



# Gender, Body & Sexuality

*Proceedings of the Annual Graduate  
Interdisciplinary Conference, held in  
Montreal, Quebec; March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016.*

The *Proceedings of the Annual Graduate Interdisciplinary Conference (PAGIC)* is proudly produced in collaboration with the *Journal of Religion and Culture (JRC)* and the graduate students from the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University.

© 2017 Journal of Religion and Culture,  
Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

ISSN 1198-6395  
Journal of Religion and Culture - Volume 26, no. 3 (2017)

All rights reserved. No part of this journal may be used or reproduced in any matter without the express written permission of the editors except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles and reviews.

For more information:  
Journal of Religion and Culture  
Department of Religions and Cultures (FA-101)  
Concordia University  
1455 de Maisonneuve O.,  
Montreal, Quebec  
H3G 1M8

AGIC logo design: Jesse Toufexis and Josiah Toufexis  
Book design: Joseph E. Brito  
The type face of this journal is Minion Pro,  
designed by Robert Slimbach,  
issued as a digital Open Type font  
by Adobe Systems, Mountain View California, 2000.

## Content

- 5      **Gender, Body & Sexuality**  
*An introduction*  
Joseph E. Brito

### *Articles*

- 9      **Profanation du féminin maternel et de sa lactation à travers la (re)mise en scène de l'allaitement dans l'autoportrait photographique de Catherine Opie.**  
Fanie Demeule
- 23     **The Trans-Aesthetics of Effy Beth:**  
*Perception, Self, and Embodiment*  
Adam Beyt
- 33     **Le conservatisme chrétien, les rapports de genre et les médias:**  
*Diffusion d'une vision alternative de la famille*  
Mathilde Vanasse-Pelletier
- 47     **Coming into Being**  
*Desire, Pleasure, and the Necessity of Female Orgasm for Conception in Late Antiquity*  
Nathan Dyck
- 61     **Bodily “μέριμνας”**  
*Instances in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Literature*  
Daniel A. Giorgio

- 75     **What Looking at the Son of Man's Bustline Reveals**  
Aaron Ricker
- 85     **Dressing the Savior**  
*Considering a New Notion of Gender Theory Through  
the Feminized Body of Christ*  
Julie Morris
- 97     **Colonizing Bodies**  
*The Visual Rhetoric of Masculinity in New Spain*  
Daniel Santiago Sáenz
- 109    **In/Between**  
*Challenging Gendered Binaries in Contemporary Photographic  
Practices*  
Clinton Glenn & Tal-Or Ben-Choreen

# The Trans-Aesthetics of Effy Beth

## *Perception, Self, and Embodiment*

Adam Beyt – Ph.D. Student, Theology, Fordham University

### ABSTRACT

This paper will argue that the categories of perception, self, and embodiment should be used for theological anthropology when considering the experiences of trans-gender individuals. It examines the aesthetic dimensions of the performance art of the Argentinian trans-woman, Elizabeth Mía Chorubczyk, aka “Effy Beth.” Her piece entitled *You Will Never be a Woman (Nunca Serás Mujer)* explores her own sense of identity and feelings toward embodiment through thirteen performances involving her menstruation. This paper will use Erika Fischer-Lichte’s analysis of the aesthetics of performance art as a transformative experience; Fischer-Lichte’s concept of performance art emphasizing “thresholds,” “borders,” and the hyper-attentiveness to reality helps to illuminate how Effy uses her art to articulate her own experience as a trans-person. The paper will then utilize the analysis of the phenomenon of art as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty—and unpacked by the recent work of Maya Rivera—to show how perception is intertwined with subjectivity and embodiment. Finally, the paper will use the phenomenology of Michel Henry, who emphasizes that the self is disclosed in art and thus has a relation to God, who is Life, to bring Effy’s art into the realm of theological anthropology.

**T**oday, the lives of transgender individuals have reached an unprecedented level of exposure in the media. Yet in so many cases this experience of not identifying with one’s gender identity given at birth results in pain and marginalization. Called to attend to the experiences of society’s outcasts, many of today’s theologians feel challenged to listen to these experiences.

Elizabeth Mía Chorubczyk, aka “Effy Beth,” was an Argentinian transwoman and performance artist. Her piece entitled *You Will Never be a Woman (Nunca Serás Mujer)* explores her own transwoman experience. The work of Erika Fischer-Lichte on performance art helps to illuminate the aesthetic dimension of transformation permeating Effy’s work. Aesthetics here

may be defined as the critical reflection on human perception, particularly in relation to forms of artistic expression. This paper will bring these aesthetic dimensions into conversation with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and describe how perception, embodiment, and sense of self are dimensions of transgender experience. Through these categories, theologians might articulate a new theological anthropology engaging the experiences of transgender individuals.

### *MERLEAU-PONTY'S EMBODIED SUBJECTIVITY*

For Merleau-Ponty, we encounter the world through the body: when “our experience of the world” appears to us “in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body” (Merleau-Ponty, *Basic Writings*, 126). To use more classically theological terms, the body, i.e. “outer” self, is deeply intertwined and part of the soul, the “inner” self (67). Merleau-Ponty sees that one cannot treat our experience of being-in-the-world as “a collection of reflexes,” nor can he see the experience of the self as separated from the body. Because being-in-the-world exists as a “union of the ‘psychic’ and the ‘physiological,’” subjectivity is embodied (81-91).

Being connected to the world through our embodiment means that our sense of our selves is also shaped by the world we inhabit. As he writes, “there is no inner man [sic], man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (67). Since the body is a “vehicle” existing in the world, the self is embedded in the world, committed and identifying with particular goals and endeavors (93). As Mayra Rivera writes, “there would be no knowledge without bodies and no bodies without their constitutive relations to the world” (Rivera, 63). Because bodies are known only in this relation, this means that the body is “dynamic and malleable.” The body is thus tied to “things it perceives, the objects it uses, and to other human bodies” (65). A developing infant has the capacity to “absorb” a person’s gestures: the baby integrates into the body what it perceives visually. In staring at their reflections, children cultivate their own corporeal sensibility. This self-perception is also intertwined with how others perceive the self. “The sensations of my body and the other’s are imbricated,” Rivera writes, “and so are the cognitive representations of my own body with those of others.” Perception then is linked to self-development (68-70). Our “selves” are our “sense of self” and thus are created in this relational web of other selves and world.

Since perception is so intertwined with Merleau-Ponty's notion of subjectivity, art relates to his idea of self, for artistic expression helps to disclose the embodied self. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, he examines countless painters, novelists, and musical performances to convey the reality of embodied being-in-the-world (Silverman, 95). There is a tension between the phenomenon of one's own perception and subjectivity and difficulty in conveying it. In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty describes this phenomenological tension. A painter, for example, goes out into the country in order to paint a mountain. The artist attempts to paint the experienced phenomenon on a canvas but cannot. As he writes, "The painter 'takes his [sic] body with him,' says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine who a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings" (Merleau-Ponty, *Sense*, 123). In every work of art, the body of the artist is in play, not as an agent of expression but "a transubstantiation" that takes place among the self, the perception of the world through the artist, and the work of art itself (Fóti, 43). The work of art may thus be said to be a point of convergence for embodiment, sense of self, and perception.

Since it is this point of convergence, art is the means by which the self transforms the world and vice versa. Human creativity can change the world (Rivera, 85). While Merleau-Ponty does not speak of performance art, one could readily imagine that he would see it as an affective disclosure of the self's embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's ideas illuminate how embodied subjectivity may be developed, shaped, and articulated by the world, as expressed in artistic action.

Amid these philosophical reflections on perception, self, and embodiment, one might wonder if Merleau-Ponty's notion of subjectivity implies a radical immanence unrelated to anything transcendent. In writing on perception in postmodern theological discourse, Philip Bond interprets a tension between the visible and invisible, i.e. immanence and transcendence, in Merleau-Ponty's later work. Recalling the disjuncture he saw between art and the artist in "Eye and Mind," the distance between subject and object "begins to speak to him of a form of visibility that accompanies the massiveness of flesh such that it graces it with subtlety...this discernment brings with it the consequent implication of an order which is higher than that of mere immanence." Merleau-Ponty sees a strange tension amid the phenomenon of embodied human subjectivity that indicates transcendence. Bond reads the phenomenologist as claiming all beings are "in

truth enveloped in an invisible penumbra which they can either deny or acknowledge.” He suggests that within human perception, there is a “curious and unexplained filiation of the invisible to visible.” He reads in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology a kenotic act of the invisible disclosing itself into the visible (Bond, 235-237). In this small opening to transcendence we find room to develop a theological anthropology.

In describing the self as open to the transcendent, Bond’s reading of Merleau-Ponty is analogous to the transcendental anthropology described by Karl Rahner. The human person, as he explains, has an innate openness to the transcendent, an infinite horizon we call God (Rahner, 32). Each individual has the a priori capacity for “a transcendental experience” of the absolute divine mystery (54). A person experiences “creatureliness,” which is an encounter of God and one that is “not so much in nature, in its stolid and unfeeling finiteness,” but in the self and “as freely administered in the unlimited openness of his own spirit” (81-82). For Rahner, God communicates God in Godself within the human experience. The abiding character of his anthropology is that nearness to God and genuine human autonomy grow in direct and not inverse proportions. In other words, a person’s true self is realized in becoming closer to God. To be put more simplistically, in living one’s fully human and fully authentic life, one achieves salvation. Thus for Rahner, self-actualization and the full achievement of one’s true identity are key elements of theological anthropology. One could then suggest that the openness to God’s self-communication could be an element of personhood in addition to the aforementioned categories of perception, self, and embodiment. In this analogous openness to transcendence, Merleau-Ponty’s embodied subjectivity is brought into the realm of theological anthropology.

### *THE PERFORMANCE ART OF EFFY BETH*

The unique aesthetic sensibilities cultivated by Effy Beth in her performance art piece *You Will Never be a Woman* help to affirm some of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of embodied subjectivity. The title of Effy’s work comes from a claim made to her over the course of her transition: she will never be a woman due to her inability to menstruate. This statement presupposes the notion that the sine qua non of womanhood, if there could ever be such a thing, is the ability to menstruate. For Effy, such reductive biological essentialism represents a worldview wherein one’s reproductive organs dictate gender identity and general being-in-the-world. Her performance art can be read as an attempt to push back against biological essential-



ism and assert her own agency in defining her identity and her body. She writes of her own feelings regarding these performances and her decision to transition as a woman and pursue hormonal therapy: many people think transgender individuals who start to transition “do so on a whim or out of desire, but few understand that there is a need to grow, search for oneself, to reaffirm oneself, of being true and that internally we go through conflicts regarding whether truth is found by means of artifice.”<sup>1</sup>

While Effy does not explicitly reference Judith Butler’s work, her artistic practice enacts much of the critical gender theory Butler explores under the notion of gender’s “performativity.” In *Gender Trouble*, she writes that “the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler, 190). Since Effy is making a conscious decision to proclaim her own identity, performance art is thus an appropriate way to express her experience as a transwoman. The thirteen performances of *You Will Never be a Woman* take place in a variety of public and private settings, ranging from the streets of her hometown to the intimacy of her own bathroom. Each of the performances explores Effy’s experience as a transwoman and utilizes a “menstruation,” i.e. a sample of her blood that is meant to represent her non-existent menstrual cycle. Pictures and descriptions of each performance are posted online. Each is preceded by a deeply personal reflection on the aspect of Effy’s life that inspired the performance. The presentation of the performance—published content made available on the Internet—is also part of Effy’s assertion of her identity as a woman. Due to time constraints, I will only be able to discuss a handful of the performances.

One performance, for example, takes place at a school. Presenting herself as a man while at an assembly of students, she explains to the students and faculty her status as a transgender woman. While in front of the crowd, she puts her hands in her pants to touch her genitals, which are covered with her menstruation. She takes her hand out and shows the blood to the students before declaring, as if during roll call, “My name is Elizabeth Mía Chorubczyk, present.”<sup>2</sup> In this instance, Effy emphasizes her capacity to name herself and her body. Despite having presented as a man for much of her life and despite being born biologically male, she still makes the conscious decision to assert her own sense of self, which includes a public and deliberate announcement.

Another example concerns the performative aesthetic standards of beauty associated with femininity. In order to look more like a woman, Effy un-

dergoes expensive and painful laser hair removal to rid her face of facial hair and any otherwise “masculine” physical attributes. This process upsets Effy, and she reflects on why she is forced to live-up to certain culturally defined notions of femininity: “Why cannot women be beautifully bearded? Why must we submit ourselves to painful treatments or spend money to comply with a socially accepted mandate: beauty, attractiveness, and femininity?”<sup>3</sup> For her performance, she applies her menstruation on her face, like a beauty mask, and pretends to shave her armpits, again using her blood as if it were a cosmetic beauty supply. In this instance, Effy is fully aware of the socially constructed and performative nature of the aspects of gender she is trying to embody. Despite the physical and emotional pain this process causes her, she still feels obligated to publically declare her identity in this manner.

Her final performance takes place in her own bathroom. Completely alone, she stands before a full-length mirror and writes, using her menstruation, “I am always a woman.”<sup>4</sup> Once again, she utilizes her own artistic expression to articulate her own sense of self, which remains in tension with her physical body and the assertion other people make about it.

Again and again, Effy articulates her own struggles as a transgender person through her performance art. As exemplified by these performances, Effy Beth’s *You Will Never be a Woman* explores thematic tension among perception, embodiment, and self.

### *PERFORMANCE AS TRANSFORMATION*

While it is clear how Effy Beth uses her performance art as a vehicle to explore these anthropological tensions, Erika Fisher-Lichte helps us see how this medium is so appropriate for transgender experiences. She describes the aesthetics of performance art as a deliberately transformative event, and this helps to understand further how self for Effy’s work relates to perception and embodiment.

She first asserts that performance art must first be thought of as a happening rather than a usual “object” of analysis. As she writes, the aesthetic valences of performance art lie in their “very nature as an event” (Fischer-Lichte, 36). The author examines the famous piece, *Lips of Thomas*, by Marina Abramović. In the piece, the artist performs a variety of masochistic actions on her body in the presence of an audience, culminating in cutting a five-pointed star in her abdomen with a razor. The work obfuscates

the distinction between subject and object, i.e. observer and observed. For many works of art, subject 1 creates an object 1 to be perceived by subject 2. With performance art, there is no distinction between subject 1 and object 1. As the author writes, “the artist did not produce an artifact but worked on and changed her own body before the eyes of the audience. Instead of a work of art that existed independently of her and the recipients, [Abramović] created an event that involved everyone present.” This means that the relationship between subject and object oscillates during the course of the event itself (17-18).

When analyzing the oscillation between subject and object amid this event type of artistic expression, one must also understand its unique performative valences. Fisher-Lichte unpacks the concept of the performative utterance as described by J.L. Austin, meaning the act of making a claim makes a statement true. For example, saying “I now pronounce you a married couple” during a wedding “does not simply validate a marriage but performs it at the same time” (25). She then connects this concept to the performativity of gender made so famous by Butler to assert how it is crucial “in constituting bodily as well as social identity.” Understanding gender as performative enables individuals to discern their own form of embodiment, even if such activity provokes sanctions for transgressing the definitions of embodiment imposed by society (27-28).

Through interacting with an environment, a performance has a unique capacity to transform the meaning of reality. Consider an example from Hamlet. When the actor who is playing Hamlet walks a few feet across a stage, his act of walking changes the reality implied by the set. This context allows for a new meaning to emerge from the action. As described by Fischer-Lichte, “when the actors move in and through the space, they are actually changing the position of their bodies and with it the performative space” (170). If one were to apply this concept to performance art, the performer engages with the same changing of meaning with everyday objects. The act of performance brings about a heightened state of attention to the spectator, “thus transforming what has been ordinary into components of aesthetic experience” (168).

Through its capacity to reconstitute reality, performance art brings about a transformative experience both for the actor and audience. Fisher-Lichte invokes the term “liminal,” made famous by Victor Turner, in order to describe the space created by performance art. This term denotes an unusual transition phase whereby a change takes place through a ritual. This un-

usual state of transition is, for her, an aesthetic category of the event-like character of performance art (174). Performance art, for Fischer-Lichte can be said to exist on borders, on the threshold of a new way of being-in-the-world. As she writes, “the aesthetics of the performative focuses on art that crosses borders” (203). The uniqueness of thresholds thus marks “possibilities, empowerment, and metamorphosis.” The distinction between borders and thresholds is a matter of perception, for her: “what one person may perceive as an insurmountable borderline might appear to another as an inviting threshold.” The nature of the aesthetics of performance art can be said to be a passage into a new way of being, a transformation (205).

If performance art is a way of reconstituting her own reality, Effy Beth's *You Will Never Be a Woman* is how she articulates her own experience of transition, changing both her own identity and the ideas of those reflecting upon her story and performances. As she writes of her own intentions in pursuing this work:

I was a woman before this, so why externalize my identity? I feel that I ought to connect with my body; I ought to eliminate any distortion, any mask. I ought to experience things that I don't want, because this is about the definition of sex, a following of external consequences and cultures.<sup>5</sup>

The piece reflects her transformation as a woman. Effy is in a “liminal” phase in that she could be said to be caught between the two categories of gender: the biological essentialism she repudiates and the gender identity of her own choosing. She identifies with one yet is constantly told she is another. She acknowledges the socially constructed nature of gender, yet still performs these roles precisely as a means of declaring and embodying her womanhood. The nature of her performance art navigates both the public and the private world, mirroring the struggles she feels with her private identity and her public persona. Above all, the transformative aesthetics or trans-aesthetics of her performance art help to further exemplify how self is intertwined with embodiment and perception.

One may recall that for Rahner theological anthropology is motivated by a desire to live the fully human life. The trans-aesthetics of Effy's work helps to convey the transformation and actualization of the self that takes place during the discernment of not just the identity of transgender individuals but the identity of all human beings seeking self-actualization. Trans-aesthetics conveys the transformative dimensions of a person's self-actualization in becoming fully human before God.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Merleau-Ponty, as claimed earlier, presents an understanding of embodied subjectivity open to transcendence in a Rahnerian sense. This theological anthropology is open to a reciprocal transformative relationship between the world and self. Effy Beth utilizes the trans-aesthetics of her own performance art based on her own capacity to repudiate gender-essentializing categories. Attempts at making normative claims, especially about individuals whose identity lies on repudiating norms, are bound to end in failure. This paper, however, hopes to suggest that examining how perception and embodiment are intertwined with ideas of self may provide space for acknowledging the experiences of transgender individuals within the domain of theological anthropology.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bond, Philip. "Perception: From Modern Painting to the Vision in Christ," In *Radical Orthodoxy: a New Theology*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Chorubczyk, Elizabeth Mía. "Nunca Serás Mujer." <http://nuncaserasmujer.blogspot.com/2011/04/ultima-menstruacion.html>. Apr. 2011. 12 Dec. 2015.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Trans. Saskya Iris Jain. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Fóti, Véronique Marion. *Tracing Expression in Merleau-Ponty: Aesthetics, Philosophy of Biology, and Ontology*. Evanston: Northwestern, 2013.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*. Edited by Thomas Baldwin. London: Routledge, 2004.
- *Sense and Non-Sense*. Trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Evanston: Northwestern, 1964.
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Trans. William V. Dych. New York: Seabury, 1978.
- Rivera, Mayra. *Poetics of the Flesh*. Durham: Duke, 2015.
- Silverman, Hugh J. "Art and Aesthetics." In *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Edited by Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds. Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008.
- 

## ENDNOTE

1. "Muchos creen que las personas que accedemos al mismo lo hacemos por capricho o deseo, pero pocos comprenden que hay una necesidad de crecer, de buscarse, de reafirmarse, de ser verdaderas y que internamente atravesamos conflictos respecto a si la verdad se encuentra mediante el artificio." Translations done by author, with help from Ameilia Bande and Joshua Sales.
2. "Mi nombre es Elizabeth Mía Chorubczyk, Presente."
3. "¿Por qué las mujeres no podemos ser bellamente barbudas? ¿Por qué debemos someternos a tratamientos dolorosos o gastar nuestro dinero en cumplir con un mandato social sobre lo aceptado, la belleza, lo atractivo y lo femenino?"
4. "Siempre soy mujer."
5. "Yo era mujer antes de esto, ¿por qué entonces exteriorizar mi identidad? Siento que debo conectarme con mi cuerpo, debo eliminar cualquier distorsión, cualquier máscara. Debo experimentar cosas que no quiero, porque de eso se trata la definición del sexo, una seguidilla de consecuencias externas y culturales."