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*Untitled (Too real is this feeling of
make-believe)*

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5/1/2015
Printmaking
Washington University in St. Louis

Abstract: Tucker Pierce works to examine the constructed nature of identity through the act of modifying the surface of his body, the site of all identity expression, and through the strategic crossing of borders, both internally and externally. Using drag and his own body, he crosses the internal boundaries that govern identity expression and then the more physical border between the private and public sphere. He crosses this boundary by taking this modification of his external identity expression into the world at large. On a personal level, this project allows him to engage more completely with his own sense of self, and at a more public level it allows him to expose a crack in the system of gender, something society wants us to perceive as a strict and un-malleable binary and that works to oppress individuals based on what are perceived as inflexible differences. Using the artist's body as an armature for the multiple originals that identity can take the form of, as well as the primary site of identity and identification, he explores the disjunction between his expected performance and the modifications of that expectation that he presents. By upsetting the social contracts that govern all identity expression, *Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe)* reveals the fluidity and self-awareness that can be achieved when one stop taking themselves too seriously.

Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe)

In this project I am working to examine the constructed nature of identity through the act of modifying the surface of my body, the site of all identity expression, and through the strategic crossing of borders, both internally and externally. Using drag and my own body, I cross the internal boundaries that govern identity expression and then the more physical border between the private and public sphere. I am crossing this boundary by taking this modification of my external identity expression into the world at large. On a personal level, this project allows to me engage more completely with my own sense of self, and at a more public level it allows me to expose a crack in the system of gender, something society wants us to perceive as a strict and un-malleable binary and that works to oppress individuals based on what is perceived as inflexible differences.

This project began with the concept of gender performativity as discussed by Judith Butler, a theorist who investigates the construction, development, and performance of gender. Butler writes that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, or a natural sort of being” (Butler, 33). The act of repetition and citation on the physical surface of the body is, for Butler, the essence of identity. This is what I am attempting to make manifest in this work. By repeatedly “stylizing” my body I am altering my identity expression and creating a new sense of being. Society expects a consistent and unchanging performance, something that can be labeled as an individuals “identity,” a mode of being that essentializes and creates a physical locus for one’s self.

Drag subverts the rigidity of identity expression by revealing the performance at its core. Essentially, by “imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Butler, 137). This act of imitation undermines the rules set in place by power systems that argue for the immutability of identity and use this principle to marginalize and exploit people whose identities fall outside of the hegemonic order.

Working under the assumption “that the body is the site on which identity and identification are based and is the medium through which it is experienced” (Smith, 18), manipulating the physical surface of the body and the way in which one presents themselves to the world is tantamount to manipulating identity. In understanding identity as an extended performance, the audience of this performance becomes equally important. In this way “the power to make and assert identity is, at least partly, mutual: one party must actively negotiate identity, and the other party must provide an audience to witness the identity. In that case, neither party possesses or abdicates control” (Smith, 66). The act of witnessing enacts the mental change that accompanies the physical changes occurring on the body. By observing and lending recognition to my performance, the audience is participating, however unwillingly, in my transgressive act.

Drag, by engaging with the artist’s body as the locus for identity expression, works “toward a humanist utopia in which identity boundaries and hierarchies will be leveled; [benefiting] larger communities by disrupting the separatist and discriminatory status quo” (Smith, 17). Drag is a disruptive act that challenges

hierarchical systems put in place by the systems in power. This disruption makes evident the arbitrariness with which the system is constructed.

The disruptive character of drag stems from the contradictions it presents. These contradictions engage with the inherent “Camp” of drag, “[drawing] attention to the artifices employed by artists, constantly [reminding] us that what we are seeing is only a view of life” (Dyer, 115). The Camp sensibility works by drawing attention to the failures of sincere endeavors, exposing the artificiality and performance inherent in the way we see and experience the world.

In understanding Camp, it is important to understand the artifice at the core of all things. Sontag writes, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (Sontag, 56). It is a way of plasticizing the rigid nature of identity and embracing the freedom that comes with not taking oneself so seriously.

Putting too much importance on maintaining the integrity of identity limits mobility within society. Bartlett writes, “If you can’t be authentic (and you can’t), and it doesn’t feel like real life (and it doesn’t), then you can be camp” (Bartlett, 182). Camp sensibility relies on the notion that nothing feels real. By embracing the artificiality and the constructed nature of the world, one is able to see themselves outside the oppressive system in power.

Many drag artists rely on the artificiality of Camp to help cross the boundaries that society imposes on them. Drag embraces artificiality in a way that

does not shy away from Camp, “rather, drag relies on the Camp factor to amplify gender conventions in a parodic way that calls attention to the ‘artifice, exaggeration’ and ‘stylization’ of gender and other identities” (Smith, 15). Drag acts as a parody of gender not to marginalize a specific group, but to call attention the artifices present within the system of gender.

Drag is, at its most essential, an act of border crossing. Daniel Harris writes about his experience with drag:

“I have never felt more myself than when I am in drag, more conscious of the truth than when I am lying. To erase oneself is to know oneself, to recognize one’s boundaries, which are never more heavily patrolled by one’s internal border guards than when one attempts to illegally cross them, eluding the customary surveillance of one’s eternally vigilant immigration and naturalization service” (Harris, xiii).

Societal pressures instill in an individual certain expectations on their body. These rules and regulations become instilled in an individual’s sense of self, become internalized, on account of external influences. By crossing the boundaries that govern gender expression and expectation, a crack in the system is made evident. By manipulating what is consistently taught as immutable, a sense of self-awareness is reached that can only exist outside of societal expectations.

I use drag and my own body to work to expose the artifice within gender and personal performances as well as to disrupt societal perceptions of gender and sexual identity. By crossing the boundaries that society places on my body, I am able to reach a point of greater personal understanding. This work serves as an entrance

in the conversation of *what identity is* and *how it comes to be* as well as exposing the synthetic fibers that bind it together. Using the artist's body as an armature for the multiple originals that identity can take the form of, as well as the primary site of identity and identification, I explore the disjunction between my expected performance and the modifications of that expectation that I present. By upsetting the social contracts that govern all identity expression, *Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe)*¹ reveals the fluidity and self-awareness that can be achieved when you stop taking yourself too seriously.

Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe) exists in two forms: performance and documentation. In this way, the work engages with two distinct and un-overlapping audiences. The performance consists of enacting a physical

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Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe), Tucker Pierce, Color Photography, 2015

change on my body through makeup and costuming and then taking this physical manipulation into the world. The witnessing of this performance, the gaze that I encounter, becomes invaluable in experiencing a definite shift in my identity expression. The drag queen Alaska Thunderfuck 5000 says about her experience with drag that “somewhere while the makeup is happening or somewhere between makeup and hair...there’s something that switches over and I don’t think it’s just drag queens. I think it would happen to anyone who went through the process. You start to see it in the mirror and then it starts to affect your mannerisms” (Alaska Thunderfuck 5000). The self-witnessing that happens in the mirror, the time spent in the transformation process, and the witnessing from other people in a public setting allow for the change in mannerism and mindset.

The documentation of the performance is captured on a disposable camera. I give control of the documentation over to an assistant who goes with me. These pictures serve as both documentation of the performance and as a site of delayed witness. The camera and the act of photographing become important conceptually. They mark the performance as what it is, cluing unsuspecting observers in the secret. It also serves to capture the gaze, serving as a bystander itself.

The snapshot functions as an objective viewer, at once confirming the actions it captures and delaying the experience for the viewer. Time functions differently in different types of photographs. “In the posed photograph time still held its own, because its benevolent collaboration was asked for. But the snapshot flies in the face of time, violates it” (Rim, 41). In violating the rules of time I am able to extend

the life of the character I put on and offer an opportunity to experience the performance for someone unable to witness it.

The particular setting of these photographs is important. They are set in the Midwest, a part of the country that is neither particularly conservative nor liberal, but has this neutrality that lends itself easily to a universal atmosphere.² I also seek out places that lend themselves inherently to camp, places that themselves seem to be pretending.

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Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe), Tucker Pierce, Color Photography, 2015

One particular photo in the series that I feel works most effectively is set in New Town, a suburb with St. Charles, Missouri.³ New Town is a completely artificial community that sprung up in the middle of a cornfield in rural Missouri. Each house is citing a different architectural style and constructed in a way reminiscent of a Disney movie set. This community and this space are engaged in this act of pretending and performing as fully as I am. They are engaging in this campy activity with complete ignorance, unaware of their failure or the performance they are putting on.

Audience for this work is paramount because this witnessing, both delayed and in real time, is what enacts the change most effectively in my identity expression. In considering my audience, there exists “an imaginary (or perhaps

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Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe), Tucker Pierce, Color Photography, 2015

intended) and an actual audience, that is, an ideal audience who the artist imagined would see the performance and a real audience who actually encountered it” (Smith, 19). The performance engages with the real audience while the imagined or intended audience experiences the work through the documentation. The actual ‘art’ of the piece is meant to speak to my intended audience, but the actual audience who happens upon the performance is more important. This audience, Midwestern, suburban, outside a traditional art space, is confronted with the modified identity I am presenting and forced to participate in the negotiation of my identity. ⁴

The work also possesses a third audience, a personal introspective point of view. By manipulating the exterior of a body, an artist is able to “delight in the disjuncture between their own and their assumed identities, because the

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Untitled (Too real is this feeling of make-believe), Tucker Pierce, Color Photography, 2015

performances enable, from a sensuous viewpoint, the embodiment of new identities... [resulting that these] performances were largely solitary affairs and that the greatest impact was realized in the artist's private, intellectual, and psychological life" (Smith, 17). I am able to use this performance as way negotiating my own identity and seeing myself outside of the societal expectations on my body.

There are many artists who actively negotiate their identity in their work. Cindy Sherman in her portraits series works to expose the artifice of identity expression and formation.⁵ "Sherman's...investigation into the construction of

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contemporary identity and the nature of representation is drawn from the unlimited supply of images provided by movies, televisions, magazines, the Internet, and art history” (Respini, 13). Sherman’s practice mimics the process of identity formation in which an individual observes, cites, and performs examples of pre-existing identities and in this way forms a constructed sense of self. Sherman uses her work to create entirely new characters that function on the surface of the body but are not indicators of the artist’s ‘actual’ self.

Adrian Piper in her performance, *Mythic Being*, spent two years going out in drag as her male alter ego over on hundred times.⁶ This performance, in adopting

Untitled #466, Cindy Sherman, Color Photograph, 2008,
http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/cindysherman/lib/uploads/G01A08Untitled-466.2008_large.jpg

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Mythic Being, Adrian Piper, c. 1975 <http://www.ihmefestival.fi/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Piper1973MythicBeingStill10HR-copy.jpg>

the persona of a stereotypical womanizing man, challenges the system that oppresses women like Piper. This piece served as a point of access for Piper, enabling her “to depart from her own learned behavior and to trespass the boundaries of patriarchal heterosexist feminine conventions” (Smith, 63). This element of border crossing, both internal and external is relevant to my practice. In the same way that Piper gains accessibility and movement in her surroundings by trespassing into the space defined by her oppressors, I take my performance into the public sphere. These acts serve as disruptions into the physical and conceptual space of the oppressive culture.

Through repeated performance and exposure Piper is able to create a fully actualized character. Engagement with the audience becomes crucial in Piper’s project, because when constructing identity two parties are necessary. Identity always exists in negotiation between the person performing and the person witnessing. In order for physical changes on the surface of the body to become internalized, some sort of recognition needs to take place.

Nikki S. Lee in her *Projects* series similarly navigates the politics of identity through the observation and citation of pre-existing identities.⁷ Lee investigates different sub groups of American culture and then works to imitate these identities on her body. This project, fittingly, began in the drag queen community. Lee observed and then imitates members of the community in a series of snap shot photos. Lee's observation of and then imitation from a particular cultural reference mimics perfectly the natural formation of identity. Lee's project "serves as proof of the constructedness of identity: if the artist can become anyone she wants, then the boundaries that enclose and separate identities are not as hard and fast as they seem" (Smith, 190). The act of border crossing becomes important symbolically and

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The Seniors Project (26), Nikki S. Lee, fujiflex print, 1999
http://www.tonkonow.com/lee_projects_2.html

metaphorically. Every time a border is crossed, the boundary it establishes becomes less powerful.

Lee presents her work in the form of snapshots. Her emphasis is on the conceptual basis of her work rather than on the physical manifestation of the documentation. Lee works to embrace “the realism and straightforwardness associated with the document” (Smith, 215). This is evident in the handling of her photographs. During each performance Lee hands the camera off to a member of the group, this photographer is not a professional, but serves as the eyes of the performance. This documentation delays the experience of the performance for later experience. These photographs are presented as artifacts, remnants and documentation of what occurred.

Karol Radsiszewski is a gay, Polish artist who plays into stereotypes against the gay community in Eastern Europe in order to dethrone their power. This action has inherent risk and power, because “to critique stereotypes, [artists] must over-perform exaggerated iconographies in order to emphasize how they flatten out and circumscribe the individuals they represent. The taking on, enacting of, and acting out of slippery and complicated icons with one’s own flesh-and-blood body is a worthwhile work because it has the potential, for the practitioner as well as audience, to bring into focus the danger of dismemberment. This labor is treacherous, for it threatens to reinforce iconographies already in place” (Smith, 21). In making work this way, one must consider whether they are reifying or dismantling the system that puts these stereotypes on their identity.

Radziszewski in his project, *Fag Fighters*, plays into the stereotypes placed on the gay community by the Polish government in a Camp way.⁸ His performances, videos, and installations that make up the series appear extremely earnest, real even, on first glance, but on closer inspection the over-the-top-ness and the theatricality of the work emerge. In this project, “Radziszewski intercepts and amplifies the stereotype-based conservative discourse and transforms it into an asocial, anarchic, subversive fantasy” (Radziszewski). In translation and adoption of these conservative stereotypes about the gay community, Radziszewski exposes the incongruity of the performance. When the artist plays into the stereotypes of the

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Fag Fighters, Karol Radziszewski, photo, 2007

<http://www.karolradziszewski.com/index.php?/projects/fag-fighters/>

conservative party and physically manifests their greatest fears, the system in power is weakened by the campy incongruity of the scene.

My body of work advocates for a mode of self-awareness and expression that functions outside of the system in power, even outside of a system of gender. In resisting a strict binary of gender expression, I am complicating this system, expanding the definition of self. The act of border crossing, both externally and internally, becomes a powerful tool in dethroning the seriousness of both gender and personal expressions as well as the hierarchical system imposed on society. I want to work to reveal the intrinsic power and the sense of mobility you can achieve when you stop taking yourself so seriously.

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