





Transit Lounge

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Transitioning Normativities: Memory, Bodies, Gender

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Normativities

Norms circulate through contemporary behaviours, texts, frames of interpretation, bodily comportments, dress and codes of acceptability and tolerance. They are rarely escaped—even in sites of subversive expression which, at first glance, appear to be outside a given, dominant norm but really work instead to uphold it, appealing to an ethical demand to be likewise subverted. While the simplicity of nineteenth and twentieth-century frameworks of thinking about norms involved multiple dichotomies (normal/abnormal, masculine/feminine, straight/queer) the regulatory functions of biopolitical power technologies plot the normal and the abnormal along ‘different curves of normality’ whereby certain distributions are considered to be ‘more normal than the others, or at any rate more favorable than the others’¹. What this means is that we are asked—in order to be coherent subjects—in multiple, ostensible and sometimes tacit ways to plot ourselves on a curve in *proximity* to a culturally-given norm. Problematically, it places demands on ourselves that have genuine psychological, social, emotional and corporeal impact on how we are perceived and how we perceive ourselves. Usefully, it allows us to move beyond over-simplified dichotomies and categories to think in possibly more useful, interesting, innovative and complex ways about who we are and how we ‘do’ our identities.

One outcome of this cultural shift in thinking about norms is that it opens the possibilities of thinking things in slightly more subversive and useful ways beyond the assumption that a subject can be encapsulated by one-side-or-the-other in a dichotomy. In the case of gender, it opens the possibility of being outside of both masculinity and femininity, to consider ways in which gender norms can be plotted on a continuum²,

and ways in which we can disavow the norms of masculinity and femininity that appear at the centre of the curve. This, then, is to go beyond about the familiar framework in which norms are made available, and to see the norm as transitional, changeable, transgressive, constructed but not necessarily always constructing ourselves.

The images in this exhibition challenge normativities. Not at all because they are unfamiliar—there is nothing new or startling in drag or transgendered persons (or in the highly complex interweaving of drag culture and transgendered subjectivity across which norms transition). Nor is there an easily-seen set of subversions—in a world decades since *Priscilla* (1994) and the positioning of Sydney’s *Mardi Gras* as a central economic, investor and tourist attraction, the very ideas of a play with gender are not readily able to challenge gender norms. Rather, the challenge to norms emerges in the framing of the *Transit Lounge* series through the positioning of bodies in the context of memory.

Naked

In Kathy Sport’s 2001 video documentary (starring Norrie-May Welby who challenged bureaucracy to recognise ways of performing selfhood outside of dichotomous gendered norms) includes a tongue-in-cheek exchange occurs with a medical practitioner who ends a consultation with the phrase “Fine, thank you, you can put your clothes back on”. More than just the routine of an invasive, constitutive medical examination, the phrase “you can put your clothes back on” points to radical opportunities that sometimes come from thinking about situations of the un-clothed. Physical nakedness is something every subject experiences, but only within particular codified frameworks of acceptability (for example, in the context of being with a lover or partner or any other explicitly-coded sexual situation; in a power-relationship such as parent/child, doctor/patient or warden/prisoner; and in other well-bounded frames such as the locker-room or the nude beach).

However, nakedness points to the momentary possibilities of being outside the normative clothes through which one is defined in terms of gender.

This is not, of course, to say that the naked body without gendered clothes is somehow itself gendered—for the points that draw attention to what is exposed are precisely the parts that are coded as gendered. In Sport's phrasing here, however, we learn two things. Firstly, that naked under the eyes of surveillance is one of the most potent ways in which we normativities are measured, recorded and made fixed. As the doctor puts it: "Fine, thank you". That's fine. That's final. This body is at proximity to norms. But the second point is that the norms that affix to the naked body's bits in a kind of stickiness are not only always messy, but not necessarily in place once the clothes have gone back on. Which clothes? Whose clothes? What is the agency behind the choice of clothes, and in what ways might certain performances of doing gender otherwise allow transitions away from the norms that a naked body might be seen to express?

Transiting Bodies

Queer theorist Cindy Patton once made the point that 'the focus of attention is no longer whether identity is ever not constructed . . . but instead of how to make sense of the always poignant, sometimes hilarious labours of reinvention and renegotiation in new places or re-imagined old ones'³. Naked bodies are as much constructed as the choices of clothing draped upon them (for a performance, for the theatre of drag, for the everydayness of transgression or the everydayness of doing gender in non-normative ways).

Naked bodies themselves are not fixed, but transition, and such transitions are not ever simple cross-overs between two points in a scale but, on the one hand, produce new bodies doing new things in new ways and, on the other, allow us to re-think the body as a gendered body. What is it about a body—clothed

or naked—that is of a fixed gender? Nothing, because bodies themselves transition through various forms of construction, re-invented and re-imagining themselves.

In a recent book, Judith Halberstam challenges us to think differently about both memory and forgetting in order to disrupt the temporal logics that constrain us and tie us to norms⁴. For Halberstam, forgetting change and re-remembering it in new ways can be more important than a drive to capture a body's particular moment—the multiple ways in which we forget and remember and re-remember the very constructedness of the body that transitions and re-invents itself can be the very site at which norms are surreptitiously challenged.

Memory

Memory is central to how we think about ourselves in explicit relation to norms. Memory, however, is no certain thing. Anne Brewster points to the possibility of a poetics of memory that moves us beyond the idea of memory as a repository of stored material of individual and group pasts that can be retrieved⁵. Part of this involves the question of repetition—it is always impossible to repeat or reiterate or re-express a past memorialised event, attitude, stance or expression, because the context has changed even in the passage of a short amount of time. However, repetition of that which is remembered is one of the conditions for how we perform ourselves in the context of our identities. Drag, as Judith Butler has shown, is emblematic of how we do gender as a kind of repetition of cultural discourses and norms that have come before us: 'In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency'⁶. That is, drag as a concept has its usefulness in pointing to the transitory nature of gender as that which emerges at the blurred interfaces of memories, norms and corporeal articulation. This is not to say that a drag performer remembers womanhood, but that in performing a theatrics of memory that is neither retrieved nor

necessarily corporeal, the norms of gender are themselves potentially transitioned by showing that these were never really natural in the first place.

Remembrance, for Butler, is 'attends to the way that history acts now as well as to what opens up within that reiterated history to reclaim the history of the oppressed'⁷. Remembrance through the archive of exhibition here is a way of doing non-normativity at the interface between the memory of cultural tradition and the 'thoughtlessness of oblivion'⁸. The images and installations in the exhibition are demonstrative of the relationship between memory, identity and the subversion of normativities through the concepts of transition. Here, we witness the significant ways in which artists and contributors have captured various manners in which the self is presented not only as transitional (from memory, from norms) but as embodying transition. Still images capture bodies that are prepared for movement, whether that be Rouge or Vonni in costume for a performance, or Malt and Oktavia adjusting entering their costumes for performances which demonstrate not only the transition of the perception of the normative body but draw attention to the transitional nature of selfhood as that which moves in and out of normativities, through spaces codes by different norms and in ways which sometimes pay respect to the subversion of norms unexpectedly.

The title of the exhibition, *Transit Lounge* notes the significance of the airport or port waiting room in which one is both in the liminal space of transition as part of a 'movement towards' or a 'movement away' but, at the same time, can be seated, waiting for transfer, transmission, transgression—a larger transition that comes with the unexpected cultural shifts in how we perceive norms that at times can be glimpsed across this exhibition. How we remember those transitions we glimpse, how we re-articulate memories in impossible ways for our own transitions will be the questions that not only have always been with us, but those that permit transitions in thinking and culture if we remember them as we move away afterwards.

1. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans., Graham Burchell, ed., Michel Senellart, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 63.
2. Terry Threadgold, 'Introduction', eds., Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*, North Sydney, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1990, p. 1.
3. Cindy Patton, 'Introduction', eds., Cindy Patton and Neigro Sanchez-Eppler, *Queer Diasporas: Sexuality on the Move*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 3.
4. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
5. Anne Brewster, 'The Poetics of Memory', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 19(3), 2005, p. 397-402.
6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London & New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 137.
7. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 113.
8. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans., Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books, 2002, p. 144.