A Hidden Gender:
Scrambling Gender Codes

"Darling, what's happened to us?"
Introduction

In the previous essay I explored Lacan’s psycho-analytical concept of “Otherness” which has been appropriated by contemporary photography theorists to explain, in part, individual identity as defined by difference. This comparative “Other” may be the feminine compared to ideals of masculinity, the “Oriental” as deconstructed by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (2003) or the manifestation of racial difference and/or sexual preference as explored contentiously by the alleged homoerotic gaze of Robert Mapplethorpe in his series of statuesque nudes, often featuring muscular black male subjects.

This photographic project focuses almost entirely on the sub-category of gender and explores gender representation (or re-presentation) to the exclusion wherever practical of other Others. This is of course problematic when it comes to sexuality, as gender identity is often closely associated with it, consequently sexuality remains as a subtext throughout.

This paper provides a brief summary of gender as redefined by queer theory. Re-presentation is then illustrated initially using the vehicle of photographic “reportage” regarding female to male cross-dressing and then photographic studies of female subjects of body fitness training and finally a female bodied individual currently undergoing testosterone treatment. The photographic project then concludes with simulations of some of Mapplethorpe’s less controversial images where the male figure has been substituted by female bodied subjects in an effort to remove gender from the aesthetic, or indeed invite critique of this reversion of the subverted gendered subject position: an example perhaps of the female body reclaiming the spectacular.
Gender

When an individual is assessed by the medical profession, initially while still in the womb and certainly when born, gender labelling begins based on a simple observation of physical genital anatomy. In one case the organs are external and evident and in the other child bearing potential is hidden within. If there is any ambiguity a clinical test based on XY or XX chromosomes or a hormonal register can be administered. Biological difference is consequently marked by this widely accepted medical classification system. A very basic issue with the essentialist biological view of gender is that it is complicated by the exceptions, e.g. If *female* is defined as “a person that can give birth” this simplistic view immediately excludes most children, post menopausal women, women with malfunctioning reproductive organs, chaste women etc. This simplistic binary opposition of male/female has been seen by many to be unsatisfactory in a post-modern cultural context: notably by theorist Judith Butler’s radical re-reading of Lacan and in particular in her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and later *Bodies that Matter* (1993) where she introduces her insights into gender performativity driven by Michel Foucault’s observations of power in governance, i.e. a social construction of gender as identity.

Widely accepted ideas of masculine and feminine norms of performance, or behaviours, directly caused by the influence of a patriarchal society (e.g. active v. passive) have been explored and challenged in feminist writings from 1970’s onward and in part formed a foundation for Butler’s reinterpretation within the emerging context of queer theory. Ruth Holiday (in Stanczak, 2007) investigated queer performance of identity in a study carried out between 1998 and 2000 concluding that identity in queer subculture is often constructed deliberately as “texts” on the surface of the body and the level of confidence or discomfort an individual may feel influences how these texts may be read.

Butler accepts that feminist theorists reject the idea that functional anatomy is destiny, but then argues that masculine and feminine genders would still be inescapably associated with “male” and “female” bodies, by virtue of the Foucauldian influence of the patriarchal culture. She then proposes that gender is not a “natural” component or inherently linked to biology, but is entirely performative, i.e. gender identity is the effect (rather than the cause) of our performances.

Interestingly Foucault’s writings often begin with medical or clinical contexts e.g. the example of “The State’s” almost military rule in reaction to the Plague epidemic described in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) illustrating behaviours born of broad autocratic influence.
She further theorises that we come to believe that our performance is real and the “text” written onto the body in terms of clothing, gesture, styling etc. reflects the acting out of established and recognised behaviours as caused by what she describes as the “policing norms and personal relations of a sexist, heterosexual culture”.

**Transvestism**

Cross dressing or “drag” can be seen as a simple performance that can subvert these dominant policing norms. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler addresses issues arising from her first book relating to cross dressing and asks the question:

“How is the notion of discursive resignification linked to... gender parody/impersonation?”

She goes on to explain that, in her view, when gendering occurs it is a compulsory process, an assignment. One subversive function of drag is that it exposes (often by caricaturing) the “mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed” thus possibly robbing them of their power. But Butler goes on to suggest that “drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalisation and re-idealisation of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms” (Butler 1993) i.e. in addition to possibly subverting normative performances, drag could also be seen as an acceptance of gender binary oppositions hence feeding into the hegemonic concept of the “natural” order. To complicate things further, subjective meanings made by the audience of any text (whether it be on the body, a written document or a photographic image) are, of course, often at odds with authorial intention.

Drag is usually thought of as a male presenting as female but also applies to women cross-dressing as men and this is the initial focus of this project.²

Women’s control over representation in this way is not new to photography, in the 1890’s Alice Austin used images to illustrate how she and her friends could “manipulate the semiotics of cultural signs” (Pultz 1995) of clothing, and by painting on facial hair. By donning this masculine costume they were also able to adopt the confidence and authority of men rather than the tender vulnerability coded to more feminine dress.

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² This is a trend currently seen in fashion and commodity advertising. For example the CK One campaign. “Gender plays an important part in how consumers relate to products......One noticeable feature of the CK One campaign is that it seemed to deconstruct this connection - it’s for a man or a woman, after all.” (Shroeder, 2002)
The documentary series of images (pp 3, 4 &5) taken at a Manchester Lesbian Community Project event, (a drag king [as opposed to “queen”] workshop) reveals a performative element of gender portrayal as attention is drawn to components that make up this gender performance. The speaker is seen to substitute the body parts associated with one gender with those associated with the Other (“packing”) and uses a “binding” technique to conceal the breasts which will of course conflict with the intended gender display; essentially she is putting on a costume. In permitting the viewing of this “binding and packing” ritual these photographs allow us to be party to the deception. Following Butler (and Foucault), it makes sense to see the drag costume and consequent presentation as a performance of the masculine gender role as defined by a hetero-normative society, and that the new “Self” he now inhabits is the representation of a man as dictated by society. Hopefully also illustrated photographically is a noticeable change in posture, confidence and authority in this new Self.

The second series of images shows members of the work shop audience who partake in the next part of the transformation process by having artificial facial hair glued to their faces. Despite the fact that some of the participants are more convincing than others (and as Others!) there is a clear message of engagement, enjoyment and acceptance of the liberating process that this scrambling of gender codes facilitates.

The final images in this section show male impersonator Lisa Lesley, well known as an active performer in the Manchester “scene”. He is shown firstly in full drag as “Flirty Bertie” and in contrast, on the facing page, as she presents herself in everyday life.
Transforming

A visibly muscled body symbolises masculine power and physical strength, coding the “naturalness of sexual difference” but also historically the proletarian status of manual labour (Benson S. in Woodward 1997).  

More recently, a powerful physique in both men and women is associated with a positive, healthy, caring attitude and self awareness, symbolizing will power and control. In a post-modern Western society self-discipline is a valued characteristic written on the body as text though the control and management of the corporeal appearance of “self”; the flesh, muscle and bone. These physical attributes can be reshaped through attention to nutrition and exercise and a whole industry has grown to pander to these needs.

Benson, quoting from (and criticising) photographer Trix Rosen’s first book Strong and Sexy (1983) describes female body building as an “epidemic of will” rather than Rosen’s description of a feminist success story where women have subverted the phallic economy by channelling the “raw energy fuelling their belief that they are capable of changing the world” inwardly to “change... the physical body”.

In either case a muscled, masculinised female body is read as athletic, powerful and strong: another example of the scrambling of gender codes and further exposure of the ubiquitous masquerade.

The relevant project images (pp 10 -13) include portraits of Monique, a competitive power lifter and childhood cancer survivor and Mia a personal trainer and fitness model. Mia has adopted further masculine coding by “packing” in this image to further confuse the reading.

3 Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic images complicate this dynamic further by encapsulating subjects whose bodies could then be read as slave labour.
Trans-gender

Biological essentialism and theories of transgression have been eloquently challenged by the insider art of photographer’s like Del La Grace in England and Loren Cameron in America who class themselves as “intersex by design, not diagnosis” (La Grace, 2005), third gender, trans-gender or trans-men. Both have grown facial hair, literally written on their bodies in the form of tattoo art and, particularly in the case of Cameron, trained to develop a muscular physique as shown in the self portraits below.

Intersexuality is a modern activist (and subsequently socio-medical) term used to define people whose biological sex cannot be classified as clearly male or female, i.e. they have characteristics of both. For this project I have featured androgynous female-to-male transsexual model “Boy Kitten” in the final portrait diptych and first two Mapplethorpe simulacra (pp 14 -17) the final images feature fitness model Mia in similar homage (pp 18 & 19)

In summary, current normative definitions of gender are inadequate and should be driven by the individuals sense of belonging (or not) to a particular role type, not a binary medical model. Feminine (and masculine) ideals are actively being challenged by dress, fitness training and transgendered bodies. It is my hope that by taking a diagonal slice through photography using the “everyday” approach of reportage, a mainstream commercial approach to portraiture and simulations of recognised art photography of the body, the irony will reveal in part the inadequacy.
References


