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Without Warning

Margins and the mainstream at the New Museum's "Trigger."

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Tschabalala Self, *Mista & Mrs*, 2016. (Courtesy of the New Museum)

Sometimes it happens that you meet someone briefly and then say to yourself, “I want to get to know that person better.” Usually, though, it doesn’t happen. Maybe you’re too shy to follow up. Or the person just inexplicably disappears from the scene. Something similar can happen on a less personal level: You read about someone who strikes your imagination, and you think to yourself, “I must find out more.” But maybe your research leads to a dead end. Or, more likely, you get distracted by other things; your resolution fizzles, and you regret it later.

In 2015, when the Whitney Museum opened its new building in Manhattan’s meatpacking district, among the works that caught my imagination in its first show was Hans Haacke’s notorious conceptual piece *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*. When this collection of photographs and text was originally set to be shown, at the Guggenheim, the museum canceled the show and fired its curator, claiming that this documentation of more than 100 slum properties and their tangled ownership couldn’t be art. After seeing the work at the Whitney, I went to view some of the tenement buildings whose facades Haacke had photographed. A number of those on the Lower East Side, where I lived at the time, had disappeared; some had changed with gentrification; and a few looked pretty much the same as they did in 1971.

I became curious about something that Haacke had bracketed out of his documentary project: the life behind those facades. Who’d lived there? What had their lives been like? When Haacke made the work, it must have seemed self-evident that the slumlords who owned those buildings were ruthless exploiters of their impoverished tenants. But the subsequent upscaling of the neighborhood is unlikely to have dramatically improved the renters’ housing conditions, or those of their children.

Unfortunately, in the time I spent preparing my response to the Whitney show, I wasn't able to find out much about the individual inhabitants of the tenements whose ownership Haacke traced to the Shapolsky organization, but I did find something striking. It was an announcement from 1972: "Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries meet Friday at 6:00 p.m. at Marsha Johnson's, 211 Eldridge Street, New York, N.Y., apt. 3. For information write: S.T.A.R., c/o Marsha Johnson, at the same address. Power to all the people!" I particularly liked that final twist on the famous slogan: not "all power to the people," as the Black Panthers used to proclaim—which seems to imagine the people as unitary—but "power to all the people," which recognizes that the people are many rather than one.

Who was this Marsha P. Johnson, I wondered, whose ideas of power and of the people were so much more forward-looking than most of those in circulation then (and now)? I found out a bit: that she was an activist and drag queen, a fixture on the downtown scene; that she was involved in the great uprising at the Stonewall Inn in 1969; that she died under mysterious circumstances in 1992, when she was just 46 years old. Her death was initially declared a suicide, but later the cause was changed to "undetermined." And that's where my investigation trailed off. There was plenty more information out there, but I had other work to do, other research to follow up on, and Johnson slipped to the back of my mind with a note attached: "I'd like to know more about her."

Luckily for me, I found Johnson again at the New Museum of Contemporary Art's "Trigger: Gender as Tool and Weapon." There, she's both evoked indirectly—in *Street Transvestites 1973* (2015), a banner-like painting by Tuesday Smillie made using "beads, buttons, and bits" and depicting the standard carried by Johnson's group at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade—and represented directly, as the subject of Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel's short film *Lost in the Music* (2017). Played with bewigged aplomb by Mya Taylor, Johnson is introduced in the film as "the saint of Christopher Street" but then comes onstage and recites a poem in which she seems to refuse that label:

*If I wanted to be a saint
I would have died for our sins
Honey, I would be a zombie
I'd have turned my sisters in
If I wanted to be a saint
I would sleep when it was dark
I'd be a loyal to the law
Not the queens in the park*

Johnson's inspiriting defiance is undercut by melancholy—with the weariness brought on by struggle, and a sense of the brutal difficulty of existence. Then there's a final foreshadowing of her death in the Hudson River:

*I'm not sayin' that it's easy
To shine, to love, to twirl
I'm not sayin' it don't hurt
To be awake in this world
But the river keeps on flowing
The water's cool, deep, and blue*

The film cuts briefly to found footage of the real Marsha Johnson, somehow looking more intense, a bit tougher and more serious, than the glamorous figure cut by Taylor. This deliberate underlining of the disparity between performer and subject—or, rather, between Taylor's performance of Johnson and Johnson's performance of herself—poignantly highlights the uneasiness behind even the most confident presentation of self.

If the film's obvious takeaway is about the pain one suffers "to be awake in this world," there's a subtler implication that such wakefulness is not to be found on the right side of the law, but in defiance of the diurnal round and in making common cause with the people whose lives play out in the park, at night, rather than behind closed doors. If there's any truth to that, then we have to wonder, as Taylor's Johnson looks straight out at us from the video: How awake can we be in an art museum?

It's a question posed more bluntly in Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's 2012 video installation *Toxic*—also a reenactment of sorts, and equally concerned with its own theatricality and artifice. Set on a stage filled with potted plants and glittering tinsel—when one of the characters tries to sweep it up, she seems only to spread the mess around—the video ends with a re-creation of a 1985 interview with Jean Genet broadcast on the BBC. But in Boudry and Lorenz's version, the French novelist and playwright is replaced with a nervously smoking drag queen (played by Werner Hirsch). In the original, Genet wonders why the film crew remains silent and unseen, and demands to know why they don't revolt and take his place before the camera—in other words, why do they submit to the illusion? *Toxic*, then, is a clever appropriation and restatement of Genet's message. But then it emerges that for the drag queen, just as for the French writer, being the subject of an interview—far from a desirable sign of status—is more akin to the police interrogations that she experienced as "the thief I was 30 years ago." Hirsch's drag queen finds herself outnumbered: She says she wants to "break the order" of things, explaining, "On one side, there is the norm—the side where you are, and also outside of this room, the producers of this film, the editors, et cetera. And on the other side, there is the margin, where I am.... Yes I am afraid to enter the norm. And if I am annoyed right now, it is because I am in the midst of entering the norm.... But I am not angry against you.... I am angry at myself because I accepted to come here."

For viewers of the video, Hirsch seems to be saying that the norm is where we are as we're watching it—that is, in the museum itself, as well-behaved museumgoers who implicitly accept the order of things. What does it mean that the once and seemingly still subversive gender identities revealed or evoked by the works in “Trigger” are becoming part of the norm? I'd like to see that as progress, but Genet, as channeled by Hirsch, warns me that this too might be an illusion. People who have been pushed to the margins—the gender-nonconforming among them—have had to invent, of necessity, their own worlds, alternative cultures. Can the vitality of these cultures persist when they are, however tentatively, coaxed out of the shadows where they have flourished?

A partial answer to such questions emerges from another of the video works on view: Sharon Hayes's *Ricerche: three* (2013), a 38-minute group interview with some students at Mount Holyoke College. The students make up an ethnically mixed group whose self-identifications range from straight to gay to trans to not sexually active, encompassing all points in between. Straightforwardly shot, *Ricerche: three* seems almost artless, though it also has a specific artistic model: It's an update on Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1965 documentary feature *Comizi d'Amore* (*Love Meetings*), for which he interviewed groups of Italians about their views on love and sex. Some of Hayes's questions are the same as Pasolini's, but of course the answers are different. What emerges from the students' varied responses is the extraordinary diversity—and, in many cases, the happy ambiguity—of the ways that young people claim their sexuality and

identify (or don't identify) their gender. Needless to say, Mount Holyoke students may not be typical of American youth, but if one tries to imagine how different the answers to Hayes's questions would have been in Pasolini's day, there's something heartening in their openness to expressing the differences among themselves without a need to resolve them. "We're talking about different *we's*," says one, and here, at least, it seems that possibly noncongruent identities can be sharpened, rather than worn down, through contact.

■ may be giving the impression that "Trigger" is primarily a video exhibition. In part, my focus on the works by Gossett and Wortzel, Boudry and Lorenz, and Hayes mostly reflects the fact that I found them so striking in themselves. But it also reflects my feeling that all of the words flowing in and out of such pieces make it easier to explain how the show's themes are threaded through them.

Nevertheless, one of the exhibition's strengths is the range of mediums and styles it encompasses:

sculpture, painting, and photography, both representational and abstract, which don't need words to make their point—and those points are in contention. Another of the show's strengths is how it allows the works as much earnest and thoughtful disagreement among themselves as there was among the students in *Ricerche: three*.

In some instances, I was left wondering what the works even had to do with the topic of gender. That's not necessarily a problem: The show asks its viewers to ponder whether gender always has to be something that can be rendered visible. I remember seeing Ulrike Müller's paintings for the first

time at last year's Whitney Biennial. I liked her modest enamel-on-metal abstractions with their blunt, almost graphic patterns and forms that lightly hint at biomorphism without quite indulging in it. But I remember thinking that the Whitney's wall label, which insisted on the paintings as referential to the female body, was way too heavy-handed. By contrast, the labels at the New Museum accord with my experience by allowing whatever referential features may be there to remain at the level of suggestion by focusing on form and process ("Composed along a central axis, each work is charged with a magnetic asymmetry; delineations between colors are blurred in the process of melting the powdered enamel pigment into glass") and by relying on Müller's biography (her work with a genderqueer collective) to prompt viewers to wonder what exactly gender might have to do with what we see in her paintings—if anything at all. That sense of wondering is more powerful than any didactic lesson. The "magnetic asymmetry" between what we can know and what we can only imagine is as powerful as the formal asymmetry that gives Müller's simple compositions their inner dynamism.

More overtly concerned with the female body are the fabric-collage paintings of Tschabalala Self: expressionist images of ecstatic figures pieced together from mismatched parts, like happy Frankenstein monsters. There are echoes in Self's work of a host of (mostly female) midcareer artists, from Nicola Tyson to Wangechi Mutu; but Self's approach to figuration feels more demonstrative, more theatrical than theirs. One always senses that her figures are performing themselves, and this is what, for me, makes it credible to see them in one context with the likes of Marsha Johnson. "My work does not comment on stereotypes and generalizations about the Black female body, my practice absorbs these fantasies," Self has explained. "The work is celebratory because one must thrive despite destructive rhetoric"—restating in her own way a determination "to shine, to love, to twirl" despite the hurts of the world.

Nearly as abstract as Müller's paintings are some photographs, made last year, by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, which venture into a different terrain from the ones I wrote about in these pages not so long ago. These works, each titled *Exposure* followed by a sequence of numbers, appear to be images in which the object has been reduced to little more than a blur—color photographs with all the color drained out. It makes me think of what the poet and theorist Fred Moten, who's been dwelling on the notion of "blur" recently, and who participated in a discussion included in this show's catalog, has called a "radical indistinctness that actually radicalizes singularity." Sepuya's photographs achieve something similar to the blurring of colors that occurs in Müller's enamel paintings where two hues touch—but his blurring seductively invests nearly the whole surface. Each of Sepuya's photographs also contains some kind of cut where a slightly less or differently blurred image shows through, in which one can make out a reflection of the photographer himself at work. In these pictures, the withheld promise—or foiled desire—to stabilize an image that can be identified evokes a fog of longing.

I was so heartened by what I saw in "Trigger" that it's hard for me now to remember that I came to the show a skeptic. It's not that I didn't think gender "beyond the binary" was a timely topic in contemporary art, but rather that the title and subtitle put me off. Have our contemporary feelings about gender drifted so far away from the territory of pleasure and love, I wondered, that we now talk about it using words associated with work and war? Or is that just a problem with the art world?

Fortunately, the title turned out to be a red herring. But it's worth thinking about why the subject turns out to be more than merely topical. In November, the following headline appeared in *The New York Times*: "Danica Roem Wins Virginia Race, Breaking a Barrier for Transgender People." But the story, which told of Roem's election to the State Legislature and her defeat of a vocal opponent of trans rights, also noted, ominously, that "killings of transgender people are on the rise." We live in an age of never-ending wars, metaphorical wars with real bodies in them—on drugs, on

terror, and so forth. Another of these is the so-called culture war—that decades-long, ever-changing, but always paranoid struggle about who gets to make a full claim to American identity. Today, the front lines of this war appear to be at the bathroom door: Who gets to use which one, and why?

But art is something other than journalism and punditry; and while it might seem obvious why artists today would be as exercised about gender issues as anyone else, what takes more explaining is how and why gender lends itself so readily to becoming the substance of works of art. Why is it, in other words, that gender turns out to be much more than one topic, among many others, for artists to consider? Let me put it like this: Art is not a tourist in the realm of gender, but rather a native.

It's worth turning back to Judith Butler's groundbreaking 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, which, as "Trigger" curator Johanna Burton explains in her essay for the exhibition's catalog, "ushered in a seismic shift in discussions of and around gender." Butler convincingly argued that gender is performative, which is to say that "gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts" that produce a "stylization of the body." Or, as Butler explained, it is "a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies," and therefore something that "can be neither true nor false." This is why, as one of Oscar Wilde's characters observed, "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up."

As a performance, as a stylization, as an effect on a body's surface, and above all as something that confutes the distinction between fact and fiction, gender—any formation of it, trans or cis—is fundamentally congruent with art and aesthetics. It is not identical to either, but it is, one might say, proto-artistic, and therefore ripe for artistic handling. And, it might be added, the more original the stylization, the more extreme the effect on the surface, the more profound the blur of nature and artifice, then the more aesthetically charged any performance will be—whether of art or gender. **N**