesses within all of these approaches, and argue that researching queer and feminist visual activism, not least because of its many different contexts and modalities, requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws on both arts, cultural studies and social sciences methodologies and epistemologies, and that incorporates a decolonial lens and decolonial research methods (Davis, 2023; Karam and Mutsvauro, 2021).

We find there is good reason to challenge dismissals of activist artistic work as inherently inferior due to its overt political motivations and priorities and would question the contrasting yet equally reductive position that regards “‘protest art’ as authentic, and art based in galleries or museums as inauthentic – because of their complicity with global capital (Demos 2016)’ (Lewin, 2020a: 16). Within the field of political communication research, we see

the need to challenge the longstanding suspicion of ‘affective, cultural and aesthetic forms of communication’ (Aiello and Parry, 2020: 111) to better engage with a diversifying repertoire of visual political communication employed by actors across different social movements. Venti et al.’s (2019) and Lilleker and Veneti’s (2023) work does so, by attending to both theoretical and empirical concerns in visual political communication. It situates visual images in relation to communication technologies, political practices, and civic engagement, but conceptualises visuals primarily as *tools* for political communication. We would argue for a more holistic understanding of protest culture as visual culture. Nevertheless, their work, alongside collections such as *The Aesthetics of Global Protest* (McGarry et al., 2020) demonstrate not just a visual turn in political communication studies, but a growing interest in the visual communication strategies and styles of social movements and ‘citizen-led forms of political communication that represent instantiations of collective action and protest’ (Venti et al., 2019: 10) to which we seek to contribute.

Developing interdisciplinary approaches that expand on both the notion of aesthetics and ideas about where activism or political action are ‘located’ in processes of resistance, dissent, projection or mobilisation, including creative expressions, we suggest, is needed to critically explore contemporary feminist and queer movements. This begins perhaps with a rejection of the limiting notion of aesthetics as exclusively linked to art-forms or visual culture. Nato Thompson’s (2015) perspective on living and social practice as *form*, alongside Olcese and Savage’s (2015) theorisation of ‘social aesthetics’ is a good starting point for this. Social aesthetics, they propose, is ‘the embedded and embodied process of meaning making which, by acknowledging the physical/corporeal boundaries and qualities of the inhabited world, also allows imagination to travel across other spaces and times’ (2015: 720). In our thinking on different protest practices below, we seek to foreground the social, and argue that, in feminist and queer settings, the social is also the political. What this points toward is a conceiving of aesthetics ‘as a practice, a resource, a choice with instrumental and expressive components’ (McGarry et al. 2020: 17).

Extrapolating the notion of social practice as an integrated part of visual activism, we engage below with process as a specific dimension that offers fresh perspectives on feminist and queer activism. This has an affinity with sociological work that mobilises visuals in participatory action research or work aimed at voicing marginalised groups’ social and political visions and demands for change, exemplified by participatory visual methodologies in research (e.g., Pink, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2018; Burkholder, 2020) where the co-production process with participants as much as the creative output constitutes the enabling frame for collective action.

As is clear from the previous sections in this introduction, our engagement with feminist and queer activism is not limited to socially engaged art. But that is not to say that art institutions are not part of the field of visual activism research. To the contrary, we suggest it is important to consider how cultural institutions both create opportunities for and limit activist opportunities. In the vein of institutional critique, in this issue, Perry and Krasny tackle the question of how art museums respond to interventions – both activist and scholarly – that expose their patriarchal structures. Challenging institutional practices and power dynamics remain important for queer and feminist critiques (Sullivan and Middleton, 2019; Smith, 2015) as is the building of alternative collections and archives preserving subcultural cultural memory (Cvetkovich, 2003). From an adjacent perspective, the symbolic cultural power of the category ‘museum’ itself has been mobilised by activist projects such as The Museum of Transology¹¹, displaying objects and artefacts collected from trans people to offer a reorientation away from the sensationalising, pathologizing and stigmatising frames dominating mainstream media and cultural representation.

There is a rich body of scholarship focusing on activism and art specifically (e.g., Felshin, 1995; Thompson, 2015; Sholette, 2022; Shipley and Moriuchi, 2023), some with a specific focus on feminist visual activism and embodiment (Sliwinska, 2021) or feminist art in relation to the concept of political imagination (Mullin, 2003) or queerness in relation to artistic production and reception (Horne and Lewis, 1996). Enhancing this vein of research is the growing body of work on transgender art and visual culture. A special issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* (Metzger and Ringelberg, 2020) offers a useful introduction to this field and Gossett et al.’s (2017) edited collection *Trap door: Trans cultural production and the politics of visibility*, dealing with the complexities of trans visibility in a climate of increasing discrimination and violence has been a key inspiration for the present special issue.

The broader field of visual culture studies incorporates some further valuable frames for thinking about visual activism and the aesthetics of protest. This includes critical work on ways of seeing (hooks, 1992; Mirzoeff, 2015) and queer/feminist considerations of the politics of the gaze beyond cis and heterosexual visual regimes, which Jenna Allsopp in this special issue expands on, by theorising the ableist gaze. Visual culture studies also expands research beyond fine art to incorporate spheres such as design. A key contribution to thinking about queer visual activism from a design point of view is Andrew Campbell’s (2019) *Queer X Design: 50 Years of Signs, Symbols, Banners, Logos, and Graphic Art of LGBTQ*. Often downplayed or overlooked in social science approaches, these methodological frames help elucidate important aspects such as how formal components, including composition, perspective, shapes, colour and texture are used as semiotic resources (Aiello and Parry, 2020) and how meaning

¹¹ Curated by E-J Scott, UK 2017. See <https://www.museumoftransology.com/about>

is constructed in the encounter with visual images, in the looking. It is through these types of studies we gain insights into what activist artefacts and queer and feminist visual production can tell us about the culture and society they are produced and consumed in.

We also find that it is necessary to expand the study of visual activism beyond the image. It is important to consider the work that images do, across the phases of production, mediation and circulation, and reception. In the digital context (but not exclusively) the social practice of sharing images, and the co-creative processes of mixing and manipulating images carry activist meaning in themselves and are functional in the formation of both connective and collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Wargo, 2017). Furthermore, the visual practices of protest, process and product, that we outline below, centrally involve images and visual communication, but also, significantly, expand on the situating of the activist impulse, intention, affect and effect beyond visual artefacts or performances themselves. In short, we make a case for an interdisciplinary queer feminist approach that mobilises the historicising, aesthetic and post-structuralist methods of visual analysis but also situates visual activism in relation to media practices, social movement theories and the broader visual dimensions of social life. Following this ethos, in this special issue, we have invited researchers to consider both the aesthetics of visual activism; the work the visual does in communities, movements and public discourse; and political (visual) acts such as purposeful reimagining (of pasts, presents and futures), or wilful claiming of spaces and places and the visual field.

STRUCTURING LOGIC

Drawing on Lewin's (2019) work on Queer visual activism in South Africa, we conceive of three primary forms of queer and feminist visual practice – protest, process and product – each with its own histories and epistemologies. Each of these forms offers the capacity for resistance and collaboration. A central element of feminist and queer activism's aesthetic and imaginative powers is their potential for queer/feminist worldmaking, which involves community-making outside the logic of heteronormativity or emerges through what Buckland (2002: 86) calls 'pre-political configurations of community'.

Visual activism is perhaps most obviously political when linked to *protest*, and certainly most of the scholarship on visual activism in the United States and Western Europe emerged in the wake of the occupy movement (Doerr et al., 2013), and the movements of the squares, and is linked to protest. In this form protestors mobilise the visual image to provoke, support and sustain their struggles for political change; what Matynia (2009) describes as enacting 'performative democracy'. The first scholarship that explicitly articulates this form as *visual activism* is Cvetkovich's (2003) writing on the queer HIV/AIDS protest movements of 1990s New York. More recently, protest-based visual activism has also involved taking down the visual symbols of institutionalised racism – statues of imperialists and slave traders – by Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) and Black Lives Matter (#BLM) protests in Cape Town, Antwerp, Tennessee, and Bristol. Nazneen and Okech (2021: 231) note that 'protests have become the leading route through which feminist movements have organised against austerity, corruption and authoritarian regimes across Europe, the United States of America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia'.

Visual Activism as *product* in which artefacts make discursive interventions as 'visual acts', as opposed to 'speech acts' (Austin, 1962) is a form strongly associated with Zanele Muholi's photographic work, which is closely tied to the fine art market (Lewin, 2020b). Products are crafted for display, primarily in galleries, museums and cinemas; these products carry political content, as they interrupt and contribute to the canon. These products *do* things, 'the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – [have] a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life' (Hall, 1996: 443).

Queer and feminist crafting might be seen to fit predominantly into this category of product. Matt Smith's ceramic and textile work, and his curating, explore the representation of queer and marginalised histories with/in the museum space (Smith, 2015). Smith's work, which involves intervening in the museum space by placing new works alongside the existing collections and rearranging objects from the permanent collection to recontextualise them, is influenced by the American curator Fred Wilson (Smith, 2015: 12). Portia Malatjie and Nontobeko Ntombela's 2022 exhibition, *When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940-2000*, makes an important contribution in bringing together work, much of which has not been publicly exhibited or acknowledged before. The exhibition makes visible the aesthetic and intellectual contributions of Black women to South Africa's art history. Relatedly, Lara Perry and Elke Krasny (this issue) urge museums to take responsibility for their role in normalising sexual violence and challenge them to adopt curatorial policies that work against it.

Visual Activism as *process*, our final category, has a long history in a variety of contexts, but is perhaps most closely documented in participatory research and education contexts (Clover and Stalker, 2007; Lewin and Shaw, 2021), particularly when these are linked to social movements (Watkins and Shulman, 2008). The focus of much of this work is on facilitating participatory creative and visual processes, designed to engage with participants on a particular issue, to facilitate critical reflection, and to build cohesion and catalyse political conscientisation (Freire, 1968; Boal, 1979). This includes the participatory visual methods used in social and action research, such as

photovoice, digital storytelling, and participatory video (Mannay, 2016), This category also includes community-based art (Naidus, 2009). Often, there are rich processes associated with what appears to be ‘protest’ or ‘product’ oriented work, and a focus on these categories can, for example, miss the social interactions formed through the processes of image production or circulation (Lewin, 2019).

SITUATING GLOBAL QUEER AND FEMINIST VISUAL ACTIVISM

The contributors to this special issue offer us a set of contextually situated cases of resistance, dissidence or protest that centre questions of aesthetics and the visual. Attention is given to both theoretical and ethical questions as well as to insights gained from empirical research. Contributions reflect both international queer and feminist activism, as well as activism and its conditions in specific geographical and cultural contexts, including Brazil, China, Lebanon, South Africa, the UK and the USA. Articles by Lucie Fremlova and Jenna Allsopp highlight the particular intersectional contexts and visual regimes imposed on queer Roma and the representation of queer people with learning disability, respectively, thus also illustrating the centrality of visual self-representation for marginalised groups within the broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ communities. Filmmaking as activism has a long history with an emphasis on documentaries and has been given academic attention. In this special issue however Xiyang Wang and Jenna Allsopp orientate our attention toward less researched aspects of filmmaking as activism by thinking about processes of production and dissemination as locations for activism beyond the films themselves. Activist filmmaking can also be thought of as a form of craftism and craft is a central visual and material mode of making in feminist and queer activism and culture (Kempson, 2015). In this special issue several articles relate to craftism as a creative principle, for example, Nana Soares’s consideration of strategic mixing of retro style images with queer sexual health messaging in digital collages that would otherwise risk being censored on social media platforms. Several theoretical considerations also emerge across articles, such as museums’ complicity in the normalisation of sexual violence, and how institutions navigate feminist and queer critiques. This is discussed here by Lara Perry and Elke Krasny. A central theoretical consideration reflected in several other pieces including those by Anna Stielau, Priya Raghavan and Kylie Thomas is the limitations of activism.

Anna Stielau’s work offers a decolonial queering and undoing of the idea of activism. Through an engagement with work by Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis, she expresses a deep suspicion of the individualising and instrumentalising nature of the activist discourses that celebrate the heroic above the ordinary. In so doing, she argues against a focus on purpose and efficacy, with the legacy of imperial violence this implies, instead advocates for a relational ethics of maintenance and care.

Lara Perry and Elke Krasny, explore visual activism within the museum space, in relation to the curatorial choices underpinning the display of artworks depicting sexual violence. Their analysis invites reflection on the museum’s complicity in the normalisation of sexual violence against women and appeals to its curatorial obligations to work against this.

Chloe Skinner’s work documents an artist space in Beirut that became a space of refuge and belonging for a queer community in the wake of the 2020 blast. Skinner describes the work of three visual artists, whose practice becomes the architecture within which they navigate their loss and begin to reclaim their space in the city.

Jenna Allsopp’s work explores the ‘Queer Freedom’ strand of the Oska Bright Film Festival, UK, and specifically two artists associated with this strand. She argues that through a mutually affirmative process, they refuse the public understandings and representations of learning-disabled people’s sexuality, and capacity for artistic expression.

Xiyang Wang’s article is an appreciative inquiry of, and introduction to, three films by queer, participatory, Chinese documentary filmmaker He Xiaopei. Wang notes that He Xiaopei has employed film to document and empower participants. He Xiaopei’s use of self-deprecating humour is evident throughout this article, including in her giving the Directorial credit for her film to the main character, in response to their appropriation of the storyline.

Lucie Fremlova’s article documents a process in which queer Roma activists use self-representation to work against the reductive and essentialising stereotypes within which they have historically been constructed. In the participatory action research project Fremlova writes about, her participants upload their self-images into a stock photography library, as an archival intervention which refuses existing misrepresentations of queer Roma.

Nana Soares’s article deals with digital visual activism that employs visual style and typography as instrumental strategies to circumvent censorship of queer pleasure activism. Her case study features the work of SENTA – a Brazilian, ‘pleasure-activist’, sex education Instagram feed that employs humour and a vintage aesthetic both to appeal to its audience and camouflage its sexually-explicit messaging. Soares’s recognition of sex education as a political project is particularly pertinent in the current backlash context in which sex education has become a central site of contestation.

Ace Lehner explores the self-representations of non-binary Black British trans femme multi-disciplinary artist Travis Alabanza, on Instagram. They situate Alabanza's work against a history of portrait photography as mechanism of colonial control, and one that worked to continually fix and reiterate raced and gendered binaries. Their work claims the category of 'trans' as an explicit refusal of these binaries, challenging the mainstream visual representation of trans and non-binary people.

Priya Raghavan situates Malawian-born, Johannesburg-based tapestry artist Billie Zangewa's work as a quiet refusal of the white (colonial) male gaze, 'a Black woman's reclamation of the terms under which she is looked at'. Like Kylie Thomas, she notes the complexities of claiming self-care as political, but recognises its importance as a strategy of survival and resistance. Thomas discusses Zangewa's work alongside other contemporary feminist fibre artists. She points to a discomfort felt in reading Zangewa's work as a form of feminist resistance, given the limits of the feminism this implies. Ultimately, both readings of Zangewa's work question the boundaries of the political when operationalised by the art market.

EMERGING THEMES

We identified three strongly emerging themes across the articles in this special issue: *refusal*, *care*, and *thriving*. Heather Love (2017: 127) in writing on refusal, notes that the 'historical exclusion of queers from normative definitions of intimacy, the family, reproduction, and basic human thriving has resulted in the production of a crucial resource, *a resistance to the world as it is given*' (our emphasis). This active refusal to accept existing ways of seeing and knowing, and associated material implications, is prevalent across all the articles in this special issue.

Raghavan employs Tina Campt's (2019) idea of 'black visibility' as a mode of witnessing that is a practice of refusal. In an approach that resonates with Love's, she writes about 'the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise'.

Refusal also resonates in the conceptions of activism. Many of the assumed binary oppositions associated with activism are challenged, for example seriousness and humour, empowerment and marginalisation, pleasure and politics. Furthermore, refusal also resonates in the conceptions of aesthetics. For example, Raghavan (this issue) notes that Zangewa's depiction of domestic scenes refuses 'the patriarchal and colonial binary between the private and the public, feminine and masculine, blackness and whiteness, and their corresponding opposition in high and low art'.

Ace Lehner's article on Travis Alabanza, shows an artist working against fixed meaning. Alabanza's multiple portraits refuse a singular reading of identity, against a trans stereotyping. Like the participants in Fremlova's research, who create a self-imaged counter archive, this can also be read as a form of visual activism concerned with de-spectacularising media images. This move is not just limited to achieving more authentic representations, it also queers the idea that visual activism is first and foremost about gaining attention.

Anna Stielau writes against a framing of activism as 'doing', in which particular subject positions afford agency, and those without this capacity are considered 'less worthy'. In a focus on 'decompositions', on unthinking the world as we know it, she refuses the binary between 'doing', and 'being undone'. In Perry and Krasny's piece, they refuse a curatorial approach that valorises artworks above their context, and normalises sexual violence against women, by not critically acknowledging its presence. The SENTA Instagram account in Soares article 'hides' text within visuals in a refusal of the censorship of social media platforms.

Almost all of the articles here touch, in different ways, on the notion of care. Care, as an everyday investment in self and community, as a contribution towards creating spaces of belonging (Buckland, 2002; Thompson, 2015; Holland-Muter, 2017). Alongside this notion of building caring communities, is one of care as responsibility, or taking care. In Perry and Krasny's article, they invite museums to better curatorial care around work implicated in normalising sexual violence. Here the idea of crafting returns. Raghavan, writing on Zangewa's silk tapestries, notes the slowness of fibre art production as 'hostile to capitalist and neo-liberal temporal ... rationalities ... which overinvest in haste'. Within this work, as with other feminist fibre art, the slow craft requires a temporal logic that moves away from a linear, masculinist, imperial notion of time (Motta and Bermudez, 2019). What the process of crafting affords, is an architecture that allows for a suspended or liminal time, one that allows time to care, to connect, to reflect – this alternative temporality exists in different ways across all our three modalities of visual activism. Think, for example, about the out-of-time nature of much protest, or the space held for relationship building in participatory visual processes, or the way in which museums allow for critical reflection.

To return to Heather Love (2017: 127) and her writing on refusal again – the 'historical exclusion of queers from normative definitions of intimacy, the family, reproduction, and basic human thriving has resulted in the production of a crucial resource, *a resistance to the world as it is given*'. Striking in this text is the articulation of 'basic human thriving'. It is an interesting idea, because it elides two things that are normally kept separate – basic needs and a more substantive well-being beyond survival and, in its refusal to separate them it stresses the

fundamental importance of *thriving*. For queer and feminist communities, the capacity to survive and to reach towards thriving, has been significantly dependent on the building of intentional communities, ‘a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world’ (Muñoz, 1999: 121). Berlant and Warner (1998) articulate this as ‘queer worldmaking’. Rancière’s reading of artistic practices suggests that with their inherently democratic and egalitarian modes of being (2006: 14) they offer a special relationship with the building of communities inherent in queer/feminist worldmaking.

Ultimately what is at stake in all of this work is a refusal of dominant forms of visibility, representation, and social recognition, and the related political claims that these afford. And, a practising of inclusive and nurturing ways of being, and doing, that recognise a democratic mutual interdependency. There is an ethic of care at stake, a communal care, and, as Raghavan and Thomas underline, self-care only as it relates to a political, collective care. As Tanke articulates in a reading of Rancière’s work – ‘what Rancière teaches is that the field opened up by the aesthetic regime of art contains the promise of the much more difficult art, the art of living well’ (Tanke, 2010: 15). We are interested in art both as a refusal, as ‘a constitutive force in the building of social movements’ (Holmes, 2012), driven by a ‘determination not to be governed thusly’ (Feher, 2007: 14), and as a practice of care and inclusion.

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Radical Decomposition: Unravelling Agencies in the Art of Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis

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ABSTRACT

For understandable reasons, global discourses around queer, feminist, and decolonial activism are unified by an emphasis on action, the agential, and the productive. Doing is what matters most, hence the critical focus of this special issue on how the doing gets done, or the forms that most effectively transmit action. However, these discourses risk reproducing the hard binaries by which political activity has historically been assessed, including success/ failure and resistance/passivity - in other words, they can unintentionally reinforce a racialized and gendered dichotomy between those who do things in the world and those who are simply undone by it. Such binaries further scaffold progress narratives that have long been weaponized against populations in the global South, founding good subjects, proper objects, legitimate politics, and viable futures in line with agendas set elsewhere. In this article, I turn to contemporary South African art to ask a different question: what might we learn from scenes of undoing instead? What expanded repertoire of actions, affects, alliances, and options emerges when we are sensitive to how decompositions, not just compositions, reroute agency, mediate relations, and make worlds? My article explores decomposition as a literal and figurative method in recent works by Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis, three South African artists who do not all align with notions of visual activism proper. But by placing pressure on the unruliness, vulnerabilities, and expressive limits of form and material, I argue that each artist usefully troubles the figure in whom normative notions of political agency are supposed to reside. In so doing, they sensitise their audiences to how vectors of precaritization and (in)capacity intersect today, unravelling the linear means-ends logics that conventionally underwrite theories of both art and activism.

Keywords: South African art, agency, visual activism, decomposition, decolonial

INTRODUCTION

In the great slackening of life and hope that was the first Covid-19 lockdown in New York City, I kept returning to a single line from Jia Tolentino's collection of pop culture essays, *Trick Mirror*, published around the same time. The cruelty of the internet, Tolentino (2020: 31) writes in her chapter 'The I in Internet', is its intensification of an asymmetry baked into much modern media consumption: 'The internet was dramatically increasing our ability to know about things, while our ability to *change* things stayed the same, or possibly shrank right in front of us'. The reality is more complicated than a soundbite can capture, capacious 'us' included. Much of online life is sustained by a sense of doing something, as current affect-forward discourses of offence and cancellation hint. Yet part of the strangeness of virtualized social space is that statistically speaking, this feeling rarely translates into liberatory action, with a few dramatic exceptions. The Covid-19 pandemic has cast the resulting imbalance into sharp relief.

Those privileged enough to stay inside are positioned as spectators only, paralyzed in the eye of a disaster. From the vantage point of that little eye/I, not much can harden into a plan, let alone a political program.

Anxieties about a diminishing capacity for action are a red thread running through Western philosophy, stringing together theories of the subject as a perpetually busy doer of deeds. Predictably, these theories advance an individualist understanding of political agency that has been foundational to Euro-American grand narratives of progress and freedom, where action itself is framed as rational, linear, productive, and future-oriented. Most famously, Hannah Arendt (2013 [1958]) argues that men acting in concert is the only real form of politics proper, and must be ferociously defended against the incursion of less special sorts of activities, like the boring matter of staying alive. She claims that,

Men can very well live without laboring, they can force others to labor for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it [...] A life without speech and without action on the other hand [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men (176).

Black feminist thinkers like Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) have since turned a more critical eye on these divisions of capacity, showing how racialized and gendered difference is naturalized as exactly the distinction between those who can affect (subjects, transparent 'I's') and those who are affected (objects). Because who counts as a political actor is one of modernity's founding assumptions, any reading of action must inhabit the terrain that modernity has made, including its ossified arrangements of who gets to speak, listen, be heard, and be seen (Rancière and Žižek, 2004). Though there have been efforts to assign agency more generously to the material world, disturbing these entrenched parts and positions (Latour, 2014; Bennett, 2010), it remains surprising to me that the spectre of incapacity is seldom taken seriously on its own terms, given how it trails agency everywhere like a shadow. In the face of so much attritional violence, maybe it is easier to live in a world composed entirely of small forces waiting to happen.

In this article, I am not interested in relitigating where agency begins or ends. I do not want to identify the correct objects or practices through which to channel intent or excavate some latent redemptive drive that might transform a feeling of incapacity into action-to-come. In my home country of South Africa, as in much of the global South, history tells us that when somebody makes or does something, they risk being soldered into racially-inflected scripts of failure and success, resistance and passivity, *even when that thing is only making do*. These prevailing scripts serve to further regulate distinctions between people, divvying everyone up into camps of those who get stuff done in the world and those who are simply undone by it. Arguably, these scripts are at their most far-reaching when it comes to artists in the global South, who tend to be governed by strong discourses of endurance, empowerment, and resistance that conceive all creative action as always already reaction, whether those artists like it or not (see Yapp, 2014, 2021)¹.

Instead of reinforcing these stories, I want to use this text as an opportunity to sit with a problem that might seem at odds with the general thrust of this special issue. It is the underside of those urgent studies of activism that would combat a threatening (and increasingly democratized) experience of affectability. If Tolentino is right that some people are newly sensitized to precarity, passivity, and incapacity in moments of globally distributed crisis, that seems like cause to explore what political imagination blooms when human agencies disintegrate, or perhaps when action changes nothing at all. What is produced by losing – or surrendering – a feeling of control, and with it the ability to make things or people act on our behalf? Is it possible to evaluate decisions to embrace Arendt's 'deadness to the world' without fetishizing the abdication of agency or glorifying apathy? *What if deadness to aspects of this world may yet make us alive to others?*

In what follows, I explore how three South African artists, Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit and Nolan Oswald Dennis, employ tactics of undoing, agential rearrangement, and material breakdown, or what I call 'decompositions'. I adapt this language from Denise Ferreira da Silva (2018: n.p.), for whom the concept is inseparable from the decolonial feminist task of unthinking our world with a view to the end of that world *as we know it*. For da Silva, decomposition names an intervention in the master codes of Western epistemology, and specifically its schemes of separability (dividing and defining things according to their qualities), determinacy (that true knowledge of things can be obtained via formal constructs), and sequentiality (historicity, or progressive movement in time). Together these schemes make up the framework through which agency is usually apprehended and assessed as a fixed attribute of subjects, and a name for what does and does not belong to the category

¹Writing in the context of contemporary Chinese art, Hentyle Yapp elaborates the flattening effects of these universal discourses, which can reinforce rather than change an order of things. '[T]he entrenched argument that non-Western art is worthy of inclusion and valuable for demonstrating resistant agency against the strong state repeats static formulations of subjects, culture and the state, and reinforces logics of liberalism, modern humanism and capitalism', he points out (2021: 6).

'human'². Decompositions are therefore a method of introducing the uncommon to common sense, and unravelling what exists without deciding in advance what will replace it. By rejecting preconceived notions of agency, and by resisting the impulse to force matter into the shapes demanded exclusively by efficacy, I argue that artists working in a decompositional vein reimagine what activist art *is* and what it mediates. In the process, they productively provincialize the goal-seeking, self-possessed subject of political action, itself a trope of Enlightenment thought.

ART'S ACTS

To understand how South African artists are *undoing* things, it is helpful first to consider how their art is read as communicating normative notions of agency, as well as what this reading takes for granted. One case study is particularly instructive. In her glowing review of a mid-career survey exhibition by the acclaimed South African photographer and filmmaker Zanele Muholi, at the Tate Modern, *The Guardian* critic Laura Cumming (2020) concludes decisively that, '[T]his is an art of agency'. On its face Cumming's description makes sense. As an important voice for Black lesbian, trans, and gender non-conforming communities, Muholi has dedicated their entire career to challenging dominant attitudes about race, gender, and sexuality by filling a representational void. They have repurposed the tools and techniques of documentary photography, a genre with an ugly history of racialized objectification, to stake out a claim to personhood for Black queer people in the face of extreme, ongoing persecution.

Yet, Cumming's phrasing is suggestive in both its ambiguity and its constitutive outside. First, it is unclear if the critic locates agency in the artist, audience, subjects, or photographs. This vanishing mediator recurs throughout critical engagements with Muholi's body of work, which centres 'seeing the agency – life choices, decisions, failures, confusions, discoveries, rejections – of the Black lesbian in the picture' while making form and context into second-order problems (Gqola, 2006: 84). As a result, Muholi's choice of *art* as a preferred delivery method recedes from view, as though a political message must come at the expense of its medium. Second, these celebrations of sovereign agency inevitably code incapacity, its other, as weaker or less worthy (Berlant, 2011: 96). By downplaying the constraints that continue to inhibit free action and choice-making, from social limitation to economic lack, this coding reserves humanity for spectacular postures of performative action while ignoring what erodes will. In a fundamentally assimilatory gesture, agency is therefore extended only as far as subjects whom the viewer recognizes as equally human *like them*, capable of self-authoring and self-extending in meaningful, legible ways. Ultimately, contending with these blind spots requires thinking more about 1) how artworks mediate political action in ways distinct from other forms of discourse, and 2) how agency might be transformed by art, rather than just represented in it.

Though there have long been politically-engaged artists and aesthetically-minded activists, the convergence of art and activism is in some ways a very recent phenomenon. 'Activism may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century', Peter Weibel (2015) writes in *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, tracking a turn toward reading activism as artistic and art as (in)direct action that cuts across artworlds of the new millennium. Without a doubt, Zanele Muholi is heir to a tradition of cultural producers in South Africa for whom art represents a distinct grammar of political struggle, a position shared by the artist themselves. But their self-identification as a visual activist marks an evolution of this tradition, eliminating distinctions between aesthetic and political considerations in favour of symbiosis³.

In key respects, however, visual art and activism are actually in conflict. As authors in this special issue appreciate, activism is a big and elastic tent. It encompasses everything from humble postures of resistance to collective expressions of rage, generally prompted by necessity and often coming from the margins. What unifies activism as a category – and what defines it per se – is the marshalling of human action toward a specific end within a perceived power imbalance. For activist practices to cohere, then, a degree of certainty is required about the sources of action, its agents, its objects, and its objectives, as well as the forces worth harnessing for social change. These guarantees clash with art's longstanding location within a realm of creative freedom distinct from the realm of political necessity, and its strong association with qualities like openness and targetlessness. 'The goal of

² The Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter (2003) has meticulously unpacked how a Western European notion of Man was made synonymous with the human through knowledge systems formalized in the nineteenth century, meaning that the characteristics of what we now call 'humanness' are themselves legacies of racial colonial modernity.

³ Though it is not always named as such, this is an increasingly popular position to adopt in contemporary discourses around artistic production, which today tend to follow from the assumption that content trumps form, as effect trumps intent (Nelson, 2021). Some writers have suggested that this focus derives from the rejection of an (ostensibly) ideologically agnostic brand of formalism, infamously dominated by white male artists and summed up by the old modernist mantra of 'art for art's sake' (see Ruiz, 2016 for a rich analysis).

activism’, the media theorist Stephen Duncombe explains, is ‘to generate an effect’, whereas art is usually geared more ambiguously toward affect over effect, even at its most didactic (2016: 118). Indeed, current debates about the instrumentalization of art and the social responsibilities of artists revolve around this basic contradiction, wherever a desire to agitate for change is opposed to a desire to leave things without a clear moral position (see Van Niekerk, 2013; Nelson, 2021). For Duncombe, the point of departure when thinking about activist art-making must therefore be a question that better reconciles the two domains, ‘a question that haunts, or ought to haunt, the entire practice [of art activism]: Does it *work*?’ (2016: 115, my italics).

‘Does it work?’ is a valuable approach when activist art is imagined as a direct conduit for wilful agency and a vessel of intention. Any would-be answer must imbue artworks with a heroic world-transformative power so that their effects can be held to the same standards as other kinds of political activity. Likewise, any answer must iron out ambiguities in order to get to grips with *the work of art*: what is produced, where it is produced, and why it matters. Still, this opens up other challenging questions. From whose perspective is art’s action assessed? Who determines what qualifies as ‘working’? According to what measures, metrics, and timescales? Duncombe himself proposes a non-exhaustive list of goals for activist art from fostering dialogue to building community while acknowledging that any number of exceptions continue to arise.

To be clear, by highlighting these tensions between artistic and activist agendas, I am not advocating for a retreat into disinterested aesthetic judgment, where it is enough to evaluate an artwork for its beauty alone. Rather, I am struck by the extent to which not being purposive disqualifies something from having a politics when art is theorized like other activist discourses. Instead of ‘Does it work?’, I find myself curious about the far queerer question of what does no/t work, evading the combined imperatives of productivity and progress, or perhaps perverting their paths. As Denise da Silva (2018: n.p.) remarks, instrumentalizing views of art impose imaginative constraints not because they express a desire for change, but because a tight hold on efficacy restricts the kinds of questions we might ask about how things can be otherwise. ‘What if what matters in (the) artwork exceeds representation not because of its “why” or “when” or “where” but because of its “how” and its “what”?’ she wonders (2018: n.p.). Which is another way to say, what if what does not obviously *work* in the work of art is part of how transformation happens?

Briefly, I want to show how restoring the less obviously activist ‘how’ and ‘what’ to Zanele Muholi’s art reveals a richer, more nuanced vision of agential unevenness, scrambling the teleological drives that would reduce all means to ends. What counts in an image is not always its content. As objects, Muholi’s photographs possess quieter properties that do not enter the conversation much. They have scale, proportion, proximity, sequence, mass, surface area, gloss, density, and number. Though representation rises to the fore, these secondary properties carry affordances of their own. Without supplying the already-existing narratives to which documentary modes are particularly vulnerable, these properties nonetheless structure and pattern perception.

The ongoing *Faces and Phases* (2007–) series, Muholi’s most widely exhibited work, now comprises more than 500 photographs of Black queer people (Figure 1). Usually displayed in tight, evenly spaced clusters, these black-and-white portraits generate a densely populated visual field in which many bodies crowd the viewer, with the eyes of each figure breaking the fourth wall of the frame to meet the gaze. Crowd is the operative word. Instead of encountering every portrait as a single unit of meaning, the sheer number of images encourages the eye to move fluidly between scales: from the individual to the collective, from what is distinct to what is held in common. In other words, if these photographs depict the ‘phases’ of life experience, sexual object choice, or transition, then the viewer’s gaze is invited to phase in turn, travelling freely between states and across surfaces. Rather than consolidating *Faces and Phases* around individuals infused with an agentic power that makes them worthy of care or capable of self-determination, the artist’s use of a number of portraits thus sets the stage for understanding agency as a property of relation. When it is difficult to aggregate individuals into a totality, but similarly impossible to reject collectivity for exception, we are invited to de/re/compose boundary lines between these categories. The direct, individualized connection that portraits conventionally stage between human subjects is substituted for a more diffuse communal demand that the viewer can neither meet nor deny. This is what it means to establish *a ground* for political action, not simply a figure who acts.

Comparably, when the people of *Faces and Phases* are read formally as sequence, curious commonalities surface. All the portraits depict figures in moments of repose, a decision that bumps up against accompanying rhetorics of agency. Each person inhabits a quality of time that does not immediately register as urgent, and therefore is too easily and too readily disqualified from the political. Here there are only suspended moments without before or after, a constellation of linked presents (Figure 2). Muholi’s repeated focus on ordinary, undramatic instants interrupts a vision of effective will that would assign value to persons proactively taking charge of their own destinies, despite the experiences of repression, exhaustion, and slow death that plague queer and Black communities. Zanele Muholi nudges us to remember that ‘lives are not novels’, as Lauren Berlant (2011: 99) puts it. They do not always have to have intentionality to be meaningful. Some bodies do not do, or cannot do, or have done enough.



Figure 1. Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases 13*, Stevenson Gallery installation, Cape Town, 2019.



Figure 2. Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases 13*, installation detail.

Zanele Muholi's photographs push beyond individual autonomy and sovereign performativity. By deepening the kinds of agency that activist art is understood to encode and enact, and finding sharedness in their stead, *Faces and Phases* allows for the radical possibility that being in the world together, existing and persisting, and doing nothing at all can be as important as exercising control. In their play of medium and message, the artist also wedges open an additional space to think beyond instrumentality, so that the form of a piece might enhance, rather than usurp, its subversive potential. Perhaps the most famous description of anti-instrumentality in art comes from the poet W. H. Auden (2007 [1939]), who wrote in his elegy for W. B. Yeats that 'poetry makes nothing happen'. Auden's sentiment is helpful here not for that line but for the line that concludes the stanza, which is quoted far less. Poetry may make nothing happen, Auden writes, but it is also 'a way of happening, a mouth'. Muholi's art, too, proffers a *way of happening*, a word without a defined subject, static object, or finite space and time.

DECOMPOSING A PHOTOGRAPH, OR HOW TO DO REPRESENTATION WITHOUT (EN)CLOSURE

The philosopher Bruno Latour (2014: 11-12) has identified a deep seam of incapacity at the heart of contemporary climate change activism. Today our ability to assert control as a species is being pushed to its utmost limit, he writes:

[I]t seems now very plausible that human actors may arrive *too late* on the stage to have any remedial role ... Through a complete reversal of Western philosophy's most cherished trope, human societies have resigned themselves to playing the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject! Such is the frightening meaning of 'global warming': through a surprising inversion of background and foreground, it is *human* history that has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on a frenetic pace.

For Latour, climate change is a seismic disturbance in the system of differences that discourses of agency help to sustain. In a decidedly decompositional formulation, he articulates how experiences of environmental anxiety rearrange the what and how of things, so that it is no longer possible to give a confident account of efficient causes or final effects. Background becomes foreground. Subjects become objects. As the ecological scholar Timothy Morton (2013) argues, when vast images trouble sight itself, so things fall apart.

Confronted with the threat of irreparably compromised agency, the South African photographer Jean Brundrit advances an alternative account of the field of environmental action beginning with a simple insight: sometimes, things must come apart in order to reform. From December 2019 to January 2020, the artist spent six weeks aboard the scientific research vessel SA Agulhas II, travelling from Cape Town across the Southern Ocean to Antarctica and back again. Equipped with an icebreaking hull and several working laboratories, the SA Agulhas II is equal parts polar supply ship and polar research vessel – it has played a key role in recent assessments and explorations of the region⁴. Brundrit's attempts to document her own journey on the ship form the core of *Over the Horizon* (2019-20), a photographic series concerned with sea ice and the kinds of relations we might establish with and through it.

Visual evidence from the poles has become a principal marker of human-induced planetary change, with the material vulnerability of ice simultaneously spectacularizing broader climate concerns and offering a legible, empirical measure of change. The most iconic images of climate crisis are of ice, from melting glaciers to polar bears clinging to ice floes. In fact, an iceberg was chosen as the cover image of Morton's book *Hyperobjects* precisely because its scale analogizes the 'strange strangeness' of hugely distributed objects that reveal the limits of human mastery over nature, of which global warming is a prime example. Such visualizations are employed as metonyms for concerns so enormous or urgent they are otherwise difficult to grasp, offering a general shorthand for emergency.

However, visualizing the South pole is also a way to exercise power over the thing itself, in that images of the Antarctic have long been instruments, anticipating use. When she embarked on her ocean journey, as Brundrit explains to me in our February 2022 interview, she found the experience to be eerily familiar.⁵ The artist was retracing the steps of generations of previous explorers from Shackleton to the legendary Maori voyager Hui Te Rangiora. Although some of these men did not return home, their archives attest to their successes, and it is those archives that have filled out the picture of a place where few people have set foot. Drawings, photographs, diaries,

⁴ It bears mentioning that as I write, that same ship is playing host to the Endurance22 expedition. Divers are descending more than 11,000 ft beneath the shining surface of the Weddell Sea to the wreck of Ernest Shackleton's vessel, which has lain undisturbed on the seafloor for 107 years.

⁵ This article draws on interviews conducted in the course of my ongoing doctoral research. The artists Nolan Oswald Dennis and Jean Brundrit were interviewed about their recent exhibitions in 2021 and 2022, respectively.



Figure 3. Jean Brundrit, *Untitled 1*, Handprinted Black and White photograph. Ilford Fibre paper. Selenium toned, 2019/2020, 45 cm × 36 cm.

memoirs, novels, and scientific publications mark each passage. Today, the ice is even more extensively documented, with cameras trained on its myriad mutable surfaces. The Australian Antarctic Division operates four data-gathering public webcams at permanent stations on the Antarctic continent and on the sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island. The McMurdo Oceanographic Observatory hosted a two-year livestream from the depths of the McMurdo Sound, so that viewers all over the globe could familiarize themselves with the shadowy seafloor and respond with appropriate environmental action to ensure humanity's survival. Something that is not easily experienced, collected, or preserved can thus be made knowable, a precondition for a call for action that depends on bringing home the reality of crisis, yet one that paradoxically reproduces the imperial drive for total knowledge and unlimited extension that contributed to that crisis.

If it has long been desirable to obtain a clearer picture of the ends of the earth, then the photographs that make up *Over the Horizon* are at first disconcertingly out of focus. Without knowing Brundrit's methods, these pictures resist interpretation in a standard photographic vocabulary of figures, grounds, subjects, and objects. In the handprinted black and white photograph *Untitled 1*, for example, all co-ordinates for orientation have disappeared (Figure 3). Instinctively, viewers draw closer to the photographic surface, looking for details from which some additional information might be gleaned. Perhaps the dark swathe occupying the lower third of the frame is water. A white band slicing through the centre of the image might be an ice shelf. A pale grey field could be sky. Beyond finding subtle shifts in tone at the borders of forms, though, the impulse to extract data comes up short. As Annabelle Weinand (2021: n.p.) observes of Brundrit's elusive work, this soft opacity is particularly unsettling to 'contemporary eyes used to the straightforward record taking of mobile phones and the sharpness of the commercial photograph'. Our image-saturated society means that '[w]e are accustomed to recording with great ease and achieving instant results'.

Other photographs from the same series, like *Untitled 5*, intensify the initial confusion. The eye can find little to stick to between what could be ground and what should be sky. A long exposure has left traces of uncertain, repetitive movement across the surface of the image, with bright lines cross-hatching one another in the darkness of their setting (Figure 4). Yet, any relationship to time remains as hazy as the location in space, and as difficult to parse. Nothing is constant enough or solid enough to assess duration. The introduction of planes of colour to subsequent shots offers little aesthetic respite, as blue piles onto ever more blue, enfolding the viewer (Figure 5). What lies over the horizon appears to have no end and no order. Though they are undeniably photographic in nature, with the skilful printing and lush surfaces one might expect from the medium, these images do not present an unimpeded window to the world, instead reflecting the enormous plasticity of their subject matter.

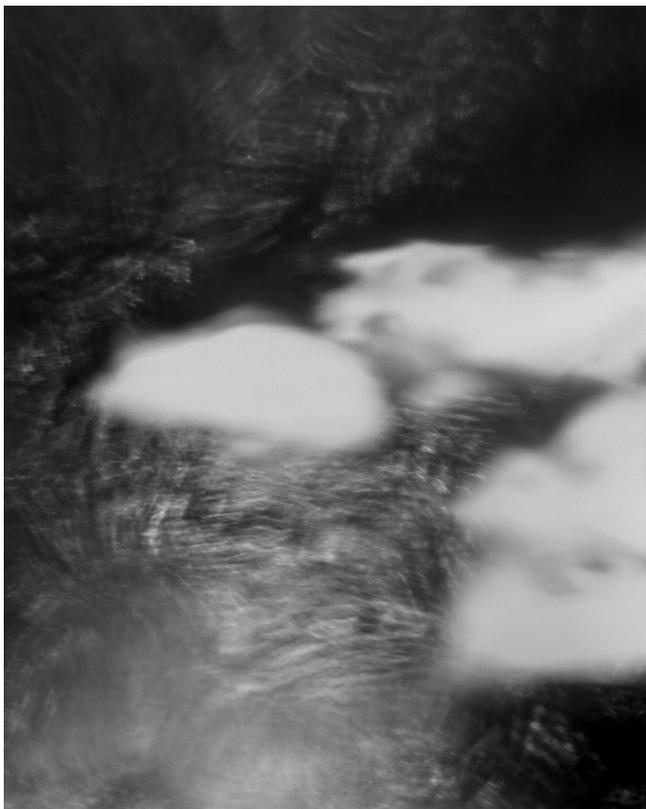


Figure 4. Jean Brundrit, Untitled 5 (from the series *Over the Horizon*), Handprinted Black and White photograph. Ilford Fibre paper. Selenium toned, 2019/2020, 45 cm × 36 cm.

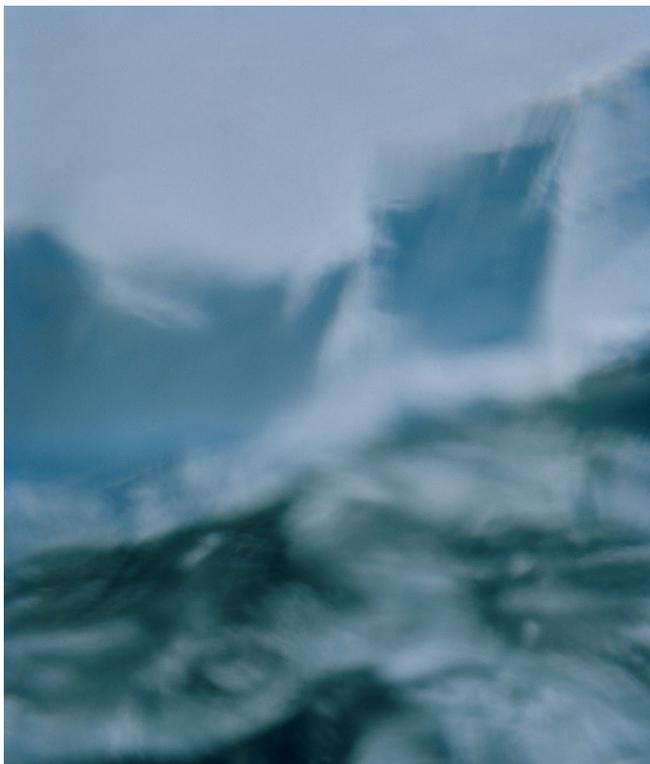


Figure 5. Jean Brundrit, Untitled 18 (from the series *Over the Horizon*), Colour photograph inkjet printed on Hahnemuhle Photorag Ultra Smooth Paper, 2019/ 2020.

Over the Horizon is in deliberate contrast to a history of photography where the photograph has been cast – whether intentionally or not – as a means to an end, sustaining arrangements of power and knowledge. As Zanele Muholi’s appropriation of the documentary genre indicates, and as scholars of colonialism concur (Ryan, 1997; Sealy, 2019), photography has played a major role in the composition of modern regimes of subjectification and subjection, determining who gets to affect and who is affected. There is a reason why the anti-colonial philosopher

and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon chose a provocatively photographic metaphor to describe the crushing force of a depersonalizing white gaze. 'I found I was an object in the midst of other objects', he writes of the scene of racializing encounter in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008 [1952]: 109), '... the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye'. As Fanon understood, cameras are tools for taking photographs, but they are also technologies for separating subjects from objects, and for making those divides seem natural, inevitable, and unbridgeable. Because of this, cameras are technologies that readily serve the interests of oppression, helping to lay the groundwork for who gets to be an agent of history and who, a prop.

The repressive function of photography derives in part from the medium's promise of objective truth, an artifact of its automation. To the eye, the camera's viewfinder resembles a transparent screen held up to the world, as a photographic surface later appears to preserve a direct stencil off the real, or a very close approximation of it. But this seemingly direct, neutral mediation is a medium-specific trick of the light – more often than not, photographs vanish the hand and eye responsible for creating them, displacing human agency into the machine by outsourcing elements of the decision-making process. The age-old battle about whether photography is really an art form has this displacement at its heart, as the language of the medium likewise hints at an underlying uncertainty about who is doing what. We *take* a photograph, we do not *make* one, a word choice that obscures how users of any machine inevitably calibrate parameters in line with aesthetic and social norms.⁶ We also *capture* a scene, a word that hints at a trap waiting to be sprung.

Contemporary photographers typically grapple with the photography's inherent power asymmetries by trying to restore agency to their subjects, levelling the scales on either side of the closing shutter. Among other strategies for more equitably sharing power, they invite collaborations and solicit consent, guided by the prevailing liberal conviction that recognizing and including the other is a solution to injustice. More agency all round is taken to be better for everyone. In her anti-imperial polemic *Potential History*, Ariella Aisha Azoulay (2019) identifies some of the limitations of such efforts to fold care into mastery, suggesting as they do that an individual photographer might will their way out of larger structural dynamics. Imbalances of power and knowledge are embedded in the basic mechanics of photography, Azoulay points out, as they also background the aesthetic imaginations that animate it:

Think of the camera shutter. It is a commonplace in the discourse of photography that an operating shutter is necessary for obtaining a legible, sharp and precise image out of the flow of light. Understood as a subservient element of the photographic apparatus, a means toward an end, the shutter is discussed mainly in technical terms, related to the rapidity of its closure, the ability to control and change its velocity, and the swiftness of its performance. The picture obtained is presumed to exist, if only for a brief moment, as a petty sovereign. The petty sovereign is not what is recorded in the photograph (in terms of its final content or image) but, rather, is the stand-alone photograph-to-be, the image that prefigures and conditions the closing and opening of a shutter ... What is suppressed and made irrelevant is excised by the shutter. In the technological and historical discussion of the shutter, the only elements that matter are the quality – precision, clarity, recognizability – of the images, the end product, and the erasure of any trace of the shutter's operation. This is an effect on the one hand of the means-ends relationship between the camera and the images it produces, and on the other hand, the disassociation of the camera's shutter from other imperial shutters.

Building on this insight, Azoulay develops a theory of imperial power predicated on a vanishing shutter mechanic that feigns innocence. She shows how in the hands of white explorers, missionaries and scientists, the camera laid the imaginative tracks of empire by rationalizing the power of a white ruling class along with its ways of knowing. As the phrase 'other imperial shutters' insinuates, shutter apparatuses supplied much of the conceptual architecture for the colonial project, from its systems of classification to the thresholds of its archives. The shutter is a way to differentiate, delimit, and make disposable through a careful arrangement of elements, composing an image and the world together.

Photography's capacity for compositions makes it a good medium through which to unpick the processes by which sovereign subjects emerge, like figures posed in relief against a ground. The universal subject of modernity is arguably invented by representations of that exact ground, with landscape imagery recruited to make the world knowable and ownable (and those are often the same thing) (Mitchell, 1994). A landscape scene reassures the viewer of their stable location in social and physical space by enclosing the land in a grid of fences, perspective lines, and schemes of longitude and latitude; as a result, we know our place and feel sure of where we stand. But this grid also creates an outside, held at bay by those fences but always encroaching. Stefano Harney and Fred

⁶ For instance, as scholarship on the intersection of race and media has shown, technologies are racialized in their design as well as in their use. Inevitably, this skews information toward the interests of white, elite populations, even as it makes it possible for those who benefit to feel like innocent users (Browne, 2015; Noble, 2013).

Moten (2011: 17) name this outside ‘the surround’, ‘the common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure’. For Harney and Moten, the surround is all that shutters cannot (en)close, and the relations that may breach them.

The many visual ambiguities in Brundrit’s *Over the Horizon* arise from a technical conceit that dialogues with a surround, troubling the divides conventionally manufactured by the camera. It is a conceit that rejects the entire principle of enclosure and with it, the distribution of capacities it shores up. The artist has chosen to photograph her surroundings with a lens made of ice. This method is the result of much prior experimentation with width, density, water clarity, shape, and temperature, although it is an imperfect science. In her exhibition catalogue, Brundrit (2021) explains, “The idea behind this project arose from my interest in rapid climate change and an engagement with making artworks in this area. And specifically, from a thought I had while photographing ice in my photographic studio in 2016 – I wondered if ice shaped into a lens could form an image. And if it could, how would ice see the world?” This formulation is the conceptual key to the project. *If ice can see, then ice can return the gaze*. Seeing askance from a colonial episteme requires renouncing the authority of a single vantage point and admitting a surround that can, and does, look back. No less importantly, it requires a deliberate disidentification with the feeling of control that vantage point affords a viewer.

The decision to shoot through an ice lens cracks photographic representation along two fault lines. In part, it reveals the secret dance of intentionality at stake in composition, as the artist grapples with, but cannot control, her new machine. ‘An ice lens offers few guarantees,’ Brundrit writes (2021); it is an instrument through which little is predictable. Effectively restoring the fact of mediation to representation, so that the hand and eye of the photographer reappear in a less-than-seamless end product, Brundrit’s images are clearly the result of human decision-making. And yet, the artist also points to the impossibility of exercising mastery over the world that she documents. By introducing ice as a collaborator, she establishes the object in front of the lens as a participant in the project of representation with whom agency must be shared, or to whom agency must be granted. At once subject and medium, ice is invited into the scene of its own imaging, where it actively *does* things as it is undone, altered by use and changing shape with temperature. Instead of enlisting the visual as a prompt for human action, as per traditional climate activism, Brundrit bridges a figure/ground, subject/object divide to offer a less imperial understanding of reality.

Her understanding resonates with older strands of feminist and anticolonial thought that seek to hold the wreckage of a shattered world, not contain or even repair it. In her poem *Diving into the Wreck* (1971), the poet Adrienne Rich describes a similar experiment, beginning deep beneath the ocean waves. Somewhere below that icy surface, Rich’s narrator is investigating a ship that belonged to the many explorers who came before her. She does not map meaning onto the broken fragments she finds there, nor does she try to forge new wholes from them – in fact, Rich knows that any image of the whole would elude her. The poet leaves her reader with only the vivid smear of subject through object, and individual experience through collective. So complete is this blurring, in fact, that by the end of the text, the human explorer has been remade. From one line to the next, Rich’s narrator transforms into a decomposing instrument, no longer useful for the purposes she previously served or the exploratory project that drove her:

we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

For Rich as for Brundrit, the lines that individualize action and responsibility become less sharp. When we abandon the reductive insistence on a singular subject of political action, and on the solid ground where that subject once stood, ‘We are’, ‘I am’, ‘you are’ the one/s to find our way, a conclusion Rich notably expresses in the present continuous tense. *Over the Horizon* is an experiment in representing a world without (en)closure.



Figure 6. Nolan Oswald Dennis, *garden for fanon*, 2021, bioactive system, books, borosilicate globes, community of *eisenia fetida* earthworms, care protocols, microcontroller, steel armature. Variable dimensions.

DECOMPOSING A WORLD, OR HOW TO DO DIFFERENCE WITHOUT SEPARABILITY

Where Jean Brundrit collapses photography's subject/object split in order to redistribute the agencies in play, Nolan Oswald Dennis rocks the epistemic foundations from which we think *acting in and for* this world. To the Zambian-born, South African-based artist, art is a 'decolonizing machine' equipped to intervene in the durable arrangements of matter and meaning that constitute our anti-Black social, cultural, and political milieu. Dennis credits the phrase 'decolonizing machine' to the writing of the activist and academic la paperson (K. Wayne Yang), who uses it to describe a subversive assemblage that breaks down the ideological machinery of colonialism from within (2018: n.p.). In conversation in Johannesburg in 2021, Dennis and I discuss what these machines are designed to do, and how one might judge their success. I ask, 'Do your machines work?' To me this seems like an intuitive question, or at least a point of entry from which to evaluate an ambitious artwork and its effects upon the viewer. Dennis informs me that this is not the right question at all: efficacy can be the problem, not the solution. According to the artist, any means-ends analysis restricts his apparatuses to only those logics of use available now, rather than a more expansive range of possible applications as yet unimaginable.

Despite the title, Dennis's art installation *a garden for fanon* (2021) is not obviously a garden, if a garden is understood to be a plot of cultivated ground prepared for human use. The work is more like a heterogenous assemblage, with its proportions dictated by the space in which it is displayed. *a garden* consists of multiple stands, glass vessels, and ceramic *izinkhamba* pots, some of which are loosely connected to one another with cords (Figure 6). Inside these vessels a community of earthworms are quietly going about the business of staying alive (Figure 7). The artist's sophisticated reticulation system maintains a constant internal environment of around 70-80% humidity inside the artwork, ideal for the worms' subsistence. An ample food supply makes the system more habitable. For food, the creatures are methodically consuming editions of Frantz Fanon's final book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004 [1961]), written while Fanon himself was slowly being consumed by leukaemia in 1961 (Figure 8). The lifecycle of these worms is self-contained: as they eat the pages and bindings, they defecate. Their waste matter then becomes an element in which they can continue to live. Gradually, and with the absolute indifference of nature, Dennis's worms are making and terraforming an entire environment.

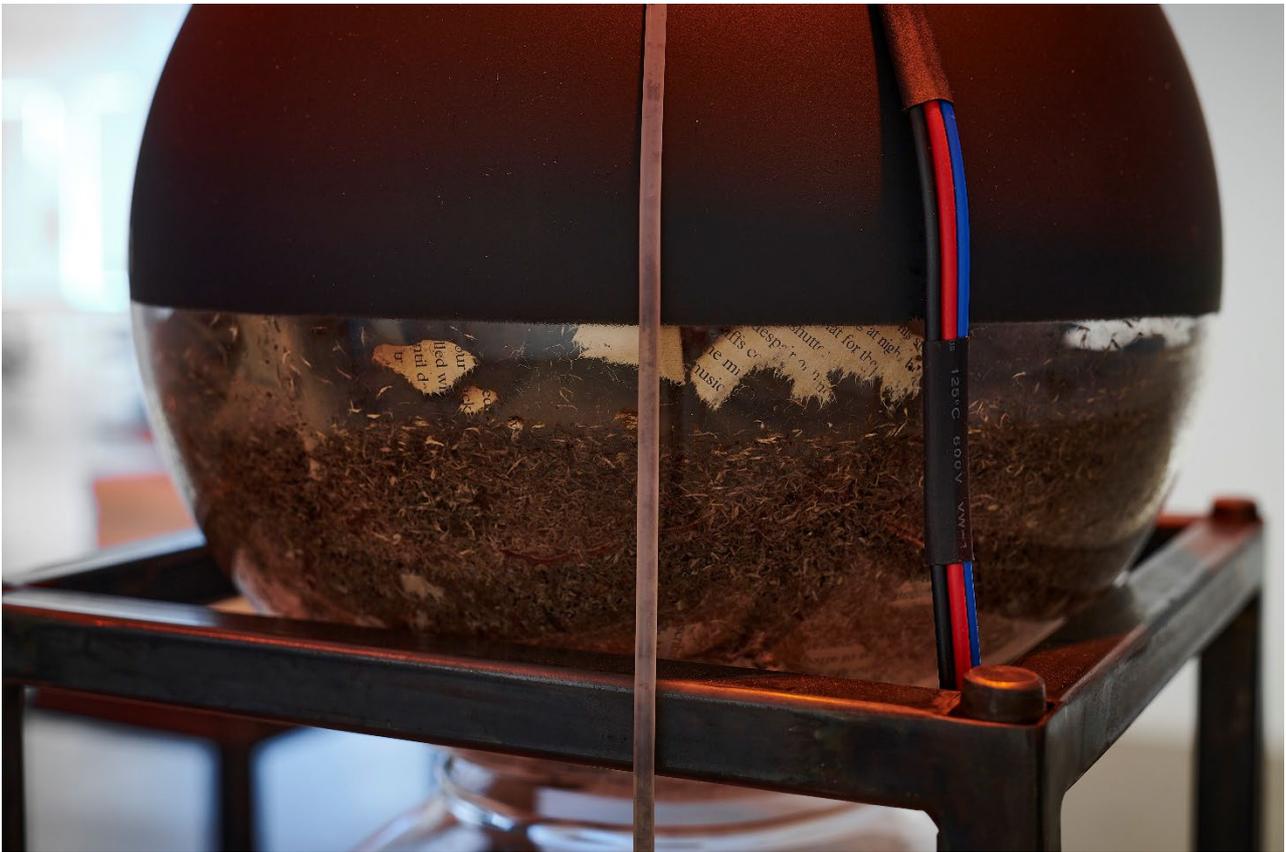


Figure 7. Nolan Oswald Dennis, garden for fanon (detail, earthworms).



Figure 8. Nolan Oswald Dennis, garden for fanon (detail, books).

Though they lack intent, these tiny animal metabolisms nonetheless have a cumulative, horizontal effect that looks a lot like collective action. Their effect cannot be read within the normal timescale of an encounter with an artwork, because very little is visibly happening, and it is happening very slowly. Yet, as Jane Bennett (2010: 100) explains in her writing on Charles Darwin's study of worms, a community of earthworms – like the temporary community of a human public, perhaps – demonstrates that 'there is no action that is not conjoint, that does not, in other words, immediately become enmeshed in a web of connections'. In this entangled environment, every worm implicates every other worm, and every bacterium and microbe matters. Drawing diverse bodies into a complex set of processes through which destruction eventually becomes indistinguishable from creation, the hummus these worms create is life-giving and life-sustaining for all. Thinking in terms of 'life-sustaining' outcomes shifts the conceptual frame of this machine from ends to ecosystems, and its temporality from conclusions to continuities. Arguably, there is no such thing as being done when what one is making is a world.

Dennis' garden is a continuum of interlocked connections and relations, largely indifferent to its viewer. Concretely, the only thing that is produced is more of what already exists, at a slow and sustainable pace. All that is extracted is what is needed to survive. In this, *a garden* illustrates a poetic form of sociality that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten theorize as 'incompleteness', characterized as 'a more or less uncontrollable generativity, as a profound danger, a metamorphic problem, always unfinished, always in decay, never complete, always simultaneously more and less than one' (2021: 109). Unlike means-ends readings of art and of political action, which Harney and Moten would critique as 'logistics', this radical incompleteness is *being without end* in both an ontological and a temporal sense. The authors' chosen metaphor for an experience of incompleteness is revealing: "Think of it as having an apple embedded in your back. It is as if one has not only become more and less than one, but also that here, where decay and generation combine, *one has become soil*" (Ibid, my italics). Becoming soil is the antithesis of the destruction of planetary life in pursuit of capital, with its illusion of endless growth and mastery. Against urgent demands to act and react, for which the agent is both a necessary and a necessarily limiting figure, *a garden* pits processes and relations.

Dennis's choice of text is not incidental to this dream of becoming soil. By invoking the canon of anti-colonial literature, the artist positions his artwork within a long lineage of efforts to remake the world by those who have been made worldless, a process that must begin from the ground up (see Joja, 2021). The opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'Concerning Violence', specifically describes colonization as the imposition of unbearable divides onto the earth, rending the world along race lines. "The colonial world is a world divided into compartments", Fanon writes (2004: 38) and "The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity" (ibid). Here again is the shutter mechanic by which those who affect are differentiated and opposed to those who are affected, without reciprocity. In mud, this inflexible, deadening structuration between zones of living and unliveability becomes fluid: it simply cannot hold.

Dennis's *a garden for Fanon* envisions decomposition at its most totalizing. Composting matter and meaning together, the artwork aims to rezone existence at a microscale. The artist's role in this process is mainly as facilitator. Neither Dennis nor the viewer can dictate the pace, form, or quality of action. Pushing blindly through the earth, it is the worms who make space where none was before, carving out their own paths. Without sequentiality, without anything that could be called progress, it is the worms who make history.⁷ As space and time de/re/form in this new world, the difference between book and earth loses meaning, as all structural integrity is lost in service of the reproduction of life. For Dennis, as *a garden* makes abundantly clear, it was always separability that was the aberration, a disturbance in a world that wants to be whole. This reunification drive is reinforced by an invitation to participate extended by the artwork itself. To keep things running smoothly, a set of minor tasks are assigned to the curator of the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, where the piece was first exhibited. Only by assuming full responsibility for this tiny world can the gallery keep *a garden* going. 'Our role here is not to observe or contemplate the garden as a work of art but to tend to the conditions that make the garden possible', Dennis (2020: n.p.) clarifies. "Simply, one must feed the worms, one must maintain a conducive temperature, humidity and illumination. What comes at the end is a result of what we put in, and what we don't. Some soil and leachate and more worms and some time spent together caring" (ibid).

Contained by the figure of an individual political actor, agency must retain its original militant and performative character, measured by grand actions with knowable effects and anchored by the spectres of incapacity, passivity, and inaction. However, '[a]gency can be an activity of maintenance, [not making] as well, Lauren Berlant notes (2011: 100). Sometimes we change nothing at all. Because its care protocols are listed on the wall behind the garden, the audience is privy to a continual, otherwise unseen labour of maintenance that helps *a garden* to endure. This labour is the only intervention that can actually be made in this case, an intervention with no visible effects. Entitled 'directions for care, or how to have a world', Dennis's protocols include checking and draining the water level,

⁷ See Jane Bennett (2010) on how worms 'make history' for a related but not identical approach to Dennis's.

placing handfuls of prepared pages into the system, and maintaining a garden log so that any significant changes can be noted. ‘TL/DR these are simple relations’, his instructions conclude, ‘take care, be patient, do what is necessary when it is necessary. It may take time. We have time’.

Like the rest of Dennis’ 2021 exhibition *conditions, a garden* is dedicated to confronting a conception of the world as a seamless, enclosed, and knowable unity, best represented by the standard blue-and-green globe displayed in elementary school classrooms worldwide. That globe is an idealized figure of Western cosmology, camouflaging the ideological as merely descriptive and naturalizing it through sheer ubiquity. Such models were as important to the imperial imagination as the photograph, transforming everything into a potential possession and object of knowledge by securing protocols of interpretation. A colonial whole is made by splitting and breaking, enclosing and isolating – it was always already in pieces. In contrast, *a garden* is a portrait of life lived *through, with, as, and in decomposition*. For Dennis, as for all the artists I have discussed, coming apart can be a basis for coming together.

CONCLUSION

By unravelling and relocating agency, Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis shift focus from a sovereign political actor to the circuitry of relations that conduct change, of which art is both a medium and a mode. They blow up the figure of an individual agent and in the process, they mark that figure – in terms the Black Marxist Cedric Robinson would appreciate – as not only rarer, but much more compromised, than it may appear (see Robinson, 2016: 196). Threaded through these artists’ work, capacities and incapacities are so closely knitted together that they cannot easily be separated.

When the figure of action is called into question, surprising avenues and practices of creation emerge, born from still and quiet places. In his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, the philosopher Jacques Rancière has previously directed attention to some of our base assumptions about political action, many of which are so familiar as to have become almost invisible. Chief among these assumptions is a distinction drawn between what it means to be a spectator and what it means to be an agent. Art in particular is often understood as *acting upon* a viewer, who is the quintessential passive spectator, supposedly absorbing the artist’s intention like so much soft wax. Against this model, Rancière formulates an alternative, inclusive interpretation of agency, beginning with his observation that even the most receptive spectator also acts. She thinks, interprets, wonders, doubts, and compares. Or, as he puts it (2011: 13), ‘she composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her’.

To decompose is not to tear to pieces, or not only. Decomposition admits the possibility that all that exists can come undone, a possibility already alive in the fabric of things.

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Against Sexual Violence in the Museum: Art, Curating, and Activism

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ABSTRACT

Depictions of sexual violence are frequently found in the collections and displays of art museums, and material that represents and affirms violence against women often is displayed unchallenged. This article poses questions about how the presence of this material has been addressed in the relations between feminist activism against sexual violence, art made by artists responding to and participating in feminist activism, and the curatorial activities that have arisen to address the challenges that these activities present to art museums. The chapter investigates the 2021 exhibition *Titian: Women, Myth and Power* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and its handling of themes of rape in the central exhibit, Titian's *Rape of Europa*; the history of themes of rape in feminist art since the 1970s and in exhibitions of this art that have taken place in museums in the last two decades; and curatorial engagements with sexual violence and rape in recent art exhibitions in the US and in the UK. The article argues that new strategies for the presentation and interpretation of artworks dealing with sexual violence are needed for museums to redress the patriarchal and colonial presence of sexual violence in their collection.

Keywords: sexual violence, curating, activism, museums, art

DO WOMEN* HAVE TO BE NAKED TO GET INTO THE MUSEUM?

“Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” In 1989 the anonymous feminist artist group The Guerilla Girls famously used this question in the context of their public poster and billboard activism. The question, posed on the streets of New York City, deliberately conflated the presence of living women* and of the cultural imaginings and social and political imaginaries of women*¹. Do women have to take their clothes off to buy a ticket and see a show at the Metropolitan Museum? Do women artists have to disrobe in order for their works to be collected by the Metropolitan Museum? Reformulating their provocation in this way makes very clear that the traffic between social realities and cultural imaginaries is complex. Seeking to strategically expose the misogynist exclusion of the works of women artists by the modern museum institution, this campaign raised awareness that women* were very present in art museums as nude bodies in the paintings and in the sculpture of men, yet not as creators of art. The Guerilla Girls' bold visual critique publicly exposed the museum as an organization of patriarchal power. This was just one example of feminists calling for changes in the museum and curatorial orientations.

Museums, one of the key institutions of modernity in the newly built public infrastructures of the modern metropolis, are an important site for the visual articulation of the culture and civilization of modernity. Through the ordering, and norming, of gendered, sexualized, and racialized taxonomies of humans and their

¹ The asterisk is included throughout our text to indicate that we are using the term women in the most inclusive way.

environments, museums including art museums have fostered the heteronormative, racialized and patriarchal order of modern western society. The systemic exclusions of particular kinds of material as well as forcible inclusions of others, are the focus of feminist and decolonial activism and scholarship, including studies of what may be called museum violence (Hicks, 2020; Reilly, 2018; Adair and Levin, 2020; Krasny and Perry, 2020; Ashton, 2017; Krasny et al., 2022). These works were preceded by studies that undertook feminist analysis of museum collections and exhibitions which often focused on the representation of women* artists as an extension of art historical concerns about the presence or absence of women* in art historical knowledge more broadly understood (e.g., Dimitrakaki and Perry, 2013; Reilly, 2018; Hayden and Skrubbe, 2010). In a parallel development, some writers have undertaken analysis of museums and collections as a specific form of visual culture that represents gender and sexuality in normative ways (e.g., Levin, 2010; Duncan, 1989; Tyburzsky, 2016; Perry, 2006).

The treatment of female sexuality in art museums is most often explored through the status of the nude in art: the nude figure is central and treasured, cared for as cultural heritage, and proudly exhibited in ways that typically separate the appearance of a nude figure from its narrative or documentary implications (Duncan, 1989; Nead, 1992; see Smith, 2001 as an exception). In 1977, in the first issue of *Heresies. A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, Carol Duncan (1977: 50) observed that ‘most of us have been schooled to believe that art, *qua* art, if it is “good art”, is never bad for anyone, never has anything to do with the powerless, and never imposes on us values that are not universally beneficial’. Writing about acknowledged masterpieces, Duncan goes on to argue that ‘they acquire an invisible authority that silently acts upon the consciousness, confirming from on high what social customs and law enforce from below’ (ibid). Modern museum institutions themselves have been the biggest advocates of this perspective and seem to deliberately avoid the difficult questions which juxtapose ‘good art’ with ‘bad’ life. The relationship between nudity and sexuality—and the polite conventions of art museums that refuse or downplay that relationship—has been a focus of feminist critical commentary on the nude in art, and in museums: as Jennifer Tyburzky (2016: 1) provocatively points out, ‘[a]ll museums are sex museums’ although few present themselves as such. In this article, we extend her observation to assert that by virtue of their replication of the taxonomies of modernity, all museums are *sexist* museums which require critical scrutiny of their practices to identify the ways in which they enact sexist norms including one that most concerns us here: the normalization of sexual violence particularly against women*.

By invoking ‘normalization’, we are inviting reflection on how art museums in particular feature or rehearse visual or narrative accounts of sexual violence without due recognition that they clearly relate to the perpetration of actual sexual violence against living women*. While what might be termed historical museums do sometimes narrate in a critical way the histories of sexual violence against women* (for example, as discussed in Kwon, 2020) a meaningful distinction must be made between historical museums which may identify sexual violence as a factual historical event and art museums’ tendency to treat the content of images of sexual violence as secondary or even irrelevant to their status as artworks. An important article by Tania Weinstein asks us to consider whether we ought to be satisfied with this situation, since to demand otherwise is to expect more of feminist art and activism than we do of other, similarly critical but ineffectual practices in contemporary art (Weinstein, 2020). However, in the last decade, the ways in which the sexualization of women* also codes violence against women* have featured strongly in public discourses of feminism and activism such as #MeToo, Slutwalks, and campaigns against sexual assault on US university campuses. Some art historians have taken on this topic of sexual violence as it has been treated in works of fine art, tracing a long history of rape as a subject in Western forms of high art, including feminist works produced in resistance to and critique of that tradition (Wolfthal, 1999; Hammer-Tugendhat, 2015; Fryd, 2019; Princenthal, 2019). As one of them, Nancy Princenthal (2019: 182) writes, ‘the image bank for rape is as old as picture making, a historical record as illuminating as it is robust’. The highly eroticized sexual availability of the female nude, even her bodily violation, abduction, rape, or murder, is made visible, and widely available for visual consumption, on the walls of museums.

Such is the Museums’ normalization, and naturalization, of sexual violence, that people are very practiced in looking at its imagery as an expression of civilizational gain and a form of cultural achievement. In her 2021 book *Every Rape in the Met Museum*, Macushla Robinson collated the catalogue descriptions of 181 works of art in the New York Metropolitan Museum’s collection where rape appears as a word in the title or description, in works attributed to artists who are among the most celebrated in museums and art histories. Robinson’s project reveals the centrality of the theme of rape (particularly but not exclusively the rape of women*) to artists across centuries and the repetition of particular narratives through multiple works, as well as the lack of critical attention to the implications of representing such content. Connecting the visual articulations of sexual violence against women* presented as high art in present-day curatorial museum practice to the social realities of sexual violence today, in this article we seek to raise difficult, painful, and constructive questions to think through the epistemological implications, and cultural potentialities of this connection. Persistent transnational activisms, which make sexual violence visible and have led to changes in legal processes and regulations, play a role in our

analysis, alongside more disciplinary tools such as those developed in feminist visual studies, cultural studies and art history, in tandem with power-critical, race-critical, and decolonizing methodologies. These trajectories of feminist challenges to the presence of sexual violence in lived experience as well as cultural production offer starting points for the critical examination of the museum as visual perpetrator of sexualized violence.

As feminist cultural theorists concerned with the contributions culture and museums as public infrastructures can make to achieving ecological and social justice, we ask if, and how, museums will find new curatorial ways of meaningfully contributing to achieving the aim to eradicate violence against women*. We have not undertaken a systematic survey of the subject but instead present a discussion of a selection of instances where feminist activism around sexual violence has found expression in museum exhibitions and programming. Our case studies have been chosen because they might serve as 'landmarks' (Daniel and Hudek, 2009) in the relatively new but evolving field of histories and studies of feminist curatorial practices. In keeping with the disciplinary practices of museum studies that treat museum exhibitions as discursive productions, constituted both by the artefacts displayed and the apparatus of their presentation, our discussion focuses on artworks and the interpretive material developed by curators to present them. We present our case studies here in three different sections: our first section discusses a recent exhibition at a US museum of a Renaissance painting of the ancient story of the rape of Europa and the strategies the museum used to mitigate what was, in bald terms, its celebration of an image of rape; our second section considers trends in curatorial responses to the production of artworks from the 1970s onward that address sexual violence from a feminist perspective; and our final section examines different ways in which rape and sexual violence have been or could be productively addressed in museums' interpretive practices. In describing specific instances of how feminist activism around sexual violence has been recognized and represented by art museums, we consider how activist aspirations are also transformed by their relocation into museum curatorial projects and practices. While activism which addresses gender-based violence more broadly will also have something to contribute to this topic in a broad sense, we have retained a focus on artworks, artists and activism that address women* as the objects of rape. Our case studies raise the alarm that despite the changes that are taking place to transform museum practices, there is still a continuance, and even cultural and civilizational justification of sexual violence, which manifests in museums. The presence of material that represents and affirms patriarchal sexual violence is one dimension of museum culture that requires, and would be rewarded by, renewed engagement with de-patriarchalizing acts.

The Rape of Europa

In November 2021, tens of thousands took to the streets in Paris, France, calling for an end to sexual violence (DW, 2021). In December 2021, civilians protesting the military government in Khartoum, Sudan, were retaliated upon with threatened and actual sexual violence (United Nations, 2021). In these same months, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston hosted the exhibition *Titian: Women, Myth & Power*. The exhibition's centrepiece was the Renaissance artist Titian's (1488-1576) painting titled *Rape of Europa* (ca. 1560). In 1896, the American philanthropist and art collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, who subsequently founded the museum named after her to display her collection, bought Titian's *Rape of Europa* from the Earl of Darnley and had it shipped to America. Today, the museum's website states that the painting 'became the crown jewel of her museum's growing collection'. Its *Titian: Women, Myth and Power* exhibition brought together the series of six paintings by Titian called 'the Poesies' for the first time in 400 years. Commissioned by King Philip II of Spain and painted between 1551 and 1562, the Poesies make use of motifs from Roman mythology, as they are known through the poetry of Ovid. In their recreation of ancient narratives and subtle flattery of their patron, the Poesies are widely considered to be exemplary works of Renaissance art.

The aesthetic accomplishments of the painting were at the centre of the curatorial rationale for the exhibition. A video recording of Nat Silver, the collection curator speaking about the upcoming exhibition, refers to the exhibition as a 'life changing event, a once in a lifetime opportunity' (The National Gallery, 2020: 0:26) because of the opportunity to see Titian's works assembled again in their original group. Silver speaks of the 'kinds of fireworks that ensue from the moments' when 'gods come into contact with humans', stating that Titian's paintings are 'pictures of lust and tragedy, and sometimes of death' (0:53). While Silver's discussion is candid about the subject of the painting and uses words including rape, kidnapping, panic and terror to describe the narrative, there is no hesitation or mediation of the implications of the violence that is both depicted and implied in the painting. In its presentation of the exhibition, the museum however did balance the promotion of the exhibition work by developing accompanying content that was evidently commissioned in order to contextualize the exhibition with perspectives that were more aligned with the increased social awareness around sexual violence against women* and in the specific context of US-American discussions of sexual harassment, coercion and rape.

The museum crafted several interpretive elements to address the dissonance of celebrating an image which depicts rape. Dedicating space on its website to 'The Representation of Sexual Violence in Current Exhibitions',

the Museum sought to demonstrate, and reconcile, ethical awareness, social responsibility, and cultural sensitivity through the following statement: “Depicting the sensual mythological heroine Europa on the back of Jupiter (assuming the form of a bull), the painting is a stunning example of the artist’s technique. However, as the title suggests, the painting depicts the titular character’s abduction and (eventual) rape”. This makes clear that the museum had understood the specific challenge of presenting a painting titled rape as ‘the most famous Renaissance artwork in America’ (Gardner Museum, 2022). This is one of three strategies that were used by the museum to mitigate the possibility that its exhibition could be perceived to condone or even celebrate rape: in addition to publicly and openly addressing on their website the problematic of exhibiting a Renaissance painting depicting rape, the Museum commissioned two new art works as feminist responses to rape; and worked with the Boston Area Rape Crisis Centre to create content warnings for the exhibition’s visitors. The website also introduced audiences to the work of the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center as a resource for advice on ‘potentially triggering themes in the exhibition’ as well as further resources for ‘survivors of sexual violence and their supporters, and for all those, who want to take action’.

The newly commissioned art works were presented as ones which aimed to ‘transform the roles of women, power, and sexuality in Titian’s artwork for the modern day’ (Silver and Cavalchini, 2021). They included a piece for the museum’s façade by postmodern conceptual feminist artist Barbara Kruger, who came to prominence in the 1980s with her highly stylized reworkings of commercial advertising imagery with texts that challenge the authority of the images. This commission instead used a detail from Titian’s *Diana and Actaeon* (1559) that shows a man’s dark and muscular leg extended over a woman’s knee with the text ‘Body’ applied at the top of the banner and ‘Language’ applied at the bottom. A film by artist couple Mary Reid Kelly and Patrick Kelley, reuses the title the Rape of Europa, using it as a platform to retell female-centred narratives from antiquity and specifically to adapt the character of Europa to a character with contemporary features. Both of these works strategically adapt content from the central exhibition into contemporary formats which may be perceived to allow visitors to reflect on that content from their own perspectives on sexual assault and violence, although these were presented by the museum through the terms of ‘power’ and ‘sexuality’ that are relevant, but which could be considered to have withdrawn somewhat from the directness of the central exhibit itself.

What remains absent from this curatorial introduction to the exhibition and in particular the central piece, *the Rape of Europa*, is an acknowledgement of the wider cultural implications of the exhibition continuing to reify sexual violence as aesthetic pleasure. If we accept that there is a connection between the continued public display of the god Zeus raping the female and racialized body of Europa, a Phoenician princess (celebrated as the literal and figurative birth of Europe and its culture) to today’s misogynist and masculinist rape culture—an acceptance which is implied in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s programming around the Titian painting—then museums are still far from having become institutions dedicated to promoting and practising sexual justice. Examining the ethical dimensions of contemporary museum work it is important to place curatorial strategies in relation to what can, or could be learned, from engaging with the visual and artistic strategies that have been developed and tested by feminist activists and artists both in terms of the potential for such works to challenge the patriarchal positions that are commonly encountered in museums.

LEGACIES OF THE 1970S: RAPE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN FEMINIST ART IN AND OUT OF THE MUSEUM

While the canonical art works valued, conserved and displayed in art museums tend to present images that comply with or even celebrate patriarchal norms of sexual coercion and violence against women*, the history of art more broadly conceived can offer many alternatives to this visual landscape. Images which defy the normalizing of sexual violence against women* have been produced both within the domains of what is now called visual activism, and within works that would more properly be considered more situated in the domain of art as it is recognized in art museums. Feminist activists have orchestrated campaigns against both state-imposed and criminal sexual violence against women* since at least the 1870s, and these campaigns occasionally entered into museum cultures, but the relationship between art and opposition to sexual violence is most easily identified in the feminist movement of the 1970s. As what might be described as a more culturally oriented feminist movement evolved, the relationship between feminist activism and feminist-inspired art-making became strengthened, and work that has been themed around the relationship between sexuality and violence has been produced by artists and visual activists ever since. However, this work has arguably remained marginal to the collections and exhibitions even of feminist art, which have tended to focus on representing feminist work that is more thematically and aesthetically palatable.

The tendency for feminist art that addresses sexual violence to be very graphic in its reference to lived experience makes it arguably more difficult to assimilate into museums as art. One of the most long-standing strategies of feminist activism against sexual violence is the mobilization of testimonies and the production of

evidence or documentation of sexual violence. An approach which we might call forensic feminism was first practiced on a very large scale at the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women. For four days in March 1976, 2,000 women from 40 different countries gathered in Brussels for this tribunal. One of its aims was to make violence against women understood and recognized as a crime. The tribunal set out to ‘denounce the crimes perpetrated against us by the male-dominated nations in which we all live, and to develop strategies to combat them’. (Russell, 1977: 1) Collecting personal testimonies, the tribunal produced evidence covering a wide range of crimes against women including rape, pornography, and femicide. South-African born and US-based feminist activist Diana E. H. Russell, who together with Belgian feminist activist Nicole Van de Ven organized the tribunal, importantly contributed to literature and research on rape as well as to the definition of femicide:

We must realize that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide. We must recognize the sexual politics of murder. From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for ‘honor’, we realize that femicide has been going on a long time. But since it involves mere females, there was no name for it before the term femicide was coined (Russell, 2012: n.p.).

Artists have taken diverse approaches to addressing the subject of sexual violence in their work, but when they do it is often directly related to wider strategies of feminist activism.

Artists whose work has engaged with the feminist movement have produced a number of significant art works that were intended to function in part as interventions in the public awareness of violence against women*. In the 1970s, Suzanne Lacy (1945-) and Leslie Labowitz (1946-) devised a number of large-scale multi-part and participatory works that generated new representations of sexual violence, forensically collecting and documenting specific instances of sexual assault and exhibited or practised outside gallery or museum spaces. *Three Weeks in May* (1977) was a project that represented the information reported to the police of the locations of specific sexual assaults, with daily updates of incidents recorded on a map installed in a shopping mall and in sidewalk drawings, to make publicly visible the extent of sexual assaults in the neighbourhood. This was complemented with a map/calendar of sources of aid for survivors and injured women. Later that year, their work *In Mourning and in Rage*, realized a public performance which was strategized to command the local and regional television news to the reporting of murders of women being perpetrated by the ‘Hillside Strangler’. These works (not the only ones in which Lacy addressed rape as a subject) were designed as highly visual interventions into public awareness and to create new information networks between citizens, police and the media. In 2012, when Suzanne Lacy restaged the anti-rape project, this time titled *Three Weeks in January* (2014) she emphasized the importance of visibility in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* (Finkel, 2012). Lacy said: “We have a spiritual or emotional connection to aesthetics that we aren’t even aware of”. Reading this back to what being exposed or confronted with rape and sexual violence celebrated in canonical art works means, tells us how much work of learning, unlearning, and relearning there is to be done to see, that is to understand, the aesthetic justification of the masculinist perpetuation of violence made visible in the art works themselves.

That there was a visual dimension to the problem of violence against women* was an insight that was decisively centred by anti-pornography feminist campaigns of the 1970s, mainly in that reproduced in magazines but also other forms of popular visual culture including cinema and the emerging and generative format of videotape. Grassroots campaigns such as Women Against Violence Against Women addressed the normalization of representations of violence against women as part of a wider opposition to domestic, civic and police violence. Carolyn Bronstein (2011) has argued that the activist drive to end the violence, rather than the sex that was represented in contemporary pornography, has been forgotten in the historical recollection of these events which culminated in some of the most divisive debates between what was characterized as ‘pro-sex’ and ‘anti-sex’ feminism, a development which may have had significant consequences for the legacy of awareness of sexual violence within art histories.

A number of women* artists (and a very occasional male one) did take on the production of images that dealt directly with rape and which developed new vocabularies for representing women’s perspectives on sexual violence. The visual strategies of these works were diverse but often unflinching in their reference to violence and the disruption of the integrity of the body. From Ana Mendieta’s (1948-85) experiments with creating realistic scenes of apparent violence, drenched in what appeared to be blood, to Nancy Spero’s (1926-2009) *Torture of Women* (1976), 125 feet of drawings that combine extracts from texts describing violent acts interspersed with classically inspired figure drawings, feminist artists produced images that refused the relating of pleasure and sexual violence that characterized pornographic depictions. Direct and intrusive in their confrontation with the effects of sexual violence on women*’s bodies, such works seemed to some to avoid more complex discussions of the question of the relationship between art and pleasure, pain and pleasure, and the role of sex in culture that some women* artists and writers advocated (Princenthal, 2019: 165-71). As well as

being a subject of debate within feminist circles, the backlash against feminism in the 1980s and 1990s frequently caricatured feminist anti-violence positions as reactionary and fundamentally conservative.

The historic body of feminist work that engages in opposition to sexual violence through methods that foregrounded testimonies of rape and visual violence has arguably tended to be avoided or at least downplayed by developments in the production and mapping of feminist art by curators and art historians. In 1985 the Ohio State University Art Gallery mounted an exhibition, which then toured, called *Rape* (Princenthal, 2019: 177; Fryd, 2019: 148-86); but in the 21st century, exhibitions that reflect on histories of feminist art have typically not centred issues of sexual violence in their selection and interpretation of works. Hilary Robinson selects five survey exhibitions of feminism to discuss in her 2016 essay 'Feminism meets the big exhibition: Museum Survey Shows since 2005'; of these, she identifies only one whose selection of works connects in a clear way to feminist activism including activism against violence against women* – the exhibition *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* curated by Xavier Arakistain in Bilbao in 2007. One of the examples selected by Robinson, the exhibition *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), was surprisingly minimal in its representation of artistic activism against sexual violence although the subject was extremely prominent in the body of work it surveyed. The visitors' gallery guide suggests that there was a section with a few works dealing with the theme of 'Body Trauma', within which works by only one artist (Ana Mendieta) are specifically identified as addressing rape. The introduction to the 'Body Trauma' section compares the visual strategies for addressing 'Body Trauma' to those described as representing artists' approach to 'Pattern and Assemblage', a comparison which has the effect of subsuming the content of both sections to a question of aesthetic strategy (Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 2007: 5). One essay of 4 pages in the 360+ page catalogue for *elles@centrepompidou* takes on questions of violence under which rape is subsumed (Dumont, 2009). Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, the curators of the exhibition *Global Feminisms* (2007) more boldly selected a significant number of works that explicitly and graphically registered themes related to state and in some cases gender-based violence in feminist art of the early 21st century (including Rebecca Belmore's *the Named and the Unnamed* discussed below) but were criticized in a feminist journal for making an exhibition that 'appeared to be replacing the sense of global sisterhood... with a sense of the universal violability of the female body' (Muller, 2008: 472). Posed as an ethical concern about the replication of images of female victimization, the review (though not the exhibition) estranged certain visual forms of activism from feminist practice.

One explanation for this marginalization of feminist activist work against sexual violence from the domain of feminist art is to correlate the forms of feminism that tend to inhabit museum and curatorial practices with what we might now refer to, following Françoise Vergés (2021: 35), as 'civilizational feminism', or feminism that concerns itself with the gender inequality replicated in colonizing cultures. 'Civilizational feminism' as it pertains to feminist art could include issues of artistic reputation/visibility and sometimes of artistic labour itself; of the relation between the female lived body and its aestheticization; and of maternal experience, birth, childrearing and domestic labour as a preoccupation of women*'s lives. Under the reign of civilizational feminism, feminist art is something that is more likely to celebrate desire than fear, to mark the presence of desire rather than violence, and to concern itself with issues of identity and status rather than those of bodily integrity. In her exhibition catalogue for *This Will Have Been: Art Love and Politics in the 1980s* (2012), Helen Molesworth argues that the exemplary feminist art of the 1980s in the US is characterized by its address to *desire* (erotic, historical, and social), reflecting the art that developed in relation to emergent queer theory rather than the 'sex wars'. The usefulness of understanding feminist art as having shifted to 'theory' in the 1980s has been widely debated by feminist artists and their critics, but its impact on museum representation has yet to be analysed.

Using Vergés's category of civilizational feminism, and its contrasting category of decolonial feminism, may provide a more helpful way to explain the relative presence or absence in art curatorial practices of the specific address to sexual violence. Viewed from the 21st century museum survey exhibition, feminist art's central themes did not include sexual violence. Issues of sexual violence seem much more likely to feature in works and exhibitions that address the situation of women outside the Euro-American 'centre' of the art world. In her catalogue essay for *Radical Women: Latin American Art 1960-85* Andrea Giunta's essay (2017) addresses violence and sexual violence as distinctive themes in Latin American women's art arising from the specific and highly militarized wars that have rent the region in the period of the cold war and later. The US artist Jenny Holzer's (1950-) work *Lustmord* (1994) is a response to the violence against women perpetrated in the wars in Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia of the early 1990s – but is not a work that is frequently exhibited. Kara Walker's (1969-) works, which contain extensive references to sexual violence, are often interpreted primarily in relation to racial rather than gender conflicts. Ursula Biemann's (1955-) *Performing the Border* series of video works (1998-2008) explored the dangerous conditions of women working in factories or *maquiladoras* near the Mexico/US border where rape and murder were rife; her work has been shown in only one of the five key surveys identified by Robinson.

The power of decolonial insistence to ensure that activist art about violence against women is collected, shown and appreciated in art museums can be evidenced through a consideration of the visibility of Rebecca Belmore's 2003 video work *the Named and the Unnamed*. In 2002 Rebecca Belmore (1960-) of the Anishinaabe nation performed at the corner of Gore and Cordova streets in Vancouver a work titled *Vigil*, which addressed *in situ* the disappearance of a large number of women, mostly indigenous, from the city's streets. While the work was very site-specific it also was connected with activism against high levels of violence against indigenous women in many regions in Canada and across North America. Video from the performance was incorporated into a work *The Named and the Unnamed* which was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada some years later in 2009 (Emberley, 2014). In the decade that followed the purchase, the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) was foregrounded through many indigenous activist projects and through a formal national inquiry that reported in 2016. The significance of the work as an activist work that arose in resistance to gender-based violence was recently reiterated through an essay on the work by Greg Hill titled 'Rebecca Belmore: In Violation' that was published in relation to 2021's International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. It may be that we need to insist on much more intersectional approaches to analysing the presence of sexual violence in art museums, in order to understand and appreciate its presence there most fully.

Given the apparent likelihood that even exhibitions of feminist art shy away from the works that directly address sexual violence, it is unlikely that museum collections and displays will the works of art that expose resistant responses to sexual violence which specifically develop a better understanding of strategies which are used by visual artists to address sexual violence from feminist perspectives – the examples discussed above range from the production of mass-evidence and 'forensic feminism' to the re-signification of the female body from a source of erotic pleasure to a register of violence. How such strategies have been transformed into interpretative practices that can be employed in museums to address sexual violence in new and depatriarchalized ways.

WITHIN AND BEYOND THE REGIME OF THE CAPTION: NEW VALUES IN FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND CURATORIAL PRACTICES

Even the most hegemonic of art museums has in recent decades been touched by the insistence of artists, audiences and curators to integrate feminism-related work into their collection and exhibition activities, resulting in a surge of activities that can be directly identified with feminist production although sexual violence has arguably not featured strongly in these developments. The limitations of museums' strategies for dealing with the implications of sexual and other forms of violence in their collections and displays have been exposed by new developments in social justice movements that are more than ever concerned with the relationship between symbolic and actual violence, and which have introduced debates into museum and heritage practices that have not yet and may never find a full resolution. The absence of 'real' violence against identifiable women in artworks, which are most often removed from actual acts of sexual violence, has mitigated the urgency of museums' need to respond to their participation in the normalization of this aspect of gendered violence. As Tanya Isla Weinstein (2020) has explored in relation to a 2015 exhibition of work by activist artist Lorena Wollfer, even where works that deal directly with sexual violence are featured in museum programmes, that does not guarantee that the institution is signalling a commitment to address the presence of sexual violence even within its own organization.

That there are scant existing models for most museums to manage their own histories of violence and potential for causing harm to audiences, is increasingly evident (Levin, 2020; McLaughlin, 2016). What are some of the strategies that could be adopted to allow museums to share and examine with their publics the implications and consequences of showing such work? The aesthetic, civilizational, and educational function claimed by art museums is, perhaps, best understood through the regime of the caption. The caption offers the key to sanctioned knowledge to art works as it gives the definitive, and short, explanation of their significance and meaning. Very often, when sexual violence, rape, or femicide are literally or figuratively depicted in art works, the caption conceals the social implications, power injustices, hurtfulness or trauma of what is shown by focusing on formal analysis. The imperative for art museums to subsume their interpretations of the content of specific works in favour of situating it within the overarching narratives of art history was observed for example in Tate Modern's 2010 installation of Anna Mendietta's work *Untitled (Rape Scene)* of 1973 (Perry, 2013). Rendering the visual presence of acts of sexual violence against women by way of using the caption to foreground the art historical relevance to the museum publics, reduces the complex polysemic layers of imagery to formalism and, at the same time, shares structures of concealment characteristic to societal structures of patriarchy aimed at rendering invisible sexual crimes.

The regime of the caption is well understood by feminist activist artists. In November 2018, Michelle Hartney walked into the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the very museum that had been called out in The Guerilla Girls' 1989 question and placed her own caption next to the museum's caption to correct what the public is

being told about *Two Tahitian Women* (1899) by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Her caption stated the following: “We can no longer worship at the altar of creative genius while ignoring the price all too often paid for that genius”, quoting Roxane Gay. “In truth, we should have learned this lesson long ago, but we have a cultural fascination with creative and powerful men who are also ‘mercurial’ or ‘volatile’, with men who behave badly” (Sayej, 2018: n.p.). This intervention connects to feminist activism and scholarship in several ways. Providing testimony and creating public evidence has been one of the most important, successful, but also painful and laborious strategies to make sexual violence against women* understood as a crime, and ultimately acknowledged as a crime against humanity. Providing evidence to the public is one of the key functions of the museum. Feminist and race-critical art historical scholarship has been investigating these subject matters, as, for example, Abigail Solomon Godeau in her essay ‘Going Native’ (2013). It is possible for art museums to listen more closely to matters of concern and care as they are being articulated through art making, visual feminist activism and art histories concerned to fight against sexual violence, rape, and femicide. Responding to present-day debates such as the nature of sexual justice, consent, and sexualized injustice offers an opportunity to expand the knowledge and strategies of museum curating to devise new curatorial practices for working with art historical ‘master’ pieces and canonical art.

One such interventionist project was realized as part of Sonia Boyce’s retrospective at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2018. Programmed as *Manchester Art Gallery Takeover*, a format suggested by the institution, artist and curator Sonia Boyce (1962-) held a series of conversations with a group of 30 members of museum staff including curators and volunteers. These conversations offered the opportunity, for many of the participants for the first time, to speak about the way in which they experience art on display in the permanent exhibition including their observations on how the general audience interacts with sexualized visual content. In particular, the 1896 painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* by John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), one of the best-known paintings in the Manchester Art Gallery’s collection, was attracting selfie-traffic and new forms of visitors’ behaviour, in particular from ‘middle-aged men and teenage girls’ (Higgie, 2018: n.p.). Together, the group decided on a temporary removal of this painting. Its removal was used for different actions, both participation of the audience and artistic performances. Elke Krasny and Lara Perry (2020) have discussed how the temporary removal of the painting transgressed the gendered and raced structures of the museum as a colonialist institution and the response that such a move engendered: this included an invitation from the museum to its visitors to ‘write their thoughts about the painting and the representation of the female form on Post-it notes, which were stuck to the wall where the painting had been hung’ (Higgie, 2018: n.p.) but of course not confined to the wall space that had been freed up, and much less controlled by the museum institution and by the artist. Referred to as ‘Waterhouse-gate’ by journalist Mark Hudson (2018) in *The Telegraph*, the removal provoked public outcry on censorship and puritanism.

Removal of works might appear to be aligned with strategies of censorship that fell into disfavour with feminists in the 1980s. The current debates around sexual violence, sex work, issues of consent and the consequences for women of experiencing sexual violence are complex and sophisticated and invite us to consider a wide range of issues in addition to the representation of sexual violence. The shaming of women for sexual desire or activity which is endemic in many cultural traditions that inform the contents of art museums is another form of sexual violence that is considered in contemporary feminist activism, as is the consequent double victimization of some women who experience sexual assault. These dimensions of women*s experience, alongside the right to access abortion, are at the forefront of contemporary feminist activism. Where women*s* experience of sex is the central theme of an artwork—rather than the representation of sex or rape itself—then museums often find themselves challenged to navigate the information in a way that avoids replicating cultural norms that are now identified as aspects of misogyny. As Mithu Sanyal argues in her book *Rape* (2016/19), the symbolic power that is accorded to sexual violence can often overwhelm our capacity to listen to survivors and their individual experiences, or to recognize their capacity to recover from and contextualize their experience. If we read women*s lives primarily through their experiences of sexual violence, of sex work, or of sex more generally, are we subjecting them to a different but nevertheless destructive form of sexual violence?

In respect of museum practice, an illustrative example is in the presentation and interpretation of the work of Artemesia Gentileschi (1593-1656). One of very few prominent women artists of the early modern period, Gentileschi is known for a large (and retrospectively, growing) body of work that often took a distinctive perspective on themes that addressed sexual coercion and violence, including the subject of *Susanna and the Elders* (a biblical story relating to a woman who was falsely accused of sexual betrayal as punishment for refusing to be seduced) and two different treatments of the story of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, the beheading of an Assyrian general by a woman and her maidservant. In a period where it was common for the same story or theme to be treated by several artists in distinctive ways, Gentileschi’s work is often noted for its formulation of compositions that foregrounded the female characters. Gentileschi is also known as having been a victim of rape, whose accused was convicted after a lengthy and well-documented trial. The conventional art historical practice of

reading an artist's work through their biography, which normally underpins museum presentations and the expectations of their audiences, invited Gentileschi's work to be interpreted in light of her status as a rape victim.

Feminist art historians have debated whether Gentileschi's treatment of her subjects was directly tied to the rape or should better be understood as a fascinating and very able artistic contribution to the dynamic art scene of her time, which like our own, debated differences about gender roles. In a major retrospective held at the National Gallery in London in 2020, the display of the manuscript that recorded the rape trial alongside her paintings was a provocative material accompaniment to the display which suggested to visitors that this history was relevant to her art practice. To what extent did the juxtaposition of the material facts of the rape trial and the art practice (over)determine the reading of Gentileschi's art? One must ask here how many transcripts or recorded proceedings of rape trials involving men* artists as perpetrators of rape have been displayed in a major retrospective or solo exhibition of their works, and whether such displays could or did change the perception of great artists and their canonical, colloquially understood, good art? Austrian artist Egon Schiele (1890–1918), accused of kidnapping and statutory rape in 1912, is one such example. With the celebration of his 100th anniversary of his death coinciding with the present-day #MeToo movement in 2018, journalists publicly celebrated his work, stating that Schiele was 'not a sex offender' (Kallir, 2018). In response to the public debate, and general awareness of Schiele having been tried for abduction and statutory rape that was consequently created, the Museum of Fine Art in Boston 'updated' a wall label as follows: '[r]ecently, Schiele has been mentioned in the context of sexual misconduct by artists, of the present and the past. This stems in part from specific charges (ultimately dropped as unfounded) of kidnapping and molestation'. It also notes that Schiele 'has long had a reputation as a transgressive at society's edges.' While the label provides information, it also manages to retain Schiele's recognition as transgressive (read: admirably *avant-garde*) daring, and bold (Sayej, 2018).

The treatment of prostitution can similarly be identified as a site in need of depatriarchalization in the museum. The subject of sex workers, if not sex work, is a familiar theme in Christian iconography (Mary Magdalen was often depicted in ways that refer to her sinful promiscuity or prostitution and subsequent repentance) and museums could be a constructive site through which sex work activism could be channelled. As Lena Chen argues in a forthcoming book chapter, the results that derive from artists engaging sex work as a theme for their own practice, even when it is the outcome of an earnest and authentic engagement with the implications of the relative positions of working as an artist and working as a sex worker, are likely to replicate some of the assumptions and stereotypes about sex working (Chen, 2023). Some sex workers are, at the same time, active as artists and use their art practices to address and advocate for their legal, human and social rights in ways that directly relate to the normative practices of artists and curators, but which also engage with the activist potential of such cultural practices. These are practices which could easily be integrated into museums and their programmes, as sometimes takes place at art institutions which position themselves at the intersection of activism and art, such as the ICA in London. Such collaborations have the potential to offer depatriarchalized perspectives on sex work although in practice they tend to arise as self-organized exhibition activities—not least because the processes of self-organization allow for disparate and authentic views of sex work to emerge.

What we see encapsulated in the highly constrained space of the museum, is arguably a microcosm of the contests over public space and visibility for feminist perspectives that arise in global feminist movements. Global feminist activism today invite a deeper investigation of the coming together of the right to gather in public space and the political struggles against misogynist harassment, rape, and femicide. One such example is *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Woman Less), an intersectional feminist grassroots movement which, from the streets in Argentina, grew into a global contemporary movement against rape and femicide, and which strategically employs the visibility and performativity of art-based activism. Another example is the long-running campaign One Billion Rising, first initiated by artist Eve Ensler in 2012, and since grown into a large-scale mass action against rape and sexual violence against women*. The billion refers to the UN Women (2022) statistic of the global estimate of '736 million women—almost one in three—having been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life'. The prominent presence of feminist activism in public space is an invitation to more critically link the historical realities and the political imaginaries which are present in the public space of museums. Popular activist aesthetics and art-based strategies created in resistance to crimes against women present an ethical and epistemic obligation to feminist visual and cultural analysis and critical feminist art history to work in alliance with those practices.

CONCLUSION

Today, in connection to transnational as well as locally grounded visual activism and art making against the rising tide of violence against women*, the museum has been diagnosed as a perpetrator of visual sexual violence, validated and justified in the cultural appreciation of canonical art works. There is, of course, no one-size-fits-all answer to the presence of sexualized violence in art works of the past, which are implicated with the

cultural acceptance of such violence throughout centuries. Seeing the museum as a site of de-sensitization to the mental, emotional, affective, spiritual, and corporeal effects of exposure to sexualized violence requires a different ethics and politics in curating. Thinking of the museum as a public institution which could actually usefully contribute to the efforts to end sexual violence committed against feminized, classed, racialized, and otherwise marginalized bodies, needs an expansion of curatorial practices and new collaborations with knowledge practices beyond the museum as they have been established in visual feminist activism, art, infrastructures of support for survivors and many legal changes. The Istanbul Convention (The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) is based on the understanding that ‘violence is used to sustain male power and control’ (Council of Europe, 2011). It states the following:

it is the obligation of the state to address it fully in all its forms and to take measures to prevent violence against women, protect its victims and prosecute the perpetrators. Failure to do so would make it the responsibility of the state. The convention leaves no doubt: there can be no real equality between women and men if women experience gender-based violence on a large-scale and state agencies and institutions turn a blind eye (ibid).

We assert that the museum is a perpetrator of visual sexual violence that is implicated in preventing real equality between women* and men*. The word curating—which means both care and cure—suggests an obligation to counteract such violence. Connecting to the imaginaries of healing, in turn connected to the etymological legacy of curating understood as care, is an invitation to think of curating as working against sexual violence in the museum.

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‘The Spatial Void Could be a Chance to Recreate’: Queer Visual Activism in the Fallout of the Beirut Blast

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ABSTRACT

On August 4th, 2020, Beirut was torn apart by a chemical explosion at its port. The blast was a consequence of dire government negligence – killing over 200 people, injuring a further 6,500, and causing massive destruction. Although the catastrophic effects of the blast were felt across the whole of Beirut, those areas most significantly affected – particularly the neighbourhoods of Mar Mikhael, Gemmayze and Geitawi – were among the most queer-friendly areas in Beirut, in which ‘queer bodies [could be] safely visible’ in the otherwise ‘hyper-(hetero)sexualized city’ (Aouad and Abed, 2021: 3). Intersecting with the realities of an economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, the devastation of queer safe spaces as a result of the blast precipitated deep material and indeed existential losses across the diverse queer communities of Beirut. This article engages with the process of visual activism in the fallout of the Beirut blast, exploring specifically the affective and temporal dimensions of creation against the backdrop of spatial destruction. Analysing the work of three Lebanese visual practitioners from Beirut, I explore how they navigate the terrains of material loss, traumatic grief, reclamation, and resistance through their art and activism. I examine the evolution from immediate adaptation to humanitarian activism post-blast – quickly organised through the mobilisation of existing networks of artists and activists – to the grappling with grief and trauma through artistic outputs, and finally the ongoing work of reclamation and recreation within a particular spatial context. Analysing both loss and rebuilding, this article serves to foreground the voices, work, and strategies of queer and feminist visual activists as they reclaim space and reassert their presence amidst the trauma and material wreckage of the Beirut blast.

Keywords: Beirut, queer visual activism, Queer art, urban geography, queer theory

INTRODUCTION

The day of the explosion and the following days coming down to the city and seeing it in rubble, personally it is a heartbreak I have never felt before in my life. It’s like you lost your home, you lost your identity, everything was taken away from you in the blink of an eye. And following that you are left to clean up the mess; you go down to protest what happened, and the government throws teargas and fires rubber bullets at you.

So, after the explosion we all sat down and said, ‘OK, I think we need to leave the country’. Because something broke that day.

But here we are nine months later, and we are all still here [...] This is our home [...] we are all a part of the city becoming what it is [...] So, yes it was one of my biggest heartbreaks, but I think we are at the point where we are ready to rebuild (Sandra Melhem, founder of Queer Relief Fund, and the queer clubs and safe spaces, 'Projekt' and 'Ego', taken from the Podcast 'Queer Beirut: A Sense of Belonging', Bergman, 2021).

This excerpt – taken from the Podcast 'Queer Beirut: A Sense of Belonging' (Bergman, 2021) – speaks volumes of the experiential context in which queer and feminist Lebanese artists, activists, and visual practitioners responded to and resisted the material and existential wreckage of the Beirut blast. On August 4th, 2020, as a result of the detonation of tonnes of ammonium nitrate stored at the port (unbeknown to Beirut's population), the biggest non-nuclear explosion in history devastated vast swathes of the city, killing, maiming and destroying homes and livelihoods, as well as traumatising those subjected to it. Grief, trauma and heartbreak reigned alongside dire material need as a compound of intersecting crises precipitated an expanding reality of precarity, confinement and loss across Lebanon.

As spaces in the city that had become known as 'queer friendly' were destroyed in the blast, diverse queer communities within Beirut variously grappled with the loss of homes and loved ones, and spaces of refuge and organising – sites in which 'we had once practiced the full spectrum of our existence and revolted against the status quo' (Aouad and Abed, 2021, Yasmine, in Art Collective¹ 2021). Asking how queer visual activists navigated this loss of queer safe spaces within their art and activism in the fallout of the blast, this article explores creation and reclamation against the backdrop of spatial destruction – the strategies, processes, and temporal evolution toward rebuilding in the face of such heartbreak. Highlighting the temporality of these responses, this article explores the responses of queer and marginalised artists and activists to the horror and trauma of the blast. Moving from immediate humanitarian – and indeed, prefigurative – action, to mourning and later rebuilding, these processes were dynamically shaped by the complex ways in which queer communities are situated spatially, socially and affectively in the city – before and after the blast.

Those whose work I analyse, namely Dayna², Walid³ and Ayesha⁴ are artists and activists, variously associated with Art Collective – a Beirut-based cultural organisation that works on advancing women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-conforming gender and sexual identities' (LGBTQ+) rights through cultural interventions and projects. Discussing both their individual work, and the work of Art Collective more broadly, I draw specifically upon the exhibition curated by Art Collective, post-blast, named 'Moulding the Lost Space', referring to the words of Yasmine, (Art Collective's Creative Director) as featured within this exhibition. I utilised an in-depth qualitative methodology for this, including two online interviews with Dayna and Ayesha, analysis of the digital exhibition 'Moulding the Lost Space' (with a particular focus on the work of Walid and Ayesha), and analyses of secondary and grey resources, most specifically a Podcast with Sandra – founder of Queer Relief Fund⁵, and queer clubs and safe spaces Projekt and Ego – and Andrei, a drag performer with whom Sandra regularly works. As such, the discussion below is based on select interviews, textual, visual and secondary data, all of which subsequently I coded according to themes and patterns that were generated.

In what follows I first contextualise the analysis through spatialising discourses and realities of queer existence within Beirut – from Orientalist discourses of 'Gayrut', to local geographies of sectarian power, sexual citizenship and political economy as they relate to the 'regulative norms' imposed upon diverse queer bodies across different spaces (Ahmed, 2014). Within this section, I also provide a brief overview of queer visual activism in Lebanon prior to the explosion, before then turning to the blast itself, focusing on what was lost for queer communities. The body of the article addresses the work of artists and activists post-blast, predominantly those affiliated with Art Collective, as well as the Queer Relief Fund. Following the temporal evolution of queer activism and art after the blast, I first explore the immediate adaptation to humanitarian activism underscored by both radical

¹ Pseudonym used for the safety and security of the staff and space of this organisation

² Lebanese cultural and social activist, feminist, playwright, performance poet, and the founder & executive director of the non-profit arts organisation, 'Art Collective', a feminist cultural organization in Beirut, Lebanon working at the intersection of art and activism.

³ Lebanese photographer, creative director and copyeditor whose photographic practice was fuelled by the publication of 'Faraway. So close' by Cold Cuts Magazine, 'Nobody owns the Beach' at Sharjah Art Foundation, and 'Disembodied' in 'Molding the Lost Space', discussed below (see more and links in Walid's biography at Nehme, 2022).

⁴ A multidisciplinary creative practitioner based between Beirut and London, who has worked in the fields of visual arts, and production, specifically video editing, content creation, and script writing. Most recently she wrote and directed a short film, "بنزين" (Benzine) or petrol in Arabic in 2020, approaching Lebanon's heated political and economic climate in a satirical manner, with her work more recently exploring fashion-films and theatre (see more and links at Starkey, 2022 on Behance).

⁵ A group of activists in the Lebanese queer community aiming to provide relief for the marginalized victims of the Beirut explosion.

prefigurative politics and a politics of care. I then explore the return to art as a form of feeling, healing and expression, discussing finally Art Collective's ongoing work of material and immaterial rebuilding and reclamation.

BEIRUT: A QUEER SAFE SPACE?

Safe space in itself in Beirut is an ever expanding and retracting concept (Dayna, interview, 04/04/22).

Orientalist tropes prevail in hegemonic conceptions of 'LGBT+ rights in the Middle East'. Becoming a potent means through which imperial power has been reiterated in recent years, 'queer safety' has been discursively mobilised in a process of false bifurcation between the (Middle) East and the West – 'as a [supposed] property of the West and a deficiency on the part of the rest (as well as the rest in the West)' (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Haritaworn et al., 2014: 11; Naber and Zaatari; 2014; Puar, 2011, 2013). Indeed, these teleological and racialised designations of modernism vs. non-modernism have formed the discursive backdrop of Western interventionism across the Southwest Asian/North African (SWANA) region. Within these imagined geographies, however, Beirut has been deemed an exception, as 'Gayrut', or 'a gay haven in an otherwise wholly homophobic Arab World' (Chamas, 2021: 3; Reid-Smith, 2012: 1). Through such frames, Beirut is therefore hailed for its 'cosmopolitanism' and 'exceptionalism' – rendering profitable the so-called 'rainbow economy' (Sioufi, 2013) – 'in a region presently marked by war, conflict, and political and religious violence' (Moussawi, 2018: 175).

Such simplistic and Orientalist designations of Beirut – frequently dubbed 'Paris of the Middle East' – occlude an array of intersecting power dynamics, complex realities, and diverse subjectivities, punctuated and shaped by class, race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship status (or lack thereof), state repression, and neoliberal capitalism (Merabet, 2014; Moussawi, 2013, 2015, 2018; Nagle, 2022). Narratives of so-called 'cosmopolitan exceptionalism' so frequently ascribed to Beirut neglect to engage 'the multiple positions that LGBT individuals occupy', and therefore obscure the intersecting socio-political realities that diverse queer communities navigate and resist within Beirut (Moussawi, 2020: 10). Although universally circumscribed by the legislative context in Lebanon, inclusive of Articles 534 and 521 of the Penal Code 1943 imposed under the 'French Mandate' (with the former prohibiting so called 'sexual intercourse against nature', and the latter criminalising gender expression through 'disguise as a woman'), queer individuals and communities in Beirut are by no means monolithic. Indicating the subjectivity in such 'morality laws' and the related dynamism of conceptions and the prosecution of 'sex against nature', scholars have noted that Article 534 of the penal code is most frequently used to 'target the working-classes, refugees, trans folk and the spaces they frequent' (Chamas, 2021: 4).

Dynamics of survival and suppression, precarity and power, inclusion and exclusion, therefore, overlap as much with the global geographies of imperialism, as with the local geographies of Beirut as a complex social milieu, marked as it is by 'plural and uneven modes of governance characterised by sectarian groups exercising control over space' (Nagle, 2022: 958). Contrasting with designations of Beirut as 'queer friendly', the logic and spatialisation of the city's post-war order are 'wrought through uneven processes of urban reconstruction and gentrification which construct some sexual lives as useful and deserving of protection while others are cast outside of the body politic' (Nagle, 2022: 957). As heteronormativity affects the surfaces of bodies, it thus affects too the surfaces of cities, especially in a context in which queer modes of being and loving are criminalised such as in Lebanon (Ahmed, 2014: 145). In this setting, writes Nagle (2022: 956-957), 'a dual Beirut has emerged within assemblages of sectarian power, sexual citizenship and political economy'; while 'gentrification has created a space of implicit tolerance for specific assemblages of sexuality, class and power' – specifically those deemed 'non-threatening to institutionalised homophobia' – this is simultaneously mirrored by the 'cleansing of spaces and forms of sexuality deemed to be transgressive'. As modes of coercion exercised by social norms interact with both neoliberal gentrification and mechanisms of state suppression, complex enclaves have emerged within the city that – to some extent – provide 'safe[r] havens' for communities fleeing from what Soja (2010: 31) has termed 'unjust geographies' defined by discrimination and homophobia (Nagle, 2022: 959).

Within this context, as Naima Morelli (2022: 1) writes in *Al-Monitor* – drawing on Sofian Merabet's monograph *Queer Beirut*: "Beirut artists are at the forefront of the gender and sexual identity conversation in the Middle East, telling different stories of queer cultures that at times are tolerated but often repressed". Joseph Kai, Lebanese queer graphic novelist, photographer and editor thus explains that within Beirut – where he considers himself 'part of the artistic, underground and queer community' – queer communities and the art scene often overlap. Upon moving to the capital and working at this intersection, he explained, "I was literally everywhere, I attended every performance, every exhibition, every talk, every discussion. I was spending a lot of time with other artists who wanted to tell our stories and think about a better place to live" (Kai in Morelli, 2022: n.p.). As diverse as the artists and activists themselves, these spaces, stories and conversations are multi-faceted, as they interact with the realities of living within a politically and economically fraught setting. As Mohamad Abdouni, a filmmaker, photographer

and the founder and editor-in-chief of *Cold Cuts* magazine⁶ asserts, “Western media tends to place all these wonderful communities under one label, that of ‘An Arab Queer Community’. This is untruthful, because even in Lebanon, things are drastically different from one neighbourhood to another” (Abdouni cited in Morelli, 2022: n.p.). In founding *Cold Cuts* therefore, Abdouni joined with the diverse body of queer and marginalised artists in Beirut exploring queer cultures in the SWANA region, ‘record[ing] our histories and shar[ing] them under this umbrella, in one place’ (ibid). In discussing these creative places and physical spaces within Beirut, Andrei, a drag performer speaking in the podcast ‘Queer Beirut’ (Bergman, 2021), explained:

You have to be very specific about where you choose to walk or where you choose to go as an LGBTQ person – especially if you are very out or very flamboyant – so Mar Mikhael, Gemmayze and Achrafieh were usually the areas where artists united, and also queer spaces [...] so it gave the LGBTQ community a sense of belonging.

Andrei continued to explain that in these spaces, ‘you start to come together, and seek refuge, and these were the places that really people found refuge in’. Bearing in mind the intersections across LGBTQ+ communities within Beirut, the complexities of these spaces must not be erased, as gender normativity, class dynamics, race and nationality continue to shape and delimit access (Moussawi, 2018). Yet, where the public display of queer intimacy is criminalised, the process of rendering oneself visible, and laying claim to spaces within an otherwise hyper-heterosexualised city are in and of themselves acts of resistance. However, there are many ways and modes of challenging these forms of violence without expressly rendering oneself ‘visible’ with ‘pride’ and ‘coming out’. Whilst these processes are frequently reified as beacons of LGBTQ+ liberation within particular discourses and movements, these idealisations do not necessarily translate across different contexts, such as Lebanon, in which Dayna described ‘coming out’ as a ‘labyrinth’ (see also Chaer, 2020). Speaking of their film *Courage*, they told me:

Basically, there is a kind of Global North concept, that ‘you are not a proud queer if you are not out’ – this is very much based on cultural difference. We perceive that, both coming out and staying in the closet – however you want to say it – [...] is an act of courage in itself.

In this setting, queer visual activism does not always *have* to be visible to be a radical platform for resistance and reclamation. Indeed, it could be that what is largely invisible – the love, the care, the connections and the community networks needed to sustain and support the courage to be one’s entirety – that render queer and feminist artistic communities in Beirut at the vanguard of anti-normative resistance, adding fuel to the fire needed for queer world-making in a society that militates against ‘the Other’. Safety then may not be found in being *seen* by all of society (as it is currently assembled – indeed this may render someone unsafe), but rather being fully seen and held within a community. Beyond a physical space, this *community* can then function as a form of refuge – even if the former is lost. As Ayesha described to me, a safe space is:

... like a very safe cave ... made of rocks. When the blast happened all these rocks fell down and a bunch of people had to come in and take out rocks – but there is still the cave...It still shelters you [...] but it just shelters you differently, because of the lack of rocks ... because of the lack of physical structure ... but the same amount of love and care for the community is still there.

To Ayesha, what truly represents ‘shelter’ is not a material place, but rather the ‘love and care’ made manifest in the way the immaterial spaces are held and incubated. In this way then, the affective dimensions and possibilities of ‘safe space’ are to be found within the artistic and activist community themselves, rather than the locations in which they meet. That said, expanding and contesting the ‘regulative norms’ variably imposed upon queer bodies across different spaces, physical sites, therefore, become more than spaces of refuge, but also the locations from which queer activists and artists could mobilize against diverse processes of violence and exclusion (Ahmed, 2014) – deconstructing and constructing new meanings, and forging counter-publics founded on a radical and intersectional politics (Nagle, 2022).

THE BEIRUT BLAST

The destruction of the city included the loss of scarce safe spaces and cultural institutions, where we had once practised the full spectrum of our existence and revolted against the status quo, only to witness their ruination birth new forms of loss (Yasmine, Art Collective’s Creative Director, in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’).

⁶ A visual platform and photo-journal which explores queer cultures and the SWANA region.

In an already precarious context, the Beirut Blast constituted one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in known history, said to have been the equivalent of 200-300 tonnes of high explosives erupting in downtown Beirut. Beirut's residents had been sleeping, eating and walking past a ticking bomb every day with tonnes of ammonium nitrate (a highly combustible chemical compound) stored in a hangar in Beirut's port since 2014, having allegedly entered as cargo. Ravaging vast swathes of Beirut in seconds, and rattling windows as far away as Cyprus, the blast pulverised the port, killed 218 people, wounded over 7,000, and displaced over 300,000 in seconds – while ammonia gas and nitrogen oxides were released into both eco- and respiratory systems (El Hajj, 2021).

In a context in which 'violence perpetuates across and threads through generations to form one continuous narrative that pervades (and purloins) Lebanese lives and livelihoods', El Hajj (2021: 8-10) quotes Lina Mounzer (2020) who writes that, in Lebanon, 'an explosion resonates across time, that the shock reverberates forward into your life, and the pressure reconfigures the landscape of the mind'. As bodies, minds, and being were hence instantly affected – indeed, transformed – by the trauma of the blast, 'bodies [thus] automatically revert[ed] to phantom geography, to war mode' as 'traumatic peculiarities' are passed from one generation to another (El Hajj, 2021: 10). Indeed, it was the learned adrenal reaction to former explosions that saved the lives of many of the staff of Art Collective, who had gathered on August 4th in their offices to work on the film *Courage*. Dayna told me:

I was in the office with the creative director, and our filmmaker [... and] if it wasn't for the creative director screaming and running out first after the first kind of shock in the ground – because we felt it – and then about 3-5 seconds later the blast went off. So, it was actually her scream that saved all of us [...] But that is not a positive thing – the only reason she was able to identify it so quickly was that she has been through 8 different explosions throughout Lebanon [...].

Similarly, Ayesha was at a friend's home and recalled watching the:

... window cracks first [...] And then the whole wall. The books. The door. Everything became jello. As if you put a filter that just went wavy. [...] I grabbed my partner and brought him to the floor because that's what you usually do in an earthquake, cover our heads in case something fell.

In just these two accounts, the affective dimensions of past explosions – and the way they show up in behaviour and body through learned response to violence – are clear, as is the trauma of the blast itself as it violently ruptured everyday lives and everyday activities across the city. Immediately afterward, Ayesha told me, phone lines were flooded, with people desperately calling family and friends. In the days that followed, the true devastation of the blast became clear, as the government suppressed protests amidst the rubble with teargas and rubber bullets (Melham in Bergman, 2021).

For Beirut's queer communities, amid the intersecting realities of the pandemic, the economic crisis and the blast, their loss was material, spatial and existential. Particularly in queer safe[r] spaces, entire neighbourhoods where queer people had found community, livelihoods, refuge, and artistic and intimate expression had been completely destroyed. As Aouad and Abed (2021: 3) write, such 'areas allowed queer bodies to be safely visible and offered an alternative space to develop non-heteronormative discourses and to gather, organise, and resist against all forms of oppressions they face'. In these places, employment could be found in a context in which a visibly queer individual may be spurned; bodies could be adorned and carried in a diversity of ways regardless of the regulative norms that otherwise restrict them, and queer intimacy – platonic or romantic – could be more safely expressed. Many had to return to domestic arrangements with families that did not accept their entirety, while jobs were lost, and homes were decimated. Discussing a survey undertaken with 101 LGBTQ+ individuals in Beirut, Aouad and Abed (2021) state that housing-related issues were ranked as the most challenging post-blast, with many queer individuals left without a permanent living space, and the ability to access community spaces and support systems ranked the second biggest challenge. Heightened militarisation, the loss of livelihoods and worsening mental health was also cited by many within the survey, with 70% reporting that they had lost their job within the last year, and 75% reporting that the three-layered crisis had had significant negative impact on their mental health. At the time of writing therefore, Aouad and Abed (2021: 3) noted that 'the potential loss of these spaces [...] could have an especially damaging impact on queer individuals given the scarcity of similar inclusive and safe spaces elsewhere'. Despite these material realities, existing networks of queer, feminist and artistic activists quickly mobilised, first reacting and then responding to the losses precipitated by the blast.

THE IMMEDIATE FALLOUT: VISIBLE HUMANITARIAN-ACTIVISM

In moments such as that [the blast], it is a test of character; you either hit the ground, or you hit the laptop ... and we hit the streets (Dayna, interview 04/04/22).

Even with homes and spaces destroyed, rents were paid, electricity bills were collected, even despair in and of itself became too expensive a commodity to own alone (Yasmine, in 'Moulding the Lost Space' Exhibition).

In the days following the blast – amidst the trauma and the rubble – many queer activists and artists organised, taking to the streets, opening the doors of their homes and offices, and responding to the urgent need for rapid response humanitarian action in the absence of such provisions from the state. In this context of acute material need, artistic and cultural forms of visual activism were rendered impossible, giving way to more humanitarian forms of practical solidarity activism. 'For the time being', writes Sleimann El Hajj (2021: 16) on August 9th, 2020, 'the pain is more immediate and pressing, more physical than cultural. Fractured skulls versus charred books.' As the most basic of needs and rights were stripped away by the blast, 'normal' order and activities were suspended, and so emerged networked humanitarian activism among queer artists and activists.

Predominantly a cultural collective specifically focussed on women's and LGBTQ+ rights and representation, Art Collective quickly adapted into one of humanitarian aid – as Dayna explained, 'we believe in rebuilding and restructuring on the basis of the needs of the community we aim to serve – it is really not about what we want, it is about what they need, [...] even if we are not a service provision organisation, we don't have to be to care'. Pouring 'our tools and skills as artists [...] into our work and advocacy', stated Dayna, Art Collective collaborated with others through the previously established solidarity project Yalla Care – conceived in May 2020 to create a network of support and service provision amongst queer and other marginalised communities at the height of the pandemic (see Khoury and Traboulsi, 2021). Eight organisations, including Art Collective and the Queer Relief Fund, created a referral system and assessed 310 LGBTQ+ individuals affected by the blast, responding to the urgency of the needs that arose.

Art Collective, meanwhile, turned their offices into a shelter, hosting eight LGBTQ+ individuals and two migrant workers who had lost their homes and livelihoods – the latter whom they supported upon their desired return to Ghana. For some of the former, homes were renovated, 'but if they were very triggered [going] back to their old apartment, we just made sure that we got them a new place, a new home, new furniture, and enough money to get themselves back on their feet' (Dayna). For the rest of the community, they explained, 'we paid six months in advance for their rent – I think it was 243 people [...] to give them] six months to just chill, take care of yourselves, your mental health'. This money was raised through mobilising 'artists and groups and people all over the world', with every dollar raised going directly to the community with the 'intent also to create an understanding of – both the redistribution of wealth [...] – but also [...] how we function in a feminist economy', said Dayna.

In these ways, practical solidarity became entangled with the ongoing process of 'alternative world-building' with which Art Collective was already engaged through their cultural work. Even in the immediacy of need, 'prefigurative politics' reigned as Art Collective operated in service of the just, inclusive and redistributive community they seek to foster (Reda and Proudfoot, 2021: 1496). As such, as a form of activist-humanitarianism, the provision of material support for marginalised and queer communities was imbued 'with much broader transformative political significance' than 'classical humanitarianism' – which 'places more stress on guiding principles of neutrality, universality and apolitical immediate relief' (ibid). This proved also to be a coping mechanism for Art Collective staff who too were traumatised by the blast, shattering the physical space in which they had grown and nurtured the community. As Dayna said, "I am one of those people that copes by helping – when I feel like things are desperate, I open a safe space. [...] most of our projects are always stemming from feelings." Thus, both politics and emotion underscored Art Collective's shift to humanitarian-activism at a time when 'despair [...] itself became too expensive a commodity to own alone' (Yasmine, in 'Moulding the Lost Space' exhibition).

Similarly, Sandra shifted energies into founding Queer Relief Fund (QRF) to respond to the dire need among the queer community post-blast, starting by cleaning streets, homes and rubble, joining protests and eventually starting a Gofundme campaign for the provision of diverse forms of material support. As for Art Collective, this too had an affective and prefigurative political dimension – allowing Sandra to process heartbreak:

When you see something negative being channelled and turned into something positive – I think that on its own is something that can give you peace and that peace will help you process. [...] you can't just be passive and fall down when something happens you have to get back up, and you have to lift as many people as you can back up with you – so that is how I function personally (Bergman, 2021).

Humanitarian-activism also generated a greater sense of unity and visibility within and beyond the queer community and their shattered safe spaces. Sandra explained:

... after we started the initiative to help people affected by the blast – you really saw a sense of unity [...] Really there was sense of community – as well as the international queer community – that was not there before (Bergman, 2021).

Moreover, Sandra, asserted that the heightened visibility of queer people participating in practical solidarity activism served, in the first instance, to generate greater societal acceptance of non-normative gender and sexual identities, and be welcomed in spaces in which they previously were not:

After the explosion, especially when we were helping people on the ground, and we were able to walk around looking the way we do, into areas that we would not have thought we could ever walk into – looking very queer or flamboyant – without hearing some bullying or anti-queer words – we were actually able to go and be welcomed.

It was like OK, you people are coming to help, there is no differentiation, there is this catastrophic tragedy at hand – like you can't come and say, 'I am not going to accept help, aid or support or someone to talk to just because of what they look like or what they believe in' (Bergman, 2021).

Amid the state of exception that was the devastation of the blast, queer communities engaged in activist-humanitarianism were – according to Sandra – to some extent accepted by the broader Beirut population, despite normatively denigrated gendered performances and presentations. As such, material solidarity became in and of itself a form of visual activism, rendering queer bodies visible in spaces in which they previously could not be. Once again, prefigurative politics came about through the immediate shift to humanitarianism – a glimpse into a world where individuals have the right to visibly be who they are and be (albeit momentarily) welcomed across spatial divides and entangled power hierarchies.

'MOULDING THE LOST SPACE': A DIGITAL EXHIBITION

But the matter of fact is that, even within this context, there remains a need to express, to try and articulate our state of mind, especially with the looming fear of it becoming futile (Yasmine, Art Collective's Creative Director, in 'Moulding the Lost Space' Exhibition).

As the urgency of material need became at least relatively less acute, after 'more than a year' explained Ayeesha, 'people started coming up with films [...] there's the exhibition with Art Collective [...] it's a whole aspect of trying to heal from trauma through visual arts and activism [...] I guess it just needed time'. With time then, Art Collective 'returned to culture in the midst of 2021', said Dayna, pouring feelings into projects, trying to 'find some kind of understanding or closure through the work – the cultural project itself'.

One outcome of return to artistic work was the digital exhibition 'Moulding the Lost Space' which 'asked marginalised artists in Beirut to reflect on the after-effects of the lockdown and the Blast on our spatial surroundings, on the boundaries of physical space and its impact on identity' (Art Collective 2021). The exhibition serves as an intimate exploration of the artists' inner worlds of trauma, grief and mourning of what was lost in the blast and the pandemic. As participating artist Ayeesha explains, 'this is the first piece of art I have created that began with the question of how I felt. I've never been asked that before when creating something'. Art Collective's Creative Director, Yasmin, writes, the exhibition is an 'attempt to deconstruct collective loss and present it as the binding of individual anguish, reflections, and expression, in hopes of archiving the individual experience in times of cataclysm and disarray' (Art Collective, 2021). Along with Yasmin, seven visual artists contributed to the exhibition, and next I analyse the work of two of these.

THE CONSOLATION/DISEMBODIED (WALID NEHME)

In 'Moulding the Lost Space', Walid's self-portraits are presented under the title 'The Consolation', as an ongoing personal project that evolved amidst the 2019 revolution, successive lockdowns and the blast. Walid writes:

During these events [...] every time I tried to pick up my camera to document my surroundings, I was faced by a crippling feeling. I was no longer able to connect with the city I knew, the spaces that used to define my every day, nor was I able to practice or experience queer art in its broader form. Suddenly, I felt that I lost everything, and so this self-portrait project started as a means of refuge, both internally and externally.



Figure 1. The Consolation/Disembodied (Walid Nehme)

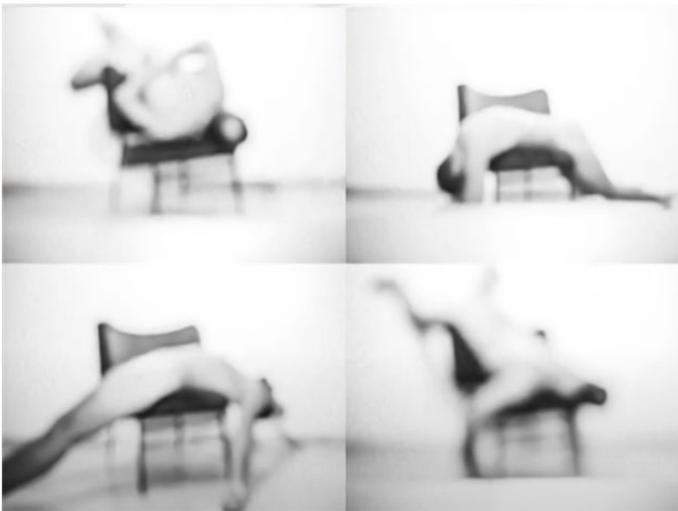


Figure 2. The Consolation/Disembodied (Walid Nehme)

In a context of turbulent transformation then, material spaces in the city as Walid had known and experienced them were lost, and with this came a disconnection to self and embodied being (as he writes in a later iteration of the work, *Disembodied*, discussed below). As the process of documenting external landscapes was blocked by ‘a crippling feeling’, he thus turned to the documentation of his internal landscape as a means of refuge (Figure 1).

A common theme in these series of self-portraits is the chair that Walid sits upon – a chair which he writes represents his ‘unrequited love for objects’ which act then as ‘guardians of his solitude’. As he searched for ‘consolation’, he suggests that this could be found in objects ‘incapable of transformation and therefore soothing in their neutrality’. Representing ‘an idea of perfect internality’, the chaos of the external could then be safely internally navigated. As Walid felt he ‘lost everything’, what remained was his self, his body, and the chair that held him. In a context in which El Hajj (2021: 19) notes the population’s ‘inability to verbalise or neutralise pain due to its sheer abundance and continuity’, Walid’s self-portraits communicate a contrasting sense of neutrality – in the enduring presence of the non-sentient (the chair) – and visualisation of loss in his body stripped bare (Figure 2).



Figure 3. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port – Original/without filter (Ayeesha Starkey)

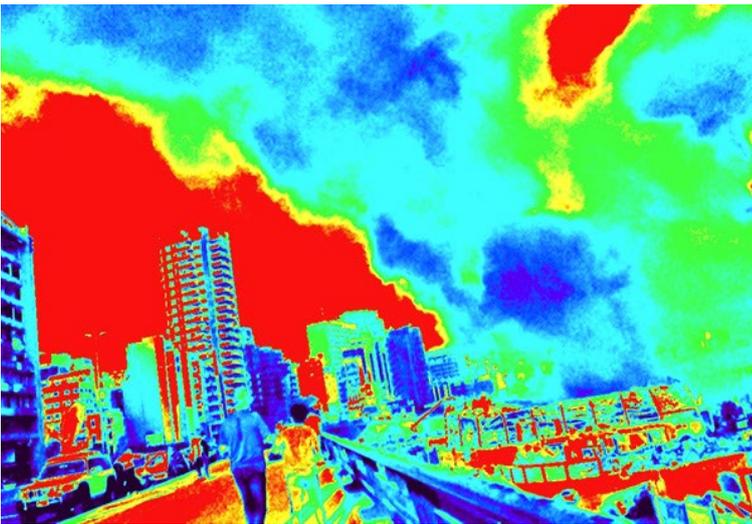


Figure 4. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)

In a later iteration of these evocative self-portraits – shown on Walid’s website (Nehme, 2021) – the description of the images shifts as he further reflected on the events, and the process of creation amidst them. He told me via email that, while the context remains the same, ‘after some reflection, I changed the narrative a bit and saw a different meaning’ – indicating that even when ‘the product’ – the images themselves – have been created and exhibited, the process of creation, reflection and evolution continues. The image of the chair, however, as the non-sentient permanent to which his body is visibly surrendered remains. However, while his earlier iteration focussed more on the consolation provided by the chair that held his body, his later work focussed on the body itself that ‘during the first moments of the explosion, [...] went into a state of oblivion, even without any physical harm – protecting itself from the shock of that larger-than-life sound.’ In an intensive assault on the senses then, Walid writes that he ‘first became conscious of the existence of my body [...] at the same moment that I realised I lost a sense and ownership of it’. With the blurring in the images perhaps connected to this sense of lost bodily coherence, this project, he writes, thus played an important role in his attempt to ‘reclaim my body and prove its presence in the city that lost its space’. In this way, for Walid, even as all was stripped away in exteriority, his body – that which he had simultaneously gained and lost connection with – was held by some vestige of certainty, represented here by the chair – ‘soothing’ in its ‘neutrality’, performatively laying claim to solidity amidst collective turmoil and turbulence.

NEON LIT SKIES - FIRE AT THE PORT (AYEESHA STARKEY)

A month after the blast, there was a fire at Beirut’s port. Ayeesha Starkey’s photographic interpretation of this event – entitled ‘Neon Lit Skies - Fire at the Port’ – also featured in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’ (Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6).

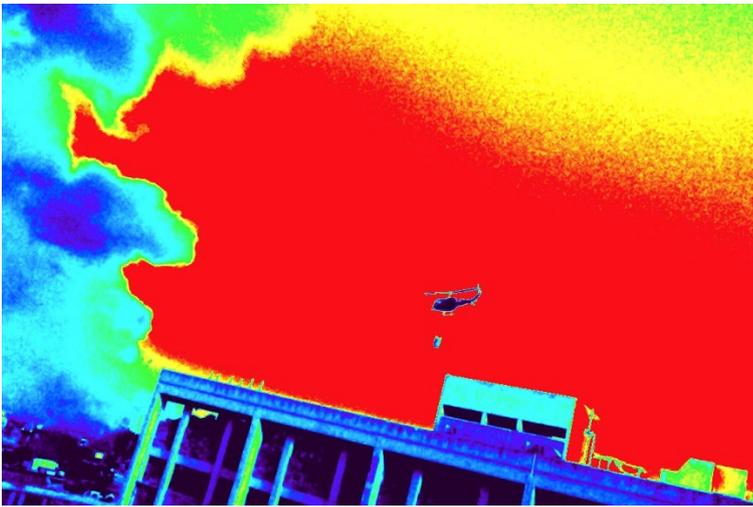


Figure 5. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)



Figure 6. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)

She told me that as black smoke rose, her family and friends called and texted to ensure that she was safe from her workplace in downtown Beirut. Waiting until the fire had calmed, she walked to the port to photograph the fire. Ten minutes after her arrival her phone ran out of battery, and she resorted to her laptop to take photos. ‘What I was seeing in front of me was so big and colossal ... there was this huge black cloud [...] people say, ‘you carry your own weather’ but I couldn’t, it was above me, I was coughing.’ Along with the low-quality camera on her laptop, the heavy, grey of the ash cloud – rendering Lebanon’s usually ‘gorgeous sky [...] murky, barely blue’ – frustrated her, and so she switched to an infrared, thermal effect. As a result, she writes:

The dark cloud of ash filling the sky turned into neon colours that made the scene somewhat more bearable. A crimson red sky bothered by miscellaneous yellow, and green smoke with seeping hints of turquoise.

She continues:

The temperatures of the bodies present in the photo collided with the surrounding objects and buildings, separating them from the intruder in the image, the port and the smoke, or the grain silos, that the lens deemed a different alien element.

With the fire at the port then presented as ‘intruder’ and ‘alien’, Ayeesha could not see the darkness of the ash cloud, rendering a ‘disconnect’ between what was happening and what she was capturing via photograph (Figure 7). This, she explained to me, ‘created a barrier’ enabling her to stay and document the fire as one of the very few people present. She told me:

When I turned it to neon ... It automatically gave me distance ... If I was to pinpoint a word, it would be very much dissonance ...

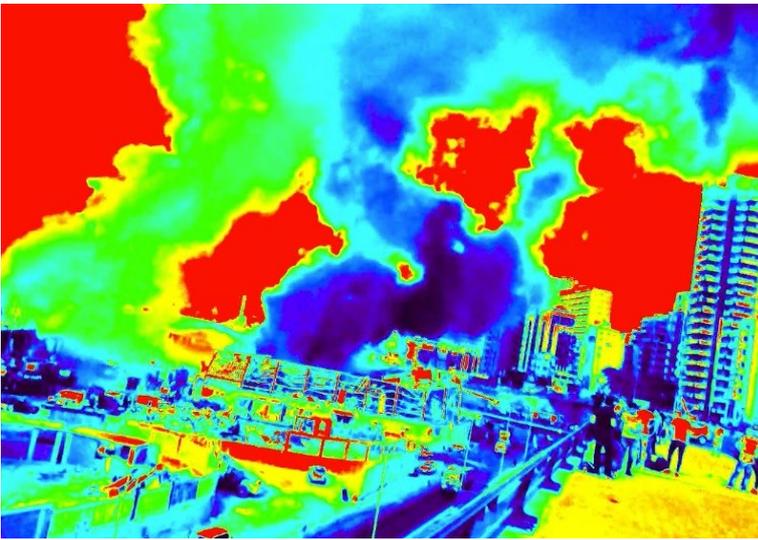


Figure 7. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)

She writes that this rendered the triggering context:

... less emotional, less personal to me, [... helping] me distance myself from the trauma that is so interconnected with the realistic images of the port blast that are being circulated in the media.

In the exhibition, Ayeesha states that: “I’m livid that I can’t grow in a space that’s moulding over me instead of around me. Because I am exhausted, I have become more solemn than angry”. The greyness then, of the ash-filled sky, the solemnity and the weight of heavy exhaustion, which was so ‘alien’ for Ayeesha to both witness and carry, is cleansed from the images, which, in their boldness fall in line with her normative approach to activism, reflected in her comment that ‘when it comes to pointing out when something is wrong, I am very loud’. The wrongness then of ‘the consequences of unforgivable neglect’ that led to the blast, and for ‘our tactical surroundings to no longer exist’ is loudly and boldly proclaimed in the images.

Ayeesha writes as caption to the images, ‘physical spaces remind us of emotional spaces that we now need to carry, without support, without infrastructure, and without an end in sight’. She continues; trauma becomes ‘an intrusive act that has taken physical and emotional space’ and punctuates ‘the fond experiences’ that come too with memories of the then-destroyed spaces. Space is presented then, in Ayeesha’s words, ‘as purgatory in neon’. Conversely to the above, in which Ayeesha describes a felt sense of distance as provided by the filter in the act of taking the photos, the product itself meanwhile evokes a sense of proximity, as a landscape that is felt through the visualisation of temperature. The heat of the fire and the bodies before it is bold and red, and the hot fire of searing loss and grief is palpable as space is visibly destroyed in the images. Anger too is red and hot in the photos, yet Ayeesha explained to me how this energy shifted over time. I asked her how she now felt looking at the images over 18 months since she took them, querying if she still felt a sense of both purgatory and dissonance. She said:

Not as strongly. Now [...] I feel pride [...] I’m glad this was documented. Whether it was me or someone else. But I’m glad this is how it was documented [...] I’m not as angry. Because I understand how to help. More. How to do my part or, in other words [...] If I want to help, I need to help in my own artistic way. This may be one of them.

I am still exhausted. But I’m much more hopeful [...] I don’t have hate anymore. I have hope.

For Ayeesha, then, the process of capturing and expressing the bold, loud rage of loss appeared to be healing, eliciting pride in her artistic skills, and her related ability to document the realities that were exploding around her and her community at that time.

Both Walid’s ‘Consolation/Disembodied’ and Ayeesha’s ‘Neon Lit Skies - Fire at the Port’ powerfully communicate the deep and dynamic affective realities of the blast, as it visibly affected both the surface of bodies and the surface of the city. With both works communicating the dualities of withdrawal and attachment, distance and proximity, exteriority and interiority, permanence and impermanence, the changing responses of the artists to the unchanging form of the images illustrate the dynamism of loss and mourning in the visual storytelling of devastation. Also illustrative of the dualism inherent to the individual and collective response to the catastrophe, alongside loss and lament, came reconstruction and reclamation.

‘A CHANCE TO RECREATE’: REBUILDING AND RECLAMATION

Yet, there seems to be agency found in the idea of loss and deconstruction, the spatial void could be a chance to recreate, reform, and rebuild material and immaterial spaces (Yasmine, 2021, Art Collective’s creative director in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’).

As humanitarian-activism evolved into artistic mourning of what was lost, activists and artists in the city soon began to ‘rebuild and bring back some of what was destroyed’, stated Sandra (in Bergman, 2021), continuing; ‘hopefully it will now be better than before’. With lands, bodies and psyches scarred, the Art Collective team questioned ‘how can we create a sustainable impact for the community?’, Dayna told me, stating that the answer was ‘to create something that we know is missing’ – ‘a community centre’, that was bigger, better, and more dynamic than that which had been damaged in the blast, then turned shelter, and back to office space, triggering and re-traumatising the staff and broader community. Now, Dayna told me, ‘There is an average of 40 persons in the space every single day. We incubate three organisations that are grassroots collectives from Beirut.’ Although Art Collective remains a cultural centre rather than a service provider, they continued:

It is incredible. It’s a ‘bring-to-tears-everyday’ sort of situation – [...] The community centre is there for artists and activists of all ages to come in and work. We host activities and workshops, we believe that if they have a central place to organise to come together, then the movement will not only just mobilise in and of themselves but also that they can expand their understanding of other movements. So that is why the space in and of itself aims to be an intersectional platform for the exchange of tools, ideas, knowledge and of course collaboration.

Once again, the space then, is more than just a physical site; it’s a dynamic space of safety *and* growth, internal *and* external movement building, individual *and* collaborative work. Initially manifest through immediate humanitarian work, love and care for the communities Art Collective works with materialised into the recreation of what Ayesha referred to as ‘the cave’ – ‘incubat[ing]’ artists, activists, women and LGBTQ+ people to create, heal and collaborate.

Bound with this hope is a vision to reclaim not only ‘the present’ through the creation of this cultural centre, but also the past and future. Included within Art Collective’s two-five-year strategies are both the publication of a historical book ‘also as a response to the Beirut Blast’, said Dayna, that will serve as a queer counter archive of queer art from the region, as well as creating future ‘bridges between the queer artists that have remained in the SWANA region and the queer artists that have emigrated’. With the plan to launch, release and disseminate the book at the start of 2023 – to disperse history as much as possible’ – Art Collective is also discussing the possibility of beginning a process of future ‘repatriation’ of queer and marginalised art and artists (Dayna). As a result of successive crises, Dayna told me that many queer artists have simply had to leave to make a living, and to find a way to continue creating, and to ‘exhibit their art’. Dayna quoted Yasmin, Art Collective’s creative director, who states that the plan is to ‘repatriate queer artists one exhibition at a time’, yet also asserted that this can only be an idea and possibility at this point given the ever-changing nature of Lebanon’s cultural, socio-political and economic landscape.

Both plans, the queer counter archives, and the possible conscious repatriation of queer art, are thus ‘about reclaiming the artistic practice of queer artists within the SWANA region, *and* then it is about reclaiming the art itself as part of our narrative and history’ and ‘basically to bring them [artists] home’. This is bound then with the rebuilding – better and ‘stronger’ – of the Art Collective community and space following both the material and immaterial devastation of the blast and overlapping crises. ‘Bringing them back’ explained Dayna:

... is also to make sure that when they do return that there is their safe space, that not too much of Lebanon has veered away from what they know, and that they know that there is still a space that holds them, in their entirety, when they do return.

Loss then, writes Yasmine in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’, ‘was only the beginning’, as processes of reclaiming, recreating and rebuilding now fill the ‘spatial void’ left by the blast with hope.

CONCLUSION

This article has documented the responses of Lebanese visual activists to the Beirut Blast, examining how they grappled with the resultant loss, trauma and material devastation in their art and activism, and the processes of care involved in re-worlding and reconstructing community in the aftermath of catastrophe. Focusing predominantly on the work of Art Collective as well as the Queer Relief Fund, this empirical analysis has revealed

both the affective and temporal dimensions of these dualistic responses – bound with both turbulent emotional landscapes (evident in both Consolation/Disembodied and Fire at the Port) and solid prefigurative politics – as artists quickly adapted into humanitarian-activists, created cultural outlets for the visual navigation of intimate internal worlds amid external turmoil, and later, recreation and reclamation. Through work of public activism, followed by visual mourning and later rebuilding, queer artists and activists – even in the violence, repression and exceptionality of the blast – could variably lay claim to both visual and physical spaces in the uneven geographies of Beirut, after what was formerly considered a ‘safe space’ was lost in seconds.

The significance of this extends beyond Beirut in a context of imperial politics which designate either the ‘Arab world’ (singular) as inherently and wholly hostile to LGBTQ+ individuals or communities – and who thus allegedly need ‘saving’ by the West – or Beirut as a ‘gay haven’ – imagined as a paradise and playground for those with otherwise marginalised gender and sexual identities. These Orientalist tropes and imperial imaginaries are debunked in analysis of the grassroots community support – indeed, love and care – imbricated in the networked yet organic, response to the devastation of the blast. This immediate response also served to transcend the normative boundaries of exclusion and inclusion; as queer communities lost their spatial refuge, they were meanwhile temporarily welcomed in new ways in other spaces under conditions of acute humanitarian need, and ‘able to walk around looking the way we do, into areas that we would not have thought we could ever walk into’ (Sandra). With such boundaries blurred, the focus was clearing rubble to recover the bodies and spaces destroyed by the explosion, while agency was expressed in humanitarian action, public protest, and later mourning over what was lost. The shifting of such spatial boundaries, however, was temporally bound, entangled with the affective dimensions of acute crisis. New spatial refuges thus needed rebuilding, fragmented piece by fragmented piece *by those who loved and loved in them*.

As Yekani, Kilian, and Michaelis (2016: xxii) write, ‘from the outset queer has been active, connected to the wish to act’, centred not only on identity, but also addressing broader interconnected issues. It is unsurprising then that queer artists organised following the blast to address the wide spectrum of emotional and physical losses that queer communities within Beirut faced, mobilising existing networks, tools and skills to document the horror of what was unfolding, and respond, adapt and rebuild in the face of it. As Dayna explained to me, ‘our creative director Yasmin says we need to stop viewing art as a means of expression but seeing it as a tool for change’. In this context, when change was violently imposed as a result of the explosion, art and artistic networks enabled visual activists to variably navigate that change, imbuing this process with the love and care needed to recreate truly safe spaces.

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Building Community Through Queer Learning Disability Amateur Filmmaking: Oska Bright Film Festival and Queer Freedom

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the intersection of disability and sexuality since the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Disability* (Shakespeare et al., 1996), however scant literature refers to these issues as represented on the screen, where it can be argued representations have the most power to shape perceptions. Disabled characters in media narratives are invariably represented as lacking in any sexuality or negation of heteronormative gender and sexual expressions.

In 2017, Brighton-based learning disability film festival Oska Bright (OBFF) launched their Queer Freedom (QF) strand as an intervention in this lack of queer representation within learning disability narratives. In 2017 and 2019, QF featured films made by or featuring queer people with learning disabilities and autism, including Glasgow-based queer femme filmmaker Mattie Kennedy. Devised by OBFF Lead Programmer and queer filmmaker Matthew Hellett after meeting Kennedy at a previous OBFF, Hellett believed he had a responsibility to create a space for these unheard voices.

This article mobilises Bonnie Honig's feminist refusal method of inclination and bell hooks' theory of talking back to explore how OBFF and QF have enabled Kennedy and Hellett to create space and claim their visibility as queer learning-disabled filmmakers through a process of mutual affirmation. Learning-disabled people have historically been segregated from society, so in the spirit of Foucault's heterotopia, by coming together to form a community of people who affirm and encourage other queer learning-disabled people to make their voices heard, they are refusing their assigned societal segregation.

Keywords: visual culture, cultural disability studies, queer studies, visual activism, amateur film studies

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I pose an argument for the radical potential of community building through queer learning-disabled amateur filmmaking. I draw particular attention to the Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF) and its 'Queer Freedom' (QF) strand, operated by the learning disability arts organisation Carousel. More specifically, I focus on two artists associated with QF; filmmaker and OBFF Lead Programmer Matthew Hellett and filmmaker Mattie Kennedy. Drawing upon Hellett's chapter 'Sparkle and Space' for the edited volume *Made Possible* (2020), and my interviews with Kennedy (2021), and based upon their reflections on their relationship with OBFF, I posit that QF is a radical space in which a global queer learning disability filmmaking community's voice has come into existence (Couldry, 2015: 47). QF has afforded artists such as Kennedy and Hellett, among others, the opportunity to express themes of queer gender and sexuality in a world in which this still carries taboo connotations for people

with learning disabilities. Here, they come together in a refusal of the historical segregation and institutionalisation of learning-disabled people to create art outside the art-as-therapy agenda.

My argument is informed by the relationship between feminist intersectionality and queer theory as well as disability studies, and critical race theory. By synthesising bell hooks's work on the politics of care as preservation and her theory of *talking back* and Bonnie Honig's feminist refusal theory of *inclination*, I will demonstrate how Kennedy and Hellett incline toward each other to talk back through a process of *mutual affirmation*. They work in concert to talk back to the heteroableist attitudes of contemporary society towards learning disability art and learning disability sexuality. In the final section of the article, I draw upon Foucault's (1984) concept of the *heterotopia* to claim OBFF and QF afford this mutual affirmation and extend it to the encouragement of other queer learning-disabled people to join them.

When working at the intersection of queerness and learning disability, it would seem logical to analyse my research through a crip theory lens, so I want to briefly explain its omission from this research. My position on crip theory aligns with Kirsten Marie Bone's critique, which exposes it as continuing 'a cycle of silencing and marginalization that widens the divide between disability studies and the lived experiences of the disabled rather than bridging those critical gaps in meaningful ways' (2017: 1298). Bone notes that a fundamental principle of disability studies is that any research undertaken should strive to improve the living conditions of the people being researched, which she argues crip theory fails to realise (ibid). Exploring the theory through multiple frameworks, Bone concludes that the reclamation of the word 'crip' privileges physical disability, noting that Robert McRuer makes no mention of 'intellectual disability' in his writings (2017: 1306). She notes that crip is a term claimed by those to whom the original pejorative use of the word did not refer, exemplified by both Sami Schalk's 'disidentification' with the term as a not-yet-disabled person and McRuer who presented an academic paper wearing a t-shirt with the words 'HIV positive', despite being HIV negative (2017: 1303). Crip theory permits 'claiming an identity that is not one's own' in the name of solidarity (ibid). This authorises anyone to speak on behalf of the disabled rather than prioritizing actual disabled voices, Bone argues, which 'limits the types of disabled voices we hear from' (2017: 1308). Like the social model of disability, which focuses on the cultural construction of disability rather than the political marginalization of disabled people, crip theory's claimed radical potential is not realised because it avoids engagement with disability activism (Bone, 2017) and represents what Mike Oliver describes as academic 'chatter' (Oliver quoted in Bone, 2017: 1305). Bone draws on Mark Sherry to posit that those who self-identify (or disidentify) with 'crip' are distinct from the disability community at large who do not use the term 'because it does not focus on the lived experiences of poor and working-class disabled people, and instead represent 'privileged people' who use crip 'in the context of the safety of academia' which 'masks enormous embodied, classed, gendered, sexualized, and racialized privilege' inherently embedded in the act of 'reclaiming' a derogatory term' (Sherry quoted in Bone, 2017: 1304). I therefore suggest that crip theory fails to account for those with learning disabilities and does not contribute to meaningful societal change, so I prioritise what I regard as more productive interpretive frameworks such as queer studies and intersectional feminism.

Regarding language, I use the term 'learning disability' as that is the term Carousel and OBFF use, and this is the term Hellett and Kennedy also use when discussing community contexts. I use the word 'queer' in its widest umbrella sense to connote diverse gender and sexual identities and because 'queer' is the chosen word for the Queer Freedom strand of OBFF under discussion.

This article argues that through QF, filmmakers can take ownership of the learning disability narrative and enact a new (queer) way of being, through the medium of amateur film, which grounds new (queer) normativities for learning-disabled people. It offers an analysis of, and original approach to, queer visual culture which has hitherto been marginalised within queer and disability visual studies. The issues raised engage with current debates on learning-disabled sexuality and demonstrate the radical potential of amateur filmmaking as a tool for building community.

OSKA BRIGHT FILM FESTIVAL AND QUEER FREEDOM

Learning disability arts organisation Carousel launched in Brighton, UK in 1982 with the aim to offer a creative platform for, and bring together, learning-disabled people in order that they can explore their creativity and learn new art skills. Founded in 2004 by a group of learning-disabled filmmakers, 'frustrated at having nowhere to show their work' (Oska Bright, *Our Story*), OBFF is one of Carousel's largest projects. Hellett (2020: 164) notes that the name Oska Bright is a play on words inspired by the 'Oscars' and 'Brighton' where the festival is predominantly held.

Beginning as a one-day showcase celebrating the work of learning-disabled filmmakers, OBFF has since grown to become 'the world's leading festival for films made by or featuring people with learning disabilities or autism' (Oska Bright, *Our Story*). OBFF runs every two years and, in-between festivals, regularly tours nationally, supported by external funders including the BFI (Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright, 2020). The festival is typically

programmed by genre, based on contributors' strengths and as decided by the festival committee as a democratic whole (ibid). Hellett explains the quality of submissions has increased over the years, as well as the geographical reach (ibid), noting the 2019 festival screened 99 films from 15 countries (Oska Bright, *Our Story*).

Hellett entered his first short film, a spoofy cookery session, *Cooking with Matthew* (2006) into the 2007 OBFF and describes in 'Sparkle and Space' (2020) how it felt amazing for him to have a platform to show his first piece of work. The film won the 'Best Overall Film' award at OBFF that year, and by accepting the award, and the accompanying creative recognition, Hellett was inspired to continue his filmmaking practice. Soon after awarding Hellett the prize, Carousel invited him to join the OBFF committee (Hellett, 2020). Hellett has since made a total of six short films with Carousel, receiving a commission from Brighton and Hove City Council for *Unusual Journey* (2007) themed on bus travel, and a surreal portrait of his drag alter ego Mrs Sparkle in *Mrs Sparkle* (2009); the first film by a learning-disabled filmmaker to be funded and commissioned by South-East Dance (Hellett, 2020).

Through OBFF, Hellett has been mentored by Emma Smart, programmer of *Flare*; the LGBTQIA+ strand of the BFI, which Hellett described as a positive experience which paved the way for his promotion to Lead Programmer of OBFF. Emma assists Hellett to organise themes and assess which entries to accept or reject (Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright, 2020). Hellett has acted as Lead Programmer for three festivals as of 2022, which has equipped him with the knowledge and understanding of the creative process of film festival curation.

Hellett describes the ease and confidence with which he now curates the festival programme; 'I don't find it hard choosing which films to include [...] I know in the first five minutes whether something will work or not, if it looks amazing or if it's trash. It's got to grab people and it's about quality, not quantity' (Hellett, 2020: 166). This demonstrates a criticalness to Hellett's curation and a consideration of aesthetics when choosing what to include or exclude; a theme that will be explored in more depth below in the context of his position as gatekeeper and thus insider/outsider of the filmmaking community.

It was through Hellett's Lead Programming role at OBFF that he first came into contact with Mattie Kennedy, having programmed their film *Just Me* (2013) for the 2015 festival. Until Kennedy became aware of Hellett through this invitation, they did not know any other queer learning-disabled filmmakers (Matthew and Matthew in Conversation, 2016). This invitation to visit Brighton to screen their film was a 'nerve-wracking' time Kennedy explains, not knowing if they would be awarded the much-needed funding from Creative Scotland to realise the trip (they were). "I was really, really wanting this, I was wanting it so badly [...] it was like, if I don't get this, I don't think I'm going to be able to handle it, 'cause this is important" (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). Since 2015, Kennedy has made two short films with Carousel; *Enid and Valerie* (2018), a stop-motion animation telling the story of a witch and a spinster, and the documentary *Not Mythmakers* (2022) in which Kennedy shows their work on what they have named the 'Matthew and Matthew Archive'; an archive of ephemera, photographs and collage templates related to the 'Matthew and Matthew' events hosted by OBFF across the UK in which Kennedy and Hellett screen their films together followed by a Q&A session.

Inspired by meeting Kennedy, the first queer learning-disabled filmmaker Hellett had also met, he began formulating the idea for the QF strand. Hellett felt that Kennedy 'really understands what it's like to be me' and meeting them made Hellett 'realise that we need to give the space to more unheard voices. [...] I don't have that many friends in the gay community and it's important for us to come together, support each other and celebrate the work we do as artists' (Hellett, 2020: 165).

The 2017 QF screened four films, *Versions* (2015) by Kennedy; a stop-motion animation exploring issues of re/birth, family and identity, *John and Michael* (dir. Shira Avni, 2004), a stop-motion animation film following the story of two men with Down's syndrome who fall in love, *Life on Two Spectrums* (dir. Elizabeth-Valentina Sutton, 2017), a documentary following UK Drag Queen Tia Anna who has Asperger's, and who Hellett 'really identified' with as a fellow drag artist (Hellett, 2020: 166), and finally *Pili and Me* (dir. Ignacio Garcia-Sanchez, 2016) which explores themes of family and advocacy. QF has become a permanent feature of OBFF, with the 2019 and 2022 strands showing 6 and 4 films respectively. In 2021, in light of social distancing measures, QF took the shape of a virtual Facebook live stream named 'Love Bites' to coincide with Brighton Pride and showed a selection of films from the 2017 and 2019 festivals. Although not intended for 2022 due to its bi-annual scheduling, a festival in 2022 was held to compensate for the virtual format of the 2021 festival.

Hellett was nervous prior to the first QF, fearing it may be 'too controversial' (2020: 166). These fears are not unfounded considering in 2019 Republican US congressional candidate Peter Meijer declined to host the UK Down's syndrome drag troop Drag Syndrome at the arts venue he owns in Grand Rapids, Michigan because he questioned whether the performers could give their 'full and informed consent' (Jacobs, 2019). Referring to their Down's syndrome status, this inability to give consent relates more broadly to the labelling of people with learning disabilities as vulnerable, which Garbutt (2012: 298) states has led to their being 'excluded in many areas of society'. Meijer's refusal to host Drag Syndrome aligns with the issues highlighted in the social model of disability in which disabled people suffer discrimination and exclusion as a result of environmental, institutional and attitudinal

barriers (Oliver, 1990). Davies (2000: 183) notes that ‘people with disabilities are seen as passive, childlike objects/subjects unempowered and disempowered. It is not acceptable in the 21st century that disabled people are still treated like innocent children or fragile flowers’. Not every member of Drag Syndrome identifies as LGBTQ so it is unclear what consent Meijer is specifically alluding to, but it can be presumed it is the association of drag as a performance style to queer gender and sexuality. Relatedly, it is noteworthy that not all the films curated for QF express queer love and sexuality, which suggests that the expression of *any* love and sexuality is almost a queer gesture in itself for learning-disabled people, if queer can be interpreted in its broadest meaning as a non-normative way of being.

While not officially part of the QF strand, the feature-length film *Sanctuary* (dir. Len Collin, 2016) was screened at the same event, which dramatises a story of sexual attraction between Larry with Down’s syndrome and Sophie with severe epilepsy who hatch a plan with their sympathetic carer to have alone time in a hotel room. As the 2017 OBFF programme blurb asks, ‘How do they express a love that dare not speak its name? Are they aware that in Ireland they are about to break the law?’ The law in question refers to Section 5 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 1993 in Ireland which stated, ‘A person who has or attempts to have sexual intercourse or commits or attempts to commit an act of buggery, with a person who is mentally impaired [...] shall be guilty of an offence’ (Irish Statute Book, n.d.). In February 2017 that law was changed as a result of the work of Inclusion Ireland and other lobbyists, which cited *Sanctuary* as one of the reasons behind that decision (CBC Radio, 2017). The law now states that the ability of a person with mental impairment to consensually engage in sexual intercourse is to be considered on an individual basis. *Sanctuary* therefore marks a significant moment in the history of visual culture where film has been used to confront pervading stereotypes and assumptions and consequently to affect socio-political change.

Hellett explains that he was shocked on watching *Sanctuary* and was ‘proud’ to give the film its UK premiere at the 2017 festival. ‘People are being too protective’, he believes, ‘like they don’t want to open up that door to sexuality. There’s just this sad stereotype that means people who have a learning disability get treated like children. But I have a human right to be me’ (Hellett, 2020: 174-75). The infantilisation of learning-disabled people was ironically mocked in *Sanctuary* when one character appears shocked to hear of Larry and Sophie’s sexual chemistry, stating she always thought of them as ‘full of hugs’ (Collin, 2016).

Irony aside, Hellett raises a crucial issue when he notes he has a ‘human right to be me’. ‘Why can’t we just allow people with learning disabilities to be sexual?’ Hellett asks rhetorically (2020: 174). Since the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Disability* (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies, 1996), a wealth of literature has emerged exploring the sexual rights of disabled people, with increasing reference to the intersection of disability and queerness. Like Shakespeare et al. (1996), Schwier (1994) draws on first-hand accounts of people with learning disabilities discussing their sexual lives to challenge barriers and assumptions. In 1997 the journal *Disability and Sexuality* was founded to continue this discussion, and while predominantly publishing articles related to physical disabilities, the journal has published substantial articles related to learning disability. Clare (1999) offered one of the first in-depth personal accounts of disability and queerness, and 2000 saw increasing interest in media representations of people with learning disabilities (Block, 2000; Tepper, 2000), paving the way for further personal accounts and research at this intersection (Kafer, 2013; Gill, 2015; Liddiard, 2018). However, as the cast and crew of *Sanctuary* discussed at a Q&A following the screening at OBFF, public opinion and understandings of these issues take longer to change than any legislation or academic publication, so the stigma attached to recognising people with learning disabilities as sexual beings will likely remain. This is a cynical position, but a justified one, as evidenced by Meijer’s refusal to host Drag Syndrome in 2019 embedded in a discourse of vulnerability.

Hellett’s idea when formulating QF was ‘to champion the voice of every person with learning disabilities. I didn’t want to leave anyone out. The festival is totally committed to pushing the representation of all learning-disabled people, gay or straight. We believe that the stories and films we show are ones that people everywhere should see’ (Hellett, 2020: 166). Hellett is clearly motivated by making the voices of queer learning-disabled people heard through films either by or starring queer people with learning disabilities. Frohlich (2011) notes how ‘a central aim’ of LGBTQ activist work has been to increase visibility in society. During the early years of the gay rights movement in the 1970s, gay politics was predominantly concerned with transparency, with being out and visible and being so with pride (Frohlich, 2011). Similarly, the disability rights movement followed in the footsteps of Gay Liberation and used visibility as its main weapon in the fight for rights (Thomsen, 2015). The 2019 OBFF attracted an audience of 3000 people (Oska Bright, *Archive*) and Hellett points out that 50% of those do not have a learning disability. He believes ‘that’s a really important statistic for me as it shows we’re having a much bigger impact’ (Dimensions, n.d.). Lizzie Banks, Deputy Artistic Director of Carousel, noted during a personal conversation that the QF strand is the most requested and popular of the touring OBFF events, which demonstrates that Hellett has tapped into an increasingly crucial conversation. Hellett’s motivation for ‘pushing the representation’ and for ‘people everywhere’ to see the films is explicitly built upon the foundational principles of the gay and disability rights movements’ interest in the politics of visibility.

REFUSING THE ART-AS-THERAPY AGENDA

In a similar concern for pushing visibility, Carousel's website describes their intention to 'provide a bridge between people with a learning disability and the wider community'. They point out that funding cuts to UK support services have resulted in people with learning disabilities 'facing greater isolation and alienation than ever before' (Carousel, n.d.), demonstrating a wish to make an intervention to bring learning disabled people together. In *Just Me* (2013) Kennedy speaks of such 'alienation' and similarly reflects in one of our interviews how they found it difficult getting a foot in the filmmaking world, having received the crushing blow in 2015 that the one learning disability arts organisation in Glasgow had its funding pulled, mid-project. This lack of access to funding raises questions over the value of learning disability creativity and relates more broadly to the infantilisation of learning-disabled people, particularly within mainstream art circuits.

Mitchell and Snyder note how disabilities have historically been narrated as individual and private concerns which have been 'banished to the closets or attics of houses or institutions' (2000: 214) and they assert that the danger of such a narrative of disability has resulted in the isolation of people with disabilities from public view outside of a medical discourse. Reflecting on the obstacles they themselves faced when trying to complete their short film documenting a national (US) disability arts community, *VITAL SIGNS: Crip Culture Talks Back* (1998), Mitchell and Snyder explain finding themselves in some sort of catch-22 scenario when describing the issues they faced securing funding to complete the film; the subject matter was not considered 'rehabilitative' or 'practically applicable' to the lives of disabled people (ibid) and, likewise, filmmaking and arts funders did not recognise disability subjects as in line with the goals of experimental filmmaking of the time (2000: 215).

Disability artists are often funded through therapeutic and health agendas which Hadley (2014) argues ignores the experimental and political possibilities of their work. This is a view echoed by Hargrave who regards 'the relationship between art and therapy as highly contentious, since it has, in the case of learning-disabled people, conflated the creative drive with sickness and reinforced a view of such persons as inherently in need of rehabilitation' (2015:35). Hargrave works with British learning disability theatre company Mind the Gap whose aim is to make learning-disabled performers artists in their own right, outside of the therapy agenda. His text, *Theatres of Learning Disability* (2015) is the first scholarly text to focus on the aesthetics of learning disability away from such a therapy agenda.

In an interview with Kennedy (2021), I asked their opinion on the assumption that learning disability art is always in some way 'therapeutic', to which they responded how 'it's the way it's framed [...] it's an isolated term for specific communities, like the learning disability community or just the disabled community in general, I don't like it [...] it smacks of condescension to me [...] We're allowed to express ourselves without having those terms pinned on us' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). Likewise, Hellett recounts being questioned on his filmmaking at a conference and was directly asked if he worked on arts projects for therapy. 'This attitude makes me so angry', Hellett states. 'It's not therapy—it's art [...] People think that if we 'do art', it's at a day centre and it's something to keep ourselves busy with or it's some sort of healing or wellbeing treatment. I think it's stereotyping again' (Hellett, 2020: 177).

To borrow a phrase from Nirmal Puwar, artists with learning disabilities carry 'a burden of doubt' regarding their artistic capabilities to measure up, which results in an infantilisation whereby they are assumed to have 'reduced capacities' (2004: 59-60). Because people like Kennedy and Hellett have refused the confinement to the 'closets and attics' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: 214), they instead exist as 'anomalies in places where they are not the normative figure of authority', and thus 'their capabilities are viewed suspiciously' (Puwar, 2004: 59). Puwar notes that although anyone can theoretically enter a space, it is the sense of belonging in that space that is restricted to some. Some people have the presumed right to be there, whilst some are 'trespassers', 'space invaders', or 'matter out of place' (2004: 43). The space in question here is the filmmaking world, which Kennedy never felt they had a chance of getting a foot in, and the world of representation where Kennedy and Hellett did not see queer learning disability reflected, where the 'normative figure of authority' has historically been the non-disabled controlling the narrative of disability. QF has given Kennedy, Hellett and others a platform through which to refuse this 'normative figure of authority', to place themselves as the authority on their own narrative in a radical gesture of self-representation and community gathering.

Informed by hooks's understanding of care and recovery, it occurred to me that while I did not want to fall into the trap of considering Kennedy and Hellett's film work in the context of therapy, there was undoubtedly an element of 'care' or 'recovery' for the self in the process of filmmaking for them both. In their film *Just Me* (2013) Kennedy speaks of having anxiety and explains how having a voice as an artist calms that anxiety. The voice is something that Kennedy evokes is something they have had to 'regain,' or 'recover' to use hooks's words; suggesting it was taken away at some point. Similarly, Hellett in their film *Sparkle* (2008) speaks of being a worrier and of having anxiety, but that when he becomes Mrs Sparkle, the frustrations are gone. Hellett has written of his experiences growing up and attending a Catholic comprehensive school in Brighton where he received little

support in core subjects but ‘found solace in the art room’; the only place he felt able to express himself at that time (2020: 167-68). Reflecting on his filmmaking, Hellett explains how his work gives him ‘a voice and a chance to tell people who I am’ (2020: 161). He explains his main aim as having ‘the right space artistically to express myself. I was born with this need to express myself, but I didn’t always have the space to achieve it’ (2020: 181). Reflecting on the early days of Mrs Sparkle, Hellett recalls wanting to dress up in drag as he wanted to forget about his anxieties and worries, to be visually outspoken that ‘this is me, this is who I am’ which ‘felt great’ (Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright, 2020). If the act of filmmaking is giving Kennedy and Hellett the platform to come to voice, then the platform of OBFF and QF as a place to share that with the wider queer learning disability community affords an act of ‘talking back’ to the dominant culture, to use hooks’s (2014: n.p.) phrase. Kennedy and Hellett are doing what can be interpreted as a form of ‘care’, or ‘recovery’, for the self and for their community, not in a clinical rehabilitative ‘recovery’ sense, but a philosophical recovery, a recovery of agency and power as radical care for the wider queer learning-disabled community.

Writer and filmmaker Juliet Jacques notes the concept of self-care emerged after the decline in Europe and North America of the principle of dying for an idea or sacrificing one’s life in confrontation of a political ideology. Jacques (2020) determines how self-care can be considered a ‘critical part of long-term radical engagement’ and is something that has primarily been done by those from marginalised communities who experience discrimination. Jacques quotes Audre Lorde who explains that self-care is self-preservation and that in itself ‘is an act of political warfare’ (Lorde in Jacques, 2020). This is why Hellett’s creation of QF represents such a radical gesture of ‘political warfare’ because, as queer disabled writer Jamie Hale (2021) notes, ‘disability’ is still considered a political word ‘because disabled people still face barriers.’ By making artistic films outside of the therapy or rehabilitative agenda, and by showing them in public contexts such as at OBFF, Kennedy and Hellett refuse the ‘dictates of a culturally-imposed isolation’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: 201), and defy the cultural barriers and attitudes which have dominated disability filmmaking as therapeutic. Kennedy and Hellett, and the queer learning-disabled filmmakers and performers associated with QF, are deviating from their expected role. But not only do they ‘invade space’ to draw on Puwar, they actively create and construct *new* spaces within which to nurture community.

For hooks (2014a), self-care, self-preservation and self-recovery are inextricably linked to the resistance of exploited and oppressed people, and ultimately their liberation and revolutionary transformation. The term self-care has been reclaimed by queer and disabled communities from its bastardisation in neo-liberal capitalist contexts of guilt-free leisure and the purchase of pampering products. For hooks and Lorde, self-care meant looking out for the self and other exploited people in oppressive societies, to work towards a more equitable future and to value one’s self/ves when others are not, to imagine new ways of being and seeing oneself and one’s community in more affirming ways.

In a radical act of affirmation, and just two months after the Drag Syndrome show being cancelled by Meijer, the 2019 QF screened *Born to Dance with an Extra Chromosome* (dir. Nikolay Nikolov, 2019), a documentary following Drag Syndrome, followed by a Q&A session with the performers. Going one better at the 2022 event, Hellett programmed Drag Syndrome to perform live. Hellett consistently and defiantly confronts timely issues and debates related to (queer) sexuality and learning disability through his programming. Vocalising this refusal, he understands that people ‘might not like my drag act or my films. They might not understand my learning disability or the fact I’m gay. But I reckon you either like it or you get lost’ (2020: 181).

Kennedy describes Hellett as ‘a history-maker’ due to his creation of QF which has given a platform to Kennedy and other queer learning-disabled filmmakers’ narratives ‘to be seen and [...] to be valid and allowing them to have some sort of dialogue within the film festival circuit [...] that was a big deal within our community’ (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). In addition to confronting timely issues and championing the sexual rights of people with learning disabilities through art, Hellett is also building a community through his programming and curation. ‘I’ve learned that the best way to change things is through positive action’, Hellett told the charity Dimensions in 2019. By inviting Kennedy to deliver a keynote speech at the 2017 QF, and by regularly programming Q&As, Hellett is driving this ‘dialogue’ Kennedy mentions and allows others within the community to contribute. They refuse their isolation and alienation by talking back to the dominant culture through the medium of film; they are putting forward their voice and their narrative.

AMATEUR FILMMAKING AND CURATION AS MUTUAL AFFIRMATION

In *Talking Back* (2014b [1989]), hooks discussed the notion of ‘the personal is political’, noting that real transformation happens when personal experience or ‘radical self-awareness’ (108) is linked to collective struggle. In our interview, when Kennedy states that they are just ‘one piece of the puzzle’, and when Hellett curated Kennedy’s film *Just Me* in 2015, they both acknowledged that the political certainly starts with the personal gesture (of making or programming a film), but it does not end there, it must reach out. For hooks, to be critical, to think wider, deeper, as to why the oppression exists, which includes both the personal and the collective experience and

interrogates the structures of domination which allow the oppression to exist, to talk back to the dominant culture - that is when real transformation happens. Kennedy and Hellett can be seen to gravitate towards each other, to think critically together, to *incline* toward one another to talk back to and refuse their position as isolated therapeutic artists who are thought to not express non-conforming gender or sexuality.

In her chapter on inclination in *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), Bonnie Honig disorients Adriana Cavarero's understanding of the refusal concept of inclination. For Cavarero, inclination is theorised in relation to da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*; the Virgin mother's inclination can be found in her maternal and caring relationship with the child, rather than as patriarchal expectation and subordination to motherhood and unpaid care labour (Honig, 2021). Honig interprets Cavarero's inclination as pacifist, and instead calls for an agonistic inclination, locating mutuality not in maternal kinship but in the sorority of the bacchantes in Euripides's *Bacchae*.

In the *Bacchae*, when the bacchantes realise they are being watched by Pentheus, they try to attack the voyeur by individually pelting him with stones and using branches of fir trees as javelins. Realising the limitations of their individual strength, they incline towards each other and act in concert to force the tree down upon which Pentheus is hiding; "Come, my maenads, gather round this tree and *all take hold...*" and with that, *countless hands* pulled and pushed' (Honig, 2021: 46, emphasis in original). Instead of merely reorienting the sororal relationship from lone working to group working, the agonistic turn of the bacchantes in their attack on Pentheus is more akin to Sara Ahmed's concept of disorientation, which Honig draws upon; a more agonistic interpretation. If to be oriented is to be in one's rightful place, it can be said Cavarero's subversion of the maternal role is a reorientation. Therefore, as Honig argues, to be disoriented is to actively reject that space and refuse the concept of having a rightful place at all, thus going beyond subversion.

For Honig, the expected role of women as passive, non-violent and non-confrontational is disoriented in the *Bacchae* and the women reject their maternal duties by leaving their children in the city of Thebes, retreating to their own heterotopia of sorority in the mountain range of Cithaeron. Here they take on a more assertive, violent and confrontational position. Inclination becomes 'generative and caring, violent and murderous' (2021: 59) and is a continuation of the challenge to 'sovereign power' (2021: 58) which keeps things and people (women) in their place (passivity). The point at which new normativities are grounded and old ones unlearned, inclination poses questions and confronts stereotypes and, as Honig has clearly outlined, requires some form of agonism to be powerful.

Inclination is present in OBFF through Hellett's formation of QF. Refusing the ableist gaze of a society which has worked to isolate and alienate people with learning disabilities, preventing access to arts funding and valuing art through the therapy agenda, for closing the door to expressions of sexuality and non-conforming gender presentations through a discourse of vulnerability, the filmmakers associated with QF represent Honig's (and Ahmed's) disorientation. As Puwar (2004) argues, while the ableist gaze fixes learning-disabled and neurodiverse bodies, the ableist gaze is also disoriented by the presence of learning-disabled bodies in a space in which they are not meant to be, the world of filmmaking. QF is Hellett, Kennedy and their wider queer learning disability community's Cithaeron, it is a space in which lone filmmakers come together and act in concert to enact symbolic violence on the dominant culture, through both the smashing of stereotypes by self-representing and through the refusal of status by the invasion of the medium of film with new narratives. This is the agonism of QF's inclination; 'the latent categories and boundaries that tacitly inform who has the right to look, judge and represent start, ever so slightly, to falter' (Puwar, 2004: 46). Honig suggests there is an element of metaphorical care and agonism inherent in all inclinational practices. If the above represents the agonism of QF, the mutual empowerment (hooks, 2014a) of Kennedy and Hellett represents the care.

hooks (2014a: 129-130) notes how a 'mirrored recognition' enables the defining of a community's own reality set 'apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination'. This mirrored recognition, hooks suggests, reinforces solidarity, which offers a new potential audience for each other's films where queer learning-disabled subjectivity will be the narrative focus. This mirrored recognition can be envisaged when Kennedy recounts seeing Hellett for the first time; reflecting how they were both sat in the auditorium of the 2015 OBFF watching one of the strands, how Hellett came and sat down beside Kennedy, 'and I think that was it', Kennedy explains, 'we just looked up at each other and we just smiled at each other. We didn't even need to say anything, we just looked at each other and it was like "you know what, we see each other"' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). In her study of the concept of staring, Garland-Thomson (2009: 185) notes how a 'stare is a response to someone's distinctiveness, and a staring exchange can thus beget mutual recognition, however fleeting'. This mutual recognition has been key to Kennedy and Hellett's mutual affirmation. Kennedy explains the importance of such mutuality as 'when you're *that* marginalised and there's only two of you that you can see, it's like we need to band around each other, take a hold of each other and just be like, "I see you, I see you and you see me"' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021), a sentiment Hellett and Kennedy later elaborate on: 'because being LGBT and learning-disabled is such a specific identity there's not many spaces for us as artists to carve out or be a part of [...] I feel it is a rare occurrence for LGBT learning-disabled folk to meet in arts spaces. As a community we

need to uplift each other and we can't forget that and we need to support each other' (Matthew and Matthew in Conversation, 2016).

Hellett's radical gesture of mutual affirmation can be seen in his QF curation and Kennedy's can be seen in their Matthew and Matthew archive, the subject of their 2022 film *Not Mythmakers*, which was started as an attempt to assert both their roles in learning disability arts history. Their care can also be seen through their encouragement of others to make films and join the visual dialogue.

As part of Carousel's commitment to encouraging participation and developing the skills of learning-disabled artists, OBFF regularly tours the UK and holds masterclasses and workshops for basic film training meaning 'now the films entered into the festival are of a much higher quality', Hellett states (2020: 165). In 2011 Hellett received funding to accompany Carousel to deliver a six-week workshop in Adelaide, Australia teaching people with learning disabilities the basics of film. The workshop participants have since set up their own film festival, Sit Down, Shutup and Watch!, delivered by Tutti Arts, (*Disability And ... Film with Oska Bright*, 2020), demonstrating the impact of their satellite activities on the building of community.

Hellett makes a point of programming films by young people in support of the next generation of filmmakers, to inspire their creativity and develop their filmmaking skills. As he found his own self-confidence through his recognition for *Cooking with Matthew* by OBFF, he pays this forward by scouting for new talent and generally flying the OBFF flag to encourage submissions. 'I think my work's ground-breaking', Hellett states, 'so I hope it makes it easier for younger people to do what I'm doing. If I can do it, they can too' (2020: 167).

Hellett reflects that he would not be where he is today if not for the creative work of Carousel who helped him 'try all sorts of different things, from dance to singing and film [...] I became more confident, almost like I got to know myself better [...] it's like I was a little caterpillar before I started on this creative journey, and now I'm like a butterfly' (2020: 172). Similarly, Kennedy states how learning disability arts organisations carve out space for people like themselves and Hellett and how OBFF in particular is working hard to make space for them as their culture is largely invisible (Matthew and Matthew in Conversation, 2016). These comments highlight the importance of creative organisations and festivals as not just platforms for exhibiting creative work, but also for the support and encouragement they offer through recognition and the communities and networks they foster. If Cithaeron represents the bacchants' heterotopia in Honig's feminist re-reading of the *Bacchae*, OBFF and QF more specifically can be understood as a queer heterotopia in which creativity and community are nurtured.

In his positioning of the heterotopia, Foucault defines it as 'a space that is other' which acts as 'the greatest reserve of the imagination' (1984: n.p.). The heterotopia provides a means of movement, migration, escape and adventure and represents the rejection of repression in search of new ways of being. QF can be viewed as a great 'reserve of the imagination' whereby filmmakers can explore such movement and escapism and can imagine new ways of being. Refusing art-as-therapy in favour of art-as-art, refusing infantilisation in favour of gender and sexual (queer) expression, and refusing invisibility in favour of visibility, QF becomes a space that affords other ways of being, other narratives that have been excluded, other communities flourish which have until then been invisible. In an age saturated by mass self-publication, film festival spaces like QF allows voices to be heard which can be transformed by the collective process of showing work. What emerges is a community of subjects with a voice, each seeing, listening, speaking, recognising each other, in mutual affirmation.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on their involvement with OBFF, Kennedy does not think OBFF 'even realises how much space they had given us and how important that was, they actually gave us a space to create a dialogue that hadn't really been heard before within film festival spaces [...] there was also that sense that we were creating our own history through this film festival circuit, we're creating our own narrative' (Interview with Kennedy, August 2021). As part of OBFF, Kennedy believes they and the QF community are 'setting a dialogue that needs to be continued [...] these guys are setting the standard and they're championing underheard voices and basically bringing them out of the darkness and into some sort of visible realm' (ibid). Like the film *VITALSIGNS*, and others like it (from *When Billy Broke His Head* [1995] to *Crip Camp* [2020]), whose voices 'contributed to the creation of a disability ensemble' (Fenton, 2016: 210), OBFF and QF are continuing to add to this ensemble by nurturing a collective queer learning-disabled voice. As Claire Johnston highlights in her pivotal 1973 essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', collective working and skill sharing provide 'the real possibility of examining how cinema works and how we can best interrogate and demystify the workings of ideology' (2014 [1973]: n.p.). The collective approach and skill sharing practiced by OBFF therefore challenges ableist privilege within the film industry and works as a site of mediation of queer learning-disabled images that have not been seen before.

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A Complex Landscape of Fun, Queerness and Desire in China: Introducing Three Films by He Xiaopei

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ABSTRACT

This article documents He Xiaopei's work as a film activist who contributes significantly to feminist and queer movements in contemporary China. Trained as a social scientist, He Xiaopei then went on to become the director of the civil organization Pink Space Research Center in the mid-2000s as well as an independent filmmaker. Since 2010, she has produced more than ten documentary movies. However, despite the greatness of her contribution, the range of the topics she has covered, and her position in the feminist and queer movement in China, she has yet to receive the attention she deserves in English-speaking academia. This article selects three movies by He Xiaopei, i.e., *The Lucky One*, *Playmates*, and *Bad Women of China*, and provides an intersectional analysis of gender, friendship, migration, sexuality and intimate relationships, as seen through the lens of an ever-changing China on the global stage. At first glance, the three movies focus on different figures and themes, but they share the same core spirit – breaking through boundaries and limits, maintaining humour and positivity even when facing predicaments, embracing desire and depicting humanity as it manifests in complicated modern life.

Keywords: independent film, feminist and queer movement, film activist, China

INTRODUCTION

This article introduces the work of avant-garde independent filmmaker He Xiaopei, an original voice in contemporary China, who has contributed significantly to feminist and queer movements. Based on a close reading of her films and several in-depth interviews with He Xiaopei, this article focuses on introducing three of her films at different stages of her career. This includes the *Lucky One*, *Playmates*, and *Bad Women of China*. These highlight fun, queerness, and desire as three major characteristics of her films. By paying attention to women, children, and marginalized groups, He Xiaopei's work challenges patriarchy and heteronormativity and puts desire onto the agenda of the feminist and queer movement in China.

He Xiaopei is a woman who has not chosen a conventional path. After she graduated from middle school, she was sent to the countryside as part of a group of Intellectual Youth (*zhishi qingnian* 知识青年) and worked as a shepherd for several years. After the Cultural Revolution, she enrolled in college and later became an economist at the State Council. She has also been on many adventures, taking part in different kinds of extreme sports, such as diving, mountaineering, and winter swimming. She even joined the National Team of Mountaineering in the 1980s and continues to practice her love of winter swimming to this day. In the early 1990s, she was involved in lesbian organizations (He, 2001). In 1995, she went to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, where she encountered feminist and queer activists. Inspired by this experience, she quit her stable, high-end job, to

pursue a PhD in Cultural Studies in the UK, which she completed in 2006. In 2007, she founded the Pink Space Sexuality Research Centre with three other bisexual and lesbian activists. This organisation focuses on promoting the rights of sexually disadvantaged groups. When working with marginalized groups, including women living with HIV/AIDS, wives of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, and people with disabilities, He Xiaopei found that filmmaking/video anthropology was a powerful way to not only document participants' lives, but also to empower them and let their voices be heard. Following this she taught herself filmmaking and went on to make many provocative films.

He Xiaopei is based in Beijing and has produced 11 documentary films since 2010. Despite her significant contribution and her position in the feminist and queer movement in China, she has yet to receive the attention she deserves in English-speaking academia. Her films cover a wide range of topics and themes, including diverse families (e.g., polyamorous family, arranged marriage between lesbians and gays), marginalized groups (e.g., women living with HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities), friendship, lifestyle choices, and womanhood.

While He Xiaopei's films depict diverse topics, they share some similar key characteristics: First, the space she gives to humour—there is a certain sense of humour embedded in all of her films even when He Xiaopei discusses rather grave issues, for example, illness, disability, death, divorce, and poverty. This use of humour is partially traceable to her character as a person; she is known to often make jokes about life. It can also be traced back to her viewpoint that both 'feminist and queer movements need humour and optimism to keep the activists moving forward' (He, 2017).

Second, the centrality of queerness. Seemingly distancing herself from identity politics and refusing to label her films as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans) (He, Kehoe and Bao, 2019), He Xiaopei has embraced the concept of queer, which is more fluid and inclusive, and mobilising 'queer, as a verb (doing rather than being) ... to challenge normative knowledges, identities, behaviours, and spaces, thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions' (Hunt and Holmes, 2015: 156 cited in Lee, 2019). He Xiaopei's films, for example, often pay attention to a group of people who could not simply fit into the binary gender categories, namely, 'non-conformist queers and alternative lifestyle advocates' (He, 2017), including two pairs of lesbian couples who shared an apartment and chose to enter 'heterosexual marriages' with gay men (*Our Marriages—When Lesbians Marry Gay Men*, 2013). In another film, there is an English transgender person who has had gender affirming surgery but refuses to conform to normative notions of a trans woman and instead chooses to dress boyishly (*Yvo and Chrissy*, 2017). This deliberate centring of marginalised and non-normative people is noted by He Xiaopei herself in a 2014 interview where she said: "I want to give voices to women, to the disabled, to transgender people, to the poor, the sick, and the homosexual. These people are underrepresented, misunderstood, and often unseen." The third key theme across He Xiaopei's films is desire. As the most private emotion, desire is usually hidden away or expressed in a delicate fashion. In contrast, He Xiaopei depicts the desires of her characters in a candid way. This connects to her worldview of human beings: she believes in a sense of agency and autonomy as the most essential qualities of human beings, and that desire and sexuality can empower people to be themselves (He, 2017).

In this article, I introduce the film activism of He Xiaopei by focussing on three films that offer an insight into the range of her filmmaking as they concern different topics and are produced in different years: *The Lucky One* (2011, 36 minutes), *Playmates* (2018, 46 minutes), and *Bad Women of China* (2021, 82 minutes). My focus is on illustrating how these films examine the intersectionality of gender, illness, friendship, womanhood, sexuality and intimate relationships, as seen through the lens of an ever-changing China on the global stage. At first glance, the three films focus on different figures and themes, but, I suggest, they share the same core spirit – breaking through boundaries and limits, maintaining humour and positivity through difficulties, embracing desire, and depicting humanity as it manifests in complicated modern life.

THE LUCKY ONE: WHO IS THE DIRECTOR?

The Lucky One is a film about the last few months of the life of a Chinese woman, Zhang Xi, who has AIDS and is also suffering from advanced liver cancer (Figure 1). Facing her upcoming death, Zhang Xi starts to audio-record the story of her life. On the one hand, she looks back upon her own life and reflects on her intimate relationships; on the other hand, she captures the current moment of her existence by audio recording her stories.

He Xiaopei got to know Zhang Xi through a community activity organized by the Pink Space Centre for marginalized women groups. At the time, many queer NGOs were set up with the help of international HIV/AIDS funds and often with the support of the Chinese government (Hildebrandt, 2013; Bao, 2018). He Xiaopei noticed that women living with HIV/AIDS had little voice within the HIV-positive groups and that their needs and desires were overtly ignored. In contrast, HIV-positive gay men had a much louder voice within the group and could mobilize many more resources. Thus, she decided to organize marginalized women so as to allow them to voice their needs and be able to support each other.



Figure 1. *The Lucky One* (2011, 36 minutes): An HIV-positive Chinese woman with only a few months left to live, reveals her hidden desires. Nominated for Best Documentary at the 9th China Independent Film Festival, the film was also available online where it achieved more than 100,000 hits (Picture authorized by He Xiaopei).

He Xiaopei organized a series of workshops to bring together women living with HIV/AIDS, lesbians, bisexual women, and wives of gay men (Jolly et al., 2013) to talk about their stories and discuss their desires. The workshops created a safe space for women to share their feelings and their desire to take care of each other. He Xiaopei was successful in receiving funding to purchase some digital recorders and distribute them to several women in order to encourage them and provide them with the means to document their feelings and stories in their daily lives. These interventions are an example of how the activism of her filmmaking reaches beyond the screen, beyond the subject matter of her films. Despite her efforts, Zhang Xi was actually the only one systematically using the recorder to audiotape her own stories. He Xiaopei was intrigued by her way of storytelling and decided to make a film about her.

The Lucky One documents the interaction between He Xiaopei and Zhang Xi, and their main discussion about whether Zhang Xi should tell her son about her illness and the fact that she was approaching her death. Zhang Xi insisted that the stigma of AIDS would ruin her son's future, and to protect her son, she is willing to make sacrifices and choose not to see him one last time. He Xiaopei tried hard to convince her to tell her son 'so that he would have the chance to come and see his mother one last time and avoid any regrets later' (He, 2014). Even during Zhang Xi's last birthday party, her son did not show up. After Zhang Xi's death, He Xiaopei in a strange turn of events found out that her friend never actually had a son.

In this film, He Xiaopei has created a counter-normative character who serves as an image of a female AIDS patient. In the era when HIV/AIDS was filled with stigma, women living with HIV/AIDS were often described as miserable, isolated, and victimized. However, Zhang Xi did not fit into any of these descriptions. In fabricating her own life story, and inventing a son, she challenged and pushed the boundaries of the documentary genre. 'Lucky' was the word that Zhang Xi used at her birthday party to describe her life by acknowledging 'the love she received by friends and by her partners'. Even though she was illiterate, unemployed, addicted to drugs, and living in a detention centre for a long time, she did not feel self-loathing or self-pity. She drank, smoked, laughed, and loved. She had regular sex with her partner and was stubborn and argumentative towards him, even reaching the point of beating him up at times. Zhang Xi's unconventional nature could not help but leave a deep impression on any audience watching her story.

A unique element of this film is how the power dynamics of the director and subject/participant were reversed. This reversal raises two core questions: firstly, what is reality? Traditional documentary films set out to depict people and things in a truthful and accurate way. *The Lucky One* challenges this one-dimensional reality. Both the director and the film's participants had their own version of what they perceived to be real. The film media itself allowed both to capture their co-constructed realities and have them depicted on a screen. The second question that arises is: who has the right to tell the story? Of course, He Xiaopei was the director who initially decided to

film a woman not afraid of dying. However, Zhang Xi managed to seize the power of storytelling and switch the storyline to her own desires: she decided which figures would appear in her story and even arranged or fabricated some dramatic events for that purpose (He, 2014). The more He Xiaopei tried to steer the narrative in her desired direction, the more methods Zhang Xi employed to steer away from it. By adopting this strategy, Zhang Xi 'expressed her deepest, most suppressed, and to this day unsatisfied desires' (He, 2014). In the last scene of the film, Zhang Xi was credited as the director, while He Xiaopei only as a camera woman. *The Lucky One* is a 'process-driven' documentary. At the beginning, He Xiaopei was a participatory activist researcher who used visual ethnography in her community work and Zhang Xi was a participant in the documentary. During the process, the participant was empowered and liberated to create her own stories and become a credited 'director'. Compared to *The Lucky One*, the other two films, *Playmates* and *Bad Women of China*, are ethnographic films. In these, the director documents friends and families in their daily lives over a long period of time.

PLAYMATES: EIGHT YEARS OF CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIP



Figure 2. *Playmates* (2018, 46 minutes): The story follows two boys' relationship through time. One is from rural China, and one is from a small town in the UK. Filmed over eight years, we witness how young children perceive differences in colour, nationality, class, culture, gender and sexuality. Released in Beijing, Shanghai, UK, and India, the film was presented at film festivals, cinemas, universities and galleries (Picture authorized by He Xiaopei).

Playmates is a humorous film that vividly captures the spirit of youth and the carefree nature of a childhood friendship between two boys (Figure 2). He Xiaopei was fortunate to be a close friend of both families the children belonged to and thus got a first-hand opportunity to witness and document the friendship between the two boys from 2010 to 2018. One was Kai, an English boy of mixed-race, of Afro-Caribbean and white European descent from a middle-class family. Kai's mother Susie used to be a project manager of an international research foundation based in Beijing. The other was Zihao, a rural Chinese boy from Sichuan province whose mother Xiao used to be Kai's nanny. In the beginning, He Xiaopei did not have a clear theme or objective in mind; she just took the opportunity to act as a filmmaker and document the two boys' daily lives and interactions. The film emerged as if 'time went by and created a miracle' by itself (He, 2022).

Starting at a birthday party, the two boys begin the journey of their friendship. Their class differences are depicted by contrasting images: Their homes are different. Kai lives in a 2-bedroom house in a reconstructed traditional Chinese courtyard, while Zihao lives in a rented small room at the end of the long and twisted lane. They also go to different kindergartens, with Kai enrolled in a state kindergarten with modern and fancy facilities. In contrast, Zihao goes to a small private nursery run by a retired woman. They spend their Christmas and New Year in the UK and a rural part of Sichuan province in China, respectively. Despite all their differences, they play, fight, laugh, cry, and spend plenty of time together having fun. Even after Xiao quits her job and returns to her

hometown in Sichuan to take over the family pig farm, the two families keep in touch. They visit each other during the summer holidays. One thing stood out from mainstream childhood documentaries—*Playmates* candidly documents how young boys start to explore their bodies, their gender, and their sexuality. They witness big fish being caught in the river, a sheep getting killed, and a litter of pigs being born on the farm. They brag about the length of their penis, try on skirts and wigs, and discuss the differences between boys' and girls' private parts.

This film is about class, but there is much more to it than that. It is about how people achieve mutual understanding despite class difference: two boys formulate a friendship over time, while two mothers develop their own sisterhood. On the one hand, they were different as regards their ethnicity and nationality, their social and economic background, the status of their family, and the cultural backgrounds they were brought up in; on the other hand, we witness two boys having so much fun together and sharing similarities throughout their lives—their parents getting divorced and both having a younger sister to look after. Class is a challenging topic for independent films. It easily falls into the trap of blaming one class for victimizing the other. He Xiaopei skilfully avoids this trap and depicts class distinction through the expression of emotion, and in particular through the relationship between mother and son, between Xiao and Zihao. On a bustling street in Beijing, Xiao was picking up both boys from their according kindergarten to take them home. Though Zihao was the younger of the two, Kai was the one closely kept by Xiao's side. It seems that she had put Kai's needs and safety above Zihao's. This was also the reason why Zihao cried quite often when he lived in Beijing, since he felt ignored by his own mother. His mother needed to take care of someone else's child, over her own, no longer making him her first priority. As such, Zihao was much more at ease when in the countryside, where he was allotted more attention from his mother and Kai was only there as a guest. The anxiety and jealousy felt by the young boy are vividly captured in the film and serve to foreground the tensions of class. Queer and feminist activism in China have been mainly situated in the metropolitan cities among the well-educated middle class, and class itself as an important agenda has often been neglected. He Xiaopei's subtle treatment of the complex issues of class echoes an intersectional approach in exploring gender issues within the matrix of personal emotion and social-structural factors of rural-urban division and migration.

BAD WOMEN OF CHINA: REBELLION IN THEIR VEINS



Figure 3. *Bad Women of China* (2021, 82 minutes): The film tells the story of a Chinese grandmother, mother, and daughter from the 1920s-2020s. Their lives and desires are shown with humour and emotion as they experience political and social revolutions, break the rules, and give each other both trauma and love. Screened at Beijing Queer film festivals in 2021, as the closing film (Picture authorized by He Xiaopei).

Bad Women of China is a film documenting the stories of three generations of women in one family, that of the grandmother (Li Yunqin, Li for short), the mother (He Xiaopei), and the daughter (Xiaoqiao), covering the

timespan of the last century (1920 to 2020). This is an autobiographical film in which He Xiaopei is both director and main character (Figure 3).

This film revolves around complicated mother-daughter relationships, not only the relationship between He Xiaopei and her mother, but also about the relationship between He Xiaopei and her daughter. It is also a film about the intergenerational dynamics between three women; when mother-daughter relationships turn sour, a granddaughter figure serves as the sweet and cute element that smooths things out. The overall theme focuses on finding a way to put aside bias, listen to each other, reconcile, and achieve mutual understanding across generations. Through this process, three exceptional women, who represent rebellion, independence, and free spirit are vividly depicted. Even more importantly, this film weaves personal stories into the social and political history of China's development over a century. The crucial historical moments, for example, the liberation and establishment of New China (1949), the anti-rightist movement (1958), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the economic reform (1978), and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), are all embedded in these women's personal lives. At time they serve as the background of the characters' stories, at others, they become the impelling social forces that push the characters forward and shape their path through life. In each situation, one witnesses the three women trying their best to seize the opportunities presented to them and use their own means to become the masters of their own fate.

Clinging to a strong desire to improve their communication and rebuild the relationship with her mother, He Xiaopei asks her then college drop-out daughter Xiaoqiao to interview her grandmother in the early 2000s. With the granddaughter, Xiaoqiao as a mediator, grandmother Li starts to tell her story. Li was born in 1926 in Tangshan, in Hebei province. When Li was still young, she fought with great stubbornness for the chance to go to school. Because of her determination, Li went from Tangshan to Beijing all on her own when she was only 12 years old, to take the entrance exams, and later to study at the Beijing City Teacher School. It was in the early 1950s, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to establish a Foreign Language Institute and for this purpose recruited students who were training to become future diplomats. Li was quick in taking advantage of the chance to attend a revolutionary university to learn Russian, which opened up the door for a number of new opportunities. She first became a teaching assistant for experts from the Soviet Union, and later became a university teacher. This led to her becoming the department head of the university. Just when everything seemed perfect, Li was denounced as a rightist in 1958 and sent to the countryside to reform herself through labour. At this time her daughter, He Xiaopei, was only two years old. Education became the inner drive for Li to achieve career development and social mobility. Li embraced the ideal of the new independent student and woman, who devoted herself to the course of the revolution and the reestablishment of the nation.

The film narrates the stories of three women, but also their complicated relationships as well. He Xiaopei grew up in a big loving family with a father, grandmother, auntie, and an elder brother. When she was very young, she was often puzzled by the absence of her mother, who chose to live in the university dorms and only came home on weekends. Most of her childhood was spent during the period of the Cultural Revolution. One of her favourite activities was reading the little red book by Chairman Mao in order to get a free bus ride, together with her friends. Over time, He Xiaopei became used to her mother's absence, while at other times, the absence seemed unbearable and disappointing. The longing for her mother's love and attention eventually becomes He Xiaopei's unfulfilled lifelong desire. He Xiaopei never grew close with her mother.

In contrast, the relationship between He Xiaopei and her daughter Xiaoqiao seems close and intimate. They hug, kiss, cook, and tease each other. When Xiaoqiao was a teenager, she came to the UK with He Xiaopei. She attended middle school while Xiaopei pursued her postgraduate study. Over the years, Xiaoqiao experienced He Xiaopei's divorce with her father in the form of a slow but certain process. She also witnessed He Xiaopei proceed to form all kinds of romantic relationships, such as her same-sex marriage which also led to divorce. At first glance, it seems that they have established a perfect modern democratic mother-daughter relationship. However, to He Xiaopei's surprise, her daughter, just like herself, felt neglected by her mother. In the end, He Xiaopei comes to realise that she has grown to become similar to her own mother. The subtitles of the last scene are spoken out of the depths of He Xiaopei's heart, "A thank you to my mum for not teaching me to be a wife and mother. A thank you to my daughter for wanting me to be her mate and friend."

The Chinese sociologist Liu (2014) characterises the intimate relationships of each of the generations portrayed in He Xiaopei's film in three keywords - '*Jiandan*' (simple) for the grandmother's generation (in which marriages tended to be arranged by parents), '*Danchun*' (innocent) for the mother's (in which 'free love' is associated with marriage), and 'rational love' in the youngest generation (in which pragmatism trumps romantic love). The disjuncture between these ideal types, and the three women portrayed in this film suggests all three are rebellious, in their own way.

In the film, one of the most amusing scenes is the comparison of the three women's preferences and dating choices. Grandmother Li describes in the film her type as 'revolutionary hero'. Li met her husband at a revolutionary university. He used to be an underground communist party member and organized protests against

the Kuomintang before the liberation took place. As Li describes, she was attracted by his heroic spirit. They started dating of their own free will, got married and only informed her family after the fact. Her story was not 'jiandan' as her peers and her marriage was her own choice instead of an arrangement by her parents or a matchmaker. For He Xiaopei, her preferred type, as she states in the film, is 'fat with saggy breasts'. In contrast to her 'danchun' peers, He Xiaopei had her first sexual experiences when she was working in the countryside as a shepherd. This was the first time she was away from home and had a girlfriend. As she explains in the film, the corresponding political awakening for her would be during the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. In the film she describes how she discovered the lesbian tent on the conference site, and then soon came to terms with the idea that being lesbian is not a problem. Later she divorced Xiaoqiao's dad and started to live openly as a lesbian. Xiaoqiao describes in the film her type as 'clean and good looking'. The film narrates that Xiaoqiao was popular among boys and started dating and became sexually active earlier than most. She did not maintain a stable relationship as her peers did and had a long list of boyfriends and flings from various countries. In the film she is seen as taking control of her dating and sexual life: willing to try things out but also not hesitating to give things up.

The interaction between the three women brought a lot of laughter into the film. Sometimes, their relationships are triangular, with Xiaoqiao in the middle as a mediator to ease the relationship. Though it seems that Xiaoqiao is not willing to play the role of peacemaker all the time, being naughty from time to time and using the word 'pervert (*biantai*)' about He Xiaopei's homosexuality to create tensions in the relations between her mother and grandmother. At other times, the three of them are divided into two opposing sides with the two of them sided together to tease the third. There is an amusing scene revolving around showing a postcard titled *The Great Wall of Vagina* (designed by Jamie McCartney) to the grandmother. He Xiaopei wants to show it to her mother but asks Xiaoqiao to do it. They debate this and neither of them really wants to be the one to show it to Li. Later, Li looks at the postcard very closely but is confused about what it is. At another point in the film, the only time He Xiaopei and her mother are on the same side, the grandmother attempts to emphasize the importance of schooling to Xiaoqiao. Her grandmother believes in the significance of schooling since her whole life revolved around schooling and her striving to move upwards. However, Xiaoqiao emphasizes seeking happiness by dropping out of school. At this point, the two generations fail to reach an agreement.

Through focusing on three women within one family, *Bad Women of China* brings women's voices to the forefront, in order to create a landscape of images of courageous women over a century. In a way, one could say that the three women in this film represent progressive women pioneers in the socialist era, post-socialist era, and cosmopolitan era, respectively. In each historical period, they each encountered similar and yet different predicaments and challenges. They demonstrate their resistance and agency in solving problems and finding their own way.

MAKING HE-STYLE QUEER FILMS

He Xiaopei believes in the power of documentary films. In her opinion, 'Documentaries are an integral part of social movements, and they should inspire people to continue their work' (He, 2017). It often took He Xiaopei a long time to make a film. It took her eight years to complete *Playmates*, over fifteen years for *Bad women of China*, and an additional two years for the production of *The Lucky One* after all the shooting had been completed. Her extended engagement over long periods of time gave her the opportunity to look back upon her work and ruminate on the overall progress and depiction of what she was aiming to achieve. During the entirety of her work, He Xiaopei maintained a very intimate connection with her films and did not hesitate to be present and appear on camera. Of the three films mentioned, she is least seen in *Playmates*, though her voice can often be heard in the background, reminding the audience of her presence. In *The Lucky One*, she is a supporting character, while in *Bad Women of China*, she is one of the main characters. In traditional documentary films, the directors are often invisible and attempt to document objective stories with holistic perspectives. In contrast, He Xiaopei's presence within these films, is her way of taking up a unique and changing position. She is the director who brings out her own personal perspective and queer sensibilities in the most straightforward manner to reach her audience.

BREAKING THROUGH BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS

All three films discussed here are about breaking through boundaries and limits. *The Lucky One* is an unusually candid dialogue with a dying woman living with AIDS and cancer. Despite having death approaching, the dying woman was still busy searching for the meaning of life. She made a deliberate decision about fabricating a son for herself in order to make her life more fulfilled. This story crosses the boundary of life and death, reality and fiction. *Playmates* depicts the friendship between two entirely different boys in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and class.

Instead of illustrating children as innocent and passive, as most films tend to do, this film portrays the two boys as active agents that explore their gender and sexuality. The issue of class has been artfully embedded into the storyline and into the means by which the main character expresses emotion. This story talks about class but also moves beyond it. *Bad Women of China* is about three women who belong to the same family. This case can be interpreted as the historical progression of women in China. Before the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, the new women's image was guided by the grandmother figure. This was a model based on a group of revolutionary and educated women patriots. He Xiaopei represents a second wave of feminists in China who were inspired by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Finally, Xiaoqiao symbolizes a group of young women in an era of globalization and cosmopolitanism who believe in seeking happiness through their individual life choices. Pivoted around depicting mother-daughter relationships, this story raised the philosophical question of 'who am I' for all women of all ages in China.

LAUGHTER AND TEARS: MAINTAINING A HUMOROUS OUTLOOK AND DEPICTING PREDICAMENTS

In relation to queer films and related academic work in China, Bao (2018: 30) once commented that most, 'works of art and academic writings seem abstruse, if not depressing, for community consumption, because of their theoretical density and aesthetic avant-gardism'. He Xiaopei's films never belonged to this type of queer film. Humour is the core characteristic of her films. He Xiaopei's technique is distinctive – an amateur look that combines the famous 'on the spot' style of Chinese 'xianchang(现场)' independent cinema with a more relaxed humorous outlook and commentary not usually found in such films¹.

A key aesthetic I have highlighted here is how He Xiaopei builds contrasting surprises between scenes. For example, in *The Lucky One*, at the end, we are surprised to find out that Zhang Xi's son never existed. In *Bad Women of China*, there is a line, "I thought when chairman Mao died the sky would fall, but over the course of the next few days, universities reopened, and the youngsters took their college entrance exams." In another scene Xiaoqiao is selected as one of 'top 50 young British designers' but this is contrasted in the next scene, where she becomes a 'full-time seamstress in a factory'. The contrasting lines and scenes often catch the audience by surprise and create a unique sense of humour.

Both *The Lucky One* and *Bad Women of China* touch upon suffering and trauma. However, the characters often briefly mention their suffering and even smile with tears in their eyes. This is He Xiaopei's way to express she does not want to ignore the suffering and trauma, yet she believes strongly in all women's power to deal with predicaments of any kind. Across all her films, she shows faith not only in the strength of women, but also in the strength of marginalized diverse individuals.

Furthermore, the music used in the films adds to their humour. Especially in *Playmates*, the background music is cheerful and light-hearted, produced by Kai's dad Orvil Layne. Sometime the rhythm of the music and the content of the scenes (for example, both Susie and Xiao getting a divorce) creates a contrast, thereby producing He-style entertainment and humour. As He Xiaopei said in an interview, "One can use different art forms to express ideas. It is the ideas behind these forms that matter. I want to express my ideas in a way that speaks to the audience. Therefore, the stories have to be interesting. In this case, it should be more visually acceptable, not in terms of being pretty, but in terms of being more audience-friendly" (Bao and He, 2019).

EMBRACING DESIRE AND DEPICTING HUMANITY

He Xiaopei regards documentary films as a medium to allow the desires and experiences of characters to be expressed, recognized, and understood. He Xiaopei refuses to regard women, children and other disadvantaged groups as powerless victims, and she has faith in capturing desire as the powerful engine that moves human beings.

The three films capture the desires of everyone alike, including women, children, and marginalized groups of people. The dying woman Zhang Xi in *The Lucky One* had the unfulfilled desire of having a son and being a mother. The two little boys in *Playmates* desire to have a giant penis and dress like pretty girls. The three women in *Bad Women of China* show different types of desire: what the grandmother Li values most is independence as a woman, He Xiaopei is searching for her true self at all times, while Xiaoqiao places happiness as the most valuable goal in life.

Neither Chinese Confucian culture or communist central ideology encourage people to talk about desire, especially pleasure-based desire related to our body and our sexuality, particularly not in public. In contrast, advertising is a very public discourse on the desire for material goods. It is often the case that sexuality is used to

¹ This argument is inspired by the anonymous reviewer.

sell things and it is women's bodies which are objectified through this process. The industry of pornography and of sex workers, creates the space for some people to talk about bodily desire, although this usually happens in stereotypical ways which further enhance the patriarchal system². The avoidance of a public discourse about desire is also reflected in the women's movement in China, which has mainly focused on women's liberation in the public space, including obtaining rights to jobs and education in the socialist era (1949-1978) and fighting against gender-based violence in the private domain during the reform era (1978 till now, especially after 1995) (Wang, 2017), leaving discussions about desire, body, and sexuality largely marginalized within the feminist movement. Against this background, He Xiaopei's work is especially valuable in recognizing desire as a human right, challenging mainstream culture, tradition, commodified discourses, and pushing forward, expanding the frontiers of the feminist and queer movement (Jolly, 2022).

PUSHING FORWARD FEMINIST AND QUEER MOVEMENT

He Xiaopei is a film activist who contributes significantly to feminist and queer movements in contemporary China. "The history of global feminist and queer activism has often been dominated by Western perspectives" (Jenzen and Lewin, this issue), and most of the time global movements set up the agenda and strategies for developing countries to follow. The rising of the second wave of the feminist movement after 1995 in China has also been deeply influenced by the transnational feminist movement which includes placing anti-gender-based violence as the key element of the agenda. As a feminist, He Xiaopei belongs to the generation of the second-wave feminist activists directly influenced by the 1995 World Women's Conference. Instead of following a conventional path of fighting against gender-based violence like other peer feminists, He Xiaopei chose to come out as a lesbian and work in the domain of desire and sexuality. In China, discussions on desire and sexuality are often perceived as challenging and oftentimes they are regarded as dangerous and even forced to be hidden. He Xiaopei's work on the other hand often make use of the 'participatory approach' (Bao, 2020) which aims to lift the veil, engage with marginalized groups, and challenge patriarchy, heteronormativity, and the victimization of women.

Her films have been well received among the new generation of young feminist groups in China. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of the current young feminist groups is that, like He Xiaopei, many of their members identify themselves both as women and as lesbian or bisexual. Some of them cross the boundaries as both feminists and queer activists. Many of them are urban women in their twenties or early thirties who have benefited from the one-child policy, being well-educated, single, and working in NGOs for women's rights (Wang, 2017), while others hold white-collared jobs. He Xiaopei's work strongly resonates with them, in speaking to a desire that is usually hidden away. Moreover, many queer figures in He Xiaopei's films have become their role models which encourage them to pursue their true identity in their 'precarious' daily lives (Huang, 2017).

Despite the fact that homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and depathologised in 2001 in mainland China, the Chinese government still adopts strong censorship and silences public discussion and representations of LGBTQ+ issues (Huang, 2017; Zhao, 2020; Guo and Evans, 2020). Under such circumstances, the Chinese LGBTQ+ community follows the Western strategies of activism, namely increasing 'visibility' through being outspoken and full of 'pride', an approach that sometimes may seem counterproductive or even problematic. The position of queerness, in He Xiaopei's films bring an acute sense of 'ambiguity, playfulness and non-determination' (Chiang and Wong, 2017), and may give birth to an alternative space for activism. A queer positionality has given He Xiaopei the opportunity to manifest a more inclusive perspective and to pay attention to topics and people which the mainstream feminists and LGBTQ+ movement ignored, i.e., wives of gay men, lesbian and gay formulated contracted marriages, people with disabilities, and so on. By listening to and documenting their stories, He Xiaopei's films create a special space of participation and emancipation. They even address the issue of 'active queer-feminist interventions into global politics' (Bao, 2020). Using stories of desire as an entry point, the queerness of He Xiaopei's work challenges and questions the 'fundamental assumptions and the power structures embedded in mainstream cultures and values such as race, marriage, intimate relationships, kinship, class, ableism etc.' (Zhao, 2020). The films make people laugh, cry, think, and act. In *Bad Women of China*, Xiaoqiao asked He Xiaopei, 'mom, what do you want to achieve?' He Xiaopei replied, 'I do not want to achieve anything. I just want to tell a story.' A story can be very powerful.

² This paragraph is inspired by the anonymous reviewer.

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Challenging Misrepresentations of Roma Through Queer Romani Visual Self-Representations

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ABSTRACT

This article considers, in social semiotic terms, the visual self-representations created by lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ, thereafter queer) Romani visual activists and artists, and some of the processes used in the course of a transdisciplinary, collaborative research project. Undertaken in 2019, its aim was to investigate, through queer intersectional research-informed interventions, the potential of this semiotic material – photographic renditions of the lived experiences of queer Roma – to challenge dominant stereotypical misrepresentations and an overall lack of visibility of queer Roma. Another goal was to further enhance the impact and accessibility of the knowledge co-produced with and by the queer Romani visual activists and artists by giving a visual form to their lived experiences of antigypsyism intersecting with homophobia, transphobia, sexism and other forms of oppression. This approach to co-producing knowledge enabled the queer Romani visual activists and artists not only to exercise control over the process of creating the visual self-representations, but also to spell out, in a visual form, the terms in which queer Roma wish to be represented.

Keywords: Roma, queer, visual, knowledge production, self-representation

INTRODUCTION

Historically, misrepresentations of Roma¹ have been instrumental in generating and maintaining distorted, often negative portrayals of Roma. Contrary to the reality of nuanced, plural, multi-layered experiences and intersectional identities, Roma have been trapped in a mire of myths (e.g., Sabino Salazar, 2021). The actual lives of Roma have been reduced to stark, crude representations (Fremlett, 2017: 722) and controlled by stereotypical images of ‘Gypsies’. Non-Roma have often associated Roma with romanticising images of nomadism, unchained freedom, passion, voluptuousness and exoticism; or with vilifying images of criminality, deviance, backwardness, inadaptability, anti/asocial behaviour, threat, risk, conspiracy or invasion (van Baar, 2015; Clark and Campbell, 2000). Yet, ‘[a]ll stereotypes are inaccurate, even the positive ones’ (McGarry, 2014: 761). Consequently, these damaging visual (mis)representations of Roma as fundamentally ethnically/’racially’ *distinct* and *different* from the presumed non-Romani, white *norm* have resulted in what are often tense social relations, easily manipulated and exploited by the media, politicians and other actors and stakeholders.

¹ Within the UK context, Roma are sometimes also referred to as ‘Romany Gypsies’, ‘Gypsies’ or ‘Travellers’. Here, I use the endonymous term ‘Roma’, as well as the term ‘Gypsy’ in keeping with the self-identifications made by the research participants, while noting tension and ambiguity around the usage of the terms.

In Romani Studies, too, Roma have often been essentialised as ‘eternal Gypsy nomads’ (Willems, 1997). Such a stigmatised, collective conception of Romani ethnic identity has led to members of this ‘group’ being reduced to possessing the same set of assumed, often negative characteristics and values. In the political landscape, neoliberal nation states have tended to over-visualise and use Roma as ‘bargaining chips’ to generate notions of solidarity, belonging and identity among non-Roma (McGarry, 2017). To counter these processes, Tremlett (2017) believes that an accurate understanding of Roma requires a conscious effort made by non-Roma, including through research (Tremlett and McGarry, 2013), to transcend historically constructed stereotypes about Roma and to attend closely to the self-representations of Roma themselves.

In the social sciences and humanities, textual data have been traditionally privileged over visual data despite the fact that

even literary studies have been forced to conclude that the world-as-a-text has been replaced by the world-as-a-picture. Such world-pictures cannot be purely visual, but by the same token, the visual disrupts and challenges any attempt to define culture in purely linguistic terms (Mirzoeff, 1999: 6).

In Romani Studies, too, scholars such as, for example, Tremlett (2017), End (2017) or Dunajeva (2018) have been examining photographic (mis)representations of Roma². Yet, there is an urgent need for more critical engagement with visual content and materials (mis)representing Roma. The reason is simple: a photograph is not a neutral depiction of reality. Even seemingly neutral representations of Roma reproduce ethnicised/‘racialised’ meanings and visual paradigms (End, 2017). These misrepresentations – often construed along biologically or culturally essentialist lines, also by means of photography as a tool of physical anthropology and racial classification (Surdu, 2018) – have become part of dominant societies’ hegemonic visual language of eclipsing the everyday lives of Roma.

Effectively, ‘[a]ll semiotic materials, including photographs, and their canons of use are ideological in their nature and have evolved to accomplish things that serve particular social interests’ (Ledin and Machin, 2018: 39). This is especially the case in today’s world dominated by visual representations disseminated on social media, where ‘our bodies are now extensions of data networks’ (Mirzoeff, 2015: 14). From a social semiotic perspective, the meaning of an image never lies solely in the object or person portrayed but in the context of these wider, taken for granted socio-cultural contexts, or discourses that tend to dominate in a society.

In this article, I draw on social scientific literature regarding the use of visual images when researching stereotypical representations. First, I briefly flesh out queer Roma’s experiences of intersectional discrimination, which informed both the methodological and theoretical underpinning of the research. Second, I discuss the methodology, methods and processes applied during the research project. The article then moves to its empirical part, analysing and theorising the visual and textual data through the prism of Barthes’ two layers of meaning – denotation and connotation – informed by queer³ intersectionalities (Fremlova, 2017, 2019, 2021).

INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCED BY QUEER ROMA

Lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ, thereafter queer) Roma experience multiple discrimination at an intersection of antigypsyism – also referred to as Romaphobia – homophobia, transphobia, sexism and other forms of oppression. Additionally, research in countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary has found that there is both a conceptual and a legal vacuum with respect to intersectional discrimination: vacuums that exist against a backdrop of human rights protections for members of ethnic/‘racial’ and sexual/gender minorities, including queer Roma, being reversed, along with a general trend of weakening equality bodies (ARA Art, 2021). Writing about a recent research study on LGBTIQ Travellers in the UK, Eminson (2021: 288) notes the following:

The results presented a negative experience for LGBT+ Travellers who felt the need to hide their identity and experienced discrimination in the identified theme of stereotyping in LGBT+ spaces. This research identified a lack of visibility of LGBT+ Traveller identity, in both Traveller and British society which has led to a negative impact upon this intersectional identity, predominantly causing an inability to authentically participate in either community.

² In art education, for example Fremlová (2020) or Fremlová and Fulková (2021) have been investigating visual images and artistic iconoclasm in relation to representations of Roma.

³ In the field of LGBTIQ equality and rights, ‘queer’ is sometimes used as an umbrella term. This particular usage has been critiqued as yet another way of essentialising and stabilising identity, antithetical to queer theory’s understanding of ‘queer’ as a critical non-identitarian positionality vis-à-vis the normative.

While a decade and a half ago, there was a lack of research and data on the status of queer Roma, queer Roma have been gaining visibility at an unprecedented pace. Although queer Roma have barely featured in research on Roma and/or LGBTIQ people, the ever-growing scholarship on queer Roma (Baker, 2003; Kurtić, 2013; Baker, 2015; Máté, 2015, 2022; Corradi, 2017; Fremlova, 2017, 2019, 2021; Eminson, 2021; Sartori, 2022) has demonstrated that the lives of queer Roma entail rich, multiple, intersectional experiences stemming from queer Roma's multi-faceted identities. Simultaneously, queer Roma experience intersectional discrimination, marginalisation and multiple objectifications from both non-Roma and Roma. As such, the lived experiences of queer Roma cannot be fitted into any one representation.

METHODOLOGY, PARTICIPANTS AND PROCESS

In the course of devising and implementing this ESRC-funded project in 2018–2019⁴, I was faced with a methodological question when thinking about how to enhance the impact and accessibility of the knowledge co-produced with queer Romani participants during my doctoral research. My concern was especially with queer Roma's experiences of antigypsyism intersecting with homophobia, transphobia, sexism and other forms of oppression, as well as with an overall lack of visibility in mainstream discourses on Roma and queer people.

The transdisciplinary, collaborative, qualitative, participatory action research project brought together eight queer Romani/Gypsy research participants, including visual activists and artists from the UK and continental Europe, in order to generate a series of visual self-representations. The participation of trans people, including a sex worker activist, also allowed the project to visually speak to and showcase the diversity of experiences among the different national subgroups of Roma and Romani Gypsies in terms of ethnicity/'race', sex/gender, sexual and gender identities. This 'top-up' research re-engaged two research participants and engaged six new ones. The question 'How can we challenge dominant representations of queer Roma in public spaces through queer creative and discursive research-informed interventions?' guided the investigation into stereotypical representations of queer Roma.

The research project employed elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a valuable methodological tool for working with groups and communities described as marginalised or oppressed (Johnson and Guzman, 2012; Jenzen, 2017), including queer Roma, with a view to articulating the principles of knowledge co-production and transformative action. The research also utilised visual methods and methodologies related to knowledge co-production, 'visualising the everyday' and 'viewing photography as an anti-essentialist opportunity to "counter fixed and stereotypical views"' of Roma (Tremlett, 2017: 5); and photo elicitation interviews (Harper, 2002; Rose, 2016) with the research participants to 'put more of the power into the hands of the researched' (Tremlett, 2017: 7). Methodologically, the benefit of using visual images and visual methods consists in research participants *showing* to the researcher how they see the world whilst having some control over the image-making as opposed to just *talking* about it.

Since 2009, visual representations and self-representations of queer Roma circulated in the public domain have helped to document the queer Romani movement's existence and evolution. These visual self-representations are not only the product of the queer Romani movement; they are also 'part of the symbolic practices which constitute the movement and its identity' (Daphi et al., 2013: 76). The resulting visual trail – or visual data – can be viewed, preserved, archived and re/interpreted (Kharroub and Bas, 2016; Highfield and Leaver, 2016).

DATA ANALYSIS: TYPOLOGY OF SELF-REPRESENTATION

At the initial stage of the research project, I examined approximately 70 existing visual representations of queer Roma produced and shared in online and offline space between 2009 (i.e., the year *Roma Boys: A Love Story*, a film about gay Roma was released) and February 2019. The goal of the preliminary visual data analysis was twofold:

1. to inform the creative process and the analysis of the visual self-representations created by the queer Romani visual activists and artists as part of the research project and
2. to investigate the potential of these visual self-representations to contextualise, critique and challenge – through critical, non-normative (queer) and discursive interventions – dominant stereotypical misrepresentations of Roma and LGBTIQ people and dominant representational canons that lie at the root of antigypsyism and its intersection with homophobia, transphobia, sexism and other forms of oppression.

⁴ Similar projects can be viewed here <https://southcoastdtp.ac.uk/challenging-visual-stereotypes-of-roma-gypsy-and-traveller-people-photography-stories-and-hum>



Figure 1. Typology of self-representation (2019). Roland Korponovics/QR Stock Collective.

For each of the 70 existing visual representations (and later the self-representations created by the queer Romani participants), I considered several aspects: genre, composition, the people portrayed, colours, objects, settings, and the positioning of the (intended) spectator. I also considered what each representation depicts (denotation) and alludes to (connotation); the spectator's cultural (this connotation is present in *studium*) participation in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions; and *punctum*: 'this element that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me' (Barthes, 1977, 1981: 26). For coding purposes, I used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo 11. One of its features enables the researcher to process the labelling of the content of each photograph, which can then be generated into broader themes. Initial coding and categorisation helped me to determine key preset, as well as recurrent and re-emergent constructs, patterns and themes, which I revised throughout the research process (Willms et al., 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The queer Romani visual activists and artists met at two creative methods and methodologies workshops held in Brighton, UK, in March and September 2019. At the first workshop, I shared with them the findings of the initial data analysis, which informed the subsequent creative process. At the second workshop, the research participants and mentors discussed the primary theme established during the first workshop, 'The Present versus the Past'.

Subsequently, the participants created visual self-representations challenging the trope of the 'Gypsy' trailer, the fortune teller, adding other themes ('Everyday life', 'Nudes') and genres such as portrayal photographs with text projected onto the participants' bodies ('On my skin'), or stock photos ('Everyday life', including indoor/outdoor scenes and experiences of surviving antigypsyism and homophobia). As a team, we also discussed the corresponding strategies, or types of visual self-representations – 'Direct challenge through self-representation'; 'A queer take on normalisation'; 'Pure self-representation and its limits' – and recorded them in a chart (Figure 1). The participants created over 200 photographic self-representations: of these, they ended up choosing 15 well-executed photographs for a final exhibition called 'Visualising the Lives of LGBTIQ Roma'⁵. They also produced two video interviews and a graphic novel: 'queer reading' of their experiences of antigypsyism, homophobia and

⁵ The exhibition first opened at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, UK, in November 2019, and was accompanied by a creative workshop for the general public and an academic symposium. Since then, the exhibition has been on display at the University of Brighton (November 2019), Brighton Museum (January 2020), virtually at Ljubljana Pride, Slovenia (September 2020) and at the Emil Filla Gallery in Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic (September-October 2020). Several of the photographs feature in Brighton Museum's exhibition *Queer the Pier* that highlights the rich cultural history of the local LGBTIQ community, including queer Roma. Part of the exhibition can be viewed here: <https://qrstock.qrtv.eu>. The whole exhibition is available on request. Contact the author.

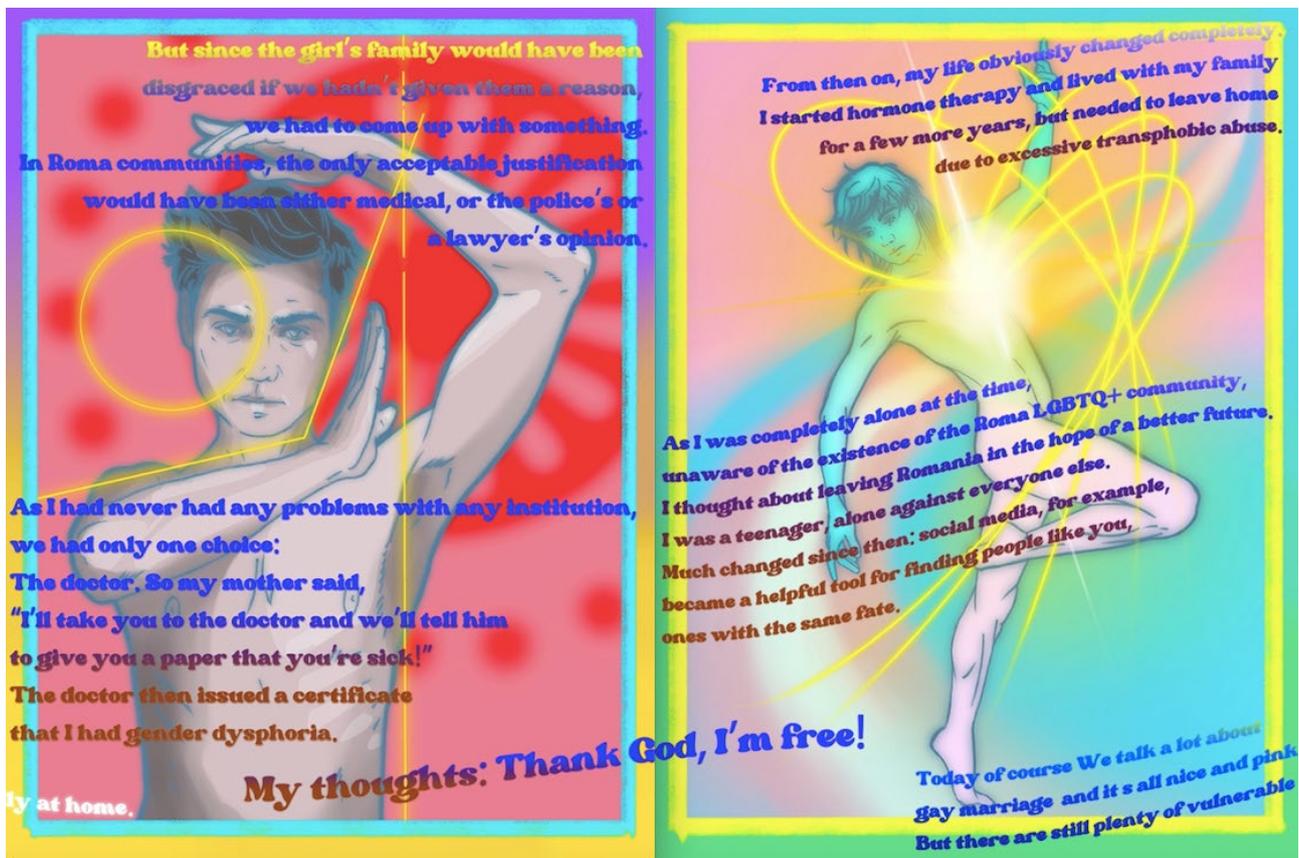


Figure 2. Stella's story (an excerpt from the graphic novel) (2022). Roland Korponovics/QR Stock Collective.

transphobia (Figure 2). In the six months between the two workshops, additional data were generated through four photo elicitation interviews. In the photo elicitation interviews, which I analyse in the empirical part below, the research participants discussed the visual self-representations produced during the first visual methods workshop in March 2019, as well as photographs of their own choice.

When analysing the photo elicitation interviews, I used thematic analysis at a latent level, sensitive to critical, discursive concepts such as queer theory and intersectionality (Erel et al., 2008; Yekani et al., 2010; Rahman, 2010; Fremlova, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021). Thanks to its flexibility (Braun and Clark, 2006), latent thematic analysis looks beyond the individual themes by examining the underlying ideas and assumptions. Thematic analysis seeks 'to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels, and thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes' (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 387). This was particularly relevant to the already interpretive and theorised process of developing the concepts, themes and thematic networks that I identified during the photo elicitation interviews and refined in the discussions with the participants during the second workshop.

In this reiterative, abductive process, the participants' ongoing input, which was provided at key stages of the research, played a central role, allowing me, the researcher, to continue to identify, name, and define themes; and to review and interpret them. Both the secondary and the primary visual data, including the visual self-representations created during the project, as well as the textual data generated through the photo elicitation interviews offer a unique insight into queer Roma's lived experiences. Equally, they help us understand which visual strategies and queer research-informed interventions can be used to effectively challenge misrepresentations of Roma, and how and why this can be done.

ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

Photographs are snapshots of events (Ledin and Machin, 2018: 42), where 'the distinction between photograph and reality – as between spin and policy – can easily evaporate' (Sontag, 2004). As lay spectators, we are often unaware of how our perception of such snapshots and reality itself is shaped by an image and the conventions that the photographer employed, including different artistic techniques such as, for example, the use of black-and-white photography; decisions made by the photographer as to proximity, angle, setting, editing, and photoshopping; and devices such as the use of children. Children are often associated with purity, innocence, vulnerability and are used



Figure 3. Nude. Queer Roma on the beach (2019). QR Stock Collective.

in images portraying poverty, social unrest, war and disasters. However, Romani children, who tend to prevail in photographs portraying Roma, are routinely associated with a lack of parental concern or safeguarding when shown in ‘clan and tribe-type structures’ (Tremlett, 2017: 728). Such Western, ethnocentric, white-, cis- and heteronormative perspectives and highly romanticised view of cultures often entail a particular set of ideas and assumptions regarding social organisation, which are used to frame the entire world (Ledin and Machin, 2018: 44).

Historically, dominant social groups have claimed to see with ‘universal relevance’ (Haraway, 1991: 188), thus establishing a dominant, normative visuality that often denies, oppresses and overrides the validity of minority groups and the ways in which they *see* and exist. Specific visual representations of social categories and *difference* – whether constituted on the basis of ethnicity/‘race’, sexuality or gender identity – are thus produced and made visible; images of difference are thus embedded within the wider social contexts – or social modalities (Rose, 2007). In this binary opposition, marked, ‘abnormal’ categories such as Romani ethnic identity, non-normative (queer) sexual and gender identities, even womanhood or femininity are constructed and visualised as diverging, or ‘deviating’ from their unmarked, neutral counterparts: non-Romaniness or whiteness, heterosexuality, cisgender identity, manhood and masculinity. Certain visualities are mobilised, privileged and lifted above others. This results in the construction and/or reification of dominant, normative representations, socio-cultural practices, codes, scripts, norms and normativities through an established visual canon; or, to paraphrase Barthes (1977), a collective, anonymous and authoritative voice presenting a ready-made, universally accepted truth. That is why such visual representations need to be understood as part of the photographic canons and the discourses they tend to carry, e.g., the media misrepresenting Roma (individuals, groups) as a threat/invasion/influx within the context of the deeply ideological discourse of antigypsyism embedded within European societies.

The 70 existing visual representations and self-representations of queer Roma I analysed tended to differ from the established conventions and canon of documentary photography, much of which has (mis)represented Roma through both romanticising and vilifying tropes as poor, uneducated, vulnerable, often uncivilised, backward, primitive lovers of free-roaming and unchained freedom, antithetical to Western modernity. Most often, the existing self-representations were highly individualised personal photographs, including professional portraits and selfies; artistic photographs; symbolic photographs; photographs documenting public events; and videos, films and other multimedia publicly available on the internet (i.e., websites, Instagram accounts, Facebook pages) or in artistic portfolios. The existing self-representations of queer Roma have tended to emphasise Roma agency and empowerment through employing a perspective that focuses on, foregrounds and makes salient either individual queer Roma in shots of a single person, or groups of queer Roma at public events such as conferences, pride marches and music or theatre performances (e.g., Mindj Panther⁶, Roma Armee⁷). Additionally, many of the protagonists are public figures active in community organising and the entertainment industry, who understand self-representation thanks to the personal, as well as professional experience they have amassed over the years. These qualities of the photographs were achieved through what can be dubbed ‘unorthodox visuality’, portraying

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/mindjpanther>

⁷ <https://www.gorki.de/en/roma-armee>



Figure 4. Present vs. past. Queer Roma and van Gogh (2019). QR Stock Collective.

the Romani protagonists as independent, confident-looking, modern-day, relatable individuals who are sex and gender diverse: their looks defy, challenge and subvert the Western ethnocentric, white/hetero/cis-normative gaze associated with the photographic canon. The photographs employ a large range of highly saturated, at times blended colours, connoting energy, vibrancy, fun, playfulness, ambiguity, complexity, hybridity, even intersectionality. All these aspects have the effect of making the spectator curious and drawing them closer to the person/people portrayed. Combined with ways of looking that foreground Roma as self-reliant, self-sufficient, independent agents, this approach contrasts with some of the conventional approaches used in colour photographs, portraying and romanticising Roma and Romani culture through visual tropes focusing on Romani women and children and their colourful clothing and dance; or with some of the photographic approaches used in black-and-white, grim and bleak – though visually beautiful – photographic representations of Roma.

The above considerations informed the creative process, during which the queer Romani visual activist and artists produced the visual self-representation. To do so, the participants had to make a series of artistic, compositional and editorial decisions, some of which I describe in the following sections.

DIRECT CHALLENGE THROUGH SELF-REPRESENTATION

According to Barthes (1977), denotation, or the first level of analysing visual data, involves describing the persons, things and places in an image. Similar to, yet different from language, visual images constitute connotative semiotics (Hjelmslev, 1961), whereby associations and meaning emerge on different levels through devices such as objects, the person/people portrayed, colours, settings, foreground/background, etc. So, what do the objects – and their combination – in the visual self-representations created by the queer Romani visual activist and artist connote in terms of wider meanings? Considering the immediate level of denotation in **Figure 4** and **Figure 5**, when looking at the two colour photographs, we see two people sitting on the floor. They sit on two colourful



Figure 5. Present vs. past. Queer Roma with Josef Koudelka's photo in background (2019). QR Stock Collective.

flags. The woman (D) reads a book; the man (L) eats an apple and observes her. There are apples in front of him. The man's clothes are colourful, while the colours of the woman's dress are more mellow and toned down.

From the start of the creative process, the setting/background of each of the photographs – or lack thereof discussed in the section Self-representation and its limits – was a key component that contributed to establishing the context, or connotation, within which the meaning of each of the photographs is constructed. While in **Figure 4**, the protagonists are photoshopped into a famous Van Gogh painting, in **Figure 5**, they sit in front of a television set that features an iconic, black-and-white photograph of Roma taken by the Czechoslovak-French photographer Josef Koudelka in Romania in 1968. Using this postproduction technique made it possible to explore how the meaning changes when certain elements are removed (the Koudelka photograph in **Figure 5**) and new ones are introduced (i.e., a romanticising background with Roma, trailers and horses in **Figure 4**).

The Koudelka photograph and the van Gogh painting in the background change the meaning through connotation (i.e., romanticised notions of poverty and nomadism stereotypically associated with Roma). The visual self-representations contain certain cultural and social references that shape their meaning. For example, the man and the woman in **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** are most likely Roma: we may infer this because of their colourful, vibrant clothes stereotypically associated with Roma, the book the woman reads (*Gypsy Feminism* by Laura Corradi) and the Romani flag they sit on. They could be gay or straight Roma: the context is provided by the rainbow flag located next to the Romani flag.

In the photo elicitation interviews, the research participants' most immediate reflections related to the people and objects that can be observed directly in the photographs, including clothes, as illustrated by the following quote from L:

I like to claim the right to wear this kind of colourful, maybe feminine clothing. Actually, they are ladies' trousers. When I wear them in Budapest, I get so many mostly negative and hateful looks from people. People's reactions to me are the same in Hungary when I wear the leopard sweater. It's been getting worse in the last few years but it's also very visible if somebody likes this. Unfortunately, especially when I go to the Hungarian countryside, to my parents', for example, the people are very negative about it. Here in Berlin, I receive mainly positive feedback (L).

Clothing is often co-opted into heteronormative definitions of 'genuine', authentic identities, including Romani ethnicity. The clothing items in **Figure 4** and **Figure 5** function as conversational pieces: 'a good tool to talk to people' (L). In the male protagonist's case, the design of his trousers bears some resemblance to 'Romani motives' (vivid colours, flowers). It is complemented by his flamboyant sweatshirt with a leopard pattern that, according to

L, 'may evoke the [sexual] behaviour of a wild animal'. The woman's dress may remind one of traditional Romani clothing (long skirts/dress) or a loose, bohemian dress. Employing these socio-cultural references in a critical, queer way, clothing becomes a political statement of queer Romani belonging: a means of transgressing and transforming social norms. Refusal to comply with these norms is integral to these photos and is a key tenet of 'queerness'. Simultaneously, one can see that the clothes they wear are modern, everyday clothing. This signals that they are not *orientalised/romanticised Gypsies stuck in the past*. On the contrary, they are modern Roma/Gypsies living in the 21st century and performing their queer intersectional identities.

The research participants' observations also related to the connotative meaning of these photographic self-representations, as illustrated by the following quote from L:

I'm very happy that I am in the photo with D, whom I know as a Gypsy artist from Great Britain. I am happy because she's my idol from the artistic field. I think it also creates a connection. The fact that I am in the photo as a Hungarian Roma person, and she is in the photo as a Gypsy female artist already shows the diversity in Roma communities. She is a Gypsy woman from the UK with her white skin and me as a Hungarian Roma with brown skin: this shows that Roma can be white, creole, brown or even black. Also, it's not only about the skin colour: somebody self-identifies as Roma or Gypsy. I am very happy that the Romani flag and the rainbow flag can be seen on this photo together because I know that this kind of setting can still provoke very negative reactions by some people in the Roma community. (...) I can be very sensitive about these things, and it can hurt me even if I don't know these people. If there are people who are so disturbed by these things, it means that the two flags should be shown together (giggles). Until these people start to understand why this is important for us, we just have to show it because both the Romani flag and the rainbow flag belong to us, to Roma LGBTIQ people and it should be accepted. I think it's very important that as a Roma LGBTIQ person, I can use these flags together. It expresses to me that actually a Roma person or a person who has some connection with the Roma people supports me in my gay, queer identity with the nail varnishing. I think it's an important thing to strengthen in the Roma people and also in the non-Roma people, to remind them that it can happen like this.

In the above reflection on [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#), L dwells on the topic of displaying the Romani and rainbow flags together, something that turned out to be contentious in 2015 and 2017 (Fremlova, 2021: 20). He also touches upon the rich diversity and heterogeneity of Roma communities in terms of nationalities (e.g., Hungarian and British), sub-groups (Roma and Gypsies), skin complexions, sexualities and gender identities. Due to the historic and modern experience of antigypsyism, the word 'Gypsy' is still a racial slur and an insult for many Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, though other Roma may identify as Gypsy. At times, this may produce tensions between the different sub-groups, as well as within the Romani rights movement. The word 'Gypsy' also appears on the front page of the book *Gypsy Feminism* that one of the participants holds in [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#). In this connection, L discusses the importance of feminism, especially Romani intersectional feminism, for Romani gay and feminine-looking men:

I also like that the title *Gypsy Feminism* is very concrete: a person who doesn't know the circumstances of the creation of this photo can already relate to the topic. This way, it's clear that she's reading about Gypsy feminism. D is sitting next to me and she's holding and reading this book. Somehow it expresses me, my connection to feminism and Gypsy feminism. I'm trying to observe what D is reading in this book: this represents my curiosity and my sympathy with the feminist and the Gypsy feminist movements. I find them very important, not because of the Romani women or women in general but because I think it is also very important for us, LGBTIQ people, that this movement exists, and these voices are heard. Because of my gay or queer identity, I received some negative or hurting comments from people. In more cases, they were related to my being feminine. In Roma communities, these comments can come from Roma non-LGBT people and mainly from Roma men because being feminine or being a woman can be not appreciated or not respected enough. That's why I am happy about this setting: in a lucky scenario, we have each other's work, we can help and support each other. I mean the Roma feminists and the Roma LGBT activists. Of course, I see misogyny and sexism are not just in the Roma populations, it's in general. Yet, somehow, I feel that it can be very specific in Roma communities.

The same photographic scene may also be reminiscent of a picnic, where the two flags function as picnic blankets, as expressed by R:

I like the idea of the two flags together. I found that the flags are the most powerful symbols. I like it that it's like blankets. I liked that L is a counter-stereotype of a kind of controlling man with his behaviour, paying attention to the lady who is very confident in that picture. Van Gogh has a painting

about Romani people with a caravan. Everybody loves van Gogh obviously, but then, I needed to realise that his interpretation of this caravan can be very stereotypical as well, for the viewer. This is the kind of modernist approach which romanticised the Gypsies in ways that are just not valid anymore in the 21st century – how non-Roma think we are and how they describe us.

Here, R hints at a particular way of portraying Roma as a cultural and ethnic/'racial' monolith or a group where the focus is on generic features. In turn, these features, whether cultural or biological, end up categorising Roma and turning them into generic (stereo)types, suppressing the complex, nuanced nature of their diverse lived experiences. The visual self-representations in [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 5](#) thus challenge a key stereotype about Roma as a homogenous ethnic/'racial' group.

[Figure 5](#) contains another element, initially chosen by the researcher (me) and then used by R when he was staging the photographs during the first photo shoot: the Koudelka photograph. It portrays a Romani boy in the foreground, with two traditionally clad Romani women dancing on the road, a horse-drawn carriage and a group of Roma in the background. In terms of its composition, the photograph is split, as it were, into two vertical halves: one half (the asphalt road) may be understood as the present/future and the other (grassy side of the road, on which we can see the carriage) as the past. The participants felt that Koudelka's depiction of Roma is stereotypical in the sense that the Roma portrayed end up representing all Roma. At the same time, they thought it depicted what was and still may be a reality for some Roma. What draws the spectator to Koudelka's photograph is *punctum*: its visual beauty and high artistic quality, as expressed by R, J and L, respectively, in the following quotes:

It's a socio-photograph which paints Romani people in a romanticised style as connected to poverty. [...] Sitting on a rainbow flag and reading a feminist book, the photo has the instant message that time has passed. It's another world. There's a past behind and there's the present. [The Koudelka] picture is black and white, our picture is in colour, so I think it's beautiful in a way. To have an image in an image where one is an analogue image, which is black and white, and the other one is digital image, which is colourful. I think the message is clear: L and D are sitting in this setting and somehow, they're trying to approach their own identity as presented by the mass media.

It's stereotypical because it shows that Roma are these romantic people who are always dancing and of course they are poor, but they don't care about that. That's what he wanted to show. From a photographic point of view, it's really perfect, though. The problem is that [the media] put this kind of pictures next to everything related to Roma.

I think the image of the Roma boy is stereotypical, but I really like this setting. The only thing that makes me feel a bit bad is that I feel that he has some pain in his eyes while I'm having fun [in [Figure 5](#)]. But maybe it's also a good contrast between stereotypical images and our setting because I see that some of the people who work on our visual representations might like to represent us as sad or poor. At the same time, I'm here with my happiness. It's a strong contrast between the stereotypical image and our setting, which shows the life of Roma people in 2019. The black and white photo is also still a reality of some Roma people in our present, but my life wasn't like this. Here in Western Europe, when non-Roma people get to know that I am Roma, they believe that I also live like this.

Thus, through connotation and *punctum*, [Figure 5](#) can be understood as a visual representation of two parallel 'realities': an encounter between the past and the present, myth and reality. In one of these 'realities', which has become a myth, Roma are poor; some appear sad and some happy; they travel and dance. In the other reality, the reality of self-representation, we see the everyday life of Roma, some of whom are educated, settled, happy, feminist, queer or straight. Yet, within the photographic canon, the former visual representation (i.e., the Koudelka photo) has become lifted over the latter, thus reinforcing the generic, stereotypical image of Roma being poor, nomadic and somehow primitive.

A QUEER TAKE ON NORMALISATION

So far, I have demonstrated that challenges to visual misrepresentations can be posed discursively and contextually, by making socio-cultural references to the wider social discourses. One way of challenging misrepresentations of Roma is by juxtaposing such stereotypical images with something different, something that is not necessarily the opposite. For example, according to one stereotype and the visual trope, a non-Romani person's future is read from tarot cards inside a Roma/Gypsy trailer ([Figure 6](#)). Using this misrepresentation and inserting into it the figure of a present-day gay Roma, we can visualise the difference between romanticised,



Figure 6. Present vs. past. Queer Roma facing a Gypsy trailer (2019). QR Stock Collective.

stereotypical ‘myth’ on the one hand and the queer Roma person’s highly heterogenous lived experience in the 21st century on the other.

Another type of visual self-representations introduces a queer take on normalisation through a strategic deployment of critical queer research-informed interventions in the form of stock photos. There were two main reasons why the participants decided to use this genre: one was the absence of stock photos portraying queer Roma in neutral or positive ways – and the attendant urgent need to create stock photos portraying queer Roma; the other was the nature of stock photos themselves and the possibility to employ it in a subversive manner. Stock photos often resemble photographs used in advertising. According to Ledin and Machin (2018: 46), this type of photography,

is idealised and is intended to symbolise a set of ideas and moods. Advertising photographs simplify and beautify the world as part of the process of loading a set of ideas and values onto products. (...) [T]hese images are created precisely to be used in this symbolic way. The archives can be searched with key words (...) Such archives are driven by the need to understand what kinds of images are required at any time.

Utilising the feel-good, optimistic, advert-like character of stock photos, an archival genre of photography associated with generic types and social norms where one can look for key words such as ‘happy queer Roma couple’, impressions and imitations of normalcy may be achieved by means of both denotation and connotation: for example, a happy household (**Figure 7**) portraying a cis- and straight-looking couple in a pensive, intimate mood, unwinding and relaxing on a comfy sofa in what looks like the living room of a modern, bright flat; or a happy couple on the beach (**Figure 8**), depicting a gay couple on the seaside.

Denotation plays an important role also in terms of the setting, showing where the scenes take place. As R pointed out in the photo elicitation interview, knowing and choosing who one speaks to by means of a visual self-representation, including through choosing the setting, has important consequences for what messages are conveyed to what audience and how that audience makes sense of them.

The visual self-representation in **Figure 7** was produced indoors, in a modern, bright living room: the bright, soft light and pastel, muted and coordinated colours contribute to the overall optimistic atmosphere. Apart from the protagonists, the setting features only a few objects (a picture on the wall, a small plant) and items of furniture: a coffee table with some décor, a book and a picture frame. Combined with the overall unclutteredness and airiness of the setting, the objects better serve their symbolic role, emphasising the cosiness of this home, which is enhanced



Figure 7. Everyday life. Queer Roma at home (2019). QR Stock Collective.



Figure 8. Everyday life. Queer Roma on the beach (2019). QR Stock Collective.

by the bright saturated light. The visual self-representation in **Figure 8** was produced outdoors, on the British seaside. We see a young gay couple in a pensive mood, sitting on an elevated wall (coastal groyne) on a pebble beach, next to an undercliff walk, both unfolding into the background. One of the protagonists is sitting up, holding his partner who is lying down. The muted, moderate colours of the setting, complemented by the hues of the overcast sky, accentuate the intimate atmosphere of the scene.

Through denotation, the two self-representations connote ordinary, mundane, everyday things that people do (hence the title 'Everyday life'). Yet, stigmatised groups such as Roma are rarely portrayed living everyday lives, doing everyday things: in fact, Roma, including queer Roma, are most often portrayed in derelict, dilapidated, squalid, impoverished interiors and exteriors. They are rarely portrayed in cosy homes or relaxing in a leisurely environment by the sea. In **Figure 7** and **Figure 8**, this quality is achieved not only through denotation and connotation, but also through photographic perspective (the positioning of the intended spectator) and individualisation. Contrary to the conventional portrayal of Roma at a vertical angle (literally *looking down* on Roma) as vulnerable, even inferior (also in gendered and racialised terms), in all the visual self-representations, the visual activists and artists used perspectives looking from the front, at horizontal angles, often taking close shots. This approach also helps achieve a greater degree of engagement by and intimacy with the intended spectator, who gets



Figure 9. On my skin 1 (2019). QR Stock Collective.

to see highly individualised representations of Roma that do not categorise – or essentialise – them in biological or cultural terms.

A ‘queer twist’ is introduced by revealing to the spectator, through captions or other hints and references, that the people portrayed in these normative-looking photographs are a cis/trans Romani couple (**Figure 7**) and a gay Romani couple (**Figure 8**). Simultaneously, these photographs convey powerful messages of survival in the face of experiences of intersectional discrimination and bullying. The ‘normalising’ essence of stock photos as a genre is thus employed to help queer Roma, a minority within a minority, inhabit spaces that are often associated with social norms and normativities (i.e., heteronormativity, white-normativity, cis normativity). Using insight from Gonzalez-Torres (in Katz, 2015) who spoke of his queer positionality as an HIV positive gay man, the queer Romani bearer of such strategic ‘normalisation’, may be regarded as a ‘spy’, strategically deploying sameness – a queer positionality resisting binary orthodoxies (Fremlova, 2021) – to ‘infiltrate’ social norms and normativities from within in order to overwhelm and unsettle them.

SELF-REPRESENTATION AND ITS LIMITS

A key reason why the participants were interested in producing visual self-representations was to tell a story about themselves, a story that, according to R, has not been told before and can be told visually, verbally or figuratively, where the participants have full control over the process of narration:

We are all artists, we all use our stories, our narratives, our memories or our bodies as a tool to express ourselves. We all challenge the stereotypes with our personality, sharing our personal stories.

We have seen that in order to tell these visual stories, the participants made use of a number of denotative and connotative devices such as the people portrayed, colours, objects, settings, the positioning of the (intended) spectator, including proximity. The close-up shots in **Figure 9** and **Figure 10** help establish a direct contact, a more intimate rapport between the protagonists and the spectator. Additionally, in **Figure 10**, the spectator’s engagement is enhanced by the protagonist’s direct gaze (‘demand image’), which is avoided in **Figure 9** since the protagonist covers his eyes/face with his hands. The ultimate effect may be an increased degree of curiosity on the side of the spectator who can better focus on the text projected onto the body: or what Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) refer to as ‘offer image’.



Figure 10. On my skin 2 (2019). QR Stock Collective.

Visual self-representations with white space as the setting came to constitute a specific type of decontextualised photographic representations. In **Figure 9** and **Figure 10**, the protagonists and the writing projected onto their bodies play a greater symbolic role. Through these close-ups, the decontextualised images not only foreground the queer Romani protagonists and their agency as individuals; they are also used to symbolise the idea that these self-representations are highly personal. Therefore, as such, they cannot, and do not represent or define the LGBTIQ Roma ‘community’ as a whole, despite the frequent assumption that members of non-dominant groups such as ethnic/‘racial’, sexual and gender identity minorities will be ‘everything for everyone’. The limits of self-representation and its use lie precisely in the notion that they do not speak for all queer Roma.

Figure 11 is a visual self-representation created by one of the participants as part of a different project entitled ‘Owning the Game’ that was taking place at the same time. The self-representation is similarly decontextualised as it has a white space as a setting. According to J, this was a conscious choice:

My picture was made in a studio and [the Koudelka photo] was taken in real life. They’re completely different. I wanted to do it in the studio because I didn’t want it to show any of the background, to not imply anything social. From the photo, you don’t know that I’m poor or rich or where I’m from. You cannot see this. Somehow to not focus on that; focus more on the person. The main audience intended was the Roma LGBTIQ community, family and friends. And the second was to challenge also these stereotypical things in the LGBTIQ community, in the Roma community.

Through the lens of adulthood, J’s visual self-representation tells the intersectional story of a Romani gay man’s life:

It’s really visible that I’m a dark-skinned person. I’m part of an ethnic group and it’s clear that I’m part of the LGBTQ community because of some elements of the picture. As you can see in the picture, I’m dressed in something which is like the 80s fashion. We were influenced by the 80s in New York when the Latina and Afro-American LGBT groups created the ball culture. (...) It was an original idea that my mentor and I worked on. We wanted this kind of glamour photo session. We had reasons why because we wanted to have some dignity, some powerful messages. We wanted to show that we are strong and gorgeous mainly because there is a lack of visual representation where Roma people – and especially this intersection [of Roma and queer] – can show that we’re having fun and we like how we look. Here, I’m not giving an interview behind a dirty wall or showing a really sad face.



Figure 11. Joci Marton/Andras Jokuti. *Owning the Game*⁸.

J's visual self-representation demonstrates to the spectator that Roma are in full control of their visual representation. One of J's key messages relates to the lack of positive, unbiased visual representations of Roma, and the attendant misrepresentations associated with Roma such as poverty, dirt, unhappiness and lack of dignity. Through his visual self-representation, J also wanted to tell the following childhood story:

When I was a small kid, I really liked to dance in my grandmother's place because she had a really nice radio. She also had a collection of old cassettes and there was one that I particularly liked. She was a teenage Hungarian girl, and she was really famous at that time. Because she was in a skirt, I was dancing to this music wearing a skirt. Nobody said or at least I didn't feel anything like 'okay, you cannot do such things'. Just once, when I was dancing in the skirt, I fell and bumped my head on the table. I had a fracture and a laceration. There was a lot of blood, so they had to take me to A&E. It was there that the question 'why did he wear a skirt?' came up. My parents felt ashamed to explain how it had happened. I felt that it was something I shouldn't do. From that time, I didn't dress in skirts my whole life so it's kind of symbolic. I'm not missing the skirt as an object. It was more like my femininity. It didn't stop me from being feminine because I am. But it was long years that I felt ashamed: when I was listening to myself and heard my voice or I was recorded and I looked at how I'm moving, you know? And I felt that it's not good. It's not attractive. I didn't like it in myself for many years. (...) It felt so good that I can dress as a model. It was really a good experience. For example, one guy especially, who was wearing high heels, I felt like he was enjoying himself like a child. He was like in Disneyland.

According to J, rather than focusing on the everyday to challenge stereotypes, self-representation can be a celebration, a playful game. Such self-representation functions as the opposite of the everyday: a platform for the participants to play, to wear high heels, hair extensions and make-up; to not be their everyday themselves.

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/romalgbtq>

Thus far, we have seen that visual self-representations can be used as powerful tools to challenge harmful stereotypes. Yet, as J's project shows, self-representations do not necessarily have to aspire to challenge stereotypical misrepresentations of Roma. In fact, they can operate at a 'purely' artistic, symbolic level, as expressed by J:

How I can truly represent myself, if I need to continuously think about the majority view? In that case, I have a feeling that I'm serving their needs and not mine. If we are against every stereotypical thing, somehow, we exclude the people who may, in a sense, embody a stereotype. If you go to Budapest's 8th district where Roma live, you can see that they dress a little bit different. And what's the problem with that? Why is it a problem if a woman wears trousers with a leopard pattern? Sometimes I don't like when Roma intellectuals say 'Why show a woman in leopard trousers? It's stereotypical'. Yeah, but there are some women who dress in this way, and you exclude them. I feel that [Roma intellectuals] don't want to be a community with the people who are in the [Koudelka] picture. This sends a message that Roma can be only *this* or *that*. If someone wears traditional clothes, if they are dirty, so what? It doesn't mean that they are not Roma, that they are different Roma than me. So that's why I think self-representation and challenging stereotypes do not go together.

The above concerns regarding the intersection of ethnicity/'race' and social status/class, and what constitutes being a 'good' or 'bad' Roma are reminiscent of debates in LGBT studies/queer theory in relation to the 'good/bad' gay binary. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the proliferation of positive images of lesbian and gay identities in the media resulted in a particular type of visibilities for queer people, lesbian women and gay men in particular. Just like both heteronormative and LGBTIQ society became more clued-in on the increasingly visible and easy to read 'signifiers of lesbian and gay identities' (Valentine, 2002), similar, albeit non-identical societal dynamics have led to the emergence of a 'good/bad' Roma binary within both non-Romani and Romani societies.

So, paraphrasing the questions asked above by J, what are the societal costs for those ethnicised/'racialised', sexualised, gendered, poor and excluded ('bad') Roma who refuse to play by the majority's 'rules'? It is precisely in answering this question that the salience of the visual self-representations lies. The visual self-representations created by the queer Romani visual activist and artists were produced in order to reclaim Romani ethnic identity, queer sexuality and gender identity from both the ethnic majority and the custodians of Roma conservatism on queer Roma's own terms: this was a key point made by the queer Romani research participants, and by Romani lesbian and trans women in particular. The self-representations treat the issue of visually representing Roma in all its complexity. Simultaneously, by opening up the category 'Roma' through accommodating Roma of all possible identities, they transcend *identity politics* whilst acknowledging the role of dominant representational canons and conventional visual representations of Roma, including the more problematic ones, in an all-encompassing way.

CONCLUSION

The visual and empirical findings presented in this article challenge dominant accounts and misrepresentations of Roma, including those that portray Roma as anachronistic and antithetical to modernity and Europeanness. Using a range of photographic genres, strategies and devices, the visual self-representations of queer Roma not only capture the lived experiences of queer Roma. They also represent a symbolic trajectory from indoors to outdoors; from the personal/private to the public/political; from the past to the present; from the 'Gypsy' myth to the reality of Roma's lives; from extraordinary, essentialising stereotypes to the ordinary, everyday lived experiences of queer Roma in the 21st century that disrupt and transcend the established dominant visual paradigms and binary representations of Roma.

The visual self-representations of queer Roma show that if sexuality, gender identity and other categories of identification are foregrounded as an intersection, ethnicity/'race' can be visualised in ways that enable 'new', alternative readings of 'Roma', as well as 'queer'. Just like the lived experiences of queer Roma, these visual self-representations pose a fundamental, strategic challenge to stereotypical, one-dimensional, often negative misrepresentations of and misconceptions about both Roma and queer people. The visual self-representations increase the visibility of queer Roma and demonstrate the ways in which queer Roma wish to be represented. At the same time, projects like this one point to the important role of impactful transdisciplinary research facilitating knowledge co-production at the interface between community organising, policy, academia and art.

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A Pleasant Ride: Vintage Aesthetics as a Strategy to Deliver Sex Education and Harm Reduction on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the possibilities and limitations of delivering transformative sex education and harm reduction on highly regulated platforms such as Instagram and what are helpful strategies in this process. I use the Brazilian project *Sento Mesmo* (SENTA) as a case study. SENTA is a multiplatform project that uses vintage aesthetics and deploys explicit language to address its topics. It is an activist project as it challenges current paradigms, particularly the way sex-ed and drugs are hegemonically addressed, and targets groups excluded from public policies. SENTA is explicitly inspired by Freirean pedagogies, and I argue it can be framed as pleasure activism (brown, 2019) as it understands sexuality as more than just a site of oppression and as an indissociable part of our lives.

Through a mixed-methods approach that included content analysis and a semi-structured interview with the creator, I analysed SENTA's content to understand the creative strategies chosen to evade Instagram's ban or censorship. There are intentional and numerous contrasts: between text (explicit) and images (vintage, evoking the "good old times"), present and past, invisibility and visibility. In sum, visual, textual and engagement concessions have to be made to be able to circulate in such a highly regulated environment, but such concessions can still be filled with meaning. In SENTA's case, the contrasts create a dialogue whilst trying to balance attractiveness for the readers and being harmless to the algorithms. This constant dialogue between past and present also reaffirms SENTA's political alignment, including its alignment with historical LGBT actors in the country. I conclude that despite SENTA's content being very context-specific, its strategies can be applied elsewhere, and become more important as public policies and traditional sex-ed approaches continue to overlook people who do not comply with every single norm.

Keywords: harm reduction, sex education, Instagram, Paulo Freire, pleasure activism

INTRODUCTION

I was scrolling through my Instagram feed when a friend of mine posted that he would be DJing at a Zoom party organised by *Sento Mesmo*, or *SENTA* (here translated as *Shamelessly Riding*), a project focused on sex education (sex-ed) and harm reduction. The unapologetic name caught my attention, and I was drawn in by the profile's use of vintage images, reminiscent of the 1970s or 80s visuals, but combined here with contemporary fonts, memes, print screens, and, above all, explicit language on sex and drugs.

Building on previous insights on the importance of phrasing sex-ed in a grounded and non-medicalised language (Paiva, 2000), this article explores *SENTA*'s style, to understand the reasons behind their particular linguistic and visual choices and how they contribute to the project's goal of delivering transformative sex-ed.

This analysis indicates that *SENTA*'s choices express contrasts in the society itself, such as between traditional/disruptive morals, which are values that the project wants to intervene in. This article also discusses the possibilities and limitations of delivering transformative sex-ed and harm reduction on corporate social media platforms such as Instagram, which is highly regulated, and makes some suggestions about what strategies can be helpful in this process.

SENTA's posts cover multiple topics, delivering their message both through more traditional educational posts or through meme culture. I consider *SENTA* an activist project as well as an educational one, as it seeks to mobilise for changes that go beyond the individual. Lewin and Jenzen (forthcoming), when talking about LGBTQ+ visual activism, stress that politics is not only related to elections and political parties but also comprises other realms, like everyday life. In this article, I argue that by considering the realms of sex and pleasure as political forces and as tools to build a new society, *SENTA* can be framed under a pleasure activism approach (brown, 2019). Moreover, for *SENTA*, education and activism are not two separate realms: sex education is an intrinsically political process in which people's autonomy must be respected. In this sense, it also has a clear alignment with Freirean methodologies (Freire, 2013, 2014), which value consciousness-raising through mutual learning and transformation. These ideas are delivered through an interesting use of contrast between explicit language and vintage aesthetics, a contrast that also reflects the project's need to be simultaneously visible to its audience, whilst invisible to social media algorithms and moderation.

The first section of this article describes *Sento Mesmo*: what it posts about, on which platforms, and the most common patterns in its publications. I used mixed methods in this exploration, applying principles from content analysis in found images (Rose, 2016), in combination with interviewing *SENTA*'s creator, as the creative process and intentionality are equally important for this research.

Next, I detail my methodology and explore important concepts to understand *SENTA*'s work, such as pleasure activism and Freirean pedagogies applied to sex-ed. This review is then followed by a discussion, which focuses on *SENTA*'s use of text and image and its effects: they symbolise contrasts such as traditional/disruptive morals and values, activism from the past/present, visibility/invisibility on social media. This section demonstrates how *SENTA* preserves and updates the legacy of previous LGBTQ+ (Lesbian Gay Bi Trans and Queer) activists in Brazil, adjusting its activist strategies to social media. Lastly, the conclusion stresses the need for this form of activism in contemporary Brazil, and I argue that although the work of *SENTA* is context-specific, its strategies can be applied elsewhere.

This article, of course, has its limitations. The greatest and inescapable one is the language barrier and what gets lost in translation. Every syllable of *SENTA*'s texts is embedded in Portuguese slang (particularly common expressions amidst young, urban and LGBTQ+ communities) and Brazilian cultural references and meme culture. Translating the meaning of the messages with all their nuances has been a challenge. In my attempt to translate the selected pieces, I prioritise equivalent English slang over exact terms.

SENTO MESMO

Created in 2020, *Sento Mesmo*, or *SENTA*, is a multiplatform project for sex-ed and harm reduction, although it addresses more than these topics. On its website, there are two 'about us' descriptions, using different language styles. The more informal one defines *SENTA* as:

a place talking about drugs, dirty sex and everything that gives pleasure. In a mocked and real way, it discusses and exchanges ideas in the most democratic and didactic form possible, trying to answer the questions everybody has and [trying] to say what everybody wants to say (QUE PORR* É ESSA, n.d.; My Translation).

In addition to the website, there are Facebook and Twitter pages, a Telegram channel, a podcast and an Instagram account (first @sentomesmo, now @sento.mesmo), which is the project's main platform, gaining over 70,000 followers in just one year¹. *SENTA*'s posts on Instagram are the focus of this article. The creator is a young man with a background in graphic design and medicine, and he launched *SENTA* as a project after one of his designs – a chart detailing the effects of mixing different drugs – went viral. [Figure 1](#) shows a sample post, so English-speaking readers can have a gist of the visual and language choices.

I suggest that a major contributing factor to *SENTA*'s traction on social media is the use of the visual style in their designs. They frequently feature images from the 70s and the 80s, like stock-like pictures, religious images, and stills from old movies or advertisements. Visuals come in all sorts of colours, but *SENTA* privileges vivid ones, particularly red. The crucial message is typically incorporated as text in the images, leaving only superfluous

¹ On the first profile @sentomesmo. The second one, @sento.mesmo, currently has 13,700 followers (November 2022).

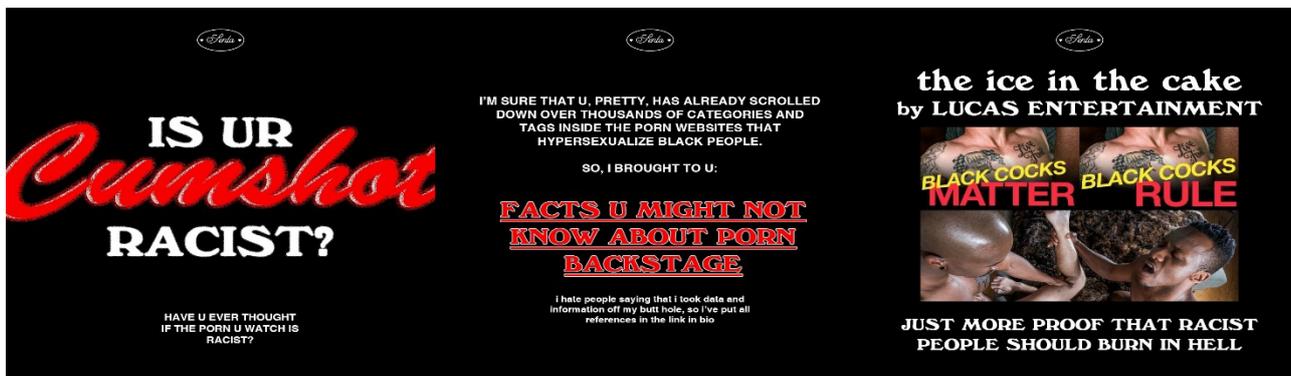


Figure 1. Three images of a 10-picture carousel on racist porn.

information for the captions. This strategy makes sense as the content is published on a platform that privileges the visual and also because, as the creator stated in the interview for this research, he designs the pieces so they can be displayed in public spaces.

In contrast, the text is very explicit and playful; there is no euphemistic language or patronising of the audience. *SENTA* frequently calls the audience out: for instance, for gathering at the peak of a COVID-19 wave or reminding them that unsolicited sexual touching is harassment regardless of your sexual orientation. But to be (sexually) explicit in an environment as regulated as Instagram requires creativity, and so to circumvent platform surveillance, letters are often replaced by numbers or symbols (Example: sex/S3X or ass/A\$\$) or excluded. For example, typing C_msh*t, means audiences are still able to identify the word, whilst avoiding getting caught by a platform's regulatory algorithm. Wordplays are another common strategy.

The central presence of the creator is a major *SENTA* feature, to a point that the project is indissociable from him. He usually shares his own experiences and impressions before explaining a topic in-depth to the followers and, particularly more recently, has relied more on videos of him explaining or reacting to different things. According to him, making the project so personal was intentional to consolidate an approachable and imperfect *persona* who speaks the same language as the audience. Someone they can contact without fearing being lectured to; someone they can ask what they *really* want to know.

ANALYSING THE VISUAL

To identify and discuss how *SENTA*'s unique combination of image/text on Instagram is used, this research initially drew on writings on visual critical methodology (Mannay, 2015; Rose, 2016) and visual political communication (Veneti et al., 2019). Rose (2016) differentiates four sites – production, the image itself, circulation and audiencing – and three modalities – technological, compositional and social – of visual analysis. Using her categories, my research question focuses on the production and on the image itself. Although audiencing and circulation are also important, I primarily seek to explore the strategies to openly address issues that are almost 'taboos', or at least not frequently talked about: heterosexual men being penetrated, consciously combining different drugs, condomless anal sex, etc. What are the project's choices? How do they express *SENTA*'s intentions? For this purpose, the research employs a combination of content analysis and an interview with the creator of the content in question.

An online semi-structured interview through Zoom with the creator was conducted in January 2022. Questions focused mainly on the (political and visual) inspirations for the project, the production process, and the feedback from *SENTA*'s community. Collecting Instagram posts for the content analysis posed particular challenges since at the time of this research *SENTA*'s Instagram page (@sentomesmo) had recently been shut down after numerous reports claiming obscene content. Whilst content posted on other platforms were still accessible these were less relevant for the purpose of this research, mainly because they followed different patterns depending on the platform – TikTok, for instance, relies on videos. After the interview, the creator added me on Facebook, where he kept a copy of many Instagram posts, images and captions.

The 175 posts were published on Facebook – in sync with the first Instagram account – from January 4th, 2021, to exactly one year later, January 4th, 2022. They were all coded and constituted my sample for the content analysis². At the time of the analysis, there was nothing posted after this date, and there was not much posted before January 4th, 2021 (and it was all personal content or relying on Facebook-specific features – events, sharing of posts, etc.). Therefore, it was not difficult to draw the line between what was *SENTA* content and what was not. Confirming

² This proved to be a lifesaver as the new profile @sento.mesmo started from scratch. A few images were already reposted but not all of them. And I noticed there are some minor changes in the strategies in this new profile.

what *SENTA*'s creator said in the interview, it was also clear the 175 posts were not primarily planned for Facebook, as they used hashtags (not clickable on Facebook), and other Instagram engagement tools (referring, for instance, to 'stories', 'carousel' or linking to specific profiles).

I relied on the interview to understand the production site and on content analysis to explore the images. As Rose (2016) describes, content analysis is a methodology that privileges this site of analysis (the image itself) over the other three. I applied its principles (selecting, coding and quantitative analysis) to observe general guidelines and main features – in my research, they matter more than the exceptions or deviant images – and then critically analyse the strategies adopted. I coded the 175 posts I have found³ on the basis of the main topic (sex-ed/harm reduction/other); if they were part of a carousel or not; the use of prevalent colours; the presence/absence of illustrations/pictures; and, if the images were religious or not, contemporary, vintage or both, sexually explicit or not. Furthermore, as I did the coding after the interview, I added the variables 'religious symbol?' and 'sexually explicit?' because the creator explicitly addressed in the interview his intentions to reference religious values and not depict explicit images. I wanted to see how this was put into practice.

I noticed interesting things: at first, *SENTA* did not rely that much on vintage aesthetics and there was no distinctive visual identity (patterns in the use of colours, fonts and images) yet. As it developed, vintage images became more prevalent, however, memes also remain important. In general, the 'serious' or educational posts are interspersed with humorous ones, which reflect the creator's effort to show his *persona* as 'normal' in the eyes of the audience, someone who is not their teacher but a peer, a guy you can send a meme to. Most posts also come as an Instagram carousel. Of the 175 posts, 21 directly addressed harm reduction, 60 directly addressed sexual education and 94 addressed other topics. Only 10 publications depicted more sexually explicit images and 9 had explicitly religious images (Jesus, nuns, etc.). However, many more relied on images that evoke 'traditional' Christian values: a happy heterosexual couple or a happy heterosexual family out in the fields, for instance. After analysing the coding results, I chose images that displayed the more prevalent patterns to illustrate this article and images that express the central topics from my interview.

CONCEPTS WORTH REMEMBERING

In this section, I present the main conceptual frameworks for theorising *SENTA*'s work: pleasure activism, Freirean methodologies applied to sex-ed, and intersectionality. I indicate how these concepts are put into practice in the project, also introducing key specificities of Instagram and social media algorithms that help understand *SENTA*'s work.

Lewin (2019) and Lewin and Jenzen (forthcoming) define four forms of (queer) visual activist practice – protest, product, and process and partying, – which can all be observed in *SENTA*'s work at some level. The project is connected with product-based LGBTQ+ visual activism as the visual pieces is made for display both digitally and physically. It is also possible to frame *SENTA* as partying and protest, as it has always been concerned with building a safe space for people to share their experiences and real doubts related to pleasure – doubts which are not usually covered in sex-ed traditional approaches. And, by doing this, *SENTA* criticises and challenges traditional sex-ed and calls for change at the societal level.

However, *SENTA* is more strongly and directly framed as process-driven visual activism as it uses 'art to empower or engage with participants' (Lewin and Jenzen, forthcoming). Projects in this category tend to be influenced by the work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (2013, 2014). Freire's pedagogies value consciousness-raising through an educational process based on dialogue and mutual learning and transformation. Freedom, autonomy, love, hope, reflection and *praxis* are key words in Freirean thought, in which Education is not politically neutral: it is aligned with the oppressed.

Although sexuality is not a primary theme in discussions on Freirean pedagogies, applying his methodologies to sex-ed is not unusual (Beserra et al., 2011; Dias, 2015; Demartini and Silva, 2016). Freirean-inspired sexual education values dialogue, and sees education as an intrinsically political, transformative and emancipatory process (Warken and Melo, 2019; Sousa, 2021). It also frames sexuality as an inseparable part of our beings. Sousa (2021) highlights how writings from Freire and bell hooks (1994) potentially lean towards a transgressive sexual education, which favours the autonomy of the self, questions heteronormativity and promotes a language of resistance. Such language of resistance is central to LGBTQ+'s (or sexual dissidents, in her terms) fight for liberation because by appropriating language once demeaning, it is possible to imagine and create the Freirean 'untested feasibilities' (Sousa, 2021:13). This means imagining and building through transformative practice a new reality beyond the

³ Carousels, although containing more than one frame, were coded as one post, as I was analysing the posts in their entirety.



Figure 2. An explicit mention of Paulo Freire.

current structures⁴. In this sense, Sousa argues, transgressive sexual education is also decolonial, as it encourages people to free themselves from the shadow of the oppressor.

In the interview, *SENTA*'s creator reflected on how the project invites people to be open about sexual and gender diversity and explore their own sexuality beyond heterosexuality - he mentioned, for instance, that people have messaged him saying they now saw themselves as LGBTQ+ after engaging with the page, accepting their (previously unexplored) desires. This process of questioning the *status quo* - heteronormativity - including at the personal level, resonates with Sousa's definition of transgressive sexual education. In addition, in terms of language, *SENTA* brings theoretical concepts closer to the audience's reality, a methodology aligned with Freire. This can be observed in Figure 2, where theory and humour are combined to describe *SENTA*'s work and inspirations. It recommends readings by Freire, Marcuse and Lopes Louro, and explains its Freirean alignment, as follows:

Education according to Paulo Freire is freeing. It sets you free and it emancipates you. Therefore, sexual education sets you free, allows everyone to freely explore their sexualities and has the power to fight against oppression.

However, it also calls Paulo Freire 'a gorgeous daddy' and argues that 'riding is freeing' and 'blowing is an act of love'. This is a very good representation of *SENTA*'s strategies towards the sexual liberation of his audiences.

Like Freire and his followers, *SENTA* values autonomy, resistance and liberation. It also values education through dialogue instead of abiding by a 'banking model of education' (Freire, 2014: 82), where there are subjects and objects: one side teaches, the other one learns, one holds the knowledge and speaks while the other passively listens. A model where one part decides and the other one obeys. *SENTA*, on the other hand:

Is not to spread information, but to create a dialogue about it. What I am proposing is that we discuss information (...). It is by discussing that we truly learn. If I just say 'use a condom in this situation' people will quickly forget (Personal Communication, 2022).

One way this intention is put into action is by showing his own face and strengthening his *persona*, with his own opinions and preferences – not only on sex and drugs but on other mundane topics. By doing this, *SENTA*'s creator is positioning himself horizontally with the readers to facilitate the dialogue. It allows that at the same time he is seen as an authority in that field of knowledge, he is also subject to critiques and disagreements from the audience.

This approach is welcomed considering Brazil's history with sexual education. Under the strong influence of the Catholic church and successive conservative governments, sexual education has been historically repressed in the country (Demartini and Silva, 2016). There was some opening after the AIDS outbreak, and individual responsibility lost some ground to approaches focusing on social and collective vulnerability (Monteiro, 2002; Ude et al., 2020). Yet even then, sexual education was still predominantly delivered vertically, aligned with the 'banking model'. Even now, the focus remains on preventing STIs and pregnancies (Demartini and Silva, 2016), and sex-ed is barely a political concern (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2021; Guimarães, 2022). *Sento Mesmo*, on the other hand, makes sexual education political and frames it as more than just preventing diseases but also as a site of pleasure.

⁴ In Freire's work, there is no direct definition of the 'untested feasibilities', although the concept is present in many of his books. Paro, Ventura and Silva (2020) offer great insights about the term at <https://doi.org/10.1590/1981-7746-sol00227>

Such an approach is exemplary of ‘pleasure activism’⁵ (brown, 2019), a concept inspired by Audre Lorde’s ‘Uses of the Erotic’ (1978, republished in brown, 2019). It is defined as ‘the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy’ (brown, 2019: 11). It considers pleasure as coming not only from the erotic realm but from a broad range of sources, and as a natural and safe aspect of life. This strongly resonates with *SENTA*’s approach, as project does not try to regulate or control how people experience pleasure – it encourages them to do so and tries to help them to do it safely.

brown (2019: 11) argues it is possible to ‘offer each other tools and education to make sure sex, desire, drugs, connection, and other pleasures aren’t life-threatening or harming but life-enriching’. Pleasure activism focuses on moderation, a concern also echoed in *SENTA*’s harm reduction strategies. For instance, *SENTA*’s first post in 2020, which went viral⁶, teaches ‘how to use drugs during Carnival’. It is not a tutorial on how to use each drug, but rather a guide on how they safely or dangerously interact with each other. In addition, brown understands moderation as opposite to excess and not to abundance, and excess is classified as a symptom of capitalism’s unequal distribution mechanisms. According to her, it ‘destroys the spiritual experience of pleasure’ (2019: 12-13). In other words, pleasure activism opposes capitalist values and aims for a new system in which pleasure and collectivity are central and regards pleasure and collectivity not just as the *products* of this new system but the *tools* to build it. Such perspective connects brown’s ideas with Freirean pedagogies, as both authors value dialogue, collectivity and emphasise not just the goal but the process as fundamental. Such perspectives, reflected in *SENTA*’s work, also stress that respecting people’s autonomy is crucial towards liberation from current structures.

Lastly, a few words on intersectionality are required to better understand *SENTA*’s work. brown defines pleasure activism as a black feminist project (2019: 62) both for the need to approach sexuality as more than just a site of oppression and for the centrality of intersectionality in black feminist thought. Coined by Crenshaw in 1989, various schools of thought have worked on intersectionality ever since, and it remains an important topic in feminist theory (Piscitelli, 2008). Crenshaw recently defined it in an interview as:

A lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. (...) The experience is not just the sum of its parts. (Steinmetz, 2020: n.p.)

The concept matters because, even if the word intersectionality is not used in *SENTA*’s posts, it is not possible to ignore its concern with it. The primary focus on sex-ed and harm reduction does not exclude addressing topics such as racism (Figure 1), misogyny and ableism, amongst others. In his attempt to make his audience explore their sexualities and fight against oppression, *SENTA*’s creator intentionally makes connections with other struggles at stake. In *SENTA*’s approach, sexual education is knowing that people with disabilities have sex too, that gay men can be abusers even if they are also an oppressed group, and that pornography can be racist and violent, and one should choose it wisely to not reinforce racist practices. In sum, that one is free to explore as long as no one else is hurt in the process. These topics are addressed with seriousness despite the jokes and explicit language.

Having connected *Sento Mesmo*’s practices with contemporary theories, the article will now attend to how *SENTA* navigates social media and how it connects with Brazilian LGBTQ+ activism.

DISCUSSION: THE MEDIUM MATTERS

Interviewing *SENTA*’s creator evidenced – especially considering the account’s ban – that the medium matters when it comes to delivering sex-ed. Although one can print and display *SENTA*’s work, the project is rooted in the digital world. Delivering sex-ed online is not exactly new: Oosterhoff et al. emphasise that, just like ‘offline’ methods, it remains common for online sex-ed to focus mainly on negative aspects, such as risks of STIs. ‘[Online sexual education] rarely offers any practical suggestions on what young people really want to know: how to give and receive pleasure, and how to engage in sexual relationships in ways that make them happy’ (2017: 1-2). Thus, there is a gap when it comes to a more open, realistic and non-judgmental approach. A gap *SENTA* aims to fill.

Sex-ed can be a sensitive topic, which makes the digital environment a privileged medium for delivering it, as it allows people to remain anonymous when looking for the content they want or need (Waldman and Amazon-Brown, 2017). To properly enjoy this potential, sex-ed projects must share content that not only reflects common doubts and questions but also rightfully adjust their language and tone to their audience. Moreover, at least theoretically, the content is accessible to larger audiences. However, a digital sex-ed project also has to abide by the medium rules. *SENTA*, like other projects, needs to comply with social media community guidelines and is

⁵ I am incredibly thankful to Bárbara Paes for introducing me to brown’s work whilst I was researching for this article.

⁶ At the time, the project was not yet named ‘*SENTA*’. The post can be found here: <https://medium.com/@unovulpino/como-se-drogar-no-carnaval-4993b6325ae7>

dependent on the algorithm at some level to deliver its content, as just posting on Instagram does not guarantee it will reach its audience.

Rose (2016) notes that social media algorithms now play an important role in visual communication. And although I did not focus on the circulation of content for this article, it is still relevant to reflect on how the medium can influence online sexual education as it directly affects the production of every social media post. As Gillespie (2018) stresses, all platforms engage in processes of content moderation, and although moderation is more noticeable on social media platforms that have algorithmically curated timelines instead of chronological ones, this is a feature of every platform. In fact, content moderation is essential to the constitution of platforms and helps shape the public conversation. However, the process of moderation has to be 'hidden, in part to maintain the illusion of an open platform and in part to avoid legal and cultural responsibility' (Gillespie, 2018: 21). A consequence, Gillespie notes, is that only those culturally privileged at some level can experience this process as if it was invisible or unnoticeable. Or, as Olszanowski (2014: 85) states about Instagram, censorship 'has a consequential role in the way particular subaltern communities are built and maintained'. *SENTA* is a good example; as a project aiming to subvert current norms and targeting people not usually targeted, battling moderation is a fundamental and inescapable aspect of the work.

In addition, moderation has to respond to the values and interests of each platform - and even Facebook and Instagram differ despite being part of the same company (Leaver et al., 2020). And although there are rules and community guidelines stating what is permitted and not permitted, there is still room for interpretation. Platforms, after all, are made up of various communities, with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests and values. That is when moderation gets trickier. For instance, users can police themselves - through the function of 'community flagging', a commonly used tool. In this configuration, users might flag content because they disagree with it, and not because it violates any rules. And if the content is subversive at some level, like *SENTA*'s, it may be subsequently understood by the platform as a violation, in which case the sanction - exclusion, suspension or ban - is collectively interpreted as a platform's statement on that matter (Gillespie, 2018).

To escape sanctions, creators often engage in strategies to circumvent the platform's automated algorithms. For instance: misspelling words, expressions or hashtags (Cobb, 2017), using synonyms, covering nudity (Olszanowski, 2014) and more. One problem is that even automated moderation has its biases (Noble, 2018), including toward conservative and cisheteronormative norms (Jenzen, 2017). Furthermore, there is still user flagging to deal with, and content creators constantly complain about content removal or a profile/page ban without further explanation (Olszanowski, 2014). Phrasing it differently: users experience first-hand the lack of transparency of social media platforms when it comes to moderation. They don't have clarity of what is allowed or not and why. And, more importantly, they don't feel like they have the space to present their side of the story. Then, they act (and react) on their own account, creating their strategies to navigate in such an environment.

Tactics vary depending on each page's topic and type of content, but the common goal remains to circumvent censorship. In this matter, Olszanowski (2014: 93) summarises it well that 'recognizing the polysemic ontology of censorship while at the same time 'playing' with it is one way to destabilise its repressive power'. In other words, it is a powerful move by subaltern communities. The tricky aspect is that subaltern communities encompass diverse and, in fact, oppositional actors: from sex-ed providers to communities promoting eating disorders (Cobb, 2017). From feminist artists to white supremacists or, important in the Brazilian context, groups trying to undermine democracy. These are all trying to remain active and visible on social media.

Specifically talking about Instagram, the platform is primarily visual, unlike Twitter and Facebook, for instance, and this focus is fundamental to its success. As Leaver et al. (2020, n.p.) argue, Instagram has become so prevalent in everyday life that it is now 'synonymous with the visual zeitgeist'. The platform has been through significant changes, particularly after being purchased by Facebook, but its original focus is of particular relevance: Instagram launched heavily relying on retro and vintage aesthetics. This was expressed in its early iconography, filters and square photos (Leaver et al., 2020) - features that were minimised over time. Maybe because, as the authors argue, 'commercial accounts advertising and selling their products through the platform may have considerably less desire to make their content seem like it was from the 1970s' (2020: n.p.). Now, the everchanging platform offers more possibilities for users, like more editing tools, Instagram Stories, marketplaces and more.

Like other social platforms, Instagram also relies both on automated and manual moderation, both of which are targeted by *SENTA*'s creator in his efforts to not be censored. The platform is particularly strict on banning nudity (Leaver et al., 2020; Olszanowski, 2014), regardless of context, which might explain why *SENTA* uses so few explicit images. However, there were some changes in the Community Guidelines over time, responding, for instance, to very vocal protests about censoring breastfeeding (Leaver et al., 2020). These changes reaffirm the platform's never-stopping changes in its rules, which force users to constantly adapt.



Figure 3. A collage of some images from a carousel on how to take a shit (sic) during a date.

VINTAGE AND YET SO MODERN: CONTRASTS BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE

In *Sento Mesmo*, the visual elements are a centrally important part of the project – particularly considering the creator’s background in graphic design – and are carefully planned to provide the best support for the educational and activist content. In this sense, Instagram is the ideal medium of choice. *SENTA*’s intention is to evoke a popular aesthetic and visually represent a paradox of Brazilian society: a society that is both very conservative, and also very libertarian. This paradox is expressed through contrasts between images and texts, but as the next sections will show, *SENTA*’s graphic choices express more than a contrast between conservatism/libertarianism. They also build a bridge between past and present LGBTQ+ activism in the country and express a social media dilemma: how to be visible and interesting for its audience whilst remaining invisible and ordinary to the algorithms.

In *Sento Mesmo*, images – with pictures or letterings – must evoke ‘traditional’ times – in terms of morals and manners – because texts are doing the opposite. *SENTA* talks to people horizontally and considers what they actually do, instead of what they should be doing – which resonates a lot with Freirean methodologies focusing on the lived reality. To do so on Instagram, the creator has to adopt strategies (like omitting/replacing letters or words) to circumvent moderation. All visual elements must make the posts attractive to readers and also invisible to algorithms, as *SENTA* is an easy target considering its language and topics addressed.

Sento Mesmo’s images reference western culture and include pop singers, decorations, or stock-like pictures of daily activities (Figure 3). Posts often replicate newspapers (Figure 4 and Figure 5) or magazine covers. Religious images (Figure 6) and, particularly, Jehovah’s Witnesses’ magazines were a visual inspiration for the project, as, in the creator’s view, they were a good visual representation of the ‘conservative’ side of the paradox he was addressing. All these features show how images are carefully chosen to reminisce ‘traditional’ times and maximise the contradiction between image and text.

Figure 4 talks about toxic masculinities; Figure 5, entitled ‘How to fuck up a date’, addresses which drugs are not to mix in this context. At the top, there is a banner saying, ‘Prevention is not the same as [drug] incitement’.

More rarely, there are contemporary pictures (Figure 7) or print screens – either for humour purposes, to depict political figures or to recommend a read. Humour plays a central role in *SENTA*’s content and evidence *SENTA*’s alignment both with pleasure activism and with Freirean sexual education. It is massively used either to call the audience out and/or to create a bond with the followers, emphasising that the creator’s *persona* shares the same culture as them.



Figure 4. A post about toxic masculinities.



Figure 5. How to fuck up a date.



Figure 6. Highlight says: Sexual abstinence hasn't worked even for Mary. // Do you REALLY think it's going to work for teenagers? i.e., people who watch "Elite"?



Figure 7. It says, 'My uterus during Carnival: Wear a condom'.

By heavily using slang and openly talking about common and usually embarrassing situations in relationships or sexual interactions, *SENTA* shows one use of the 'language of resistance' that Sousa (2021) framed as an element of Freirean sexual education. Additionally, pleasure is celebrated, encouraged and seen as a political act, as can be seen in Figure 8 and Figure 9. Figure 8, for instance, says:

WATCH OUT, BOTTOMS! Beware of your lower back! I know you lift your butt like crazy when you're near people you want, but please be careful with hyperlordosis. Today is the International Day of Fighting hyperlordosis, so girl please work out more, stretch your back and just lift your butt when it's time (Figure 8).



Figure 8. WATCH OUT, BOTTOMS!

Similarly, **Figure 9** states: ‘Masturbating is a political act (...) Uuuuhhh I’m so woke! So obvious LMFAO.’

These choices are not obvious for sex-ed and harm reduction projects, despite the accessible language being almost always described as an important feature. Müller et al. (2017), for instance, show that creative strategies, particularly visual ones, are needed to evade governmental or platform censorship. However, quite often the chosen path is precisely to use more ‘scientific’ and medical language, even if targeting young people (Herbst, 2017), as this would give more credibility and appears to be more ‘neutral’ and less ‘activist’. Other experiences of sexual education through Instagram in the Brazilian context (Castro, 2020; Silva dos Santos, 2021) are not nearly as explicit in their language. For *SENTA*, on the other hand, explicit, non-judgmental language is a non-negotiable feature. This is because the creator considers there are barely any places for people who do not behave by the book:

Brazilian campaigns are always: ‘don’t do it, don’t do it’. It’s never: ‘people will do this. What can we do for them?’ So, these people excluded from Brazilian morality have nowhere to go (...) Even if they are the majority and not the exception (Personal Communication, 2022).

Thus, *SENTA*’s focus is on the gap of knowledge in such communities on how to make safer choices – and it is an urgent concern. The work is, then, a direct critique and a response at the grassroots level to ineffective public policies⁷, which justifies the use of language ‘from the ground’. If *SENTA*’s visuals evoke the ‘good old times’, the text targets those *currently* excluded.

PAST AND PRESENT: CONNECTIONS WITH HISTORICAL QUEER ACTIVISM

Just as there is a dialogue between visuals and words, there is a conversation between past and present. *SENTA*’s entire visual identity aims for a ‘popular appeal’, to reach as many people as possible. Some of the visual references are popular Brazilian newspapers from the 70s-80s, as well as resistance newspapers from the same period, which evidences the political and contra-cultural affiliation of *Sento Mesmo* from the start. Here, I argue that the project’s visual choices evidence this alignment with the historical Brazilian LGBTQ+ movement and mark *SENTA* as a resistance project, preserving and updating the legacy of iconic activism from the past.

When I asked *Sento Mesmo*’s creator what his first *visual* inspirations were, he told me that at the time he was creating *SENTA* he was working alongside São Paulo’s Diversity Museum on a project to rescue LGBTQ+ Memory in the dictatorship years. The job involved collecting press material from that period, so newspapers from



Figure 9. ‘Masturbating is a political act.’

⁷ See, for instance, ‘Bolsonaro says no to sex’: <https://latinamericanpost.com/31957-bolsonaro-says-no-to-sex>



Figure 10. Covers of editions n. 16 and n. 20 of *Lampião da Esquina*. The entire digitalised archive is available at <http://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>

the 70s and 80s were fresh on his mind. Popular, almost sensationalist newspapers, costing the equivalent of £0.05, like *Notícias Populares*, *Super* and the right-wing *Bundas* ('Butts'). He also mentioned *Lampião da Esquina*, a queer newspaper printed between 1978-81 and considered the first media of its type in the country. Initially, *SENTA* would be called *Lampião*, which explicitly confirms the inspiration beyond the visual. More than that, it shows a willingness to somehow preserve the memory and the legacy of *Lampião*.

Lampião was visually very impactful. It used different fonts, pictures and illustrations, not necessarily abiding by only one graphic identity (Castro and Fonseca, 2021). Stories were told through abundant slang and humour and the first pages were designed to look like street posters (ibid) (see **Figure 10**) – the same features of *SENTA*, but in a different medium.

Lampião was a resistance project, traditionally framed as part of the 'alternative press' that acted outside the law, escaping government censorship (Kucinski, 2018). But it was more than that. 'It was a newspaper that disobeyed in various directions' (Trevisan, 2018: 317). Gay journalists that created it felt silenced both in the public arena and amidst left circles (ibid), with no space to discuss and to freely live their sexualities. So *Lampião* was not only to tell their side of the story and talk about their issues but also a space to collectively experiment. Meetings included group nudity and touching (not necessarily sexual) as a way to build collective trust. Trevisan recalls:

We considered fucking as a political act because our political action should be 'filled with the tenderness we have learned in the bed'. We started thinking (timidly at first) of pleasure as a legitimate right of every citizen. Even more in a country of such poverty as Brazil. We wanted to believe that misery didn't neutralise joy (2018: 318, My Translation).

This sentence evidences the stylistic and political alignment between the two projects: both the founders emphasised pleasure as a core value in their political actions, and as a right of every citizen. Trevisan also stressed the centrality of the collective, who would experience their sexuality and desires together, learn together and from each other, precisely what Freire (2014) states. These connections show that Freirean values and pleasure activism are not only embedded in *SENTA*: they are also core values of its major inspiration.

In addition, both projects rely on humour to ground their political action and focus/ed on building and sustaining a community in the process, and approach other topics in addition to the initial ones: *SENTA* discusses racism, ableism, COVID-19 (and more). *Lampião* discussed sexism, racism, and ecology as well as 'homosexual' topics and the fight for democracy. In both cases, there is a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of many agendas to advance toward a new society. In all of these, *Sento Mesmo* is carrying the legacy of *Lampião da Esquina* and updating it to the 21st century and new mediums.

BEING RADICAL ON SOCIAL MEDIA: HOW TO DEAL WITH ALGORITHMS

Another factor connects past and present in *SENTA*'s work – and it is also expressed in *SENTA*'s use of image and text: living under authoritarian and non-transparent regimes. Then, a former dictatorship with official

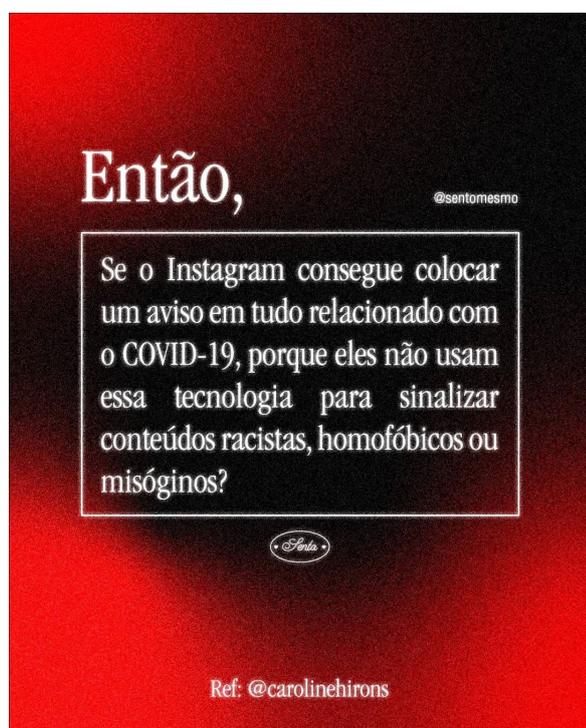


Figure 11. “If Instagram can put a warning on everything that is COVID-related, why can’t it use its technology to flag racist, homophobic and misogynistic posts?”

press censorship. Now, an authoritarian regime in a weakened democracy (V-DEM Institute, 2022)⁸ and, in addition, the omnipresent power of social media algorithms. Both forces – state power and diffuse/omnipresent algorithms – can operate together, as they did when *SENTA*’s original profile was banned: people organised and collectively flagged the page for obscene content until Instagram permanently banned it. What was considered obscene were the topics addressed and the language used by *SENTA*, its unnegotiable features. This means that to deliver sexual education on Instagram, *SENTA* has to fight not only authoritarian political regimes and the algorithm’s omnipresent power but also the conservative morality present in Instagram’s huge user base. This section will address this concern, showing how this struggle is expressed graphically.

When I asked about the strategies to circumvent the algorithms, *SENTA*’s creator said: ‘I assume I am living under a dictatorship’, explaining that this directly influences his graphic choices. And added, making it more explicit: ‘Visually, I’m in the 60s or 70s’. That is, he suggests that using images from 50 years ago might distract the algorithm. And that by visually locating itself in such a period, *SENTA* would make the content ‘safe’ to present-day moderation mechanisms. It should not be forgotten that, in the beginning, Instagram echoed vintage aesthetics. It was an ode to this style, relying on nostalgia to attract more users. *SENTA*, on the other hand, uses nostalgia to mislead the algorithm, alluding to what its political opponents consider a safer and better time. That is, *SENTA* evokes Instagram’s early aesthetics to safely navigate its current norms.

Interestingly, the 60s and 70s were precisely the most repressive years of the Brazilian military dictatorship. Thus, by visually positioning the project in these decades, *SENTA*’s creator does not simply display a contrast between text and images, it reinforces the connections between current and past political struggles. Moreover, it reaffirms that *SENTA* acknowledges the role of the first LGBTQ+ activists in the country such as *Lampião* founders. That is, the contrasts serve different functions and by no means represent a contradiction. Quite the opposite, they enrich the project’s message and put different elements into conversation.

Including numerous layers of political engagement in each post, *SENTA*’s battle with the algorithms becomes even more meaningful. In present-day Brazil, creators – including *SENTA*’s – often complain about what is considered offensive on each social media or a violation of community guidelines. This is a common complaint among sex-ed digital providers, even when a project is State-sponsored (Müller et al., 2017; Herbst, 2017). *SENTA*’s creator is particularly critical of Facebook and Instagram, saying their verdicts are quite arbitrary and impossible to follow with their constant changes.

This battle is sometimes addressed, as **Figure 11** shows. It says: “If Instagram can put a warning on everything that is COVID-related, why can’t it use its technology to flag racist, homophobic and misogynistic posts?”. It

⁸ President Bolsonaro lost the 2022 elections to former president Lula, by a very tight margin, showing concerning levels of acceptance of Bolsonaro’s authoritarian style.

criticises the automated algorithms' double standards and reaffirms *SENTA*'s political position. Other posts seem to respond to the second step of moderation: human judgement. Examples are posts carrying the disclaimer 'Saving lives is not incitement' or 'Prevention [of overdoses] is not the same as encouraging the use of drugs.' These are *SENTA*'s attempts to defend their content against an accusation of violating the medium rules. It is as if he anticipated the moderator's movement and responded to it in advance.

As shown throughout the article, delivering effective and transformative sex-ed on Instagram and other social media requires dynamism, the willingness to adapt, and a constant state of attention. Creators have to pay attention to multiple guidelines as well as to their audience's needs. Visual, textual and engagement concessions have to be made to be able to circulate in such a highly regulated environment, but such concessions can still be filled with meaning. If done effectively, this type of work can fill an important gap with a more realistic dialogue with people who are rarely targeted and even more rarely listened to.

CONCLUSION

The article sought to discuss the possibilities and limitations of delivering transformative sex-ed and harm reduction in the digital environment, using the Brazilian project *Sento Mesmo* as a case study. *SENTA* shamelessly and unapologetically talks about practices not usually addressed – condomless anal sex, penis sizes, combining different drugs to increase pleasure, heterosexual men being penetrated. And the project teaches how to enjoy such practices safely, or as safely as possible. It is explicitly inspired by Freirean pedagogies and, as I argue, puts the concept of 'pleasure activism' coined by brown (2019) into practice. It frames pleasure not only as an indissociable part of ourselves but one that should be encouraged and that has the potential to disrupt current norms and create new ways of living: a world with more sexual freedom and where labels and identities are not important or definitive. A world where everyone is deserving of care and pleasure. By doing so, it is an activist project as well as an educational one. It fights against current policies and aims for a new collective, not avoiding the political struggles in between.

To accomplish its mission, *SENTA* relies on contrasts between text/image, modern-new/traditional-old, present/past, and visibility/invisibility. In the end, these strategies all work toward circumventing algorithms' censorship, allowing *SENTA* to deliver transformative and radical sex-ed on a regulated platform.

The goal is to be as attractive to the reader as possible while being undetectable and innocuous in the eyes of the algorithm. For that, it depicts vintage aesthetics that evoke the 'good old times' when it comes to morals and manners – at least according to the voices who antagonise *SENTA*. Although the visuals might reminisce conservative values, the written language could not be more contrasting, using abundant slang, curses and sexual terms. Most of such 'dirty' words are, however, replaced, omitted or translated to circumvent the algorithms, usually with humour and irony. And the contrasts are in fact complementary. Visuals and text do not oppose, they create dialogue and make the content more engaging. *SENTA* mixes past and present times to reach its goal while acknowledging what came before. Both sides are in conversation.

The digital landscape has opened new horizons for activist and political action, as well as for educational projects. It is easier to reach larger audiences, who can engage with the content as they don't have to identify themselves. In such delicate topics as sexual practices and drug use, anonymity and privacy play important roles. This is particularly important in a context of strengthening far-right and conservative agendas, which is the case in Brazil in this decade. Such context only reinforces how *SENTA*-like projects are important. Currently, sexual education and harm reduction are in no way a priority for public policies. To fill this gap, civil society acts when the government does not, often being targeted by algorithms for doing so. Because of that, it is reasonable to assume that if there were more similar projects, it would be more difficult to censor all of them.

SENTA's creative use of visuals and text is certainly to be credited to the creator's background in graphic design and digital communications. Despite being a very grassroots project, it looks quite professional, rightfully dialoguing with the mediums it is inserted and drawing from its references to affirm its political alignment. Finally, despite being very context-specific in its references, I argue that *SENTA*'s strategies (particularly regarding image/text choices) can be applied elsewhere. Although this article had its share of translation challenges, I hope that its discussion of *SENTA* can inspire other initiatives worldwide. People need this inspiration, as they will continue to ride. May they do it shamelessly.

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The Transgender Flipping Point: How Trans Instagrammers Flip the Script on Identity

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ABSTRACT

Since *Time* magazine's now iconic 2014 cover story featuring trans actress Laverne Cox proclaimed the contemporary moment 'The Transgender Tipping Point', there has been much debate about the recent proliferation of trans representations across all media sectors. Trans scholars, culture producers, artists, and activists have argued that this is not only a misconception, but it occludes the corpus of trans visual culture made by and for trans culture producers reflecting a wider diversity of trans experiences that do not readily reflect dominant cultural paradigms. Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via social media platforms, the selfie has facilitated self-imaging becoming a ubiquitous part of globally networked contemporary life. Beyond this, selfies have facilitated a diversity of image-making practices and enabled otherwise representationally marginalized constituencies to insert self-representations into visual culture. A close look at the prolific selfie practice of Black British, gender-non-conforming, trans-femme performance artist Travis Alabanza reveals their use of Instagram to be a critical intervention into contemporary culture. In self-imaging complex, expansive, and intersectional identity, Alabanza's oeuvre produces new visual exemplars that defy stereotypes and erasures produced by dominant culture while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of identity and self-portraiture. Alabanza's work decolonizes the relationship between the subject and the portrait, encouraging viewers to consider the complex dialectical relationship between images, aesthetics, and communication about identity, performativity, gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

Keywords: media, queer, performance, selfies, trans

INTRODUCTION

Since *Time* magazine's now iconic 2014 cover story featuring trans actress Laverne Cox proclaimed the contemporary moment 'The Transgender Tipping Point', there has been much debate about the recent proliferation of trans representations (**Figure 1**). Trans scholars, culture producers, artists, and activists have argued that the notion of a 'Tipping Point' is not only a reductive and problematic misconception, but it occludes diverse forms of trans visual culture made by trans culture producers whose experiences do not readily reflect dominant cultural paradigms. It also presents a narrow and essentialist understanding of transness. Against the backdrop of dominant cultural representations of trans folks (particularly in the US and UK) this article focuses on the discourses informing this moment, and the Instagram interventions of non-binary Black British trans femme multi-disciplinary artist Travis Alabanza. Alabanza serves as a critical exemplar of a trans creative using self-representation (particularly on Instagram), to counter the problematic narratives of trans folks in mainstream media, reworking discourses of photography, identity and representation (**Figures 4 and 5**).



Figure 1. Lavern Cox, screenshot from Laverne Cox’s Twitter feed, @LaverneCox, May 29, 2014.

THE DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF REPRESENTATION IN LOCATIONS DESCENDED FROM THE COLONIAL PROJECT

The deployment of trans icons in mainstream visual culture is bound up with the construction and maintenance of trans stereotypes, established through the conceptualization of photography in Western art historical traditions. The discursive framing of portrait photographs, descended from the colonial project, assumes an ontological belief in the image’s ability to transmit ‘truth’ about its subject (Sekula, 1986; Berger, 1990; Solomon-Godeau, 1994; Tagg, 1993; Sontag, 2001; Berger and Dyer, 2013). This belief facilitated photography’s deployment as an apparatus of cultural ideology (Solomon-Godeau, 1994; Batchen, 1999).

Since its inception, photography has been framed discursively as an objective recorder of the world. Early photo theorist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) argued photographs are ‘effects of the radiations from the object’ (Sekula, 1986: 55). He argued that because photographs are made mechanically, they are not influenced by subjectivity (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001:16). However, as John Tagg and other scholars have noted, photography is highly subjective. Tagg observed, photographs record the many choices that go into making an image—including the sequential choices of the image-maker (Tagg, 1993: 188-189). Photography’s discursive framing sets up an ontology that perpetuates what can be referred to as the photograph’s ‘regime of truth’ (ibid). This ideologically driven framing of photography in the Western context has attached notions of evidence, and authenticity to pictures, and in so doing eclipsed their fabricated nature, and the fact that they are bound up with power differentials, and the creation and transmission of stereotypes (Dyer, 2002).

Representations are constituent of how expectations are set up regarding what corporealities are valued by a given culture at a specific point in time. Representations of trans femmes of colour today in the Western context correspond with the erasure of, and violence perpetrated against, trans femmes of colour in daily life. As Richard Dyer has insightfully argued, the psychological significance of stereotypes is that they outline the parameters of life for various groups at a given point in time, in a particular location (Dyer, 2002). What trans femme stereotypes translate into when it comes to depicting trans people and trans characters in dominant culture is deeply fraught. Mainstream representations of trans people narrowly present acceptable ways of being trans, demonstrate which trans subjectivities are impermissible, and side-line the majority of actual trans embodiments and experiences (For more on this see: Espineira and Bourcier, 2016; Faye, 2018; Lehner, 2019; 2020; 2021; Serano, 2013). As Homi k. Bhabha (1994) observes, via anxious repetition of fixed representations of a given constituency we begin to culturally understand a group of people as all being a certain way. Regardless of its facticity, due to its continuous circulation, the stereotype becomes believed. This is achieved due to the fixity of the image and the consistent assumptions attached to it (Bhabha, 1994), in turn, forming a cultural belief and expectation about a given group of people. Trans stereotypes are often the only examples of trans subjects that most people encounter.

The conceptual flattening of the space between image and subject is crucial to the upholding of stereotypes and by extension colonial ideologies. Photographs at their inception in the mid-1800s were deeply tangled with that period's dominant world-views, including a variety of binary oppositions that positioned Caucasian masculinities as the pinnacle of humanity (Batchen, 1999; Berger, 2005). Halberstam (2018: 6-7) has observed that in the colonial project binary oppositions were established precisely to facilitate the demarcation of others as knowable and visible in order to degrade and dehumanize them.

Considering the interconnection between photography and gender, it is instructive to consider the work of trans studies scholar Paul B. Preciado who observed the discursive framing of photography as indexical, and beliefs about photography's 'technical production' being falsely related to objectivity, endowed it with 'the merit of visual realism', which in turn has tied photography to a significant stage in the production of a gender via the belief in visual truth (Preciado, 2013: 111). Preciado writes, "the truth of sex takes on the nature of visual discourse, a process in which photography participates like an ontological catalyst, making explicit a reality that would not be able to emerge any other way" (Preciado, 2013: 112). Photographs of people not only prompt a reading of the picture for clues about the person, but they also inform the normative structures by which we live.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1994: 257), exploring the function of photographs in relation to gender formations, writes, 'photography, a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth and naturalism has been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender'. In failing to view photographs as highly fabricated and ideologically instructive, one is wont to mischaracterise what is contained in the frame as a given rather than view it as a suggestion of one possible reality. To view the portrait photographs circulating in mainstream culture as a given, reinforces established ideologies and aesthetic standards.

In studying portrait photographs we must consider how the project of creating visibility itself reinforces and further legitimizes the cultural weight invested in looking, otherwise a practice buttressing the maintenance of current power structures. Distilling vibrant debates that have been engaged by feminist theorists regarding the politics of representation, Solomon-Godeau (1994: 258) concisely argues that the problem of engaging with binary oppositions of negative visibility countered by positive visibility is 'uncomplicated', grounded in 'unexamined essentialism', and relies on a 'positivist model that is both limiting and ultimately deceptive'. It is significant that scholars do not engage in reductive thinking about portraits being synonymous with knowledge, nor should scholarship position one type of image-making in opposition to another, but instead, methodologically it is necessary to attend to the specificity of each new visual instantiation on its terms via interdisciplinary approaches that attend most fully to the image's specificity.

TRANS FEMMES IN VISUAL CULTURE AND BRIEFLY HOW WE GOT HERE

The first and oldest weekly news magazine published in the United States, *Time* holds significant cultural weight as a medium of transmission of culture. So, when, the cover story lauded that one year after gay marriage was legalised, the USA had moved on to the next civil rights battle and Cox is quoted as saying, 'more of us are living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly. So, people can say, "Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans"' (Steinmetz, 2014: 40), the takeaway is that culturally the USA has arrived at a critical juncture on the brink of *acceptance* of trans folks. However, this type of logic relies on the inaccurate and unfounded belief that an increase in representation of trans characters and a handful of trans celebrities in mainstream culture equals political and social progress. The problematic conceptualization behind this move—forwarding the belief that visibility equates to progressive or radical social change—is not only that this is non-factual but that representations are far more complex than they may seem at first glance (For more on this see: Doyle and Jones, 2006).



Figure 2. Behind-the-scenes footage of Jenner's photoshoot with Annie Leibovitz, as aired on *I Am Cait*, for her iconic *Vanity Fair* cover story, June of 2015. Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.



Figure 3. Image of Christine Jorgenson, the world's first trans celebrity, from Susan Stryker's film *Christine in the Cutting Room*. Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.

Embodying feminine aesthetics, trans femmes deploy aesthetics associated with those we have been trained to devalue and consume in the West; but in embodying femmeness beyond cis femininity, they become objects of spectacular fascination. The heightened sexualization and exploitation of trans femmes in dominant Western visual culture are aligned with cultural ideologies invested in dehumanizing trans feminine people in ways that go beyond the exploitation of cis women. The coupling of both transphobia and misogyny directed at trans femmes objectifies bodies, and demeans personhood, positioning trans femmes as objects to be perused, exploited, and discarded. In her text *Trans-Misogyny Primer*, trans scholar and activist Julia Serano (n.d.) observes how mainstream culture mobilizes trans femmes in ways that depict sexualized bodies in 'titillating and lurid fashion'. Transmisogyny has also led to the media's now decades-long depiction (starting with Christine Jorgenson) of 'the trans revolution in lipstick and heels' (Serano, 2016: 70) (Figure 3). Moreover, the intersection of racism and gender oppression continues to create uneven, problematic, and often dangerous intersections perpetuated in visual culture (Figure 2). As Elías Cosenza Krell (2017) has noted, albeit invaluable, Serano's formulation of transmisogyny does not address race or class and in so doing positions white middle-class transness as the demographic impacted by transmisogyny thus limiting the value of the term. Krell also notes that this is not a problem unique to Serano, but rather is one that has plagued the theorization of gender and sexuality since Foucault (ibid). In an effort to maintain the use value of the concept of transmisogyny, Krell traces the work of Moya Bailey who coined the term *Misogynoir* which describes the intersection of 'racism, antiblackness, and misogyny' (Krell, 2017: 236). Building on Bailey's

intervention, Krell goes on to suggest that term such as *transmisogynoir* and *racialized transmisogyny* (leaning on Patricia Hill Collins) are critically necessary and work to include voices and perspectives from outside the academy (Krell, 2017) (See: Bailey and Trudy, 2018). These debates are indebted to the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, specifically *Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color* (Crenshaw, 1991).

Trans femme activists Cece McDonald and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy observe that the hypervisibility of Laverne Cox has, in many ways, led to increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of colour (Griffin-Gracy, McDonald and Meronek, 2017). McDonald and Griffin-Gracy suggest that because Cox is presumably unreachable, racist transphobic would-be aggressors of Cox turn their acts of violence against those who come into their proximity (ibid). Griffin-Gracy notes that femme people, in general, are subjected to heightened social regulation (Griffin-Gracy, McDonald and Meronek, 2017: 29)¹ Griffin-Gracy's observation about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetails with micha cárdenas's argument that 'the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable' (cárdenas, 2017: 170). 'Now more than ever', cárdenas writes, 'it is evident that visibility is a trap'(ibid).

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, C. Riley Snorton (2017) traces the interconnections between racism and gender as regulating apparatus. Snorton sees Caitlin Jenner (see [Figure 2](#)) in an established canon of trans representations traceable to the first widely celebrated trans woman to appear in visual culture—Christine Jorgensen (see [Figure 3](#)). Snorton observes that the canonization of Jorgensen as the 'good transsexual' set up a framework in which White trans women gained an 'acceptable subject position', contingent on their Whiteness and their commitment to embodying and reflecting narrowly prescribed cultural norms associated with White womanhood (Snorton, 2107: 140-143). The same tropes are observable in the multiple visual examples we see today of Caitlyn Jenner: affluence, passivity, inviting the gaze, and being White. Snorton also suggests that, in making a narrow fraction of trans femmes acceptable via the whitewashed and rigidly bound gender category, the iconizing of Jorgensen set up a mould against which other trans femmes would be compared (Snorton, 2017). Those who did not reflect Jorgensen's precedent lay outside the bounds of acceptable trans embodiment, either due to expressing gender beyond the binary or due to racial appearance other than White².

Historically, the discursive and ideological framing of transness has been overdetermined by cultural ideologies about visibility and the medical industry so strongly that trans people have embodied transness in line with these ideologies. Historically, to procure services to transition, trans folks needed to convince care providers and the medical industry that one was 'trapped in the wrong body' and was seeking to align one's internal sense of self with an external physical anatomy that matched. Within the framing of dominant binary gender structures, this left room only to appear to others as either a man or a woman but feel as the 'opposite'. The logic of this schema is rooted in an essentialist conflation of gender identity and external physical aesthetics. In other words, as gender is repeatedly tied to how people appear and, more precisely, how others interpret this appearance, then we will all always need to embody gender in ways that comply with, and replicate, what is dictated by dominant visual culture to be treated in line with our gender identities (Salamon, 2010: 123). Yet, genders are much more complex as we will see presently with a discussion of the work of Travis Alabanza³.

As Gayle Salamon (2010: 114) writes, the process of transitioning has been described as 'a process of transforming the body so that its visible signifiers of gender come into accord with the internal invisible sense of gender' and the predominance of visual embodiment being tied to identity has regulated trans experiences to be tightly bound to achieving physical interventions so that one's embodiment reflects dominant binary gender paradigms. These logics are the same logics that undergird the various systems of oppression in locations ideologically informed by enduring legacies of colonialist ideologies.

Colonial evolutionists postulated that it was via the binary opposition of Caucasian men and women marked by visually discernible binary oppositions that white supremacy was visually recognizable and maintained (Russett, 1989; Somerville, 2000; Najmabadi, 2005; Carter, 2007; Peiss, 2011; Herzig, 2016). The linking of systems of oppressions to visual classifications of difference and hierarchies has continued to be entrenched in locations descended from this colonialist ideology. Thus, the ongoing work of racism, sexism, queer and transphobia, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, classism and more continues to be part of the same enduring oppressive systems and

¹ McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on CeCe McDonald: Erdely, 2014; Lockett, 2016; Qian, 2017; Barnard Centre for Research on Women, 2018.

² Jorgensen herself was already repeating entrenched raced and gendered tropes of femininity. One needs only to look back at the history of portraiture and visual culture in the West and view the lineage of White women imaged within this narrow aesthetic. Feminist art historians have hashed this out. See the works of Cindy Sherman, Reenee Cox, Adrian Piper, Carolee Schneeman, scholarship of bell hooks, Laura Mulvey and others. On the topic of decolonizing gender and its racist implications, see Somerville, 2000.

³ For discussion of gender as a matrix, and as performative see Judith Butler's extensive oeuvre.

are carried out via the conceptual framing that via looking one can ascribe identity to another and by extension determine how to treat them.

The recent increase in racist, queerphobic and transphobic violence is part of this enduring legacy of colonialist violence. Failing to draw the connection between these interconnected systems, and perhaps most importantly their contingency on an ideological belief in the ability to ascribe meaning (and by extension value) to people based on appearance, is a critically profound issue. Trans of colour culture, lives and social movements had a massive impact on LGBTQ liberation beginning in the 1960s. Yet trans of colour representations, narratives and identities and experiences of interlocking oppression continue to be overshadowed by the narratives of white trans movements and communities (Chen, 2019: 7). Thus, the mainstream visual manifestation of trans identities and movement by and large reflect white supremacist ideologies and embodiments. A cursory historical look at the establishment of gender as a category reveals that the articulation of gender by the 1950s was bound with gender assimilation as upheld by the biochemical treatment and forced gender assignments surgeries by the psych-medical industries. These were based on and informed by 'histories and systems of genocide, captivity, colonization and imperialism' as integral to and informed by the regulation of binary gender regimes (Chen, 2019: 4-5). Recall for a moment if you will the above discussion of the sanitised incorporation of Jorgensen as first trans celebrity.

In the contemporary moment mainstream visual culture reflects the trope of the incorporateable trans subjects in the form of a token handful of trans celebrities including Laverne Cox, Janet Mock and Caitlyn Jenner while simultaneously deploying messages about trans folks who exist outside of sanctioned parameters of gender manifestations. With this in mind *Micha Cárdenas* would have us remember that:

The act of violent backlash against trans and queer Latinx people underscores the fact that we have begun to open queer and Latinx futures as a possible reality, and those futures make some people very afraid. Queer Latinx futures point to queerness as horizon, as described by José Esteban Muñoz, and as possibility. Trans Latinx futures gesture toward worlds free of colonial borders of gender, sexuality and nationality (*Cárdenas*, 2022: 168).

Counter to the public imaginary, when it comes to trans femmes of colour and those who are not gender conformists, let us recall Latinx trans femme, *Sylvia Rivera*, one of the founders of queer liberation as an example of queer futurity, rather than as mainstream culture would have us believe, as abject victim destined for demise. For after all it was *Rivera* who said, 'nothing can stop us—now or any time in the future' (*Cárdenas*, 2022: 168).

TRANS DISRUPTION IN THE VISUAL FIELD

The tenuous relationship between trans people and visibility is a crucial tenet of why practices of trans self-representations are crucial, proposing interventions that disrupt assumptions about identity, visual culture, and representation. Trans scholar *C. Riley Snorton* (2017: 140) has insightfully noted that 'reality is sutured to the privileging of sight'. Trans as an identity and as a methodology undoes this ideologically constructed pseudologic, or belief, in the privileging of sight, while offering a way out of thinking via binaries and essentialisms. Studying trans visual culture interventions via interdisciplinary methodology co-informs the object of study and building on trans and visual studies methods offers a powerful new prism through which to rethink many aspects of visual culture and in this case identity and representation.

Trans as an identity constituency is made up of people who self-define in complex dialectical opposition to that which one has been told they are. Trans people reject the identity assigned to us at birth and that was imposed upon us based on our aesthetics. Trans is comprised of diverse gender identifications, all of whom have unique and discrete relations to geographic location, historical time periods, subcultural identification, class, and ethnicity (as well as other identifications). Trans identities highlight gender identities in ways that avoid the fixed, the linear, and the bordered, promoting genders that can change and fluctuate over the course of a lifetime, or even over the course of a day. Gender identity can even change depending on whom we are interacting with, where we are, and how we feel. Trans is often deployed by subjects as a means of articulating a lack of interest in existing and performing within the binary gender structure. It is also often used as a way of refusing to transition into a binary gender presentation. Trans can also be understood as creating a third gendered space that is diverse and maintaining a place of stasis and/or ongoing potentiality⁴.

⁴ In this usage trans represents a gender that is open, unfixed, transgressive, transversing, continually becoming, and disruptive of static norms. It is not about authenticity but reveals how bodily feeling and desire are constituted socially and spatially. Political, affective and social register produce trans bodies. See *Prosser* (2013), *Hayward* (2017) and *Stryker* (2008; 2018).

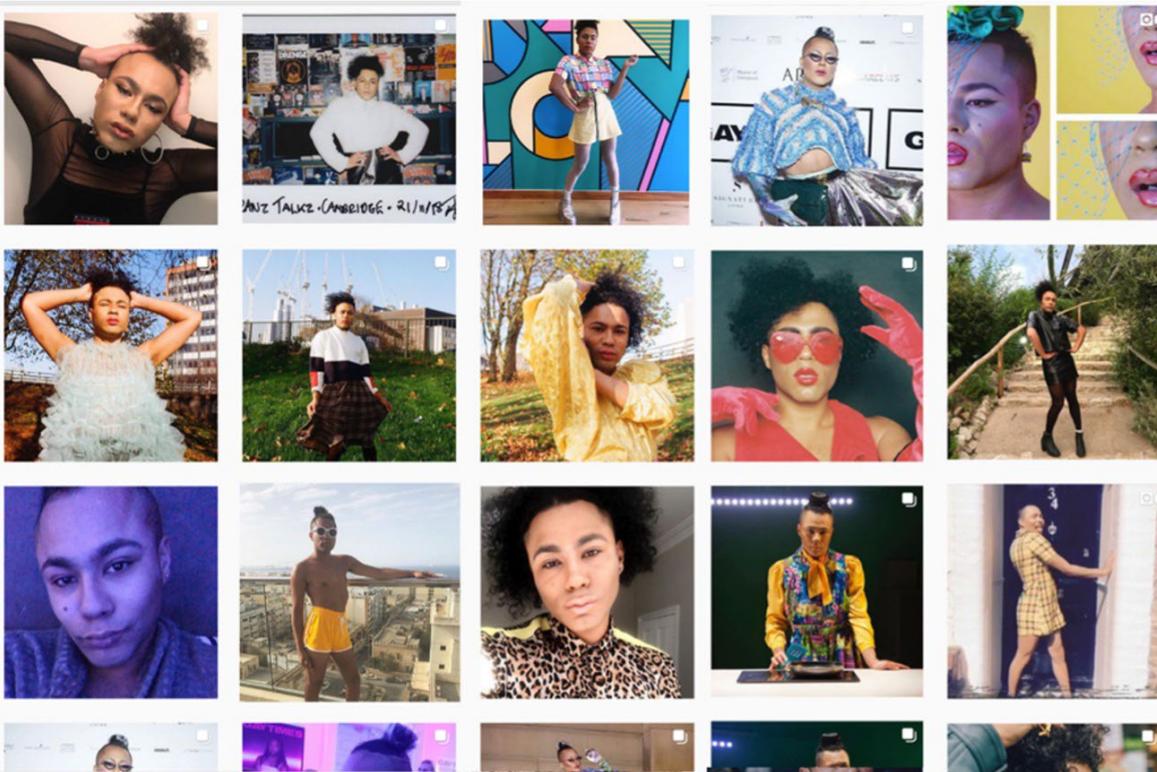


Figure 4. Selection of Alabanza's self-images on their Instagram feed. Image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza.

ALABANZA'S INSTA INTERVENTION

Predominantly known for their work in performance, Black British, non-binary, trans femme artist Travis Alabanza grew up in working-class Bristol, England, and is currently based in London, active in the performance and theatre scenes there⁵. In 2017, Alabanza became the youngest recipient of the artist in residence at the Tate workshop program. They've performed in venues such as the ICA, the Roundhouse, and Barbican. Alabanza has toured throughout Europe and the United States in hundreds of venues (Alabanza, 2022a; Minamore, 2019; Beresford, 2018; Faye, 2018; Rulli, 2017). Using the platform Instagram, Alabanza inserts radical aesthetics into the visual field, critically engaging in discourses of trans identity formations, and discourses of representation. Challenging distinctions between self-portraiture and selfies, the use of Instagram by image-makers like Alabanza mobilizes the platform as an ever-evolving, self-curated solo exhibition of self-portraiture. This not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define portraiture and photographic practice, but also confounds the way in which stereotypes are established. Rather than creating static and reductive representations that narrowly demonstrate essentialized ways of being an acceptable trans subject, Alabanza's self-representations present a diversity of potential ways of being non-binary and black, while the self-publishing and self-curatorial aesthetics of Instagram also facilitate that they speak for themselves.

Trans, as a rejection of assigned sex/gender, is a rejection of what was attached to us based on our physical attributes, or assumptions based on corporeal aesthetics. Trans subjects reject a gender that has been ascribed to us based on interpretation of our physical surface, in favour of living our lives based on our internal feeling—something not visible, but rather often expressed visually. Gender is communicated in part by playing with the aesthetics and expectations of gendered performances and embodiments. Trans, as an analytic, offers a method to view representations not only as distinct and distant from the subject rendered, but in tension with it. A trans self-imaging praxis like that of Alabanza's provides a method that prompts a rethinking of surfaces necessarily relating to essence, identity, and authenticity, unfixing the surface from the subject (Figures 4 and 5).

⁵ Black British refers to British citizens of either Indigenous African Descent or of Black Afro-Caribbean (or Afro-Caribbean) background and includes people with mixed ancestry. This is a term by which Travis Alabanza self-identifies. Non-binary, another way that Travis Alabanza identifies, refers to someone who does not identify with the gender binary. Trans femme is used here to differentiate from trans woman. While trans woman as an identity category reinforces the conflation of gender and biology and is rooted in a rigidly bound category with a history of tensions, trans femme as deployed here is about aesthetics and gestures; it recognizes gender as a free signifier not reductively attached to biological sex.

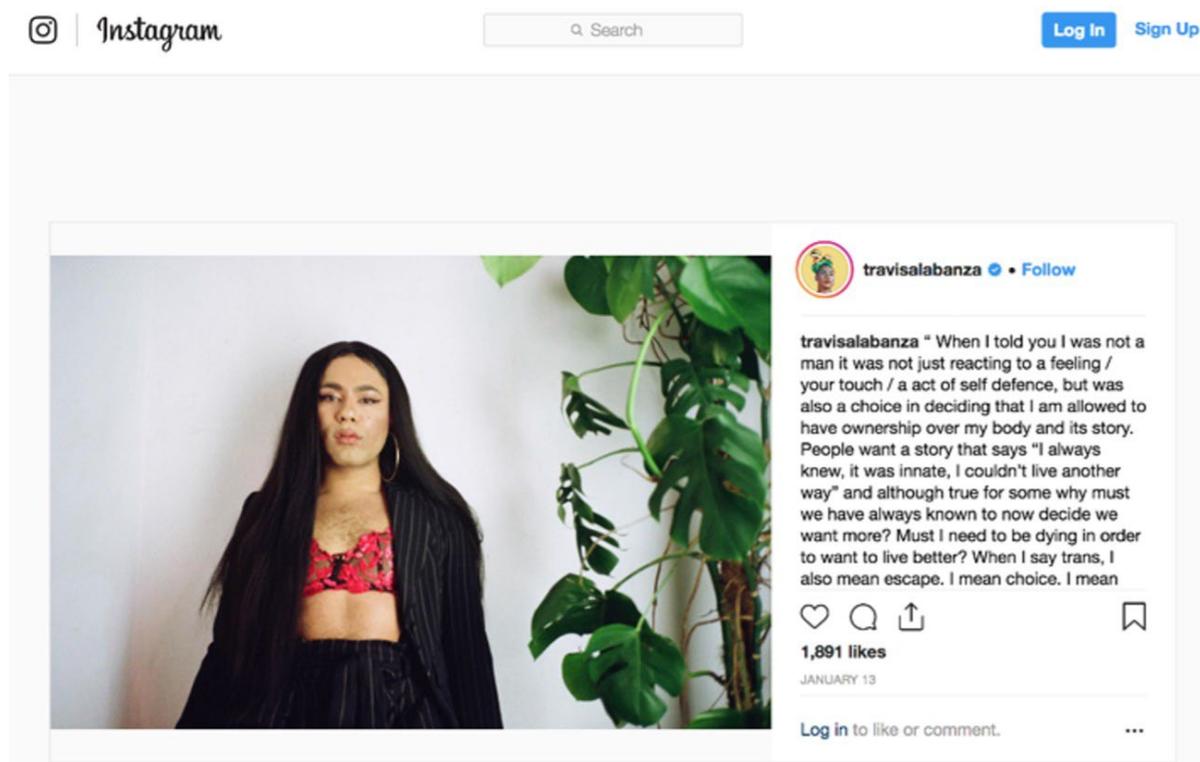


Figure 5. Self-image of Travis Alabanza on their Instagram feed posted 13 January 2020. Screen grab image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza.

Travis Alabanza's trans self-imaging practice intervenes in methods of photography, representation and complex relationship between seeing and knowledge, and notions of lens-based imaging as related to unmediated 'truth', revealing that the indexicality that we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we in the West are taught to assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification. Current discourse around identity is shifting via trans cultural production and we are seeing a move away from the idea that one can categorize others based on interpretation of aesthetics. Thus, we are now witnessing a shift wherein we learn to respect people's self-identifications, regardless of what identities and values viewers may want to suture to them based on visual assessment (for example, identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, and values such as worthiness of being treated as a person).

In their prolific self-imaging, using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of a continually evolving self, Alabanza's work visually problematises our cultural belief in the photograph's correlation with authenticity and truth. Beyond mobilising Instagram as an intervention into discourses of representation, Alabanza's ever-shifting representation acts as radical manoeuvres in reworking the conceptual ontology of photography. Alabanza performs iterations of self that deploy various displays of their complex identity and expansive gender expression. Part of the ontology of transness as an identity is well-suited to challenging the Western conception of photography. For, as trans identities often unmoor notions of corporeal aesthetics equating to some notion of authentic self or truth, they undo the equation that visually interpreting a surface can lead to the procurement of knowledge, or precisely how photographs have been framed ideologically in the Western context. Thus, when Alabanza makes a self-image, they intentionally play with the idea that they are in control of how their gender appears; they are performing a picture while intimately aware that a surface is never necessarily correlative to any notion of interiority, authenticity or truth. This conceptually opens up and troubles the relationship between the image and the subject and intervenes in this space. There can be no flattening of one image and one version of Alabanza; one must continually consult Alabanza's feed to view the gender that they perform at any given point in time, in any given location.

Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via social media platforms, the selfie has facilitated self-imaging becoming a ubiquitous part of globally networked contemporary life. Beyond this, selfies have facilitated a diversity of image-making practices and enabled otherwise representationally marginalised identities to insert self-representations into visual culture (For more on this see: Lehner, 2021; Murray, 2022; Giroux, 2015; Gorichanaz, 2019). A close look at the prolific selfie practice of Travis Alabanza reveals their use of Instagram to be a critical intervention into contemporary culture. In self-imaging complex, expansive, and intersectional identity, Alabanza's oeuvre produces new visual exemplars that defy stereotypes and erasures produced by dominant culture while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of identity and

self-portraiture. Alabanza's work decolonises the relationship between the subject and the portrait, encouraging viewers to consider the complex dialectical relationship between images, aesthetics, identity, performativity, gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

Art critic Jerry Saltz (2014) captures the art world's resistance to selfies in his piece 'Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie', published in *New York Magazine*, wherein he writes, "Unlike traditional portraiture, selfies don't make pretentious claims. They go in the other direction—or no direction at all". This derision of selfies seems unfounded and political when we consider photo scholar Charlotte Cotton's (2020) assertion regarding photography. She claims, 'rather than offering an appreciation of virtuoso photographic practice or distinguishing key individuals as "masters" of photography, conceptual art played down the importance of craft and authorship [...] It took in a distinctly "non-art", "deskilled", and "unauthored" look and emphasized that it was the act depicted in the photograph that was of artistic importance' (2020: 21). In other words, conceptual art and conceptual photography purposefully try to look deskilled to emphasize what or who is imaged, rather than the technology through which the subject is pictured. This is precisely what selfies do. They are not invested in the aesthetics or technologies of art world hierarchies; they derive their meaning from that which is pictured, whilst engaging emerging aesthetic practices.

Trans self-image makers like Alabanza are invested in challenging how we have come to view and conceptualize representation in locations informed by the enduring cultural ideologies of colonialist thinking. Alabanza's work unfixes the photograph, breaking open the space between looking at a surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. Simultaneously, Alabanza's interest in surface is not superficial; the images seem to encourage us to view corporeal aesthetics as communicating identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic languages, including gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

In recent decades, artists have been increasingly interested in photography, and photographers have turned to portraiture for its sophisticated ability to rework the concepts behind representation, to engage in different types of power dynamics, and to explore self and identity, both critically and intimately (Bright, 2011; Cotton, 2020). Conceptual art photography purposefully tries to look de-skilled, emphasizing what or who is imaged rather than the technology through which the subject is pictured. Such works often call attention to the very ontological contradictions of pictures and highlight the interconnection between photographs, performativity, and indexicality (Cotton, 2020). Photography scholar Charlotte Cotton observes that 'the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject' (2020: 137).

A mashup of the words Instant Camera and telegram, Instagram is a free photography and video-sharing social media platform launched in 2010. Designed to be used on smartphones and consisting of scrollable feeds of images, Instagram enables users to create endless streams of images to be shared instantaneously. Connecting on Instagram is primarily based on liking other people's images, and communication is facilitated by the ability to comment on images as well as 'heart' them. Key features include the user's ability to post images to their feed, scroll images posted by others, and search for images by their hashtags, such as #trans #selfie or #blacklivesmatter, to bring up images tagged with the hashtag.

Considering the complex history of photographic portraiture, it should come as no surprise that, as photography scholar Susan Bright (2011: 211) has observed, "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions." Following Bright's (2011) thinking, we can view Travis Alabanza's praxis as engaging in a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming 'truth value' of the photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects, while also challenging the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

The aesthetics of Instagram as a platform present users with the options of viewing one image after another, in a linear top-down feed, or of perusing a set of images in three-square pictures across and a variable number down (depending on the size of one's device). The frame of the viewing device almost always contains another partial image (or images) and text. Even on the few occasions that the device frames a solo image, the understanding of the feeds' function and interactivity as continually scrollable suggests ever more images to peruse. By its very design, Instagram lends itself to the production of multiple versions of oneself, a constantly shifting representation of the image-maker.

The construction of the stereotype in visual culture is contingent on flattening ideas about a person or an identity constituency to a fixed, essentialized icon of said group. Thus, when trans femmes of colour are repeatedly imaged as tragic and comedic tropes, and White femmes are spectacularised, we are bearing witness to the continued suturing of specific ideas to particular identities via the perpetuation of stereotypes (Tagg, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Sontag, 2001). We should remain wary of the complicated relationship between the icon and what it represents; we should also view the lens-based image as always ideologically saturated. Moreover, one ought to always consider any portrait as fabrication with significant political motives, whether

consciously intended by the image-maker or not. When photography is framed as indexical, ‘truthful’, or ‘objective’, it behoves us to understand that this is rooted in a colonial project, set up to make visual distinctions between oppressor and oppressed (Bhabha, 1994; Weheliye, 2014; Halberstam, 2018). To make a critical intervention into problematic issues in representation, it is necessary to begin to challenge the very discursive framing of the ontology of lens-based images.

Alabanza’s selfies showcase their intersectional identity as continually shifting and ever augmenting. Their self-imaging on Instagram reflects no investment in the technologies of art world hierarchies. Instead, Alabanza deploys a vernacular aesthetic, while contemplating the space that photographs occupy between index and performativity. The resulting images are highly complex and distinctly contemporary in the service of the conceptual underpinning of the work, and the nuanced process of the negotiation of identity. Their self-images challenge established modes of production (with no elaborate or expensive equipment expected in art world scenarios), they elide established art world forms of circulation by using social media networking; they also reach potentially massive audiences instantaneously and are readily and easily consumed. Art historian and visual studies scholar, Jennifer A. González has observed that increasingly, contemporary forms of activist art utilise the Internet and mass media while also interrogating ‘the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the politics of the gaze’ (Flanagan et al., 2007: 5). Enacting González’s observation, trans self-images like those of Alabanza intervene in the politics of representation, corporeality, and the gaze. Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, trans and non-binary self-images utilize social media platforms like Instagram precisely for the reasons mentioned above.

Scrolling through Alabanza’s feed, we can see how their gender shifts from high femme donning full makeup and pouting lips to wearing short shorts, and no top with a hairy chest (see [Figure 4](#) bottom left and one in from bottom left). Alabanza presents themselves as a hip fashion visionary, wearing fashion forward, retro looks full of colour and attitude (see bottom row right), not only countering stereotypic representations but providing a plethora of non-binary and Black British corporealities that push open the trans visual field. That is to say, in forwarding countless images of themselves as discrete iterations, Alabanza is mobilizing an infinite oeuvre of Black British trans femme ways of being.

Alabanza’s Instagram feed consists almost entirely of self-images. From one image to the next, they always appear as a new example of gender non-conforming femininity (see [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 4](#)). Their Instagram feed confounds an easy collapsing of image and subject by continually shifting their self-representation. Alabanza mobilises their Instagram feed in a way that suggests that even with a seemingly endless flow of self-representations, there will never be enough images to depict Alabanza in their entirety, and that identity and gender are continually morphable. This suggests that with one image or a thousand images, one will never be adequately capable of articulating a singular visual ‘truth’ about Travis Alabanza. It also highlights the inaccuracy and essentialism implicit in the cultural belief that one image can provide accurate information about a subject.

In contradistinction to the singular isolated iconic portrait photograph, Alabanza’s Instagram feed is made up of countless images, always augmenting and showcasing the subject as nuanced, malleable, and continually reinventing themselves. Non-binary trans femme self-representations like theirs directly challenge how we have defined portraiture in Europe and North America since the Renaissance. Amelia Jones has observed that in the West, we have a cultural tendency—especially in portraiture—to collapse the representation for the thing itself (Jones, 2006, 2012). For the purpose of understanding how Alabanza’s work is an intervention in so-called Western discourse, it is useful to think through Jones’s (2006) articulation of the complex space between the surface of the image and the subject imaged. Jones’s ‘gap’ is temporal, spatial and conceptual. The flattening of time, physicality and ideas is precisely how images have been confused with evidence, truth and fact, and when we bear in mind that the image is always removed via this multidimensional gap from the subject, then we are infinitely more capable of viewing the image just as a surface rendering and not confuse it for the subject in the photograph.

Alabanza mobilises the aesthetics and possibilities of Instagram to image themselves as an intervention into visual culture. With over 77 thousand followers around the globe, at the time of writing, Alabanza’s praxis on Instagram constitutes a compelling intervention into discourses of representation in conversation with contemporary photography discourse and the utilization of self-portraits to interrogate identity formations (see [Figure 4](#)). Alabanza’s self-imaging praxis is not an isolated occurrence; it is part of a larger movement of trans folks’ self-imaging as intervention, a movement building on a long lineage of feminist, and queer photographic interventions.⁶ I take up these concerns further in my current book project, *Trans Self-Representations: Non-binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* (working title).

⁶ Here, I position Alabanza’s intervention in a lineage of feminist and queer artists, such as Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Renee Cox, Cathy Opie, Del la Grace Volcano, Juliana Huxtable, Tourmaline, Loren Cameron, Tammy Rae Carland, Nikki S. Lee, Kalup Linzy, TT Takemoto, Mickalene Thomas, Zanele Muholi, Amrou Al-Hadhi, Tejal Shah, and Alok Vaid-Menon, to name a few.

In an image posted on their Instagram feed, on 13 January 2020, Travis Alabanza wears a dark pinstriped blazer, open in the front over a lacey red and black bra and dark, high-waisted pinstriped suit bottoms (see [Figure 5](#)). Their hair is straight and long, a gold hoop earring catches the side light coming from what might be a nearby window; they lean back toward the bare white wall behind them in a slightly sultry pose, lips pursed, cat eyes looking directly at us through the picture plane. Alabanza is mobilizing a sophisticated and sexy version of themselves, a non-binary femme-ness unabashedly wearing a bra while having a slightly hairy chest. They take up the central location in the frame, cropped at the hips, with a small amount of negative space above their head, frontal facing in shallow pictorial space; the framing, frontality and proportion of the image reference the aesthetics of a long tradition of Western portraiture, traceable back to the sixteenth century (Lehner, 2021). However, here, the aesthetics of the image-maker/subject are a radical intervention into the visual field. Rather than a cis White man self-imaging via entrenched art historical materials, Alabanza disrupts aesthetic and media-based hierarchies and traditions of self-portraiture. As Nicholas Mirzoeff (2016: 29) puts it ‘at one time, self-portraits were the preserve of a highly skilled few. Now anyone with a camera phone can make one’. Nothing about Alabanza’s image is inherently radical, but due to the various hierarchies of racism, classism, white supremacy, cis supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and binary gender oppression, their work is profoundly radical. As Alabanza writes in their recent book:

I believe my transness is a reactionary fact, not an innate one. I am trans because the world made me so, not because I was born different. I am trans because the systems the world operates through force me to be so, not because of genetics. I am trans because of you, not because of me. I did not always know, because I once imagined a world where I would not have to know (Alabanza, 2022b: 29).

Across their multi-disciplinary creative oeuvre, Alabanza’s intervention makes space and critical dialogue around the nuances of being non-binary but beyond the reductive way that neoliberal incorporation of non-binary seems to suggest that there is yet another reductive box that exists as a third gender option and begins to resign the expansiveness of non-binary to a reductive and articulated third gender. Alabanza proposes a complexity of being that is massively expansive beyond such reductive tendencies.

Alabanza’s self-images defy Western, binary gender aesthetic expectations, juxtaposing symbols assigned to the category of masculinity (a hairy chest and stubble) with aesthetics assigned to the category of femininity (red lips, floral crop top and long hair). Standing with shoulders back and eyes meeting ours through the picture plane, Alabanza presents an empowered figure who is disinterested in performing within the frameworks of normative gender. Through their mobilization of self-image and text, Alabanza invites us to reconsider how we conceive of gender and trans identities, specifically taking on the narrative of trans folks that was established when media originally spectacularized trans people and psychiatric and medical industries pathologized trans identities, and which has been perpetuated by mainstream media since. This history suggests that a trans person is trapped in the wrong one of two gender options and must medically transition as quickly as possible into the other to ‘feel like themselves’. This reductive narrative reinvests in the gender binary and effectively erases all who exist outside of or between masculine and feminine. The regulating of people in this way continues to force trans people to seek legitimization from sources outside, be that governmental, medical, and otherwise. In failing to follow the prescribed narrative and in this way resisting to conform to pressures to fit themselves into binary gender categories Alabanza demonstrates that transgressing binary gender norms is a viable option.

Alabanza’s oeuvre prompts questions about how we assign gender qualities to aesthetics; not offering any easy answers, they use the image caption to promote further reflection (see [Figure 5](#)):

When I told you I was not a man it was not just reacting to a feeling/your touch/an act of self-defiance, but was also a choice in deciding that I am allowed to have ownership over my body and its story. People want a story that says ‘I always knew, it was innate, I could not live another way’ and although true for some why must we have always known to now decide we want more? Must I need to be dying in order to want to live better? When I say trans, I mean escape.

Taken together, image and text propose that we need not belong in either one of two gender choices, that our genders may change any time in any way, and that their potential transformations are infinite. For Alabanza, trans is a way out of rigid identitarian regimes, a praxis and a life free of living within preset boundaries. Both image and statement push us to imagine other ways of being not already modelled around us. The ethos of Travis Alabanza’s self-imaging praxis does not embody a desire to create positive visibility, but rather to be understood outside of current regimes of visualities. Moreover, Alabanza’s self-image photographs are performed as intentional

interventions into visual culture, and are challenging the very understanding of representation, portraiture and visual encounters⁷.

DECOLONIZING GENDER, BEAUTY, AND IDENTITY

Trans femme of colour methodologies, emerging from within scholarly inquiry as well as creative praxis, like that of Alabanza, are pushing the bounds of trans discourse and understanding of identity, visualities, and representations. As micha cárdenas (2022: 31) writes, ‘trans of colour poetics are a gesture of solidarity animated by a poetic ambiguity that make them more capacious. The formation of “trans of colour” reveals the limitations of the Western medical definition of transgender and calls for solidarity beyond its bounds’, while also stressing the necessity to remain porous. Deploying the concept of trans of colour as an algorithm allows cárdenas to explore trans of colour as ‘a shifting variable, as a part of a process that exists only when it is performed, with an appearance that can change rapidly based on the needs and desires of the moment’ (cárdenas, 2022: 32). Part of the decolonial ethos for cárdenas here is a challenge to the ‘idea of transgender by questioning the Western notion of the self as unified, unchanging and separate’ (cárdenas, 2022: 33). This is a direct affront to the binary and linear formation of trans prevalent for the last decades in the West. Cárdenas (2022: 34) writes about indigenous folks and how including these identities in trans discourse pushes open understandings of transness that work to decolonize transness. For cárdenas (2022: 35) trans of colour poetics are a formulation that challenges their own definitions, bringing together forms of gender nonconformity that do not neatly fall into the category of transgender. Taking this insight as invaluable it is also informative to consider the words of Marquis Bey (2019: 110-111) who asks:

“What happens, though, when we take seriously the knowledge taking hold in trans studies that *trans* denotes less a specific gendered body and more a movement away from an originary, imposed starting point?” Transness, Bey argues, manifests, in the first instance, as an elusive capacity that cannot be discerned by making recourse to the visual or normative (2019: 111). Moving away from dominant ideologies around visibility and creating distance intellectually from any connection to a starting place that was imposed upon us without our consent or even our input becomes a critical offering of transness as a mode of existence, encounter and of scholarly inquiry. Building on Kai M Green, Bey (2019: 111) goes on to write that ‘trans is a “decolonial demand”, a move to rework gender; “a question of how, when, and where one sees and knows; a reading practice that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation.”

The call to decolonize gender here is bound up with a need to reconsider one’s perspective and understanding of self. It involves critical modes of existing and thinking, prompting thoughtful interrogation of givens, and a strategic de-coupling of essentialisms and binaries, particularly as pertaining to identity and representation. As Bey (2022: 64) writes further, ‘black trans feminism attempts to make clear that the “supposedly obvious” phantasm the body is not a fact’. Building on the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Bey continues ‘we’ve been framed by the enduring logic of Enlightenment reason, ideologies informed by white, cis and masculine as being the valid subject. Yet for this to remain the case, identity must rest upon an “assumptive coherence, knowability, and nonporousness, all of which are regulated, normative regimes of legibility and stability” (Bey, 2022: 37). How then might we think and exist outside of such regimes in order to decolonize? I turn again to Alabanza as their critical multi-disciplinary praxis continues to elude and evolve reworking all that may have been taken for given when it comes to identity and representation.

In portraying themselves as hip, self-assured, fashionable and sexy, Alabanza unapologetically forwards expansive gender aesthetics, reflecting an iteration of non-binary, Black-British, trans femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with masculinity and femininity, visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and White supremacist, cis, heteropatriarchal notions of beauty. Their work reflects that ‘genders beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived’ (Salamon, 2010).

In **Figure 4**, the top left image, we see Alabanza in a black-studded leather choker, tight fishnet shirt over a black tank or bra; they parse their painted lips, beneath sultry eyes, and a hoop earring dangles from their left ear while their hair erupts off the top of their head, in a small dark poof just above their hands. The image is tightly cropped, and Alabanza is cut off at the elbows and chest. They stand in front of a whitish wall in shallow pictorial space. Alabanza looks at us through the picture plane embodying femme goth sultry sexiness through their clothing and expression. In the central image in the top row, Alabanza expresses a perky bright persona via their attire, and

⁷ The very idea of being able to create ‘positive visibility’ is itself a misconception; representations can never remedy social issues and injustice, but rather are always bound up with the negotiation of identity (Solomon-Godeau, 1994). Similarly, in conversation with Amelia Jones (1998), one could discuss this as a feminist practice of narcissism; a threat to patriarchal systems as she (or they) makes the male viewer irrelevant as she (or they) need no confirmation from him of their ‘desirability’.

poses in front of a bright patterned, muralled wall. In this full-body picture, Alabanza is only cropped at the glittery platformed toe and the top of their updo. Their outfit consists of bold colour-blocked, large check top and short butter-yellow skirt, a nod to playful femme fashions of the 1980s and 1990s. Alabanza's right hand is on their hip and their knees point slightly toward one another, while their left hand juts out from the elbow in a performative gesture (as if they are about to snap), one that references film-noir cinema and a femme hand holding a long cigarette. In this pose, Alabanza references tropes of feminine glamour in visual culture history, such as 'affirmation' and 'survival' (Ochoa, 2014: 89-90).

In a very different image (bottom row), Alabanza stands topless, wearing only yellow swim trunks and big white sunglasses with black lenses. Alabanza looks to be on a rooftop, their left arm extending outward along the top of a glass wall with a cityscape in the distance, while their right arm hangs down at their side. Alabanza's chest is flat above their shorts, which are worn high-waisted. While there are many other photographs in the screen grab of Alabanza's Instagram feed (Figure 4), considering just these three, a viewer will be hard pressed to delineate Alabanza's gender identity as reductively fitting neatly into any particular gender category based on binary cis-gendered stereotypes. In fact, no *one* image reflects a normative and reductive version of binary gender, and neither do all three of these showcase consistencies with any one type of binary gender or racialized expectation. From each image to the next, Alabanza's gender shifts along with the frame, location, and attitude. One might surmise that the image in the top left is a queer cis woman, the image in the middle-upper row a femme-identified retro fashion queen, and the figure in the swim trunks identifying with masculinity in some way. However, these assumptions are all about the same person and are all based on interpretation of aesthetics (clothing, pose, performance), underscoring that gender is not fixed but rather is malleable and contingent, often changing in relation to setting, mood, and companions.

CONCLUSION

The Instagram feed of Travis Alabanza, in its production of non-binary, trans-femme iconography, presents a timely and necessary intervention into Western visual culture, bringing into being complex, expansive and intersectional identities while reworking Western concepts of portraiture. Alabanza's oeuvre not only produces new visual exemplars, but their Instagram feed constitutes an imperative and complex representation that defies the stereotypes and erasures of such identities produced by dominant culture, while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of representation and self-portraiture.

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and White supremacist transphobic notions of beauty, Alabanza demonstrates gender as performative, but also as a malleable and mobile set of endlessly mutable and ever-deployable signifiers, based in large part on visual communication. They visually assert femme-ness as a free signifier, not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics, underscoring that biological sex has nothing to do with gender. By creating a multiplicity of non-binary, Black British, trans corporealities, the field of representations mobilized by Alabanza expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being. This work begins to create space for new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated for their multiplicity and transgressiveness. It does so while simultaneously de-suturing the notion that the surface of a representation has any essentialized and/or fixed relationship to authenticity or truth. Based on this contemporary conception of trans identities, trans methods often deploy concepts of transience, unfixity, and liminality, while also challenging pre-existing barriers and categories. Trans as a method offers scholarship new ways of theorising categories, identities, and representation. Trans methods open up ways of being and thinking that undo the belief in a correlation between apprehensions of surfaces and the assumption that they correlate to some necessary given truth. Trans as a method invests in concepts that privilege self-articulation over the visual interpretation of aesthetics.

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‘Oh, There Are Politics in Billie’s Work!’: Billie Zangewa and/at the Boundaries of Feminist Visual Activism

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the consequences of reading textile artist Billie Zangewa’s art through the frame of feminist visual activism, both in terms of (i) recognizing the political potential of Zangewa’s work, as well as (ii) interrogating the conceptual boundaries of visual activism. Situating Zangewa’s work within a rich legacy of Black and postcolonial feminist investments in self-love and self-care, and in celebrations of domesticity (‘daily feminisms’ in Zangewa’s words), I argue that Zangewa’s art exemplifies the Black feminist practice of reclaiming the terms under which Black women are looked at, redressing histories of erasure as well as hypervisibility underwritten by the abjection, objectification, sexualization and dehumanization of Black women. Attending to Zangewa’s medium, fabric, I also argue against allegations of the individualised, atomized nature of self-love politics, demonstrating how Zangewa’s modality of self-love is deeply embedded in (rather than hostile to recognitions of) universality, solidarity, and the shared, collective experience of Black womanhood. Finally, reading Zangewa’s work through the lens of Lewis’ (2017) frame of presencing and Camp’s theorization of black visibility as refusal, I make the case for re-thinking visual activism as a relational, inter-subjective exercise in sense-making, generating a range of affects and effects that exceed its sites of production and circulation.

Keywords: post-colonial feminism, visual activism, feminist art, black feminism, black visibility

INTRODUCTION

Fabric, this thing we all have a daily relationship with, is often dismissed by the world as mundane and unimportant, much like the daily, mundane work that women do to keep a home, a community and a society going. I wanted to use this dismissed cultural thing to speak against patriarchy by creating powerful images about the importance of another dismissed thing, domesticity and the ordinary but important aspects of women’s daily life and work in and around the home. – Billie Zangewa quoted in Okoro (2020: n.p.).

This article is an exploration of the tensions, contradictions and possibilities inaugurated by a reading of Billie Zangewa’s work through the frame of feminist visual activism. The boundaries of what precisely constitutes ‘visual activism’ remain labile and contested, with characterisations ranging from Demos’ definition as ‘politically directed practices of visibility aimed at catalysing social, political, and economic change’ (Demos, 2016: 87), to a more capacious interpretation of visual activism as simply the abandonment of neutrality in/through art (Bryan-Wilson, González and Willson, 2016). Attaching the epithet feminist, itself a deeply fraught terrain, to visual activism further muddies already murky conceptual waters. What can and should be considered feminist visual activism,

and why, are not futile musings – it is precisely a careful contemplation of these parameters that help us unpack how (in what forms, and to what extent) aesthetic interventions have the capacity to instigate social change, or, to the contrary buttress dominant (patriarchal, capitalist, racist) configurations of power.

Mediating between varied understandings of both feminism and visual activism, this piece asks: (how) can Zangewa's work be read as an instance of feminist visual activism? What are the implications of such a reading, in terms of recognising the political potential of Zangewa's work, as well as for what it means to do, witness, and think with and about 'feminist visual activism'? The first section of the article situates Zangewa's work within rich legacies of feminist – and especially Black and post-colonial feminist – insistence on (i) self-love and self-care (ii) celebrations of domesticity and the quotidian ('daily feminisms' as Zangewa puts it) as key sites of feminist praxis. The second and final section brings Zangewa's work in conversation with fraught debates on visual activism as a vehicle for social transformation, shifting the site of analysis from Zangewa's work and how she creates it (product and process) to the spaces of its reception and circulation (place), and then back to the artefacts, but recast in insistently relational terms.

'SELF-LOVE IS THE ULTIMATE RESISTANCE': ON REPRESENTING BLACK WOMEN'S STRENGTH AND FEMININITY, AND ELEVATING DOMESTICITY

At some point I realized that I was seeing myself through a man's eyes—seeking approval from men, living my life in relation to another. It came to me that whilst I lived this way, I was in essence giving permission for others to take my power. I was giving it away. Then I asked myself the questions, "What if I started to see myself through my own eyes? What would happen if I took my power back and negated the omnipresent male gaze?" This is something I started to explore in my work, portraying myself as a poised, independent, empowered individual, not afraid to share her intimate self and be vulnerable (Zangewa in Collymore, 2021: n.p.).

While Zangewa's earlier works depicted botanical scenes and animals from her childhood in Botswana, she soon transitioned to creating cityscapes, with a focus on her own experiences as a Black woman in the city of Johannesburg. *The Rebirth of Black Venus*, a 2010 creation hand-stitched using raw silk fabric and threads, is emblematic of this shift. It depicts a larger-than-life Black woman towering over the urban cityscape of Johannesburg, hovering above the roofs of buildings dwarfed by her stature. Despite the sheer scale of the figure, she embodies delicacy and poise, with her svelte form carefully perched on the toes of one foot, as though mid-dance. The piece marks what Okoro (2020: n.p.) calls a 'threshold season' for Zangewa, signalling the commencement of a tender, complex, but firmly celebratory exploration of Black femininity (Lewis, 2017) and subjectivity, and its encounters with sensuality, solitude, sadness, strength and much more. Subtly invoking (and juxtaposing) both Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and the horrific story of the Black 'Hottentot' Venus, the image is striking in its refusal of scripts of Black female abjection, and its quiet subversion of the history of Black women's bodies as objects of the male colonial 'gaze', as theorised by Mulvey (1988).

The Black Venus, also known as the Hottentot Venus or by her colonial name Sara (Sarah/Saartjie) Baartman, was a Khoekhoe woman brought to Europe from the Cape in 1810 to be exhibited in fairs as an erotic-exotic freak, and later subject to (often public) examination as a racial 'specimen' by the leading French naturalist Georges Cuvier (Mattosio, 2017). Following Sara Baartman's death in 1815, Cuvier dissected her corpse in an attempt to establish a biologically hierarchical scale of human races in which Khoisan occupied the lowest grade, qualifying as closer relatives of the great apes than of humans (ibid). Just as grotesque as these conclusions and their implications was the treatment of Sara Baartman's remains – her brain and genitalia were preserved in jars, and displayed at the Parisian Museum of Natural History, Jardin des Plantes, alongside her skeleton and a plaster cast of her full body, which featured in the 1937 International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris. Her remains were then moved to the Musée de l'Homme, where they stayed on public display until the 1970s before being finally returned to South Africa, after a long diplomatic controversy, in 2002. Epitomising colonialism's racial and gendered brutalities, the figure and story of the Black Venus remain a grim reminder of the historical gaze Black women have been subject to.

The subversive and restorative potential of Zangewa's *Re-birth of Black Venus* must be read against the backdrop of not only this history of the abjection, objectification, sexualisation and dehumanisation of Black women, but also the more recent chequered history of academic and artistic accounts of, and efforts to recuperate, Sara Baartman. Magubane (2001) and Quereshi (2004) point to how, by way of her academic circulation, Sara – and the figure of the Black woman more generally – has been frozen as the quintessential bearer of intersectional oppression: the poor, black, colonised, exploited subject par excellence. She has become, as Mattosio (2017: 59) puts it, a sign – 'the bidimensional signifier of subjugation in the geometrical theorem of historical colonialism'. Both academic and popular circulations of the Black Venus (and the community she has come to stand for) thus

run the risk of replicating and reinscribing the voyeuristic gaze that her body has historically borne (Buikema, 2009; Gordon-Chipembere, 2011), even if intended simply to reveal the violence of the conditions she was subject to. Given the cementing of her place as the emblematic figure of enslaved women in the Atlantic world, to Hartman (2008) any efforts to represent the Black Venus must be alert to the risks of simply miming the violence of the archive rather than meaningfully redressing it.

It is precisely such a redressal that Zangewa offers through an insistently agential, powerful rendering of Black Venus, asking “What if I started to see myself through my own eyes? What would happen if I took my power back and negated the omnipresent male gaze?” (quoted in Collymore, 2021: n.p.). *Rebirth*, like much of Zangewa’s work, is an arresting display of a Black woman’s reclamation of the terms under which she is looked at, a practice of what hooks (1992) calls the oppositional gaze. The passivity of Black women as simply the object of male, colonial scopophilic voyeurism (Mulvey, 1988) is forcefully inverted through Zangewa’s determination to shift the gaze for and from which she produces her art: ‘from looking to the outside for approval and to define my value to saying, I’m going to have a romantic affair with myself. Society teaches us as women to be ashamed of ourselves, to feed self-loathing. I’m reclaiming my identity, my feminine power, and my significance in society at large’ (Zangewa quoted in Jansen, 2020: n.p.).

Zangewa’s self-portraiture following *Rebirth* is a celebration of self-love and self-care, a process she saw as a simultaneous reclamation of her narrative and her body (McDermott, 2018). In *In my Solitude*, the artist is portrayed languidly draped over a sofa, reading, in a scene that conveys a compelling sense of ease with herself and her surroundings. Scenes of Black women in leisure are disruptive in their own right, against a history of the hypervisibility of labouring Black bodies and the invisibility of Black women at rest (Mowatt et al., 2013). *Cold Shower* is an unabashed celebration of the Black female form, representing the artist in a startlingly open posture – inviting recognition of the beauty and power of her body and its stance rather than an objectifying or sexualising gaze. *Self Care Sunday* is the most expressive articulation of Zangewa’s politics of self-love, showing her surveying freshly painted nails, body and hair draped in towels, with a bottle of wine prominent on the table before her.

Within feminist literature and praxis, the place of a politics of self-love and self-care is by no means uncontroversial – it has often been subject to censure from a range of quarters for a variety of reasons. Gill and Orgad (2015), for instance, argue that dominant tropes of feminism as self-love and a culture of confidence locates feminism within what they call neoliberal therapeutic terms, as a consumer technology of self (see also Garcia-Favaro, 2016). Gill (2016) sees this version of feminism as having disproportionate visibility in contemporary media, especially through its promotion of feminine confidence, self-love, and self-esteem as a one-size-fits-all solution to gender injustice. Gill (2016: 10) writes, ‘in these iterations of popular feminism, the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation’. The critique here is two-fold: first, that a politics of self-care promotes an individualised, atomised subject shorn of their social location and the possibility of a more collective politics of transformation, and second (and relatedly), that such a politics upholds logics of neoliberal, capitalist consumerism instead of disrupting them.

Zangewa’s politics of self-love, on the contrary, falls within a tradition of work and practice emerging from feminists of colour Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa and many others, who view and defend self-love and self-care by Black women and their communities as revolutionary and transformative forms of praxis. These authors write of the necessity for women of colour to engage in practices of self-love in order to survive and sustain themselves in the face of a daily onslaught of racism, sexism and class oppression. Reflecting on this tradition, Nicol and Yee (2017) locate the politics of self-love and self-care within communities of women of colour as a strategy of survival and resistance against the tyranny of violence, objectification, exploitation and abjection experienced at the intersection of multiple oppressions. By taking seriously the question of what it means to love themselves and experience joy within structures determined to deprive them of both (Barlow, 2016), gestures of self-love within communities of colour are a far cry from the atomised acts of consumerist indulgence critiqued above.

A compelling counter to allegations of an inevitably individualised, atomised subject of self-love politics, and the supposed antitheticality of a collective politics to self-love feminisms (Gill, 2016) lies in Zangewa’s choice of medium: fabric. Zangewa’s decision to work with fabric and thread – hand stitching, sewing, and embroidering – is not incidental to her art or her politics. A key theme animating Zangewa’s accounts of her attachment to her medium is that of universality (of experience)¹: encounters and intimacies with fabric are almost a defining feature of the human condition (Okoro, 2020). Whether as clothes, sheets, drapes, or upholstery, our daily lives are spent ensconced within, and in close contact with fabric. While a relationship with fabric is not a specifically gendered experience, the historical (and in many ways contemporary) production of fabric remains insistently feminine in its associations (Michna, 2020). Michna (2020) reads forms of textile art and craft not simply as a means of artistic

¹ Used in opposition to atomism, rather than to particularity.

expression, but as a subversive aesthetic strategy, and a specifically and insistently feminine modality of creating and developing knowledge.

Zangewa embraces this association with femininity, as well as her location within a larger community of artists and craftsmen ‘using those materials and techniques to critique capitalist patriarchy and uphold the role traditional feminine “crafts” could have in creating time away from home, a sanctuary space for women experiencing domestic problems, and a way to speak to personal histories’ (Collymore, 2021: n.p.). As a child, Zangewa watched her mother and her mother’s friends come together to sew in the evenings – “Some of these women had issues at home and then they’d come together as a group and talk about it. I saw how sewing would ease some of the anxiety and pain” (Zangewa quoted in McDermott, 2018: n.p.). *Mood Indigo* (2016) captures such a scene of a group of women sewing together by hand, finding not only sanctuary, solace and safety, but also community as a Black woman. Zangewa shared “In those hours together, my mother and these women were figuring out how to make better decisions about their lives and how to keep cultivating resilience against the hardships of life” (Okoro, 2020: n.p.).

Fibre arts, including sewing, weaving and embroidery have been compellingly theorised within feminist art history as not only collective, communal and intergenerational work, but as gestures (and labour) of love and care (Pérez-Bustos et al., 2019; Kelly, 2014; Montgarrett, 2017). The patient, incremental, intricate, laborious and inevitably non-replicable nature of fibre arts also render these practices hostile to capitalist and neo-liberal temporal and other rationalities, and which overinvest in haste, efficiency, and replicability. Fibre arts, then, even when used as a medium for the expression of self-care, constitute what Pérez-Bustos et al. (2019: 268) call ‘affective-material-embodied practices of labour and pedagogy’, insisting on a recognition that self-care is always and necessarily care with, alongside, and for others. Zangewa’s medium of self-love is thus one that is deeply and consciously symbolic of self-love and self-care as constituted through communal practices of love and care. Her work depicts themes of solidarity by bringing attention to the shared, collective experience of Black womanhood – a resounding rebuttal to the alleged insularity and atomism of neoliberal renditions of self-love. Zangewa’s self-representations are not renderings of an isolated subject, ripped out of the social fabric into which she is so inevitably woven, but a tender, complex, celebratory depiction of Black femininity as a shared experience.

The latest iteration of Zangewa’s celebration of femininity is a quiet elevation of domesticity, commemorations of the quotidian that acts women perform within and in order to sustain this space – what Zangewa terms ‘daily feminisms’. Home is now the cynosure of Zangewa’s pieces: tapestries of silk hand-stitched into collages depict intimate moments of (especially maternal) care and social reproduction. Emblematic of this turn, *Heart of Home* shows the artist standing behind her son as he writes in a notebook, *Ma vie en rose* finds the artist delicately balancing her toddler on her hip in the kitchen while reaching for a feeding bottle, while *Soldier of Love* shows her leading her son to school. Through these works, Zangewa brings to view scenes that are often neglected in the broader contemporary art space (Collymore, 2021), scenes in which Black women are and have always been at the centre, for this is a world they have created, not one imposed on them (ibid). Once more, her medium bares its own message – her choice of fabric (an everyday and often neglected medium) serves as a gentle reminder of the beauty contained within the mundane, overlooked and underappreciated like much of the labour her work tenderly honours.

Zangewa’s ‘daily feminisms’ sit within a long and enduring tradition of feminist art reproducing and elevating mundane domestic scenes in order to challenge the patriarchal and colonial binary between the private and the public, feminine and masculine, blackness and whiteness, and their corresponding opposition in high and low art (Speaks, 2021; Horne et al., 2016). Further, and once again, Zangewa’s celebration of domesticity through fabric finds transnational, and arguably universal resonance. Chung (2021: n.p.) writes of her experience encountering Zangewa’s exhibition *Flesh and Blood* at Lehmann Maupin, Seoul:

In the traditional craft shops in the area around Lehmann Maupin’s Seoul gallery that hosts ‘Flesh and Blood’, Billie Zangewa’s first solo exhibition in the city, *jogakbo* – a Korean form of patchwork quilting – can be seen in abundance. Before Korean society began to modernize in the 19th century, women sought good fortune for their loved ones by sewing (primarily at home) geometrically shaped pieces of leftover fabric into wrapping cloths. For me, Zangewa’s works are very obviously imbued with the same warmth and care towards family and friends that Korean mothers continue to invest in the practice of *jogakbo*.

‘OH, THERE ARE POLITICS IN BILLIE’S WORK!’: INTERROGATING THE BOUNDARIES OF VISUAL ACTIVISM

While the previous section attempted to map Zangewa’s work against the ever-shifting and embattled terrain of feminism, this section raises and engages with (without fully resolving) questions about what it means to think

of Zangewa's art through the lens of visual activism. (How) does reading Zangewa against literatures on visual activism enable or inhibit access to, and a critical engagement with, the political force of her work? Equally, how might it facilitate a critical encounter with the contested contours of what constitutes visual activism itself?

Writing this section presented an immediate challenge that did not confront the preceding one – while Zangewa has often expressly claimed an investment in feminism and her identity as a feminist, I was unable to trace similarly unambiguous attachments to the designation activist. What remained clear, however, was Zangewa's view of her work as *political*. In McDermott (2018: n.p.), Zangewa recounts the varied receptions her art provoked in different contexts:

In France, I felt there was a little bit of an idealizing and objectification, that I was just an object. When I showed in New York, the American people started seeing my sociopolitics. American politics are very, very complicated and the history is loaded, but I think there's a connection between being black in America and being a black woman in the world.

All of a sudden, after New York, Zangewa recalls, 'everyone else was looking and going, "Oh, there are politics in Billie's work! It's not just her looking pretty, holding her baby"' (McDermott, 2018: n.p.).

Despite the incontestably political intent (and growing recognition thereof) animating Zangewa's work, reading her contributions as instances of visual activism demands attending to more than the art itself, but also its spaces of circulation (Demos, 2016). Zangewa's art predominantly features in leading global commercial art galleries, including the Galerie Templon, Lehmann Maupin, the Tate, and international art fairs. Demos writes of the dangers of overlooking the compromised nature of these dominant arenas of art circulation (particularly commercial galleries and corporate websites), which he views as 'riven by conflicting interests' (2016: 87). These contexts, he argues, offer no political alliance, and often in fact exist in 'economic and political opposition to the displayed work' (2016: 88). While the politics of the artefacts themselves might sit in opposition to capitalist exploitation, the very fact of working within dominant art institutions, according to Fraser (2011: 124), 'ensconce[s] many of us comfortably among the 10 percent, if not the 1 percent or even the 0.1 percent', a demographic that often aligns itself with corporate neoliberalism, wealth inequality and the erosion of the social state (Demos, 2016). To Fraser (2011:124), 'if our only choice is to participate in this economy or abandon the art field entirely, at least we can stop rationalising that participation in the name of critical or political art practices – or adding insult to injury – social justice'.

In stark contrast to Demos' and Fraser's demands that art with political investments attends not only to its substantive content but to potential complicities with its sites of circulation, Steyerl (2015) makes the case for a 'duty free' conception of art, liberating it from the demands of aspiring to any higher purpose. For Steyerl (2015: 10), art 'ought to have no duty—no duty to perform, to represent, to teach, to embody value ... it should not be indebted to anyone, nor serve a cause or a master, nor be a means to anything'. In Steyerl's view of duty-free, art represents the very antithesis of art as visual activism through its insistence that art do precisely nothing, in the service of no politics. To Demos (2016: 88), this betrays an 'avant-gardist conceit that we can no longer abide'; such ostensible neutrality or apolitical posturing inevitably serves the market and other dominant structures and logics. To Demos, for it to be meaningful, visual activism *must* be driven by and demonstrate careful allegiance to an ethico-political imperative that is alive to, and in opposition to precisely these dominant arrangements of power. Such an imperative must take seriously the question of spaces of reception and circulation- in the words of John Jordan from the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii, an artist-activist collective), quoted in Demos (2016: 98):

In an age of extreme crisis, the key questions artists, activists and curators need to ask themselves are: Can these institutions be machines for amplifying our potential to radically transform the status quo, forms of redistribution of cultural and material capital, or do they simply reframe rebellion into a past tense, an immediate retro refit of revolt? Are museums public spaces that can become alternative common spaces of debate and action planning to reclaim the rights of the city, or are they palaces carefully engineered for us to play the fool in, whilst outside the kings and queens continue to play Russian roulette with our future whilst enriching theirs?

Demos' demand for an attentiveness to sites of circulation and attendant complicities must itself, however, be contextually situated. The requirement of attending to space is not equally burdensome to, or similarly experienced/negotiated by, differently located artists across the global landscape. Lewin (2020) describes how while visual activism in the United States and Western Europe is mostly linked to street protests or activism campaigning within expressly public spaces, in the post-apartheid South African context (within which Zangewa works), some forms of visual activism have historically been linked to the fine art market and its associated institutions. In post-apartheid South Africa, many self-professed visual activists view engagements with the

institutions of high art as a significant tactical opportunity and strategy². Black queer photographer Zanele Muholi, for instance, with whom the term visual activism has been closely associated, alongside other activists and collectives, is keenly aware of the role the art market and institutions play in amplifying the message their work seeks to convey, rendering even commercial galleries an important site for circulating activist work (Lewin, 2020). South Africa has a vibrant history of activism at the intersection of art and politics, to which the term visual activism is often retrospectively applied (Thomas, 2017). Crucially, this history forces an acknowledgement of the many different public spaces within which visual activism can be meaningfully sited, including within Demos' condemned institutions of fine art.

Lewin (2020) carefully traces the ways in which visual activists like queer Black performance duo FAKA and artist Robert Hamblin tactically, instrumentally and productively engage with galleries and other sites of the commercialisation and commodification of art, while also expressly situating elements of their activist practice beyond them. FAKA, for instance, has been appointed brand ambassador for Adidas and has worked with Varsace, while entirely alive to these moves as entanglements with the 'commodification of "blackness"' (hooks, 2014: 152 in Lewin, 2020: 40) in alignment with their broader project of challenging and remaking normative reality. Lewin (2020: 40) reads this 'performative engagement with corporate capital (2020: 40) through the lens of what Munoz calls 'disidentification' to describe 'a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world' (Munoz, 2009: 121). FAKA also expressly view their visual activism as a pathway to the economic freedom denied to Black South Africans prior to 1994 (Posel, 2010).

Through her analysis of FAKA and Hamblin, Lewin (2020) challenges the false dichotomy between 'authentic' forms of street-based visual activism (Demos, 2016), and inauthentic or compromised art that circulates in galleries and other spaces associated with the institutionalised art market. A key element of Lewin's contribution here is her tracking of how FAKA and Hamblin engage opportunistically with the art market to generate literal and symbolic capital, which they then channel towards movement building (2020). What does this mean for a reading of Zangewa's work as visual activism, given the absence of express links to extra-institutional movement outside of the world of high-art? Leaning on Lewin's analysis, I contend that a similar argument can be applied to Zangewa's engagement with institutional sites, particularly when viewed through the lens of Gail Lewis's frame of 'presencing', and Tina Campt's (2019a) notion of 'refusal' through black visibility.

Lewis (2017) asks that we take seriously the ways in which 'the black women' as representation (as well as in the form of embodied, sentient being) is rendered visible and invisible, and to link this to the multiple and competing ways in which she is 'present'. Under what terms of representation is 'the black woman' allowed to emerge, in what spaces, and how are these fruitfully contested? Against the historical and contemporary regulation of representations of Black women shaped by the mutually reinforcing structures of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and extractivism, Lewis (2017: 6) sees 'presencing' as a 'decolonial move through which counter-histories, counter-spatialities, subaltern epistemologies and modes of being are created and announced'. 'Presencing' is the enactment of a desire for recognition, and a claiming of space within a landscape that is persistently invested in erasing, marginalising and even denouncing some aspect of who 'the black woman' is and who she might become (ibid). 'Presencing', in other words, is what Lewis (2017: 6) calls 'an epistemological and ontological praxis of emergence', which 'contests and has the potential to detoxify the effects of colonial discourse in which Indigenous peoples are rendered invisible and/or insensible'.

Campt (2019b: 25) sought to theorise how we can engage with a contemporary visual archive of blackness 'that is saturated by the proliferation and mass circulation of images of violence, antiblackness, and premature death'. As part of a collective process of meditation on this question alongside some students and collaborators, Campt produced a glossary to explore practices of refusal enacted by black contemporary artists who 'create radical modalities of witnessing that refuse authoritative forms of visibility', in a practice that is 'neither utopic nor autonomous, and neither pessimistic nor futuristic'. Instead, these modes of witnessing function through a practice of refusal Campt calls 'black visibility'. Here, refusal is:

A rejection of status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e., a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise (Campt, 2019a: 4).

Campt's most recent work (2021) extends the framework of Black visibility to a study of the Black gaze, celebrating the works of artists whose depictions of the everyday beauty and grit of the Black experience require viewers to do more than simply consume, but participate in what Campt calls the 'affective labour' of engagement commanded by this Black gaze. To Campt, Black visibility as refusal demands a form of relationality, and establishes

² This is not to say that crucial forms of visual activism occur firmly outside the bounds of galleries and institutionalized art spaces.

a structure of feeling between viewer, artefact, and subject (rather than object) of representation in a way that produces certain effects – effects that begin to generate the possibility of a ‘living otherwise’ for Black communities (2019a, 2021). Camp’s analysis chimes with the work of Meskimon (2010) and other commentators on visual culture who argue that artworks do more than simply reflect and represent the world; instead, art can change the way we imagine, understand, and relate to the world and with others, especially those different to ourselves.

Zangewa’s art can then be read as an intervention within/into the very (admittedly particular and often elite) spaces of its circulation, but with effects that exceed them. Engaging with Zangewa through the lens of ‘presencing’ as a decolonial praxis, or Black visibility as a practice of refusal forces an acknowledgement of precisely this question of ‘effect’ – her work holds the potential to ‘detoxify the effects of colonial discourse’ (Lewis, 2017: 6), and ‘reject the terms of diminished subjecthood’ afforded to Black women (Camp, 2019a: 4) – effects that are not and cannot remain contained within, nor entirely co-opted in the service of, the commercial art spaces within which her art circulates. Returning to Lewin (2020), once more, there is no doubt that these effects can often be complex and sometimes contradictory, and can certainly never be fully anticipated, but this is a complexity and unforeseeability of effect that is shared across all forms of activism.

CONCLUSION

In her contribution to this issue, Stielau (2022) notes the difficulty (and danger) in employing efficacy, based on directed, predetermined aims and effects as barometers in the appraisal of art-activism. In doing so, Stielau shifts the focus of analysis of visual activism from the artist as sovereign political actor, to ‘the circuitry of relations and materials that conduct change, of which art is both a medium and a mode’ (Stielau, this issue). Evaluating, or indeed, defining visual activism cannot then be an exercise in discerning the sovereign will/intent of an artist, interrogating its vehicles and sites of expression, and assessing its traceable, perceptible effects, as if any of these presented themselves as transparent, accessible sites for review. How, then, should we approach the question of what constitutes visual activism? What might Zangewa’s work teach us in this regard? Thinking of Zangewa’s work alongside (i) Lewis’s (2017) notion of presencing as a decolonial praxis of emergence, and (ii) Camp’s (2019a) framework of black visibility as instituting a structure of feeling between art and viewer, perhaps visual activism can be understood as a relational, intersubjective exercise in sense-making within/against complex histories, generating a range of affects and effects that exceed its sites of production and circulation, as well as its own intents and investments.

Through such a frame, analyses of visual activism are liberated from preoccupations with the sovereign will and intent of the artist, balance-sheet exercises in weighing up effects (themselves often indiscernible and untraceable), and ridged notions of (in)authenticity based on sites of circulation. Instead, we can engage, for instance, with the relational, inter-subjective, epistemological and ontological consequences of encounters with artefacts, read against the backdrop of a complex and dynamic web of domination and erasure, or objectification and hypervisibility. In Zangewa’s *Rebirth of Black Venus*, the formidable Black Venus dominating the Johannesburg cityscape is lightly caressed by a sash that reads: ‘Surrender whole-heartedly to your complexity’. Through her celebration of the complexity of Black femininity as a shared experience, Zangewa, in both message and medium, holds important lessons for feminism as well as visual activism, nudging us towards surrendering certainties in the favour of embracing the complex, indeterminable effects and affects that emerge from encounters with the visual.

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Unravelling Anti-Feminism: On the Domestication of Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critique of neoliberal feminism and argues for nuanced and critical approaches to the question of what constitutes feminist resistance. It focuses on visual artist Billie Zangewa's creative practice and positions it within the longer history of how women have made use of traditional crafts, such as quilting and embroidery, as a means of expression and as a form of resistance. It positions Zangewa's work alongside that of some of her feminist contemporaries who have also used thread and cloth in their work to reveal how the political is woven through the fabric of everyday life. I argue that in order to understand why Zangewa's seemingly mundane, even bourgeois practice, has been framed and taken up as a form of feminist resistance, it is necessary to read her work through a historical lens that takes colonial dispossession and the brutal history of violence in Southern Africa into account. My readings of Zangewa's work acknowledge the significance of the artist's affirmation of care and self-love as resistance, as much as they point to the limits of a politics that valorises (unpaid) domestic work and fails to address the structural violence of capitalism.

Keywords: Africa, feminism, visual art, visual activism, neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION

This article places visual artist Billie Zangewa's creative practice within the longer history of how traditional crafts, such as quilting and embroidery, have been used as a means of expression and as a form of resistance. It positions Zangewa's work alongside that of some of her feminist contemporaries who have also used thread and cloth in their work to reveal how the political is woven through the fabric of everyday life. I argue that in order to understand why Zangewa's seemingly mundane, even bourgeois practice, has been framed and taken up as a form of feminist resistance, it is necessary to read her work through a historical lens that takes colonial dispossession and the brutal history of violence in Southern Africa into account. In light of this history of oppression and censorship, all forms of Black women's self-expression can be read as liberatory signs. However, as I aim to show here, such a reading misses how inequality continues to define the postcolonial and post-apartheid condition. My critique is directed less at Zangewa's beautiful renderings of her private realm and relationships, than at the larger terrain within which her work circulates and is framed as a form of feminist resistance. My readings of Zangewa's work acknowledge the significance of the artist's affirmation of care and self-love as resistance, as much as they point to the limits of a politics that valorises (unpaid) domestic work and fails to address the structural violence of capitalism.

This piece asks what it means that Zangewa's work has largely been framed and received as a form of feminist resistance – the artist has been included in shows such as “Manifest Yourself! (Queer) Feminist Manifestoes Since the Suffragettes” at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin in 2022 and “Global(e) Resistance” at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2020, and her images are described by the Lehmann Maupin gallery as exploring

‘contemporary intersectional identity in an attempt to challenge the historical stereotype, objectification, and exploitation of the black female form’ and as illustrations of ‘gendered labor in a socio-political context’¹. I argue that positioning Zangewa’s work within the frame of feminist visual activism forms part of a larger phenomenon that equates feminism with women’s self-empowerment and overlooks whether and how such forms of representation affirm classist, homophobic, and even sexist conceptions. I understand this to be a depoliticized form of feminism, as exemplified by some of the artist’s statements, such as, ‘the best way to fight the patriarchy is not by going to war with it but, rather, by showing one’s appreciation of and solidarity with domesticity and femininity’ (McDermott, 2018), and that ‘the ultimate form of resistance is self-love’². I return to these claims and discuss the implications of the appropriation and hollowing out of once-radical concepts of (feminist) resistance below.

While acknowledging how Zangewa’s visual practice opens spaces of representation for Black, cisgender, heterosexual and economically privileged women, I argue for paying attention to how the artist’s work affirms rather than contests the limits of neoliberal feminism.³ The question of what is at stake in defining what constitutes feminism and anti-feminism is taken up by Serena Bassi and Greta Lafleur (2022) in their introduction to a special issue on trans-exclusionary feminisms. Bassi and Lafleur point to the continuities between ‘strands of liberal feminism centered on the primacy of gender over other vectors of power, authentic womanhood, embodied vulnerability, and individualizing notions of happiness and empowerment’ and trans-exclusionary, gender-critical feminism (Bassi and Lafleur, 2022: 312). In this piece I take up Shahrzad Mojab and Afiya Zia’s call to ‘return to a Marxist feminist analysis that is based on social materiality rather than on a trade between class and gender’ (2019: 259). I define feminism here as Silvia Federici does in her book, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender and Feminism* (2021) as standing ‘for a commitment to eliminate inequalities and all forms of exploitation’, and draw on Mojab and Zia’s insight that, “As an ideological formation, capitalism is also a set of cultural and political practices that obscures relations of domination while simultaneously co-constituting patriarchal, racist and class exploitation and oppression” (2021: 270).

CLAIMING SPACE

Billie Zangewa, who was born in Malawi, raised in Botswana and who lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa, forms part of a small number of contemporary Black women artists from Southern Africa whose work has been widely acclaimed. After studying print-making at Rhodes University in South Africa during the country’s transition to democracy, Zangewa found it difficult to launch a career as an artist. The equipment and studio space required to work as a print-maker were costly and proved impossible to attain – instead the artist found work in the fashion and advertising industries. Her love of fashion and textiles forged in her childhood would continue to play a key role in the silk ‘paintings’ for which she is now increasingly renowned. In interviews Zangewa has described her determination to succeed as an artist against all odds, and her creative vision and persistence have led to three international gallery shows and three major museum exhibits since 2020⁴. Zangewa’s large-scale works rendered in raw silk provide a portrait of everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa that reveals the extraordinary within the quotidian. Her work, which presents images of what the artist terms ‘daily feminism’, is best understood as part of the wider cultural turn inaugurated by the demise of apartheid.

While the visual remains an important medium of and for resistance in South Africa, since apartheid ended in 1994, works of protest are no longer the dominant mode of expression⁵. The move towards a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes political art was initiated in 1984, when South Africa’s foremost cultural critic, Njabulo Ndebele, delivered an address at a conference in London that has come to serve as a heuristic for understanding cultural life in the last years of apartheid. Ndebele’s 2006 essay, ‘Rediscovery of the Ordinary’,

¹ <https://www.lehmanmaupin.com/artists/billie-zangewa/biography>

² See the TateShots video in which Zangewa speaks about her practice, “Artist Billie Zangewa: The Ultimate Act of Resistance is Self-Love”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CISkiELcT6I> I return to this phrase and discuss the implications of the appropriation and emptying out of once-radical concepts of (feminist) resistance below.

³ For analyses of neoliberal feminism, see Akinbobola (2019) and Rottenberg (2018).

⁴ Zangewa’s solo show, ‘Wings of Change’ was held at the Lehman Maupin Gallery, in New York in 2020; this was followed by ‘Running Water’ in London and ‘Flesh and Blood’ in Seoul, both held in 2021–2022. ‘Billie Zangewa: Domestic Life’ opened at the *Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle* in Switzerland in 2021; ‘Billie Zangewa: Thread for a Web Begun’ was on view at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, California from October 2021–February 2022, and at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina from June to September 2022.

⁵ Under apartheid, fine art was largely the preserve of white South Africans. From the 1960s onwards, visual media was taken up by the anti-apartheid liberation movements as a weapon of struggle (Seidman, 2018). There is by now considerable literature on resistance art and visual activism during apartheid. Among others, see Williamson (1989), Peterson (1990), Berndt (2007), Newbury (2009), Gaule (2017).

remains a critical touchstone for interpreting creative production in South Africa today (Ndebele, 2006). In that work Ndebele charts how South African writers were beginning to describe the contours of their own inner worlds and were opening new ways of seeing not only the political but the material and psychic effects of apartheid on everyday life. In an essay in which she considers how ‘Ndebele’s theorization of the spectacular remains a powerful commentary on contemporary South African culture and gendered public life’ (2009: 61), Pumla Gqola makes a series of astute observations about literary production during and after apartheid that can equally be applied to visual art:

Unlike apartheid writing, contemporary South African prose and poetry have turned inward to amplify the details of the everyday. In other words, the focus on the common textures of people’s lives and interiority is the common ground of post-apartheid literature. Today the ‘ordinary’ has been ‘rediscovered’, turned upside down, probed, circled and celebrated in varied forms (Gqola, 2009: 62).

Alongside, and partly because of, the significant turn towards creative works within which the politics of personal experience holds a central place, Black women and nonbinary artists working in the country have become increasingly visible and are producing significant and powerful work that has achieved international recognition. While in the early post-apartheid period Black women artists were tokenized and subject to the patronizing attitudes of white curators and audiences, there has been a marked shift in the last decade, a change that can be linked to a new wave of anti-colonial social movements in Southern Africa and to the greater visibility of Black women artists and photographers across the Continent⁶. Artists such as Gabrielle Goliath, Lebohang Kganye, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande and Portia Zvavahera, and curators such as Lerato Bereng, Qanita Lilla, Nomusa Makhubu, Portia Malatjie and Gabi Ngcobo have been instrumental in challenging how the work of Southern African Black women and nonbinary artists is perceived and received, and in opening new paths for their contemporaries.

EMBROIDERING THE EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY AND CRAFTING POLITICAL COMMUNITY

In 2019, Joana Choumali became the first African woman to win the prestigious Prix Pictet award for photography⁷. Like Zangewa, whose process begins with photographs that she translates into large-scale cloth works, Choumali works with photographs that she embroiders with thread to create beautiful, innovative images⁸. While the merging of photography and embroidery is not new, contemporary women photographers and artists are working with these materials in diverse and unusual ways that challenge definitions of both visual forms. As Annebella Pollen notes, “Over the last decade or so, the embroidered photograph has attracted much attention in contemporary art internationally” (2022: 44) and “Contemporary artists who bring photography and textiles together speak of the power of the needle to intervene in the photograph, puncture its veneer, bring hidden stories to the surface and fill its silences” (2022: 45). Sewing onto images provides a way to interrupt visual codes, to rupture the surface of the photograph, and in this way to intervene in the socio-political world the photograph depicts.

Choumali’s series, *‘Ça va aller ...’*, was made in the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Grand Bassam, a coastal area not far from Abidjan, the city where the artist lives and works⁹. Using cotton, lurex and wool thread, Choumali hand-embroidered colourful designs onto portraits of people and photographs of the landscape in Bassam. Creating these detailed works composed of thousands of tiny stitches served as a form of meditative therapy for Choumali whose practice is at once extraordinary and banal¹⁰. Seen from within the long history of women’s craft, sewing and embroidery are for the most part, unremarkable, and when the skill involved in creating beautiful fabric works has been recognized, those who created them were recognized as domestic heroines rather than as artists.

Embroidery, like sewing, knitting and weaving, has for the most part been perceived as a women’s craft, and while certain forms of art created with fabric and thread have featured in the history of art (such as tapestries) it is

⁶ While it remains difficult for Black women to contend with the racism of the global art market, Zangewa’s work is framed in a very different way from that of Esther Mahlangu, for example, one of the first Black women artists to be represented in the collection of the South African National Gallery. On the history of racism in the South African art world and the Iziko South African National Gallery in particular, see Lilla (2018).

⁷ Joana Choumali was born in Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire in 1974.

⁸ Choumali, like Zangewa, studied graphic arts and then worked at an advertising agency before launching her career as a photographer.

⁹ To view the images from Choumali’s series, see the artist’s website: <https://joanachoumali.com>

¹⁰ See the artist’s statement about embroidery as a calming practice and an act of hope on her website: <https://joanachoumali.com/index.php/projects/mix-media/ca-va-aller>

not a form associated with artistic genius nor, until the last decades of the twentieth century, has it led to individual women artists becoming internationally recognized. Such forms of artistic practice have often been carried out by groups of activists working together and these forms of collective creation do not only produce artefacts, but can also be sites of support, care and community. They have also been spaces for political organization and resistance – from the quilts made during the time of slavery in the United States¹¹; to women’s sewing collectives during and after apartheid in South Africa¹²; and the massive project of collective remembrance that is the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt¹³.

Contemporary women artists have drawn on these long-standing practices of crafting resistance in their own work. Faith Ringgold, who began her career as an artist in the United States in the 1960s, and began creating ‘story quilts’ in the 1980s, combines painting, text and fabric to create works that insist upon the presence of African-American women within history¹⁴.

Through works like those that make up her extensive ‘French Collection’ series, Ringgold challenges the erasure of African-American women writers, activists and artists within art history. Ringgold’s own practice is connected to the act of quilt-making from the time of slavery and provides a way to honour her foremothers. She notes how quilting was not only a way to create objects that could be shared across generations but also a process through which knowledge and stories could be transferred:

You can make a social event; the slaves did it. After working in the fields all day, they would have a quilting bee, and it was like a party. And they could actually make something that they could give to somebody: they could pass something on. They couldn’t enjoy the luxury of an object. They were cut off from the drum, they were cut off from the mask. But they weren’t cut off from those skills of sewing and appliqueing and piecing things together. And when they were sitting there they were talking and respecting each other because the best way to learn to respect another person is to work with them. And to let them show you their skills and then you see theirs and together you make something and there is a bond that grows there (Ringgold in Graulich and Witzling, 1994: 17).

For Ringgold, recalling the history of Black women’s communal practice is particularly important in contexts where women’s participation in political life has been limited. For her, the act of ‘piecing things together’ becomes a form of social repair. Although Ringgold, Zangewa and Choumali have been acclaimed as individual artists, the works they create evoke the memory of collective labour and the forms of solidarity such practices generate¹⁵. In an interview Zangewa recalls how she was introduced to the social practice of sewing as a child:

When I was a young child, I saw my mother and her sewing group working together and observed that it was not just about making pretty things for their homes. These women supported each other emotionally and coupled with the soothing repetitive nature of stitching, it was like group therapy. Without understanding it, I sensed that there was a power in this sewing thing that I was witness to. I now refer to it as the soft feminine power of stitching (*Phaidon*, Talking Textiles).

While Zangewa situates herself within an imagined community of women and of mothers she does not create her work as part of a collective and makes no secret of the fact that she uses, ‘fabric and sewing, which traditionally is a female pastime, to empower myself’. This individualist claim differs considerably from Ringgold’s aim, as well as from that of much feminist art-making and activism. Exhibitions of Zangewa’s work online and in locations in different parts of the world make it possible for individuals to engage with her work, and while her aim is not necessarily to empower others, Enuma Okoro describes the sense of connection she felt on seeing Zangewa’s exhibition, ‘Wings of Change’ in New York in October 2020. In a poignant essay Okoro (2020: n.p.) conveys the affective charge of Zangewa’s work and describes how she had ‘spent the first month of lockdown oddly comforted’ by the artist’s work, which prompted her ‘to look for silken silver linings’ in her own domestic life.

¹¹ See for instance the quilt made by Harriet Powers c.1895-1898 <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/116166>

¹² On community embroidery projects in South Africa see the work of Brenda Schmahmann (2005, 2022). See also Puleng Segalo’s account of a community embroidery project in a township outside of Johannesburg (Segalo, 2011); and Gille de Vlieg’s photographs of sewing collectives in South Africa during apartheid (<https://vimeo.com/589867843>).

¹³ <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt>

¹⁴ Faith Ringgold was born in 1930 in Harlem, New York and has worked as an artist since the 1960s. To view her ‘story quilts’, see the artist’s website: <https://www.faithringgold.com/art/>

¹⁵ I have written elsewhere of how solidarity has become atomized and visual practice is often delinked from collective work and activism when individual artists are taken up by the international art market (Thomas, 2022). This is not to discount how individual works of art might inspire those who view them, but to point to how the practices of activism can be detached from images originally produced as forms of resistance.

Standing before Zangewa's tapestry, 'An Angel at My Bedside', triggers her desire 'to inhale all the radiant, revitalising energy spilling out of the red silk swaths', and she leaves the show feeling joyful¹⁶.

'Engaging with the visual arts', Okoro writes, 'is always a move towards internal and external re-examination. And one thing that has come out of the pandemic is a call for a re-examination of how we live, and an examination of what makes a world recognisable, inhabitable and hospitable, and for whom' (2020, n.p.). Okoro's response to Zangewa's show reveals the power of art to move people, at the same time as it reveals how, unless such affective responses are linked to collective action, the radical potential of art, whether feminist or not, is tempered, if not neutralized. The structures of the contemporary international art world effectively (and unsurprisingly) separate collective struggle from individual experience and raises the question of the politics of depoliticized feminism – are works like Zangewa's that provide consolation for some viewers, rather than insisting on justice, anti-feminist?

The recognition granted to artists such as Zangewa and Choumali is significant – until recently African women were entirely excluded from the international world of art. In this particular context of exclusion, repression and resistance, Zangewa's work is revolutionary in a minor key. Zangewa's approach is one that proposes an ethics of care, one that focuses on the intimate spaces of the family and of home and that centres human relationships. At the same time, equating femininity, motherhood and domesticity delimits the bounds of the category 'woman' and invokes conservative and regressive ideas about gender. In the South African context, this equation erases the history of the separation of motherhood and domestic labour under apartheid and neatly evades the problem of class. To be granted entry into the institutions of power that have excluded Black women is not necessarily to change them, or even less to overturn them, nor does the exhibition of works by Black women artists necessarily advance the cause of those who remain marginalized and dispossessed.

WHEN FEMINISM ISN'T ENOUGH

"There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort for all" – The Freedom Charter.

Zangewa's works centre on images of the home and of domestic life and collectively form a kind of family photo album. One way to read Zangewa's work is as an overturning of the visual logics of apartheid, within which the experiences of Black people appeared in and through what Ndebele terms 'spectacular' violence:

Everything in South Africa has been mind-bogglingly spectacular: the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random mass pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation, the ultimate symbol of which is the mining industry; the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations; the luxurious life-style of whites: servants; all encompassing privilege, swimming pools and high commodity consumption; the sprawling monotony of architecture in African locations, which are the very picture of poverty and oppression (Ndebele, 2006: 31).

Zangewa's images are portraits of individual experiences and of moments in time that have little, if anything, to do with the mass violence and mass exploitation that reduced the lives of Black people to a cipher under apartheid. Yet, while Zangewa's works seem to portray the antithesis of the violent universe of apartheid that Ndebele describes, in their depictions of 'all encompassing privilege, swimming pools and high commodity consumption', these images hold traces of the violence that continues to contaminate life under capitalism in present-day South Africa. Her images ostensibly depict 'the work done by women that keeps society running smoothly, but which is often overlooked, undervalued, or ignored'¹⁷ and while they portray the artist at work as a parent, otherwise occlude the forms of domestic work that remains a key form of employment for Black women in the country¹⁸.

In many ways the 'ordinary' life that Zangewa represents in her work remains extraordinary in South Africa, where more than 18 million people live in extreme poverty¹⁹. South Africa also remains one of the most unequal societies in the world and the divide between rich and poor has deepened since 1994²⁰. The suburban, domestic

¹⁶ To view images of Zangewa's work, see: <https://www.lehmanmaupin.com/artists/billie-zangewa>

¹⁷ Billie Zangewa *Thread for a World Begun* Gallery Guide, edited by Dexter Wimberley, 2022.

¹⁸ According to Statistics South Africa, 47% of women in South Africa are unemployed. Of those who are employed, 11.9% work as domestic workers (<https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15668>). The monthly minimum wage for domestic workers in South Africa in 2022 is R3710 (176 GBP). This is less than half of the amount required for a living wage.

¹⁹ According to the World Bank, 30.3 million people (55% of the population), were living at the national upper poverty line in South Africa in 2020. This means their household income was less than R992 per month (50 GBP). https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_ZAF.pdf

²⁰ Aroop Chatterjee, Léo Czajka, Amory Gethin. "Wealth Inequality in South Africa, 1993-2017". 2021. halshs-03266286

world Zangewa depicts is one of affluence and privilege that remains beyond the reach of the majority of Black South Africans. In this sense, Zangewa's work can be read as a historical document of her own time and place, offering insight into the lives of the emerging Black middle and upper classes, portraying scenes that were unthinkable for Black people during apartheid. This includes depictions of the spaces in which she and her son live together - a beautiful home in a neighbourhood that was previously segregated and reserved solely for white people. Several of Zangewa's images portray the spacious kitchen in which she works at a large table, creating her intricate fabric works in close proximity to where her son plays. 'The Heart of the Home', presents the artist standing alongside her son, engaged in the everyday task of checking his homework or admiring something he has drawn, mother and son enclosed in the private moment they share, oblivious to the gaze of the viewer. This piece was made during the global coronavirus pandemic, when schools in South Africa were shut. While the image does convey a sense of the vulnerability of the small family unit at a time of deep uncertainty in the world outside the frame, it is also a portrait of motherly love and protection.

The homely, social world Zangewa occupies with her son is one that celebrates their togetherness. Their 'ordinary' family structure is in stark contrast with the lives of many Black women who worked in white areas during apartheid and who were separated from their children for months at a time. It is also in contrast with the living conditions of the majority of those who live in the country today. This work is one of several that conveys the complex and even discomforting politics of Zangewa's images, which on the one hand, can be read through the lens of Black feminist (self)care and on the other, are images that expose the complicity of the artist (as well as the majority of those who view and consume these images) with the structures of racialized capitalist exploitation.

Within the world portrayed in Zangewa's works, violence is in abeyance – many of her images show herself and her son at ease and at rest. There is a critical politics here of insisting on the value of the lives of Black people, on the centrality of care, beauty and love, and on the radical nature of care for the self within systems of racial injustice and brutality. I understand the impulse to celebrate the bright scenes portrayed in Zangewa's work, such as 'Return to Paradise', which shows the artist and her son on holiday, joyfully relaxing at a poolside. At the same time, delinking these scenes from the context in which they were made is difficult to sustain in the face of ongoing inequality and the persistence of structural and extreme violence in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is interesting to note that among the many articles published on Zangewa's work, only one includes the fact that the artist does not always create her work alone. According to Catherine Dormor:

While many of her works focus on the singular woman caught up in her daily work, Zangewa's broader oeuvre speaks of an agency built upon communal care and mutual support, forming a system of symbiotic relationships that follow through into her working practices. She has two women who support her when she needs it: they help her, and she provides employment. Through the careful work they undertake, they become agential partners in the production of these expressive artworks (Dormor, 2022: 18-19).

That Zangewa's 'agential partners' remain unnamed and unacknowledged is symptomatic of the radically unequal context in which she works and their elision points to other significant contradictions in thinking of Zangewa's work as feminist resistance. The difficult matter of how the artist's peaceful domestic scenes are bound to and simultaneously obscure the structural inequality that led, for instance, to the Marikana Massacre of 2012 (Bruce, 2015), or the food riots in Durban in 2021 (Ngwane, 2021), have not been raised by those who celebrate her work. Yet the question of how one might render visible what June Jordan describes as 'the difficult miracle' of not only surviving but of creating beauty in contexts of extreme racial violence without simultaneously erasing the everyday forms of violence to which so many people remain subject, is a critical one (Jordan, 2002: n.p.).

In her own framing of the political valence of her work, Zangewa draws on Black feminist philosophy to articulate the radical nature of care in a world which negates the value of the lives of Black people. Zangewa claims that 'the ultimate act of resistance is self-love'²¹ and seems to be attempting to locate herself within the orbit of Black feminist writer and lesbian activist Audre Lorde, as well as reaching towards the philosophy of Black consciousness activist and writer, Steve Biko. However, in both instances her appropriation of their positions is emptied of its political content. Framing Zangewa's work as resistance exposes how once radical feminist and anti-racist concepts have been hollowed out and appropriated in service of the neo-liberal myth that individual triumph is an indicator of collective gain. Among the key insights of Lorde's much-cited essay, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' are that racism, sexism, classism and homophobia are bound, and that "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (Lorde, 1984: 112).

²¹ See the TateShots video in which Zangewa speaks about her practice, 'Artist Billie Zangewa: The Ultimate Act of Resistance is Self-Love'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CISkiELcT6I>

To be fair, Zangewa herself, other than framing her work as ‘daily feminism’, makes no claim to addressing social injustice, and cannot be held to account for the ways in which the global art market assimilates, commodifies, and often neutralizes, resistance. Zangewa’s work brings new forms of representation of Black experience into visibility and is intended less to disrupt, but rather to enlarge, the bounds of the art market²². Zangewa’s work can be read as a call to recognize the vulnerability and beauty of the binding threads between ourselves and those we love. At the same time, it raises the question of who constitutes this ‘we’ who look and see ourselves reflected in these works and who it is that is excluded. As Panashe Chigumadzi (2017) notes in her essay, “‘Ain’t I A Woman?’ On The Irony of Trans-Exclusion By Black And African Feminists’:

When our trans sisters have to look at us, and ask as our feminist foremother Sojourner Truth did a century and half ago, “Ain’t I A Woman?”, it tells us that our visions of freedom from the oppressions that we face as black women are not only unimaginative, exclusionary, and violent, but historically regressive (Chigumadzi, 2017: n.p.).

Like Choumali’s works that transform landscapes of terror into magical zones of colour and light, Zangewa’s aesthetic renderings insist that we see what is beautiful in the everyday. To expand the individual, utopian vision implicit in these works, to challenge its exclusions and to see it linked to a political programme to realise a world in which there is security and comfort for all, would be a truly beautiful thing.

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²² The case of the documenta 14 protest in Athens in 2017 and the controversy around the most recent edition, documenta 15 in Kassel, provide an indication of the explosive effects that can emerge when the depoliticized conventions of the art world are disrupted.

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Book Review

Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex and Sexuality Data for Action

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Guyan, K. (2022). *Queer Data: Using Gender, Sex and Sexuality Data for Action*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

“The Census is not a neutral representation of reality but a tool to construct a governable population” ... raising questions as to whether the census “is an exercise in knowledge construction or a tool to bolster the state’s capacity to manage its population.”

“If the construction of knowledge is no longer the primary purpose of a census this throws into doubt the need for a census to collect accurate information that authentically represents the lives and experiences of the people about whom the data relates” (Queer Data: Chapter 3–page 70).

Kevin Guyan’s examination of the process of data collection within society is a breath of fresh air for anyone who is searching and/or researching within the fields of queer theory, with data around sexuality, gender, sex, or relationships being a key component. However, if one approaches the book as a methodological discussion of anomalies, even those in disparate fields of inquiry may find Guyan’s work of use. Qualitative and quantitative researchers alike will gain something from the book, as rather than dryly presenting data, Guyan provocatively asks the reader to address the question: “what is data for?” To what end is it collected, and in what ways might the end product be used? After all, *how* we count things, as objects, people, places and concepts, has a direct impact on what counts, and who or what ends up being either included or excluded from the supposedly objective results.

Beginning in an historical vein, the reader is taken on a journey through the ways in which data *about* us might not always be data *for* us, and how that which can enable can also exclude since: “those who stand to benefit from being counted also risk engaging with technologies and practices that hamper rather than help the wider lgbtq+ population”. Before then moving through to an analysis of the gaps in data—the oft hidden inductive qualities of managing what gets measured that can result in “straight washing” the non-normative, through construction of the anomaly and the over coding of “statistically insignificant population groups” that when combined result in questions like the ones posed in the quoted extract above.

Guyan leans on a Foucauldian analysis of power and “governmentality” to ask, “who counts what counts?” within systems of biopolitical bordering, yet they take the conversation out of the abstract and into the pragmatic and experiential as a data analyst and policy researcher, with their consideration of how state organised data practices and LGBTQ+ identities have an “*uneasy relationship*” with each other. Data, they say becomes meaningful when it is used to *impact* the lives of people. But ‘*in what ways*’ and ‘*to what end*’ are the questions at the heart of this book.

Chapter 6 is particularly interesting as Guyan considers how data practices validate particular *forms* of data, thereby presupposing said forms to have legitimacy. Intrinsic and extrinsic identification processes collide with the bio-metric and behavioural data collection methods, each of which present risk of foreclosing potential, whilst also presenting opportunity for an expansion of the queer data field. One might say that solving historical inequalities is not simply a (case of adding more) tick box process.

This leads the reader nicely into the reflective character of chapters 7 and 8, which are a rich field of ideas for the researcher—whether established or early career—forming a lead into the concluding comments that present one with a practical guide to the *doing of queer data collection*, eight questions that may serve to contextualise the work of others. Whilst there are no resolutions to the iterative problem of inductive meaning making within social and natural scientific data collections, practical application suggestions may at least aid the researcher in being mindful of it, leading to better research outcomes.

Whilst *Queer Data* is perhaps not a page turner in the sense of other, more ‘storied’ books, and the subject of data collection and its nuances can be a little dry for some readers, this book undeniably deserves a place on your shelf and is a ‘must have’ for anyone in the academic field. Whilst primarily being a work that critically engages data methodologies, the language remains accessible with minimal theory or jargon, and the chapters and sections serve not just as handy reference points about the data, but also about *the time* in which it was written, as the book itself becomes a source of the very data it discusses. Therefore, *Queer data* is not *just* a contemporary methodological book, but will find use in your collection as a somewhat historical consideration of the period around the census of 2022, and the social changes inherent. Highly recommended.

Book Review

The Hidden Case of Ewan Forbes

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Keywords: history, gender, law, culture, social justice

Playdon, Z. ed. (2021). *The Hidden Case of Ewan Forbes*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Ewan Forbes-Sempill MBChB (1912-1991) was the 11th Baronet of Craigievar. His life, and the story of how the title was ultimately passed to him is chronicled in Zoe Playdon's recently published work *The Hidden Case of Ewan Forbes*. But the book is much more than a historical record, for Playdon shines a light into a murky corner of Britain's colonialist power base, highlighting histories intertwined with legal, medical, and pseudo-scientific arguments. It is a corner which some have sought, seemingly for their own ends, to keep secret for many years.

Forbes's life was in many ways unremarkable, and Playdon recounts a tale of a quiet, unassuming man with a love of highland dancing and a deep reverence for the historical Scottish lands and its people. The Forbes-Sempill family have a long history stretching back to the time of the English civil war. Siding with the monarchy, the family kept friendly relations with the present-day royal family during Forbes's life. As a result, young Ewan was born into some privilege and agency. A quirk of fate that was to indelibly shape his life, both for good and for ill.

The book, which is also available in an extremely entertaining and gripping audio format on Audible, is a not just a historical recounting of one person's story but charts the way in which extant social power and colonialist power structures collided around Forbes. Having been assigned female at birth, Forbes lived through the time of the Hirschfield Institute. Created in 1919 by sexologist Magnus Hirschfield and based in Berlin-Tiergarten, the Institute was a ground-breaking organisation, exploring the emerging sexual sciences of the Weimar period. Forbes's birth into a wealthy family dynasty and the good fortune of a somewhat progressive mother, accorded him the fortune and agency to seek treatment there for what we today might recognise as gender incongruence. Visiting the Hirschfield institute on occasion, he also witnessed the rise of Hitler's Third Reich, and the destruction of Hirschfield's knowledge base, followed in the mid to late 20th century by a battle with entrenched institutional homophobia in the UK. However, Forbes was not just experiencing this from the viewpoint of someone whom we might today refer to as a trans man, (given how he himself rejected any other form of recognition that wasn't male) but also that of a doctor, a medical professional of his time, having been accepted into medical training at the university of Aberdeen 1939. Forbes completed his training 1944, briefly working as a casualty officer at Aberdeen royal infirmary, before moving into general practice in 1945.

Forbes's quiet, yet privileged, life with his wife Patty was torn asunder by the twin issues of hereditary male primogeniture, and family greed. It transpired that due to his birth he was in line to inherit a Baronetcy – a Scottish title that is passed to next in the male line and cannot be deferred or moved to another until death. However, at the point where this title would have passed to him, an estranged cousin challenged Forbes in the courts, on the basis that he was ineligible to inherit, because he was, in fact, female.

The story of Forbes's battle to clear his name is as gripping as the second thread of this book, the way in which the outcome of the legal challenge was covered up, and the principle of legal precedent undermined for subsequent trans people who appeared before either Scottish or English courts to seek recognition. Researchers of 20th century queer and trans history may well know of the April Ashley divorce case (*Corbett v Corbett*), which is widely cited as the landmarking ruling on sex determination. April Ashley had married Arthur Corbett, 3rd Baron Rowallan, in 1963, but when the marriage failed Arthur sought to avoid the inheritance issues resultant from divorce. Since there was no proof of either adultery or cruelty, and April herself did not wish to be divorced, a case was constructed on the premise that the marriage had never been legal in the first place, since April had been registered as a boy at birth and therefore should be treated as male. Forbes's and April's cases were heard almost simultaneously in the Scottish and English courts, however Forbes's judgment, which was in his favour, slightly preceded April's. What's is astounding to learn is that the counsel for Ashley were specifically forbidden from referring to Forbes's case in court, as it had by this time been sealed, effectively removing it from the public record.

The issues and questions that this action presents us with are adeptly explained and examined within the writing. Playdon does a masterful job of unravelling the relationships of power, privilege, social etiquettes, scientific knowledge and legal process that were in play at the time, presenting the reader or listener with a spider's web of cause-and-effect judgments that stretch all the way to the modern-day European Court. Remaining pertinent to the present-day discourse and judgment that is affecting the lives of trans people in the UK. Then as now, the media and the legal system seek to either sensationalise or control the lives of those deemed different, and medical knowledge is tangled up in social events and political expediency. The system that results may work for some but does so at severe cost to others. Playdon highlights that for Forbes to even access the care he received was in part the result of his social and family standing, with many medically similar cases dismissed by doctors, or unable to access care because they were of a poor background. This leads the reader to question how issues of social capital are constructed, to what end, and whose benefit?

So, if you are interested in the tangled history of a trans existence, Queer theory, or the medical and scientific discourses within social contexts of a British historical power base, then this book is an essential read. The story may be historical, but its ripples can be felt within an ongoing contemporary discourse of autonomy and legal recognitions, as the ghosts of the past re-emerge, perhaps with new words, but still with an old rhetoric, particularly in a UK context.

Book Review

Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries

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Brook, O., O'Brien, D. and Taylor, M. (2020). *Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

The November 2022 publication of the National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) of the Arts Council England has instigated intense discussion around who and what is funded publicly in the arts; opera, particularly, has been subject to a significant change in the funding and this has resulted in attempts to reaffirm the importance and value of the art form. Nonetheless, it is one of many art forms that continue to suffer from inequality and under-representation. Despite Brook, O'Brien and Taylor's book being published at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 it remains deeply pertinent, and weaves tightly into the recent NPO outcomes. The NPO outcomes will result in insecurity for many working in the industry; Covid-19 already had amplified the inequality for certain groups in the creative sector, and little has meaningfully changed since.

Those working in and advocating for arts and culture will extol the virtues of participation and the benefits for health and wellbeing; large-scale research continues to investigate the benefits of engagement through a variety of arts and culture. Culture is Bad for You agrees the case for the seemingly good of culture is there, though the main premise of the book grapples with the inequalities that prevent some from experiencing such benefit. The book focuses on the inequalities experienced through gender, race and social class for those that consume and produce culture.

A key contribution this book makes is challenging meritocracy; 'talent' is not the key determining factor of progressing in the industries and many barriers exist that will prevent the vast majority (and particularly certain groups of people) achieving a sustainable career. The authors reveal how those from working-class backgrounds, and people of colour (notably women of colour) will struggle the most to access a career. Chapter 10 demonstrates that male cultural workers consider talent and luck as indicators of their success, in counterpoint with the structural inequal conditions experienced by others.

The authors have meticulously made use of UK-based data; analysis of the UK's 'Taking Part' surveys that track cultural, digital and sporting activity in conjunction with a 2015 cultural workers' survey. The interviews of over 230 cultural workers provide a range of compelling detail and the quotations from some of these amplify the key themes of the book well. Chapter 5 is particularly important to many of us working in education; the limited access in our childhoods to arts and culture makes future access to the cultural professions more difficult. And this privileged access to the sector is typified in how it caters for those that can work without pay (such as unpaid internships).

There are quotations from the cultural workers peppered throughout the book, and we hear of the tensions they experience between who they believe they should be, and the expectations they pull against. A strength of the

book is the spread of voices; workers of differing ages and cultural roles. The diversity of the contributions sadly do not match the lack of such diversity in the sector, but this is why the book is so skilfully conceived.

There is the opportunity to consider a broader definition of culture, and the book perpetuates the 'high-culture' artforms that the sector could challenge more (and the November 2022 NPO outcomes appear to be an attempt to challenge some of these high-art ideals). But there is strength in investigating these forms as a priority, particularly when they have received considerable government support.

Culture is Bad for You is significant for the cultural and creative industries; it deserves to be read widely by academics in relevant fields who share the authors' deep concerns for addressing the variety of inequalities the book presents. It also deserves much wider readership, and those working in the sector and educating, training and studying creative subjects will find this engaging throughout. The authors have worked diligently to make this a book accessible beyond the social sciences and the book makes a purposeful contribution to public discourse. Only through magnifying the embedded inequalities widely will we be able to initiate the changes our sector urgently needs; the more who read this book, the better.

Book Review

Automation and the Future of Work

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Keywords: work, jobs, automation, capitalism, post-work

Benanav, A. (2020). *Automation and the Future of Work*. London: Verso.

The capitalist economy—once imagined as a perpetual machine for continuous growth—is seriously malfunctioning. Yet, the malaise is not recent or temporary, but one that has been developing over 50 years. A sequence of short-term growth bubbles, mini-booms and the buttressing efforts of the state have served to mask that the machine has been breaking down since the late 1960s. The so-called ‘advanced’ economies are deeply inveigled in what Wolfgang Streeck has called ‘a continuous process of gradual decay, protracted but apparently all the more inexorable’ (2014, p. 38).

Aaron Benanav’s book is a further timely corrective to those who would insist on the transient, temporary nature of the capitalist downturn. Like Streeck, he sees entrenched atrophy and decay, evidenced in the slow, stuttering performance of national economies over half a century, and the diminishing capacity of capitalist societies to lift themselves from the stagnant mire. The focus here, however, is on the direct consequences for jobs and work. Benanav first shows how the overall rate of output growth has been in steady decline for decades and how this has led directly to entrenched un- and under-employment for large swathes of skilled and unskilled workers. His argument is that shrinking numbers of good jobs (and the concomitant proliferation of bad, precarious, or partial jobs) is attributable to the long-term weakening of the economy as a whole—at the global scale. The data on this is presented convincingly. However, the main point of this book is to use this insight to challenge the more common and popularly held belief that the real reason for the lowering demand for labour is not ingrained economic decline but technological change through *automation*.

It is often assumed by both lay and expert observers that increased joblessness is primarily a function of automation—the acquisition of cheaper technologies that reduce requirements for human labour; aka ‘computerisation’ or the ‘the rise of the robots.’ But, as Benanav repeatedly insists, while automation *has* occurred, this is not the main reason jobs are being lost. Further, while absolute increases in labour productivity growth (the amount produced by each worker) appears to show automation in action, the actual rates of increase in labour productivity have been overall diminishing, over time—even with mass automation. Japan’s rate of labour productivity growth is currently about a fifth of what it was in the early 1970s, for example; Germany’s about half. Further, the rate of labour productivity growth only appears to be increasing when one looks at the rapid decline in the overall rate of output growth, against which labour productivity is compared. So, if labour productivity rises by 3% but overall demand for output rises by only 2% then jobs will likely be lost—regardless of productivity gains. Citing Robert Solow’s quip that the computer age is everywhere to be seen ‘except in the productivity statistics’ (p. 17), Benanav’s main argument therefore is that it is the overall decline in output that is driving job losses and underemployment, not technology *per se*.

Armed with this insight, Benanav's then deploys it in open-ended speculation on the 'future of work.' Here, he takes issue with both Right and Left variants of the 'automation discourse'—the idea that technological innovation is leading societies inexorably towards jobless futures where human labour becomes redundant or obsolete. In much of this discourse there is a strong techno-utopian leaning that imagines 'universal' automation will free up workers to either live freer and more fulfilled lives in the leisured solidarity of the convivial community (Leftist variants) or else exist as free, non-dependent citizens with an unhindered personal liberty (Rightist variants)—all shorn of commitments to endless and numbing work. Here, UBI is often tendered across the political spectrum as a straightforward solution to the problem of unwaged life. Yet, on both the technically afforded post-work society, and on UBI, Benanav offers a counter-argument. Just as work is not becoming obsolete (workers are consistently under-employed rather than fully unemployed, or else subsist through other myriad, variously consistent or unstable working means), neither are all jobs amenable to automation. Furthermore, work will always remain socially necessary—in whatever societies we inhabit. There are useful insights here on the need for democratic forms of work sharing—not dissimilar to the ideas underpinning 'contributive justice' elsewhere developed by Paul Gomberg (2007) and others. When it comes to UBI, the point is made that while it might helpfully break the link between work and income, and provided a minimal floor for subsistence, if the fundamentals of the machine remain intact—unfettered profit-making in growth-oriented capitalism—then UBI is likely to 'empower workers' at the expense of 'disempowering capital' (p. 78) and provide people with 'no greater role in shaping the wider social conditions' (p. 78) under which they live. Benanav's persuasive claim is that without system change then it is unlikely that any 'silver bullets' (be it UBI, or full automation) will be effective enough to occasion the radical, progressive change that is now required. What is needed is a fundamental and democratic transformation in the arrangements of a failing political economy, where people are first prioritised before any putative tools or instruments of progress:

'By focusing on technological progress rather than the conquest of production, automation theorists end up largely abandoning [the] basic precondition of generating a post-scarcity world (...) the abolition of private property and monetary exchange in favour of planned cooperation (...) Instead of presupposing a fully automated economy and imagining the possibilities for a better and freer world created out of it, we could *begin* from a world of generalized human dignity, and then consider the technical changes needed to realize that world' (p. 82).

A better world of work and non-work will best be obtained through 'social struggle rather than administrative intervention' (p. 12), so concludes this thought-provoking and highly engaging book.

Time to power up.

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