



Gender, Body & Sexuality

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*Challenging Gendered Binaries in Contemporary Photographic
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Clinton Glenn & Tal-Or Ben-Choreen

In/Between

Challenging Gendered Binaries in

Contemporary Photographic Practices

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will feature two photographic projects that address questions of gender (in)stability and the male/female binary. Clinton Glenn will first address problems of representation through the work of Montreal-based artist JJ Levine's series *Queer Portraits*. It is Glenn's contention that the work operates on multiple levels, calling into question how the viewer identifies the photographic subject when the strict male/female binary is no longer sufficient. The question of representation – as in who is represented, who is controlling the act of representation, and who are they being represented to – will be addressed. Through a close engagement with *Of Centre* a photographic series by trans* Canadian artist Wynne Neilly, Ben-Choreen will explore issues around the challenges posed to authorship through the act of queering. *Of Centre* documents the construction of queer identity and the means by which authorship is challenged, warped, and constructed within a single image. Queer looking has a long tradition of collecting, frequently combining aspects of camp, or drawing upon shared memory. What makes these interactions different than other forms of collection is in their awareness of their construction. Our presentation will conclude with a brief discussion regarding how our respective work address questions of trans* and queer subjectivity in contemporary photographic practices.

This paper, will examine the work of two Canadian photographers who address issues of queerness and trans* identity through portraiture. First, *Queer Portraits* by the Montreal-based photographer JJ Levine will be explored. This series, produced over a period of nine years, depicts queer individuals in domestic spaces. From there, we argue that the unstable nature of queerness, both an identity label and a deconstructive strategy, reveals the ways in which meaning and representation are constructed in the act of viewing the photographic work of art. Second, through a close engagement with *Of Centre* a photographic series by trans* Canadian artist Wynne Neilly, we investigate the challenges posed to authorship through the act of queering. *Of Centre* documents the construction of queer identity and the means by which authorship is challenged, warped, and constructed

within a single image. This paper explores two different approaches to the visualization of queer communities through photographic portraiture; though their rhetorical strategies differ, they are similar in the means by which they force the active process of identification back onto the viewer.

To begin, it is important to acknowledge the means by which identity labels such as queer, transgender, trans*, as well as personal pronouns are very important to those who use them. Wherever possible we defer to the artists and their subjects in terms of their selected self-identification. We also acknowledge the problematic nature of the term queer, in particular its history of violence and how it has been reclaimed by contemporary activists and in critical scholarship. This paper primarily uses queer as a critical, deconstructive term, one meant to trouble simple sexual and gender dichotomies. As David Halperin notes in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*:

As the very word implies, 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without essence.¹

In effect, queer's discursive power comes from the oppositional stance it takes to the normative. Robin Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson also define queer enquiry in the context critical discourse; they note that many queer scholars including Halperin shared an, "[investment] in queer inquiry as a mode of critical resistance: against conceptual closure, institutional domestication, the predications of identity, and the normativity of political thought."² Queerness enables critiques of facile binaries such as hetero-homo and male-female, while acknowledging that "queer" can also be construed as an identity label that many marginalised individuals take on. Queer can also be positioned in opposition to the homogenising effects of the gay and lesbian movement, which has been normalized and incorporated into the heteronormative framework of neoliberal society. As Judith Halberstam notes in *What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives* "[q]ueer subcultures produce alternative temporalities [...] by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction and death."³ The queer communities that our photographers depict exist within these alternative temporalities.

JJ Levine's *Queer Portraits* is a photographic series shot in Montreal over the course of nine years, from 2006 to 2015. The series features a number of queer and trans* individuals with whom Levine has or had a relationship.

The images are similar in style and content: a subject sits posed in a domestic space, and personal objects are typically on display. The subject looks directly at the camera, their gaze directed towards the photographer, and by extension the viewer, in a confrontational manner. Each work is titled by the name of the sitter: Matthew, Johnny, Harry, Kat, etc.. Together, the photographs represent a sequence through time, one image taken after another, connecting the photographer's practice to the social network in which he resides. As Levine notes: "While this project is a kind of archive of my life and the people in it, it's also a record of the spaces I've inhabited, which set the scene for each portrait. These images document moments past—moments that were created for the camera—yet this is not a documentary project."⁴ This question of documentation and performance is key: the photographs contained in *Queer Portraits* are inherently performative – both through the enactments of subjectivity visualized in each image and through the enactment of identity in the frame of queerness. In the series a number of individuals were photographed multiple times, their physical transformations caught on film.

The link between the private space, in which the subject is positioned, and queerness is made explicit. As Levine notes in his artist statement: "[t]hese settings raise questions regarding private queer space as a realm for the development of community and the expression of genders and sexualities that are often marginalized within the public sphere."⁵ The works foreground the unstable nature of queerness as a signifier: while the images reside within the frame of queerness, they never explicitly acknowledge *how* they are queer. They are also evidence of performativity through the active way the artist positioned his subjects and in the series' title. As art historian Erin Silver notes, the title is inherently ambiguous: "[it] might read as both conservatively taxonomical and subversively performative; it describes little about what makes the portraits 'queer,' leaving it to the viewer to determine where the queerness of the portrait lies."⁶ Rather than explicitly revealing the subjects' queer identities, the viewer is left to contemplate whom it is they are seeing. The subjects are still, fixed in position, yet their identities change and shift depending on the audience. As Levine states: "each viewer brings their own history, context, and imagination into their viewing experience, whether that is one of identification or alienation."⁷

What is particularly important in this series of images is the ways in which they question the act of representation. While each image is a representation of a person, their domestic space, their own queer existence, the linking of queer to the term portraits takes on a much more complex nature. As Peggy Phelan notes in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*: "[r]epresentation is almost always on the side of the one who looks and almost never on the side of the one who is seen."⁸ In effect, while the subjects of these

photos are positioned as being queer, it is the relationship that the viewer has to the photograph that determines how they are understood and how representation is impacted. For queer theorists, queerness has been linked to codes, signs, and signifiers, visible only to those who are in the know and invisible to those who would otherwise threaten their existence. José Esteban Muñoz has taken up the notion of the performative and ephemeral nature of queerness in his text “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts.” As opposed to the concrete and the material of heteronormative existence, for Muñoz, “queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility.”⁹ In effect, queerness is enacted through encoded performances that are to be read by those who are in the know while simultaneously refusing access to those who would seek to destroy its ontological formations.

Picking up on the idea that these performances of gender and sexuality are key to queer existence, curator and artist sol Legault states, “[q]ueer culture has been built around body language and self-presentation, with signs, signals, and the eye honed to register them as queer [...] This is especially true of trans experience, where gender incongruity with the mainstream imposes a practiced attentiveness to not only primary gender cues like clothing, but to posture, movement, language, speech, touch.”¹⁰ Looking at Levine’s *Queer Portraits*, the process of identification is laid bare through this reciprocal relationship between photograph and viewer. Amelia Jones takes up this unstable and temporal nature of queer to argue for a different approach to the visual field through what she terms as queer feminist durationality. This mode is defined as processual, “always already in negotiation and taking place across various modes of subjectification that are *interrelated* such as gender, sexuality, class, race, nation, ethnic, and religious identifications.”¹¹ Rather than focusing on *identity* within the visual frame, she refers to *identification*, specifically through its temporal nature, as a way to interpret objects through a mode that is both subjective and processual. The power of Levine’s *Queer Portraits* lays in its visual rhetoric, one that is focused on questioning simple gender and sexual binaries, while implicating the viewer in the process of identification and representation. The queer portrait, in effect, opens up a space for possibility for the queer subject, one that is relational rather than univocal, dynamic as opposed to static.

In 1969, Michel Foucault’s “What is an Author?” proposed that the role of the author had to be reconsidered in order to free the figure from the social constructions of society.¹² Queer authorship employs multiple theoretical approaches on writing relaying heavily on poststructuralist theorist such as

Jacques Lucan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida.¹³ The queer author both breaks from and affirms traditional notions of authorship, thereby complicating the ease with which a reader may enter the work. For a corpus formed by a queen author exists in several realms at once. Through a close engagement with the work of Canadian Trans* artist Wynne Neilly's series *Of Centre*, this paper explores the means by which participation by the queer community breaks from traditional notions of the author.

Of Centre is a photographic series that documents individuals within the artist's community who identify with masculinity. Produced prior to the artist's transition between 2012-2013, the series explores the way in which masculinity could encompass lesbians/queer women, trans people, and other gender-variant individuals.¹⁴ During the photographic process, the individual was allowed to select the way they were posed for the camera. The result is a typology of bodies documented in different stages of nudity, dress, and physical arrangements. Neilly created a total of sixteen photographs for *Of Centre*, each titled with the identities of the sitter. Here agency is provided for the sitters in the images as their histories are established and documented. Photographs of sitters who did not wish to be associated or outed by the project were titled 'Un-named.' The series has been presented through several different installations. At times, the series has been displayed with accompanying audio-recordings of the sitters in which they describe their personal understanding of 'masculinity.' When viewed online, or displayed as singular images, the audio interviews are stripped from the photographs and the images are left to stand alone.

Aesthetically, the series draws upon the minimal, clean stylization of fashion photography. This allows for the viewer to easily digest the presented pictorial information. The portraits captured against a neutral studio backdrop turn the subject into the compositional elements of the photograph. Such images permit the viewer to receive a lot of information without the complication of contextualizing the presented persons within an environment. Under these conditions, the viewer is invited to scan the bodies on display, latching on only to the details of clothing, tattoos, or exposed skin for interpretation. The images' ascription to the documentary form suggests an authority, a scientific truth, or rather a fact that can be drawn from the objects.

The aesthetics of the images also allow for another interpretation—that of desire. The soft lighting and aesthetic cohesion make the depicted bodies desirable. For is the ultimate purpose of fashion photography not to produce the reaction of desire in its viewers? Therefore, this series allows for different forms of the gaze;¹⁵ and places the photographer's desires and exploration of masculinity onto his audience. The heteronormative gaze

can be queered since a viewer who may not typically desire those who challenge gender norms, or members of the same sex, may do just that through their desire for the photograph's pictorial content.

The activity of queering necessitates "making them strange in order to destabilize our confidence in the relationship of representation to identity, authorship, and behaviour."¹⁶ Therefore, queering authorship directly challenge the authority of a unique individual maker. As such, the author and the work must be able to exist within several contradicting realms, resulting in a complex challenging state for the viewer to interpret. For example, the authority of the author could be challenged by including objects that were not produced by them directly, rather are appropriated from the social sphere. The work could also be produced through audience participation or engagement with the work. In such cases, the place of the author becomes that of the gatherer rather than an original producer. In such cases, the need for the author may be challenged. Authorship in itself, is a form of self-communication which can be entered through the produced work. Such works allows for a record to be produced, producing visibility for communities which are related to the author's experiences. Therefore, once such material becomes active through its placement within the social sphere, it allows for an expansion on different discursive places.

Of Centre demonstrates some qualities of queer authorship. The series, which gathers a collection of images produced of individuals who themselves selected the way in which they would perform for the camera. Here questions can be raised regarding who can lay claim to the authorship of such image. Included in the series is also an image that was not captured by Neilly themselves; yet all the images are credit to Neilly.¹⁷ Judith Butler stated "[p]erformative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power... The performative is thus one domain in which power acts *as* discourse."¹⁸ Therefore, the recorded performances of each of the sitters could be read as in fact a documentation of their self-construction, or their own authorship. In cases such as this, authorship is complicated, as there is unclear line between the author and the sitter as presented in the work itself.

The sitters presented in *Of Centre* provide an example of the way in which members of the queer community produce the queer author. As many individuals in the community are highly sensitive to the careful construction of their identities, photographs of queer people can be seen as documenting shared memory, as Reed and Castiglia stated "cultural identities depend crucially on memory, collective as well as personal."¹⁹ The carefully constructed narratives of each sitter presented through their

selected pose and dress would be easily accessible to members of their community who have the shared knowledge of camp and other social memory signifiers. This mirroring of culture can be seen most clearly in the selection of clothes and tattoos which are used to perform masculinity seen in photographs such as *Wes*, *Liam*, and *Un-named*. In cases such as these, the performances “give the lie to the notion that clothes really make the man, that clothes are in any sense natural or inevitable; they proclaim that the only things clothes are appropriate to is our fantasies of gender and sexuality”²⁰ In the ‘identity markers’ documented in the photographs, “memory is less a register of an actual event or person than a projection of desire for connection, for kinship, for community.”²¹

The community forms another queering of authorship as they collect Neilly’s images imbedding them in various blogs and journals. This can be seen in examples of “Basic Sounds,”²² “1000 woorden per week,”²³ “selectivesight,”²⁴ and “Fake Childhood.”²⁵ Here Neilly’s work becomes part of a collection of a new author. The produced objects reflect a means of expressing the new collector’s visual desires. As Douglas Crimp explained, the objects arranged in queer spaces are often a reflection not only of visual desires but a manifestation of their daily lives. In Crimp’s case, the photographs of boys hanging in his bedroom would come to stand in for the men who pass through his space: these images revealed his homoerotic desires.²⁶ Therefore, queer authorship can be seen as embedded in notions of the closet as objects act as a means of coming out. To cite Michael Camille, “if the nineteenth-century model of collection was the closet, today the spectacular display of the self through objects makes every collector queer.”²⁷ This is because the collected objects act as a means of mirroring the desires of the collector. When made public through a blog, the closeted becomes publicized once more, not through Neilly, but rather through the new author. In this way, queer work can continuously act as a tool of agency as the objects are closeted by a new author through their collection and then outed through the new author’s publication of the work.

When addressed outside the queer community, the press mirrors Neilly’s words by frequently quoting him, producing little new knowledge. In cases such as these, queering authorship does not occur as only a normative author is represented. This is because the narrative is not challenged, engaged with, or morphed in any way. Additionally, the author becomes universalized and the narrative is placed into specific discourses. This can be seen in the coverage of Neilly’s *Female to ‘Male’* exhibition by James Michael Nichols for *The Huffington Post*.²⁸ The news of the exhibition is published targeting a gay audience as made clear in the category “Huffpost Gay Voices.” The address of a ‘gay’ demographic implies that it would be the only one interested in knowing about the work. This treatment however, is

typical of the normative author who must select a singular and specific sphere for the work to reside in. For a discourse to be seen as stable, it must present a united message, a clear teleology; as such, one must stand for the whole, for multiplicity is too dangerous for the authority of the produced object. This is why universality must be established.

Both the works of JJ Levin and Wynne Neilly provide an example of the challenges produced through the recording of queer communities. Each project provides agency to their sitters and produces a record for future generations to consult. Such recorded narratives affirm the existence of the queer community, a crucial step for individual validation. At the same time, these works allow for the gaze of the other and the subjection of the photographed subject. Photographs by their nature encourage cataloguing²⁹ and as such, complicate queerness. As viewers approach a photographic work they search for locators in their known experiences with which to analyse the contents. This process introduces the dangers of enforcing rather than challenging gender binary systems. In addition, producing a record of the queer community may encourage normalization of the queer community, as future generations emulate the past. The artists presented in this paper must constantly battle and balance their voices as individuals and members within several communities. They must also weight the benefits of producing a record of their queer experiences and the implications of such actions.

ENDNOTES

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