

I'LL SHOW YOU MINE IF YOU SHOW ME YOURS: REFUTING TERF RHETORIC WITH  
VAGINA ART

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in Liberal Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

What follows is an examination of a biological body part, the vulva, represented in art and how people of differing sex and gender identities can protest society's notions of normal and abnormal with the same imagery. With the rise in trans exclusionary radical feminism, or gender critical feminism, these feminists argue that feminism is only for the female sex and including other identities like trans women detracts from the movement. My examination of the vulva art that follows demonstrates that despite the biological nature of the imagery and the different identities of the artists that use them, their purposes build onto one another rather than nullify each other's. Thus it is identity that ultimately matters, not biology.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FFS	Facial Feminization Surgery
FGCM	Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
TERF	Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On June 10, 2020, J.K. Rowling published an opinion piece on her website: “J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues.” In this article, Rowling proclaims that she believes “We’re living through the most misogynistic period I’ve experienced” because of “the new trans activism.” She details how women and girls are being silenced because trans activists “are pushing to erode the legal definition of sex and replace it with gender,” so trans women can be in women’s-only spaces, like bathrooms, prisons, and shelters. She also puts forth uncited, anecdotal evidence that some young women “decided to transition after realizing they were same-sex attracted, and that transitioning was partly driven by homophobia, either in society or in their families.” She notes that she may have even been convinced to transition when she was younger, as “the allure of escaping womanhood would have been huge.” Her main reason for speaking out was because of the backlash her and others with similar stances have faced, and because “accusations of TERFery have been sufficient to intimidate many people.”<sup>1</sup>

TERF stands for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist and is a moniker given to those who call themselves gender critical feminists. The term TERF was coined in 2008 by a feminist blogger which some cisgender feminists used to distance themselves from those who would soon call themselves gender critical feminists.<sup>2</sup> Gender critical meaning “that gender is something we should be critical of” as they are weary of a societal transition from sex-focused to gender-

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<sup>1</sup> Rowling, J.K. “J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues.” *J.K. Rowling* (blog), June 10, 2020. <https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/>.

<sup>2</sup> Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History, Second Edition: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*. 2nd edition. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017. Page 311.

focused.<sup>3</sup> Holly Lawford-Smith details in her book, *Gender-Critical Feminism*, that they protest feminist groups and academia that have broadened their definition of feminism to include sexuality, gender identity, racism, and other social justice causes.<sup>4</sup> They do not want feminism to include men (they can be allies), which to them, also means trans women (she refers to trans women as “male people who ‘identify as women’”).<sup>5</sup> Though she is careful to note that they are not actually trans exclusionary because “it includes transmen and not transwomen.”<sup>6</sup> She also notes that gender critical feminism is “a general feminist theory” just that it “currently gives the bulk of its attention to a single issue” because of the “urgency of that issue.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the new verbiage and rise in media attention (due in large part to J.K. Rowling), the supposed issues gender critical feminists are rallying against are hardly new nor revolutionary. Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, published in 1979, makes very similar points. For example, she takes issue with the distinction between sex and gender: “What the word *gender* ultimately achieves is a classification of sex-role oppression as a therapeutic problem, amenable to therapeutic solutions,”<sup>8</sup> sees transitioning as reinforcing “sex-role stereotypes,”<sup>9</sup> and that men are “penetrating” women-only spaces.<sup>10</sup> She even declares that “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” and equates trans women “gain[ing] entrance

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<sup>3</sup> Lawford-Smith, Holly. *Gender-Critical Feminism*. Oxford, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022. Page xii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Pages 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond, Janice G. *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Athene Series. Teachers College Press, 1994. Page 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 70.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 103.

and a dominant position in women's spaces" as rape "because the women involved do not know he is a transsexual and he just does not happen to mention it."<sup>11</sup>

More recent gender critical rhetoric is that they are fighting for their freedom of speech, rallying around people like Maya Forstater who was fired for tweeting people cannot change their biological sex.<sup>12</sup> She lost the case when she sued in 2019 but won in an appeal in 2021. They question why other feminists push them out of discussions, but as Sara Ahmed put it: "When you are asked to provide evidence of your existence, or when you are treated as evidence, your existence is negated. Transphobia and antitrans statements should not be treated as just another viewpoint that we should be free to express at the happy table of diversity. There cannot be a dialogue when some at the table are in effect (or intent on) arguing for the elimination of others at the table."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, vitriol and death threats have been sent to gender critical feminists like J.K. Rowling, which, to them, only proves their point.

What gender critical feminists fail to understand is that trans people are not trying to silence women, they are just trying to live. Fighting over who is "woman" enough to use the restroom, seek shelter from violence, or play a sport makes it so trans people are unable to function safely in a society that is already set up against them. They tout that trans men are just women trying to avoid misogyny, with zero comprehension on how difficult living as an out trans person is, let alone the difficulty of growing up knowing you are trans and hiding it. Many academics, doctors, and activists, both trans and cis, have spoken extensively on this subject.

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond, 104.

<sup>12</sup> Moss, Lauren. "Maya Forstater: Woman Discriminated against over Trans Tweets, Tribunal Rules." *BBC News*, July 6, 2022, sec. UK. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-62061929>.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, Sara. "An Affinity of Hammers." In *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, edited by Susan Stryker and Talia Mae Bettcher, 1st–2nd ed., 3:22–34, 2016. Page 30.

Faika El-Nagashi, an Austrian politician, said after being uninvited to the EuroLesbianCon this year for her gender critical views, “With your decision, you say to lesbians everywhere: There is no space for you here.”<sup>14</sup> This sentiment is echoed by other gender critical feminists. Sheila Jeffreys says, “Transgenderism hurts lesbian communities, which are fractured over the entryism of men who transgender, and the disappearance of their members to the chemically and surgically constructed heterosexuality that transgenderism offers to increasing number of lesbians.”<sup>15</sup> She also claims that queer theory “was devoted from its outset to a form of deconstructionism that disappeared the category ‘woman’ itself.”<sup>16</sup> As another opinion piece that J.K Rowling shared on her Twitter states: “without biological sex, there is no homosexuality.”<sup>17</sup>

So gender critical lesbians and even gay men feel threatened by expanding definitions of gender and sexuality. This is ironic considering how both have treated bisexual people, seeing as “bisexual people may experience discrimination in both heterosexual and gay and lesbian communities, whereby they may be viewed as confused or in denial about their sexual identities; may be viewed as promiscuous and untrustworthy romantic partners; or rendered invisible, particularly when they are assumed to have a monosexual identity based on partner gender.”<sup>18</sup> None of the gender critical sources I have referenced make any noteworthy mention of bisexuals, because bisexuality pokes holes in their theories. Much of their argument for hurting lesbians, besides trans women having a seat at the table, is that women can just avoid sex-discrimination

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<sup>14</sup> El-Nagashi, Faika. Twitter, September 28, 2022. [https://twitter.com/el\\_nagashi/status/1575124199366074368](https://twitter.com/el_nagashi/status/1575124199366074368).

<sup>15</sup> Jeffreys, Sheila. *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. Routledge, 2014. <http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=096db5ee8cc9d623fb2ea3f3493bf3af>. Page 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 42.

<sup>17</sup> Appel, Ben. “The New Homophobia.” Newsweek, April 21, 2022. <https://www.newsweek.com/new-homophobia-opinion-1698969>.

<sup>18</sup> Watson, Laurel B., Sydney K. Morgan, and Raquel Craney. “Bisexual Women’s Discrimination and Mental Health Outcomes: The Roles of Resilience and Collective Action.” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, Bisexual Issues, 5, no. 2 (June 2018): 182–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000272>. Page 182.

or “norms of femininity” by becoming men.<sup>19</sup> If homophobia is so rampant that it is pushing more and more lesbians to become men, would bisexual women exist? Would they not all pretend to be heterosexual instead? If lesbians and bisexual women were able come out of the closet and participate in fighting homophobia thus far, it is doubtful that now would be the time lesbians would prefer transitioning to men than dealing with sexism and homophobia. As a bisexual woman who is assumed lesbian whenever I mention “my partner” in conversation, I find it hard to believe that lesbians are being erased.

This rise in TERF rhetoric in recent years is something I have paid close attention to, as I am married to a trans-masculine nonbinary person. I admire my partner’s strength and courage in being their authentic self. Their family never minded them being gay, but when they came out as trans, they reacted terribly. My partner is misgendered every day by strangers, coworkers, and family, but they do not want to make a fuss, so they pretend it does not matter. Yet it eats them up inside. We plan our days out so that they do not have to use a public restroom, because they do not feel welcome in either gender’s restroom. I can count the number of trans people we know in our city on one hand. There is no collective silencing or erasure of lesbians happening here. For every anecdote and example gender critical feminists come out with to prove what they are arguing, we can do the same. Instead, I want to use the example of vagina art to demonstrate that something tied so closely to biology can still be inclusive of trans and intersex people without simultaneously silencing cis women.

## **Defining Terms**

Before delving into this argument, I first want to distinguish the definitions of certain terms that have evolved over time and how I will be using them. Transgender was first coined

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<sup>19</sup> Lawford-Smith, pages 115-116.

around the 1960s and has meant contradictory things over the years.<sup>20</sup> Transgender and transsexual are two separate terms, with transgender originally referring to a person who wants “to change their social gender in an ongoing way through a change of habitus and gender expression, which perhaps included the use of hormones, but usually not surgery.”<sup>21</sup> Whereas transsexual means “a one-way, one-time, medicalized transition across the gender binary.”<sup>22</sup> Transexual is an older, less-preferred term by the trans community, as it is a more exclusionary and not an umbrella term like transgender is now.<sup>23</sup> The term transsexual can be offensive, as it distinguishes a difference between—and therefore could ascribe a value to—the amount of transition someone has undergone. Some trans women or trans men may not want every sexual reassignment surgery or cannot afford them/safely undergo them, though these circumstances make them no less trans than someone seeking sexual reassignment. Transsexual also adheres to the binary of man and woman, as it refers to someone who undergoes surgery to *be* the gender they were not assigned at birth. As Kate Bornstein says, “When gender is a binary, it’s a battlefield. When you get rid of the binary, gender becomes a playground.”<sup>24</sup>

The trans community today mostly prefers the term transgender, or trans for short, as both are umbrella terms that encompass anyone who does not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, regardless of what that individual has done to change their gender.<sup>25</sup> This notably includes those who identify as nonbinary, a term that “refer[s] to people who do not conform to binary notions of the alignment of sex, gender, gender identity, gender role, gender

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<sup>20</sup> Stryker, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, page 60.

<sup>23</sup> GLAAD. “GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Glossary of Terms - Transgender,” September 9, 2011. <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>.

<sup>24</sup> Drucker, Zackary, and Kate Bornstein. “Gender Is a Playground, Kate Bornstein in Conversation with Zackary Drucker.” In *Future Gender*, by Michael Famighetti, Zackary Drucker, and Aperture Foundation, 24–31. *Aperture* 229, 2017. Page 29.

<sup>25</sup> Stryker, 60.

expression, or gender presentation.”<sup>26</sup> A nonbinary person can either switch between what gender they identify as day to day, feel more masculine/feminine but not enough to wholly identify as one gender, or identify as neither gender. In essence, someone who identifies as nonbinary could have any gender expression and any combination of Hormone Replacement Therapy, sexual reassignment surgeries, or neither. Some nonbinary people use the pronouns they/them rather than she/her or he/him so as not to be gendered in everyday language.

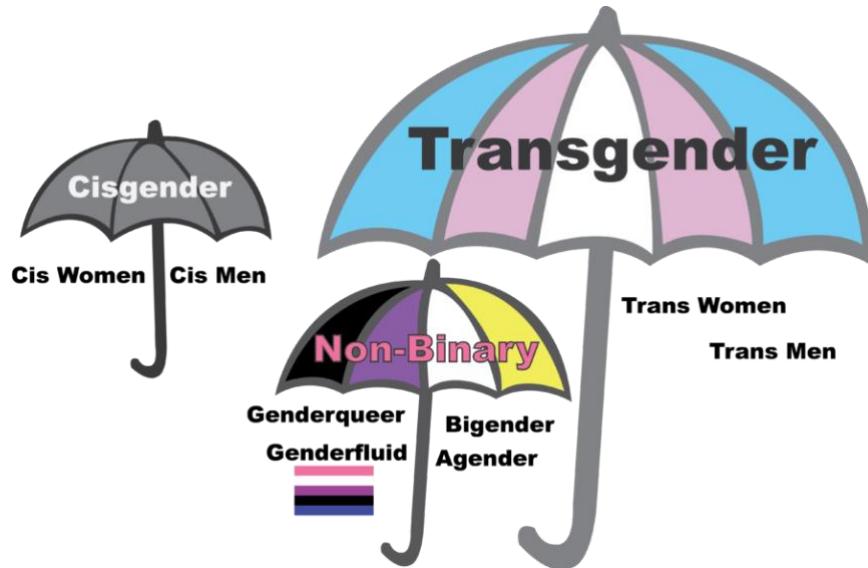


Figure 1.1 Campbell, Kelsey. Simplified of Gender Umbrella Terms in “Plot Me Genderfluid: Quantifying My Queer Self Using 3 Years of Gender Data.” Gayta Science. Accessed December 2021. <https://www.gaytascience.com/plot-me-genderfluid/>.

Another important term that is different from transgender is intersex. To distinguish the two, the difference between gender and sex should be addressed. In simplistic terms, transgender refers to gender, whereas intersex refers to sex. Gender is cultural (man/woman), and sex is biological (male/female). The two are closely associated in culture today, as “Gender is the social organization of bodies into different categories of people,” and this organization is based

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<sup>26</sup> Stryker, 43.

on someone's sex.<sup>27</sup> Sex is often used as "a synonym for genitals;"<sup>28</sup> someone is classified as male if they have a penis or female if they have a vagina. Sex also refers to sex chromosomes, what hormones someone has in their body, and their first and secondary sex characteristics, all of which are "biologically determined" rather than "culturally determined." What gender we are assigned at birth is inextricable with our sex. However, some people are born with genitalia that cannot be immediately classified as a penis or vagina. When someone's biological characteristics (genitalia, hormones, chromosomes, etc.) do not neatly align with all male or all female, they are intersex. As David Rubin puts it, "Intersex is an umbrella term for the myriad characteristics of people born with sexual anatomies that various societies deem to be nonstandard."<sup>29</sup> The *inter-* in intersex means "'among, between, in the midst of,'" which refers to the idea "that intersex embodiment disrupts binary schemas of sex and gender."<sup>30</sup> It is estimated that 1 in 2000 births result in an intersex child, so they are not at all uncommon.<sup>31</sup> Though intersex and transgender are different, intersex people can also identify as trans.

Sex and gender were first distinguished from one another by John Money and his colleagues in 1955 when they were "conducting pioneering research on individuals whose biological sex was ambiguous" (at the time, these individuals were known as hermaphrodites but would now be called intersex).<sup>32</sup> They distinguished between anatomical and physiological makeup, childhood socialization, and psychological characteristics, which they dubbed *gender*

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<sup>27</sup> Stryker, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>29</sup> Rubin, David A. *Intersex Matters: Biomedical Embodiment, Gender Regulation, and Transnational Activism*. 2017. SUNY Series in Queer Politics and Cultures. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. <https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.wichita.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1609048&site=ehost-live>. Page 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Stryker, pages 48-9

<sup>32</sup> Muehlenhard, Charlene L., and Zoe D. Peterson. "Distinguishing Between Sex and Gender: History, Current Conceptualizations, and Implications." *Sex Roles* 64, no. 11 (June 1, 2011): 791–803. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9932-5>. Page 792.

*roles.*<sup>33</sup> They defined gender role as “all those things a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively...Gender role is appraised in relation to the following: general mannerisms, deportment and demeanor; play preferences and recreational interests; spontaneous topics of talk in unprompted conversation and casual comment; content of dreams, daydreams and fantasies; replies to oblique inquiries and projective tests; evidence of erotic practices and, finally, the person’s own replies to direct inquiry.”<sup>34</sup> Mary Crawford in 2006 explained why this distinction was so important: “it enabled psychologists to separate conceptually the social aspects of gender from the biology of sex, and opened the ways to scientifically study of such topics as how children are socialized to conform to their society’s gender rules. Distinguishing sex from gender was an important step in recognizing that biology is not destiny—that many of the apparent differences between women and men might be societally imposed rather than natural or inevitable.”<sup>35</sup> This distinction between sex and gender made it easier to talk about the transgender experience, that just because someone’s biology is male or female does not mean they identify as that gender. This is where gender critical feminists find fault with trans-positive feminists, but separating sex and gender gave also gave feminists language to argue for women’s rights. The gender norms, or as Lawford-Smith called it “norms of femininity,”<sup>36</sup> imposed on us because we are born female have nothing to do with who we really are.

Another distinction to make clear is that of “woman” and “female.” Woman refers to gender presentation and female refers to biological sex. I choose which term to use with care.

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<sup>33</sup> Muehlenhard, 792.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, but the quote was pulled from Money, Joan Hampson, and John Hampson’s article “An examination of some basic sexual concepts: The evidence of human hermaphroditism” 1955, page 302.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 723, but the quote was pulled from Mary Crawford’s *Transformations: Women, gender, and psychology*, page 26.

<sup>36</sup> Lawford-Smith, page 116.

Woman will be used more in this paper, even if it seems grammatically incorrect, so trans women are not excluded. If discussing those born female at birth, that will be made clear.

The following terms will be seen in this paper: cunt, vulva, and vagina. Is there a difference? Cunt was mostly used as a slur until the 1970s with “its attempted rehabilitation in feminist discourse on gendered bodies.”<sup>37</sup> Cunt is most notably used in the text *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1970, “with an all-encompassing goal of empowering women to talk about and to take control of their bodies and general health, including their own sexuality.”<sup>38</sup> This paper will mostly use vulva and vagina, as cunt has somewhat fallen out of fashion.

The difference between “vulva” and “vagina” is an anatomical one, with “vagina” referring to the opening to the internal genitalia and “vulva” referring to all of the female genitalia visible externally. However, most English speakers refer to the entirety of female genitalia as vagina, making no distinction between the internal and external.<sup>39</sup> Some argue that we need to educate and make these distinctions clearer, but Sara Rodrigues cautions making the distinction too literal. She uses vagina interchangeably with vulva as it is “more reflective of the cultural understanding,” to “attempt to preserve diverse language practices, and also to release the vagina from anatomical language and, by extension, from the space and gaze of the clinic.”<sup>40</sup> Thus this paper may use vulva more than vagina, as the artworks examined focus mostly on the visible genitalia, yet the distinction is not emphasized.

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<sup>37</sup> Beirne, Piers. “Animals, Women and Terms of Abuse: Towards a Cultural Etymology of Con(e)y, Cunny, Cunt and C\*nt.” *Critical Criminology* 28, no. 3 (September 2020): 327–49. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-019-09460-w>. Page 343.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, page 344.

<sup>39</sup> Rodrigues, Sara. “From Vaginal Exception to Exceptional Vagina: The Biopolitics of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery.” *Sexualities* 15, no. 7 (December 12, 2012): 778–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460712454073>. Page 780.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## Early Feminist Vulva Art

The 1960s and 1970s saw a rise in women artists focusing on feminist issues in their works. Many of these women artists “would somehow inscribe the female body as a way of staking claim to the role of agent or subject” in response to the centuries of the female body being an object to the majority straight white men comprising the field.<sup>41</sup> Women like Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta, and Judy Chicago used their work to call attention to women’s issues and increasing women representation in the art world. A number of these artists used, with varying degrees of abstraction and realism: the vulva. They created the visage of the vulva so bluntly for a combination of reasons. It was an effort to “de-obscenify” women’s sex and sexuality, to reclaim their bodies from the images male artists created, and to shock. As Maryse Holder wrote of the large amounts of cunt artworks on exhibit in 1973: “This aggressive presentation of the cunt is a first step at self-definition.”<sup>42</sup>

Two women artists who brought attention to vulva art in the 1970s were Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro when they co-authored “Female Imagery” in the *Womanspace Journal* in 1973. In this article, they compiled and praised past and present women artists who used “female imagery” regardless of their intention.<sup>43</sup> They used this motif of the central core as “evidence that many women artists have a defined central orifice whose formal organization is often a metaphor for a woman’s body.”<sup>44</sup> This could be a tunnel, cavernous landscapes, ovals, voids, and more.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Chave, Anna C. “‘Is This Good for Vulva?’ Female Genitalia in Contemporary Art.” In *The Visible Vagina*, by Francis M. Naumann and David Nolan, 7–27. New York: Francis M. Naumann Fine Art and David Nolan Gallery, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Holder, Maryse. “Another Cuntree: At Last, a Mainstream Female Art Movement.” *Off Our Backs* 3, no. 10 (1973): 11–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25783669>. Page 12.

<sup>43</sup> Borzello, Frances. “An Art History Sit-in: ‘The Dinner Party’ in Its Artistic Context.” In *The Dinner Party: Restoring Women to History*, by Judy Chicago. New York: Monacelli Press, 2014. E-book.

<sup>44</sup> Chicago, Judy, and Miriam Schapiro. “Female Imagery.” *Womanspace* 1 (1973): 4–17. Page 11.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pages 11 and 13-14.

This article heavily cites Georgia O'Keefe's work, and O'Keefe is still widely known today for her flower paintings that resemble vulvas, yet "she hated the idea."<sup>46</sup>

To Chicago and other women artists who used the central core imagery purposefully, they saw that women faced discrimination because of their vaginas and it was inextricably a part of their identity: "I wanted to express what it was like to be organized around a central core, my vagina, that which made me a woman."<sup>47</sup> Rather than conforming to what was popular in the male-dominated art world, they embraced their vaginas as their identity and blazoned it in others' faces, taking this taboo, erotic, naughty object that only men were able to gaze upon in intimate quarters, and put it out for everybody to see. Making artwork with blatant central core imagery was a celebration, a rallying point for these feminist artists, a chance to use "a symbolic arena where she establishes her sense of personal, sexual identity."<sup>48</sup> Jane F. Gerhard notes: "Women as vagina-bearing people faced discrimination externally (legally, economically, socially, sexually) and diminishment internally or psychologically by patriarchy, not only or not just by individual men. Chicago, a heterosexual radical feminist, embraced separatism as a strategy, not a solution, and always harnessed her feminism to a larger humanism."<sup>49</sup>

One of the most common critiques of this concept of "central core" artworks—with Chicago's *The Dinner Party* as the most common example—is that this focus on vulval, "central core" imagery is essentialist. This concept was brought about in the 1980s by poststructuralist feminists like Griselda Pollock and Lisa Tickner.<sup>50</sup> Critics acknowledged that "Women, feminist

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<sup>46</sup> Borzello. E-book.

<sup>47</sup>Gerhard, Jane F. *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2013. Pages 4-5. Quote pulled from Chicago's 1975 memoir, *Through The Flower*

<sup>48</sup> Chicago and Shapiro, page 11.

<sup>49</sup> Gerhard, 5.

<sup>50</sup>Jones, Amelia. "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories." In *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, by Laura Cottingham and Amelia Jones, 22–38. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996. Page 24.

or otherwise, may well feel affirmed by such work, recognizing the way it confronts their oppression by exposing hitherto hidden, repressed or censored aspects of their lives.”<sup>51</sup> However, women are not the only viewers of central core artworks, and their meanings “are easily retrieved and co-opted by a male culture because they do not rupture radically meanings and connotations of woman in art as body, as sexual, as nature, as object for male possession.”<sup>52</sup>



Figure 1.2 Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 × 576 inches. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation.

[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner\\_party/](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/)

<sup>51</sup> Parker, Rozsika, and Griselda Pollock. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. Page 130.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1.3 Judy Chicago, *Virginia Woolf Place Setting*, 1974-1979. Porcelain with overglaze enamel (China paint), 14 3/16 x 14 1/2 x 4 3/8 inches. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of The Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/166102>

Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker criticized Chicago's *The Dinner Party* for tying women to their bodies and opening those bodies up for exploitation. This criticism has some merit, as Judy Chicago's feminist standpoint comes from universal womanhood, or the idea that the patriarchy's discrimination unites all women. As Amelia Jones succinctly summarizes: "While some feminists, especially women of color and lesbians, debated at length the issues of race and sexual orientation in the 1970s, these were often implicitly marginalized by feminists such as Chicago, who saw as paramount the formation of a unified coalition of women to fight patriarchy. At the time, because of the pressing need to articulate a cohesive feminist point of view, women's oppression was generally viewed (especially by white feminists) in isolation from other discriminatory structures, such as racism."<sup>53</sup> The idea of unified womanhood, that Chicago was debatably the most visible proponent, does not take other identities into account—such as race, sexuality, and class—and, as a result, puts forth a feminism that is only for white,

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<sup>53</sup> Jones, 35.

cisgendered,<sup>54</sup> heterosexual, middle- and upper-class women. This critique of radical feminism in the 1970s is the same critique of gender critical feminists today, who argue that “gender critical feminism is *not*, and need not be, intersectional” and “the focus is and should be on sex-based oppression, there is no further hierarchy between women *that is of relevance to the feminist movement.*”<sup>55</sup> If we do not strive to keep other disparities in mind, the only people feminism will serve is the most privileged of women.

This relates to another equally important criticism of *The Dinner Party*: very few women of color are in the artwork. The only women of color are Hatshepsut, Sacagawea, and Sojourner Truth, three out of 39 place settings. In a review of the exhibition, “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985,” Ester Allen relates it to *The Dinner Party*, which is on permanent display at the same museum: “*The Dinner Party* proposes an elite women’s academy... It’s now quite hard to keep from noticing that none of the thirty-nine Great Women granted a place at Chicago’s elaborate table is from Spain, Portugal, or any of the empires’ former colonies in the Americas. Among those excluded by this symbolic history of women in Western civilization are La Malinche, Santa Teresa de Ávila, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Gabriela Mistral, Frida Kahlo, Clarice Lispector, and so on.”<sup>56</sup> Judy Chicago responded to this review, stating that all but one of the women Allen listed are on the Heritage Floor. She notes that the research for *The Dinner Party* was done by an untrained team, scouring forgotten books for mentions of women and that their research opened “up scholarship on some of the very women she references, and for others, it remains the sole source of information.” Chicago and her team’s work was indeed

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<sup>54</sup> I include cisgendered here even though this is a relatively new term as I think it is important to note that these conversations on intersexuality did not include trans women; a cis woman is always implied.

<sup>55</sup> Lawford-Smith, page 58 and 59.

<sup>56</sup> Allen, Esther. “Returning the Gaze, with a Vengeance” The New York Review of Books. Accessed October 11, 2020. <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/07/08/returning-the-gaze-with-a-vengeance/>.

groundbreaking for the time, and it would be interesting to explore how she chose who received place settings and whom she inscribed on the floor. Chicago also finishes the response with, “How unfortunate that women continue to feel the need to denigrate the work of their foremothers in order to acknowledge more contemporary contributions. We need to *build* upon each other’s achievements if we are ever to break the cycle of erasure that I tried to overcome through *The Dinner Party*.<sup>57</sup>

This concept of *building* that Chicago put forth is where I see a divergence between Judy Chicago and gender critical feminists. Chicago acknowledges that contemporary contributions are needed in feminism, contributions like race, class, and sexuality disparities. This does not negate her own, more essentialist work but adds depth. Gender critical feminists fear the evolving definitions of gender and sex, thinking that it is demolishing womanhood. It is not demolishing womanhood but evolving it, building on it, expanding it and its possibilities for a richer, more nuanced, and inclusive movement that includes cis women just as much as trans women.

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<sup>57</sup> Chicago, Judy. “A Place at the Table: An Exchange | Reply to Esther Allen.” The New York Review of Books. Accessed October 11, 2020. <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/07/11/a-place-at-the-table-an-exchange/>.

## CHAPTER 2

### CIS WOMEN AND VAGINAL SURGERIES

The vagina is historically tied up in the medical field, from the invention of gynecology and the ousting of midwives delivering babies, to who is allowed to view the vagina. Though Chicago and other feminist artists in the 1970s had the primary goal of increasing the visibility and rights of women and women artists, their use of vulval imagery was also important to the general population of (straight) women who had never seen another vagina outside of their own. Until then, the only images of the vagina were in pornography made for men or in medical textbooks, also predominately for men. The medical field was created by and remains a patriarchal power that predominantly serves white, cis, straight men. Multiple contemporary artists after this initial wave of feminist vagina art have used the imagery of vulvas to show such medical trauma, whether historical or contemporary. Two examples of such work will be examined here.

#### **The History of Gynecology**

Born in Kenya, schooled in Wales, and now based in New York, Wangechi Mutu is primarily a collage artist who explores issues like colonialism, ritual, the Western perception of Africa as “primitive,” and the “eroticization of the black female body.”<sup>58</sup> Her collages combine images from various sources, from *National Geographic* to porn magazines, and often create jarringly graphic beings and faces. Rather than using the vulva to celebrate womanhood, Mutu uses the imagery to memorialize trauma slave women faced in the development of gynecology. Mutu’s series, the *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*, done from 2004-2005, uses old gynecological textbook images as the focal point to create unsettling collages of black

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<sup>58</sup> Schoonmaker, Trevor. “A Fantastic Journey.” In *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, by Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 21-47. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. Page 21.

women's faces. Each work from the series is named after the condition depicted on the page: *Complete Prolapsus of the Uterus*, *Ectopic Pregnancy*, *Uterine Catarrh*, and more. Mutu herself explains: "The title is usually a pragmatic afterthought, or hewn out of another title—it's crafted out of a bigger idea that comes from the attempt to complete a body of work. It's less about something personal and internal and more about trying to make sense of a body of work and the reason for doing it and a way to tie it together."<sup>59</sup> Rather than a frilly title for the mystical faces in these works, she ensures the viewer is aware of the work's roots, the page it is based on, and the medical condition shown.

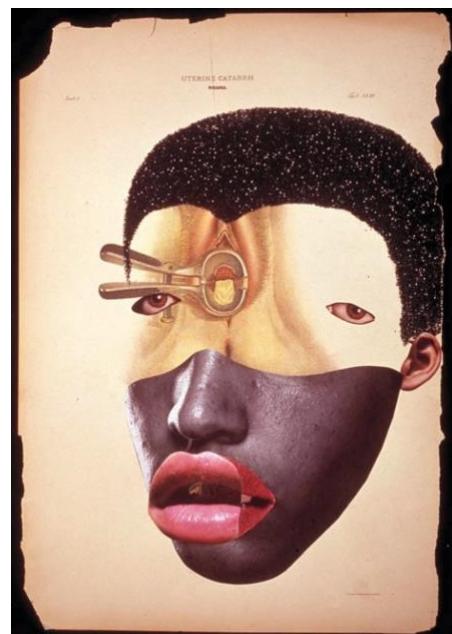


Figure 2.1 Wangechi Mutu, *Uterine Catarrh*, from *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* series, 2004-5. Mixed media drawing (glitter, ink, fur, collage, and other materials on found medical illustration paper), 18.11 x 12.2 inches when all 12 prints are displayed together.

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern One).

<https://www.charlessaatchi.com/artworks/uterine-catarrh/>

<sup>59</sup> Mutu, Wangechi, and Trevor Schoonmaker. "A Conversation." In *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, by Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 95–117. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

In her work *Uterine Catarrh*, the textbook image Mutu uses has a disembodied woman's vagina spread open by a floating speculum so the viewer can see the uterine catarrh, which is a condition of a buildup of fluids in the vagina. Mutu collages glossy images from porn magazines, fabric, fluids, and more to create a superimposed face on top of this image, with eyes on either side of the vagina, making the speculum-spread opening appear like a third eye.<sup>60</sup> Black sparkly fabric above the vulva acts as hair (both hair for the head of the face and pubic hair for the vulva), and the lower half of a black woman's face with separate, much larger pink lips to complete the face. All three "eyes" gaze out at the viewer, the image no longer a vagina splayed open for the medical gaze but one of confrontation, of discomfort for the viewer.

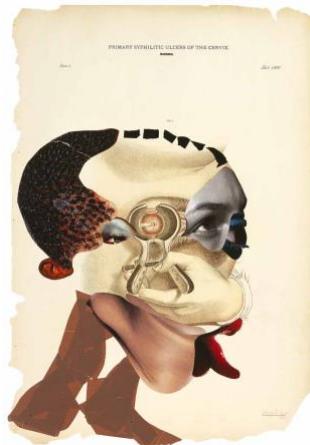


Figure 2.2 Wangechi Mutu, *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, from *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* series, 2004-5. Mixed media drawing (glitter, ink, fur, collage, and other materials on found medical illustration paper), 18.11 x 12.2 inches when all 12 prints are displayed together. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Modern One).

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/wangechi-mutu-histology-different-classes-uterine-tumors>

<sup>60</sup> Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Organs of War: Measurement and Ecologies of Dematerialization in Wangechi Mutu's Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*. Messy Studio. Webinar: TBA21-Academy. Accessed December 11, 2021. <https://ocean-archive.org/view/1310>.

Wangechi Mutu's choice to use old gynecological textbook pages to construct her collages of black women's faces is significant, as the history of gynecology is a racist one. Dr. J Marion Sims (1813-1883) is often considered the father of gynecology, as he developed a cure for vesicovaginal fistulas—when the wall separating the bladder and vagina ruptures during labor—and he developed the speculum.<sup>61</sup> Dr. Sims was able to find a cure for vesicovaginal fistulas by operating on slave women repeatedly until he was successful. His first successful surgery was on a woman named Anarcha, and it was her thirtieth surgery.<sup>62</sup> This single example was not unique during that time; Harriet Washington explains, "Dangerous, involuntary, and nontherapeutic experimentation upon African Americans has been practiced widely and documented extensively at least since the eighteenth century."<sup>63</sup> This extra attention by abusive medical experimenters cannot be argued to have helped the black community today, where the maternal mortality rate for black women is 3 to 4 times higher than that of white women,<sup>64</sup> and the death rates of black women diagnosed with breast cancer are 40% higher than diagnosed white women.<sup>65</sup> In essence, the medical field has advanced through the experimentation and mistreatment of black women's bodies, and contemporary black women have had much less benefit from it than white women.

Mutu's use of collage as her medium—a medium that cuts, that separates and disjoins, then forcibly fuses together—is an inherently violent medium: "by assembling new imagery out

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<sup>61</sup> Andrei, Amanda. "James Marion Sims (1813-1883)." In *The Embryo Project Encyclopedia*. Arizona State University. School of Life Sciences, April 8, 2013. <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/james-marion-sims-1813-1883>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Washington, Harriet A. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. Illustrated edition. New York: Anchor, 2008. Ebook. Introduction.

<sup>64</sup> Krisberg, Kim. "Maternal Death Rates High for Black Women." *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 10 (October 2019): 1311. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305305>.

<sup>65</sup> DeSantis, Carol E., Jiemin Ma, Mia M. Gaudet, Lisa A. Newman, Kimberly D. Miller, Ann Goding Sauer, Ahmedin Jemal, and Rebecca L. Siegel. "Breast Cancer Statistics, 2019." *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians* 69, no. 6 (October 2, 2019): 438–51. <https://doi.org/10.3322/caac.21583>.

of disparate parts, Mutu brings traumatic dissociation to the surface, making her art a veritable metonymy of pain sufficient to testify to ‘cultures of trauma.’”<sup>66</sup> By collaging on top of medical images of the vulva, Mutu conveys the historical trauma of black women’s experiences with the medical field, specifically that of gynecology.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson makes the connection between Mutu’s combination of faces and genitalia to Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman’s book *Against the Closet: Identity, Political Longing, and the Black Figuration*. In this book, Abdur-Rahman points out the conflation of a black woman’s face and genitalia by sociologist Charles Herbert Stember in the 1970s. He claimed that white women’s faces are “more attractive because in Western culture women’s sexual desirability is indexed by a representative disjunction between the female face and female sex organs.”<sup>67</sup> Abdur-Rahman references Stember’s quote from his book, *Sexual Racism*: “It is not alone her skin color...conceivably associated with the color of excrement, but her thick lips and wide nostrils, suggesting the vulva itself. The hair of the black woman as well is in its texture much like pubic hair, and carries the same association. The black woman, in other words, projects her face, hair, and skin—her upper half—the explicit image of her lower half.”<sup>68</sup> According to Abdur-Rahman, claiming that a black woman’s “upper” half reflects her “lower half” causes black women to be “wholly genitalized, visualized here as manifestly sexual and debased.”<sup>69</sup> Stereotyped assumptions of black women’s vulvas were also prevalent: “Sexologists and medical scientists alleged that supposed genital irregularities (e.g., enlarged labia or an elongated clitoris) that predisposed white lesbians and prostitutes to sexual deviance were standard features of black

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<sup>66</sup> Stiles, Kristine. “Wengechi Mutu’s Family Tree.” In *Wengechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, by Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 51–79. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. Page 72.

<sup>67</sup> Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah. *Against the Closet: Identity, Political Longing, and Black Figuration*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

<http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=b9de151f532b92ae1d1985f135f1fb31>. Page 12.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, page 13.

women's sexual organs." The supposed fact that white lesbians and prostitutes had a genetic difference similar to that of black women was how sexologists could argue that they were deviant, as black women were considered "the archetypes of sexual deviance."<sup>70</sup> Jackson and Abdur-Rahman point out that this negativity stems from a racist assumption of black women's genitalia. The pages of this old gynecological textbook have images of what appear to be white women's vulvas. Mutu's blending of white and black serves to remind us of who were sacrifices for these developments and who is actually represented within medical textbooks as "normal."

Despite Mutu's focus on black women, this does not detract from her feminist standpoint in the work. The effects of this negative view of larger labia and longer clitorises affect all women, just as the roots of the medical field originating in discrimination is a concern for all marginalized communities.

### Vaginoplasties

A theorist who notably builds onto the ideas of 1980s poststructuralism is Donna Haraway, whose "Cyborg Manifesto," was published in 1991. In the 1970s, feminism was all about the female body, eschewing technology as a male-dominated field. They emphasized what they saw as their only separation from men: their genitals. More than emphasizing their body and vulvas, they also focused on the woman as goddess, mother, and nature. This focus on nature as woman and technology as man-made is where Donna Haraway begins her argument in the "Cyborg Manifesto," in "an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a post-modernist, non-naturalist mode."<sup>71</sup> To Haraway, technology is already within us—think of bifocals and the birth control pill—so why try to distinguish between the two when we are

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<sup>70</sup> Abdur-Rahman, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Haraway, Donna J., and Bruce and Elizabeth Dunlevie Professor Cary Wolfe. "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *Manifestly Haraway*, 1 edition. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2016. Page 7.

already combined. She uses the concept of the cyborg to break down binary distinctions between humans and animals, humans and machines, the physical and the nonphysical. She is critical of the feminists that put their entire focus on womanhood: “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women.”<sup>72</sup> The powers of patriarchy and colonialism created labels like “male” and “female.” To hold tight to those labels only continues to feed into the preexisting hegemonic discourse by making us exclusionary rather than revolutionary. The feminism that essentializes being a woman by trying to unify all women will lead to nowhere. Haraway uses the cyborg to break binaries, point out the intricacies of identity and identifiers, and encourage feminists to utilize science and technology for “fresh sources of analysis and political action.”<sup>73</sup> Not only is the cyborg a tool in this way, but feminists can also become or embody the cyborg in their writings and activism to rewrite “the texts of their bodies and societies.”<sup>74</sup>

Sadie Plant, heavily influenced by Haraway’s Manifesto, coined the term cyberfeminism in 1994.<sup>75</sup> It is similar to poststructuralism with a technological bent. There is no singular definition of cyberfeminism. In fact, its participants wrote “the 100 anti-theses—definitions of what cyberfeminism is not.”<sup>76</sup> Despite deriving from poststructuralist feminism and Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” which are both critical of a focus on womanhood, many cyberfeminists focused on creating women-only spaces on the internet, seeing the internet as a potential utopia with new languages and images free of patriarchal influence and control. So early cyberfeminists were most similar to 1970s feminism, focusing on globalized (white) womanhood, despite the

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<sup>72</sup> Haraway, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>75</sup> Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. Verso, 2020. Page 32

<sup>76</sup> Fernandez, Maria, and Faith Wilding. “Situating Cyberfeminisms.” In *Domain Errors!: Cyberfeminist Practices*, edited by Michelle M. Wright, 17–28. New York: Autonomedia, 2003. Page 18.

1990s seeing a rise in what one might call “third-wave,” with a more prominent Black and transnational feminism focus.<sup>77</sup>

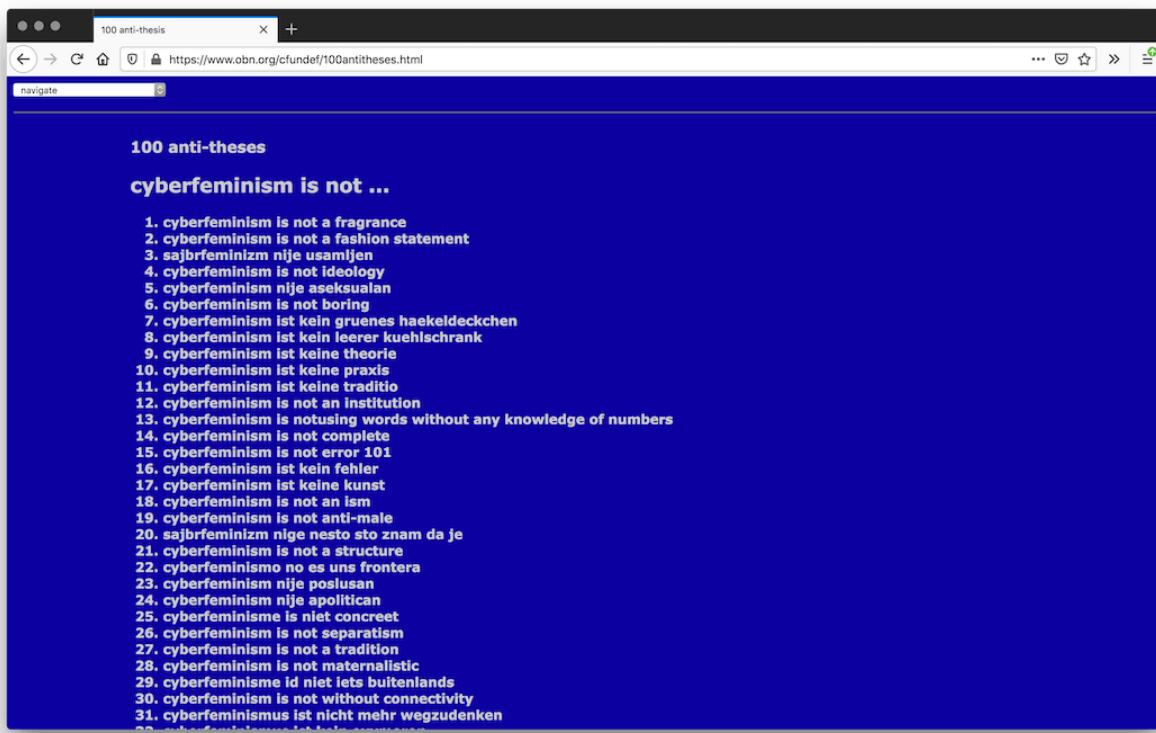


Figure 2.3 Old Boys Network, *100 Anti-Theses*, 1997. In “Sharing as Survival: Mindy Seu on the *Cyberfeminism Index*” by Marie Hoejlund, *The Gradient*, November 9, 2020.

<https://walkerart.org/magazine/sharing-as-survival-mindy-seu-cyberfeminism-index>

Later cyberfeminists saw the threat of patriarchal technology, yet they believed technology could be a tool to fight back by creating online collectives and educating fellow women. They focused less on the idea that the Web could be a utopic space of gender equality and more on the Web enabling broader access to information on who was being affected by new technologies. subRosa was such a group, proposing “activist cyberfeminism to take the lead in critiquing Net-culture and politics, and challenging Net-practices through tactical texts, artworks,

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<sup>77</sup> Russell, page 31.

and contestational projects.”<sup>78</sup> Originally a reading group, subRosa began its artistic endeavors in 2000 as a “cyberfeminist collective of cultural producers whose practice creates discourse and experiential knowledge about the intersections of information and biotechnologies in women’s lives, work, and bodies.”<sup>79</sup> One of its most active members is Faith Wilding, who also worked alongside Judy Chicago in her Fresno group in the 1970s.

subRosa took a more Marxist stance in their cyberfeminist practices, as they were critical of capitalism and its “compulsory two-gendered, nuclear family system.” This system ensures domesticated (female) labor and enables worker (male) labor to continue, literally putting the onus of capital onto women’s bodies. More so than domestic labor, women create laborers, so as capitalism reigns and technology increases, controlling women’s bodies regarding reproduction is crucial to keeping the capitalist system afloat. These issues were of primary interest to subRosa, and their artworks focused on things such as Assisted Reproductive Technologies, eugenics, and “cyborgification of women’s (mothers’) bodies through medical surveillance and control of fertility and reproduction.”<sup>80</sup>

A ten minute video artwork created in 2000 by subRosa, *Vulva De/ReConstructa*, explores the trend of “vaginal rejuvenation” or “designer laser vaginoplasty.”<sup>81</sup> These kitschy terms refer to labiaplasties and vaginoplasties, or female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS).<sup>82</sup> A vaginoplasty<sup>83</sup> is a surgery “that aims to ‘tighten up’ a vagina that’s become slack or loose from

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<sup>78</sup> Fernandez and Wilding, page 24.

<sup>79</sup> subRosa. “Common Knowledge and Political Love.” In *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*, edited by Beatriz Da Costa and Kavita Philip, 221–42. MIT Press, 2010. Page 221.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 221 and 227.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>82</sup> Rodrigues, page 778.

<sup>83</sup> Vaginoplasty today also refers to building a vagina out of a penis for Male-to-Female gender affirming surgery.

vaginal childbirth or aging”<sup>84</sup> and is perhaps the only cosmetic procedure performed internally.<sup>85</sup> A labiaplasty is “plastic surgery on the labia” and can be performed on the labia majora or labia minora, “typically making them smaller or correcting an asymmetry between them.”<sup>86</sup> As Sara Rodrigues summarizes: “vaginoplasty purports to ‘enhance’ sexual ‘function’ whereas labiaplasty aims to ‘enhance’ vulval appearance.”<sup>87</sup> These surgeries are cosmetic, or surgeries that alter the “aesthetics of essentially normal anatomy.”<sup>88</sup> In the journal *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, they say that “Female genital cosmetic surgery is becoming more and more widespread both in the field of plastic and gynecological surgery” with reducing the labia minora being “one of the most common female genital surgeries performed today.”<sup>89</sup> The popularization of FGCS is dangerous as there has been little research on the safety and efficacy of these procedures, and neither surgery is approved for cosmetic reasons by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.<sup>90</sup>

Why are more women believing that their labia minora is too long? Doctors report that “some patients might complain about pain or discomfort during sexual activities,” and “A majority of patients also complain from irritation during certain sport activities such as cycling, jogging, and horseback riding” with “many patients [showing] reluctance to wear tight clothing such as bathing suits in public.”<sup>91</sup> Seeking a solution for it causing pain is one thing, but this last reason is where issues arise. Why would someone be self-conscious of their vulva being visible

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson, Traci C., medical reviewer, “Vaginal Plastic Surgery: Vaginoplasty and Labiaplasty Procedures.” WebMD, April 19, 2021. <https://www.webmd.com/women/guide/vaginoplasty-and-labiaplasty-procedures>.

<sup>85</sup> Rodrigues, 786.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson.

<sup>87</sup> Rodrigues, pages 778-9.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson.

<sup>89</sup> Clerico, C., A. Lari, A. Mojallal, and F. Boucher. “Anatomy and Aesthetics of the Labia Minora: The Ideal Vulva?” *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 41, no. 3 (June 1, 2017): 714–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00266-017-0831-1>. Page 714.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, page 716.

in their clothing? Think of the jokes around a camel toe. Women want the area to be smooth, some seeking a “designer” vagina if you will. But where did this idea of a desirable vulva come from? In the “Anatomy and Aesthetics of the Labia Minora: The Ideal Vulva?,” they attribute it to the spread of nudity in media, detailing that one surgeon “is even showing his patients images from ‘Playboy magazine’ to help them choose the look that suits them.”<sup>92</sup> The proliferation of easily accessible pornography features women with vulvas that are “hairless and flat with no protrusion beyond the labia majora.”<sup>93</sup> The number of labiaplasties done in the U.S. in 2020 was 13,697, reported by the American Esthetic Plastic Surgery National Databank. This is an increase from 12,903 in 2019 and 9945 in 2015 (also keep in mind the pandemic probably lessened the number of procedures done in 2020).<sup>94</sup>

It is not just the U.S. where labiaplasties are on the rise. This is exacerbated in Australia, where “protruding inner labia are considered too explicit to be shown to M15+ audiences. This means women’s genitals are often airbrushed to a single crease (so they are hidden behind the outer labia), or else publishers are hit with a R18+ classification.”<sup>95</sup> Even when vaginas are visible in Australia, a protruding vulva is considered obscene. Indeed, labiaplasties are requested more and more in Australia and other Western countries.<sup>96</sup>

This trend of believing one’s labia is too long is cultural. “Contemporary public grooming trends affect considerably how women perceive and treat their genitals” with hair removal making the area much more noticeable.<sup>97</sup> With the trend of hair removal, so comes the

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<sup>92</sup> Clerico, 717.

<sup>93</sup> Kalampalikis, Andreas, and Lina Michala. “Cosmetic Labiaplasty on Minors: A Review of Current Trends and Evidence.” *International Journal of Impotence Research*, October 18, 2021, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41443-021-00480-1>. Page 1.

<sup>94</sup> Kalampalikis, page 2.

<sup>95</sup> Sharp, Gemma, and Olivia Willis. “What Drives Women to Have Labiaplasty?” *ABC News*, September 6, 2017. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2017-09-07/why-women-have-cosmetic-surgery-on-their-vulva/8878952>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Kalampalikis, 1.

trend of noticing one's labia might be protruding. As an article from 2017 notes, "by 32 years old, nearly all Canadian women surveyed (96%) reported performing some level of pubic hair removal" and "84 percent of American women report a lifetime of pubic hair grooming, and well over half (62%) reported regularly removing all of their pubic hair."<sup>98</sup>

Depending on the culture of where you live, larger labia can be something to strive for. "Labia minora elongation, has commonly been practiced in central and northern Mozambique, but has experienced a recent resurgence of popularity in southern provinces."<sup>99</sup> The practice of slowly stretching the labia minora to make it longer "is well known and commonly practiced in Zambézia Province."<sup>100</sup> In a study on the motivations for labia elongation, there were two main reasons equally reported: to increase their sexual pleasure and increase the sexual pleasure of their partner.<sup>101</sup> Girls usually start the elongation in adolescence "under the supervision of older family members" and maintain it as adults.<sup>102</sup> Because they do not do it alone, "The process of stretching one's labia results in strong friendship networks and facilitates transmission of sexual and reproductive health."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Jolly, Natalie. "Birth and the Bush: Untangling the Debate Around Women's Pubic Hair." *Birth* 44, no. 1 (2017): 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/birt.12269>. Page 8.

<sup>99</sup> Audet, Carolyn M., Meridith Blevins, Charlotte Buehler Cherry, Lazaro González-Calvo, Ann F. Green, and Troy D. Moon. "Understanding Intra-Vaginal and Labia Minora Elongation Practices among Women Heads-of-Households in Zambézia Province, Mozambique." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 19, no. 5 (May 2017): 616–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2016.1257739>. Page 617.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, page 625.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 622.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 617.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, page 625.



Figure 2.4 subRosa, still from video, *Vulva De/ReConstructa*, 2000. 10 minutes. Archived by ArtFem.TV. Accessed August 2021.

[http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9/action;showpage/page\\_type;video/page\\_id;Vulva\\_de\\_reConstructa\\_by\\_subRosa\\_2000\\_flv/](http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9/action;showpage/page_type;video/page_id;Vulva_de_reConstructa_by_subRosa_2000_flv/)

Sara Rodrigues argues that the trend for these two surgeries is a form of biopower to make women's reproductive anatomies "more useful." The popularization of vaginoplasties reinforces the idea that women are to be penetrated, that the vagina's primary function is to be receptive to the penetrating man. Whereas the trend in labiaplasties adds "aesthetics as another dimension of disciplinary control." The term biopower comes from Michel Foucault, who coined the term to examine the surveillance and regulation of bodies to perform optimally and reproduce for society. Many feminist theorists have applied Foucault's concepts of biopower to gender (something that he failed to do in his own work), but Rodrigues notes that most theorists have only focused on reproduction rather than the vagina itself. Examining reproductive control fits into biopower easily, as a capitalist system relies on creating more producers. What Rodrigues purports is that FGCS is making the private vagina visible and a "'public' site for improvement," causing women to self-regulate whether their genitalia is normal or abnormal, desirable or

undesirable to a man. This, she argues, is a form of biopower. There is also the added benefit of creating a new market to profit from, as these procedures cost thousands of dollars.<sup>104</sup>

*Vulva De/ReConstructa* includes images of before and after shots from labiaplasties, surgeon markings for what to remove on the vulva, and video footage zooming in on a woman's vulva spread on a medical examiner's table in stirrups. The voice-over on the video features words encouraging women to pursue such a procedure: "Ladies, are you tired of your lack? Do you desire surgery that will enhance your sexual pleasure and give you a beautiful vulva in just a few short hours? If so, you may be a candidate for pleasure surgery."<sup>105</sup> The majority of the video features a voice-over of a conversation between a woman named Ms. Lack and a plastic surgeon she is requesting a labiaplasty from. The doctor assures her they can achieve what she wants but is quite taken aback by her request: "I want my lips to be bigger and plumper, and I want them to *show*." He responds, "This is highly unusual in my experience, completely unprecedented in fact. Women usually want to be smaller, daintier. You know, cleaner, more streamlined down there. But as I always say, it's the informed consumer's choice. Whatever will make her happier and make her feel more feminine and desirable."

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<sup>104</sup> Rodrigues, 779, 780, 781, 786-7, 788.

<sup>105</sup> Transcribed from the artwork.

[http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9?action;showpage/page\\_type;video/page\\_id;Vulva\\_de\\_reConstructa\\_by\\_subRosa\\_2000.flv/](http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9?action;showpage/page_type;video/page_id;Vulva_de_reConstructa_by_subRosa_2000.flv/)

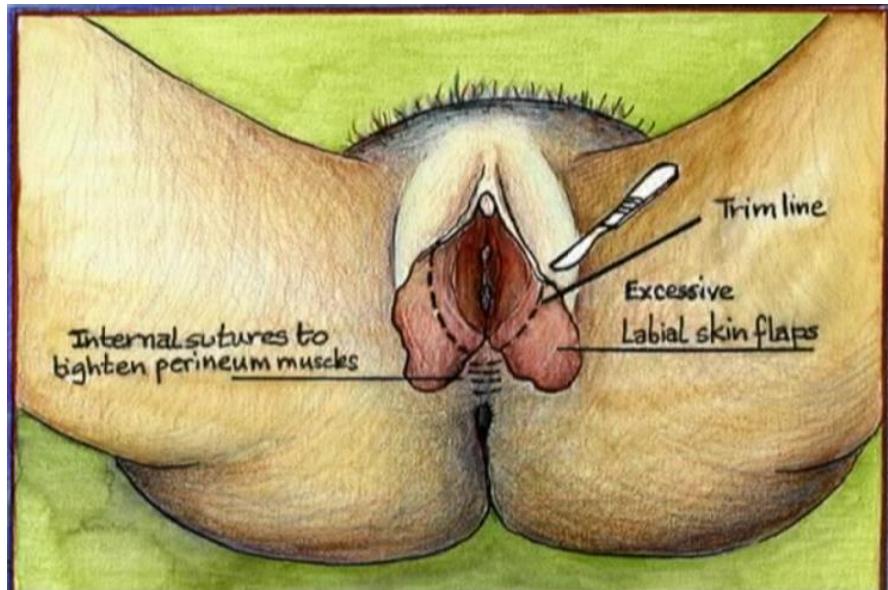


Figure 2.5 subRosa, still from video, *Vulva De/ReConstructa*, 2000. 10 minutes. Archived by

ArtFem.TV

[http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9/action;showpage/page\\_type;video/page\\_id;Vulva\\_de\\_reConstructa\\_by\\_subRosa\\_2000.flv/](http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9/action;showpage/page_type;video/page_id;Vulva_de_reConstructa_by_subRosa_2000.flv/)

subRosa expanded on this project in their writings, detailing their inspiration from real-life advertisements for Designer Laser Vaginoplasty they found on the Web. These ads “emphasized the neat, clean, petite, and symmetrical appearance of the surgically redesigned vulva—and glowing testimonials from surgically altered women dwell on their increased self-esteem, sexual pleasure, and how much their husbands are enjoying their new vulvas and vaginas.”<sup>106</sup> The idea that there is a specific vulva that appears more “normal” or “aesthetically pleasing” than others is suspect. Where would this idea have come from other than the surgeons themselves? By putting out advertisements for “more streamlined” or “petite” vulval procedures, this in and of itself begins to perpetuate the misconception that there is a wrong vulva and a right vulva, an attractive vulva and a nonattractive vulva. Sara Rodrigues also points out that

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<sup>106</sup> subRosa, page 231.

“surgeons are creating the very ‘conditions’ that they intend to ‘correct.’”<sup>107</sup> These surgeons were not answering a need that already existed for these women but creating one. As subRosa puts it:

“Typical texts on these Web sites suggest that what is lacking or inadequate is the woman’s body and the structure of her sexual organs—rather than knowledge and love of her own body, correct medical knowledge of clitoral and vulval structures and function, or informed lovemaking techniques and practices. What is sorely lacking in these Web site texts is any discussion of bodily differences, and of the social construction of beauty and sexual desire.”<sup>108</sup>



Figure 2.6 subRosa, still from video, *Vulva De/ReConstructa*, 2000. 10 minutes. Archived by

ArtFem.TV

[http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9/action;showpage/page\\_type;video/page\\_id;Vulva\\_de\\_reConstructa\\_by\\_subRosa\\_2000\\_flv/](http://artfem.tv/TEST/id;9/action;showpage/page_type;video/page_id;Vulva_de_reConstructa_by_subRosa_2000_flv/)

<sup>107</sup> Rodrigues, 786.

<sup>108</sup> subRosa, 231.

The conversation between Ms. Lack and the surgeon also stresses that the surgery is her choice, something that subRosa includes on purpose, as advertisements for the procedures “construct western women as purportedly ‘free’ ‘agents’ making an autonomous, empowered choice to undergo FGCS ‘for themselves’”<sup>109</sup> These surgeons use the language of women’s liberation to try to frame their procedures as the woman’s choice, when it is creating patriarchal standards displaying them to women to think they are abnormal so they purchase the procedure.

subRosa’s art is shocking, provokes, and sparks dialogue. They did not simply display their artworks in wealthy galleries, they held workshops and created accompanying flyers to increase awareness or teach people about the issues their art was addressing. They did this for many of their projects. As they put it: “*Vulva De/Reconstructa* was intended to provoke discussion and disseminate knowledge about the still often silenced topics of women’s sexuality and orgasmic pleasure, and the resistance, misogyny, and ignorance women may still encounter from medical and health practitioners.”<sup>110</sup>

Besides spreading awareness about the increasing popularity of such procedures, subRosa’s images of the vulva in *Vulva De/Reconstructa* are just as important. Not only were they bastardizing the concept of these surgeries by making Ms. Lack have a shocking request for her vulva, but they were also displaying explicit images of multiple women’s vulvas that varied in size, shape, and color. Many straight women have never seen any other vulvas besides their own; thus, they have no concept of how a “normal” vulva looks. If such a woman sees an advertisement for a vulva that appears different from hers, she could immediately think that her vulva must not be normal. In this way, the imagery of *Vulva De/Reconstructa* is even more critical than the skit, as a woman viewing it could see that her vulva is no more or less different

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<sup>109</sup> Rodrigues, 784. Author is quoting Virginia Braun (2009).

<sup>110</sup> subRosa, 231.

than anyone else's. Although *Vulva De/ReConstructa* only focuses on cis women, this statement against the “perfect” vagina also affects trans, nonbinary, and intersex individuals as well, since this emphasis on “normal” versus “abnormal” vulvas also “reinforces established binary distinctions between male and female, as well as between sex and gender...which undermines the lived experiences of both intersex and trans women who may not have or do not want ‘anatomically correct’ female genitalia.”<sup>111</sup> Establishing “normal” genitalia in the medical field has had disastrous effects on the intersex community. “Corrective” genital assignment surgeries performed on intersex infants and children regularly occur, with the look of their genitalia seen as more important than their function. subRosa briefly acknowledges these surgeries in their essay, “Common Knowledge and Political Love.”<sup>112</sup>

Just as with Judy Chicago’s work, subRosa and other cyberfeminists are not without criticism. Though *Vulva De/ReConstructa* is capable of being representative for both women of color and trans/nonbinary/intersex people, it is not explicitly so. Many white cyberfeminists did not include women of color in their theories and artworks. Often, the word cyberfeminist assumes “an educated, white, upper-middle-class, English speaking, culturally sophisticated readership.”<sup>113</sup> Donna Haraway herself received criticism for this. Legacy Russell puts it succinctly: “Haraway’s cyborg actively argues away from the lexicon of the human, a classification that historically othered bodies (e.g., people of color, queer people) have long fought to be integrated into.”<sup>114</sup> Rather than including “othered bodies” into the classification of human, Haraway and early cyberfeminists wanted to get rid of the human and become cyborgs:

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<sup>111</sup> Rodrigues, 787.

<sup>112</sup> 225.

<sup>113</sup> Fernandez and Wilding, 21.

<sup>114</sup> Russell, 32.

“If you are white, educated, affluent, the cyborg is your ticket to difference.”<sup>115</sup> Russell notes that cyberfeminist collectives like the Old Boys’ Network, subRosa, and VNS Matrix were not actively exclusive of people of color and offered up thoughts on racism and sexism, though racism was not a primary focus for any of them.<sup>116</sup> Women of color began adding their voices to cyberfeminist discourse, most notably the book *Domain Errors!: Cyberfeminist Practices*, published in 2003, had women of color as its central focus. They caution that keeping cyberfeminism non-specific in its definition (like the Old Boy’s Network 100 anti-thesis) and unclear in its actions is not a form of resistance and “it is foolish to believe that major social, economic, and political issues can be addressed by throwing technology at them.”<sup>117</sup>

Faith Wilding, a leading member of subRosa, writes about *Vulva De/Reconstructa* and gives more details on the vulva in *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices*. She notes similarities between FGCS and Feale Genital Mutilation (FGM), saying that they are done for different reasons, “all of which however have their roots in patriarchal gender practices.”<sup>118</sup> She also sees their similarity in that FGCS can result in nerve and tissue damage, resulting in a loss of sexual sensation, which is the desired result of FGM.<sup>119</sup> Simone Weil Davis says that the motivations for both surgeries “should not be perceived as radically distinct” as this results in an oversimplification that can perpetuate the civilized/uncivilized binary stereotype between Western and non-Western countries.<sup>120</sup> However, Davis also “notes that drawing parallels between FGCS and ‘FGM’ oversimplifies both western and non-western women’s relationship to practices of female genital cutting in general, as such parallels ignore the fact that such

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<sup>115</sup> Fernandez and Wilding, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Russell, 33.

<sup>117</sup> Fernandez and Wilding, pages 23-4.

<sup>118</sup> Wilding, Faith. “Vulvas with a Difference.” In *Domain Errors!: Cyberfeminist Practices*, edited by Maria Fernandez and Michelle M. Wright, 149–61. New York: Autonomedia, 2003. Page 154

<sup>119</sup> Wilding, pages 154-5.

<sup>120</sup> Rodrigues, 784. Author is quoting Simone Weil Davis from 2002.

relations are as complex and variable as the procedures themselves.”<sup>121</sup> subRosa also does not address hymenoplasty, which is another FGCS that involves surgical reconstruction of the hymen to appear as a virgin. Hymenoplasties are “practiced in the Middle East and other regions of the world where a woman’s premarital virginity is inextricably linked with personal and familial notions of honour.”<sup>122</sup> In a study examining why physicians in Tehran performed the procedure, “None of the doctors believed that the surgery was unethical, arguing that the girl could be ‘abused’ and ‘can even die’ if she is discovered not to be a virgin on her wedding night.”<sup>123</sup>

Though *Vulva De/ReConstructa* most likely did not slow the trend of receiving such surgeries, subRosa calls attention to a specific technological problem that can change through education and protest. Although this artwork addresses a specific procedure specific to mostly upper- and middle-class women who can afford cosmetic surgeries, increasing visibility of different vulvas can increase confidence in all cis women. Protesting the concept of a Designer Vagina has significant implications for trans and intersex communities as well.

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<sup>121</sup> Rodrigues, 784.

<sup>122</sup> Ahmadi, Azal. “Ethical Issues in Hymenoplasty: Views from Tehran’s Physicians.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 40, no. 6 (June 2014): 429. <https://doi-org.proxy.wichita.edu/10.1136/medethics-2013-101367>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### BREAKING THE GENDER/SEX BINARY

Intersex people call into question the biological binaries of sex and instead of confronting that and adjusting to this demographic's existence, "western biomedicine has managed these interstitial bodily figures through surgery."<sup>124</sup> With the invention of antiseptics and anesthesia in 1890, surgery went from "a life-threatening experience to a commonly applied technique," including using it as a treatment for "hermaphroditism."<sup>125</sup> From the early 1900s to now, intersex children have been subjected to invasive "corrective" surgeries and long-term hormone treatments by the Western medical field adhering to the belief of the sex binary.<sup>126</sup> These surgeries are seen as corrective by medical professionals who see intersex as an abnormality, yet the surgeries often result in more harm than if they had done nothing. Genital surgeries often result in a loss of genital sensation as well as lasting physical and psychological pain, and there is no sufficient evidence that these surgeries are needed or helpful.<sup>127</sup> One common surgery is a clitorectomy, when the infant is perceived to be female but with an overly large clitoris (how large a clitoris is to be considered significant is subjective and dependent upon the doctor, giving all the power to the doctor) and thus it is removed. Hence, their genitalia appears more "normal," losing the ability to achieve orgasms as a result. This happened to Cheryl Chase, an early intersex activist who formed the first intersex activist organization: The Intersex Society of

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<sup>124</sup> Rubin, page 1.

<sup>125</sup> Mak, Geertje A. "Conflicting Heterosexualities: Hermaphroditism and the Emergence of Surgery around 1900." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 3 (September 2015): 402–27. <https://doi.org/10.7560/JHS24303>. Page 402.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Rubin, 2.

North America.<sup>128</sup> Though clitoridectomy is a common intersex surgery, there are dozens of other possibilities of being intersex, some visible and some only internal.<sup>129</sup>

Gender critical feminists have said little on intersex people. Lawford-Smith states, “There are two sexes, male and female, and intersex conditions do not undermine this.”<sup>130</sup> She also questions how many people are actually intersex “Because the higher the number, the easier it is to make the case that there are no clear boundaries between male and female, so even if sex is not a ‘spectrum’ it is at least a conceptual space with a large, blurry middle area. If 1.7 per cent of all humans are in this blurry area this puts a lot of pressure on the idea of sex as a binary, at least. But if only 0.015 per cent of people are in this blurry area, it seems more plausible to say that sex is roughly what we thought it was, but that there are some outlier cases.”<sup>131</sup> Sheila Jeffreys only mentions intersex to distinguish it from being trans since apparently “Some transgender online personalities proclaim they are intersex to make out that they are not biologically male,”<sup>132</sup> which is quite a claim to make, seeing as there are many ways to be intersex and still appear biologically male or female externally. She also points out that “Intersex activists do not campaign for sex-reassignment surgery, and are often incisively critical of it” yet she does not indicate that this criticism is for unconsensual genital surgeries, not all of them.<sup>133</sup> They barely touch on intersex conditions because it pokes holes in their binary, sex-focused feminism.

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<sup>128</sup> Rubin, 2-6.

<sup>129</sup> See this extensive chart of the multitude of factors that go into determining someone’s sex and the different intersex blending of these factors: Montañez, Amanda. “Beyond XX and XY: The Extraordinary Complexity of Sex Determination.” *Scientific American*, September 1, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0917-50>.

<sup>130</sup> Lawford-Smith, page x.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pages 221-222.

<sup>132</sup> Jeffreys, 9.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

This paper will not feature any medical images documenting visibly intersex individuals for comparison's sake with artwork or otherwise. Many intersex people feel these images objectify and dehumanize those they are photographing/drawing, "reducing subjects to body parts only."<sup>134</sup> Attempts at anonymity in these photographs cause further "depersonalization, with such crass gestures as placing bags over their heads or black bars across their faces."<sup>135</sup> As Ins A Kromminga says: "The process of medical check ups are often volatile of all intersex people irrespective of age and I faced some parts of it also...Intersex people are made to be specimens on a regular basis for doctors and medical students without their consent."<sup>136</sup> It will be noted if an artist is referencing a common element or position used by medical professionals. These images exist and are easily found, but this paper promotes images made by intersex people for intersex people and intersex awareness, rather than those images that result from mistreatment and trauma.

### **Unconsensual Genital Surgeries**

Ins A Kromminga is an intersex artist and activist. Their<sup>137</sup> artwork consists of primarily "finely drawn, often small-format works on paper" and is directly tied to their experience as an intersex person. Kromminga was pronounced a girl when they were born. When they turned 13, they noticed hair growth, changes to their genitalia, and never started menstruating. They went to a doctor when they were 17 and "The doctor frankly and rather rudely declared that I was

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<sup>134</sup> Reis, Elizabeth. *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. This author chose to selectively include medical images for reference if you feel the need to explore further.

<sup>135</sup> McNay, Anna, and Jay Stewart. "GI's Anatomy: Drawing Sex, Drawing Gender, Drawing Bodies." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (May 1, 2015): 330–35. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2867704>. Page 331.

<sup>136</sup> Arasu, Ponni. "Interview with Ins Kromminga, German Intersex Activist and Artist." *KAFILA - COLLECTIVE EXPLORATIONS SINCE 2006* (blog), November 9, 2009. <https://kafila.online/2009/11/09/interview-with-ins-kromminga-german-intersex-activist-and-artist/>.

<sup>137</sup> I am unclear on what Kromminga's pronouns are. Some articles use he, others he/she, others they. I will thus be using they/them pronouns to keep my language gender neutral as to not misgender Kromminga. See them identifying as nonbinary/genderqueer here: <https://twitter.com/KrommingaA/status/1415343250265845761>

confusing.”<sup>138</sup> They were told to contact specialists, who informed Kromminga that they needed to remove their “ovaries” as they could become cancerous. Kromminga agreed, and they were removed. They later realized that the doctors removed internal testes, not ovaries: “which cause no danger to my life, and I could have lived healthily with them. I was lied to by the doctors in order to keep my gender as ‘female’ intact, a choice they made for me and not me for myself.”<sup>139</sup> Kromminga detailed the experience: “I was made to undress and stand in front of a medical grid and pictures were taken of me.”<sup>140</sup> Their experience of being lied to, humiliated, and manipulated by doctors is not unusual for intersex people.

Ins A Kromminga uses their incredibly personal experiences to inform their artwork. Though personal, their experience reflects many other intersex people’s experiences and is thus relatable on a larger scale. In exhibitions, Kromminga hangs their small paper drawings on the wall after creating a more extensive second drawing on the wall itself. As Kromminga states: “The interconnection of scale variations of the small sized works and their clustering within the wall filling drawing respond to my expectation of reading apparently personal or private issues within a social context and thus to always understand them as politically relevant.”<sup>141</sup> The whole wall becomes the artwork, and combining this large scale with the smaller, more intimate, and personal paper drawings parallel intersex people’s individual experiences that reflect a larger societal problem of discarding a person’s bodily autonomy to uphold the binary division which Western society want so wholeheartedly to be true.

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<sup>138</sup> Arasu.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Kromminga, Ins A. “Artist Statement. Redefining Difference.” Queer(ing) Religion Gallery. The Scholar & Feminist Online through Barnard Center for Research on Women. Accessed May 4, 2022.

<https://sfonline.barnard.edu/religion/gallery/kromminga.htm>.



Figure 3.1 Ins A Kromminga, photograph from the exhibition *Homosexualität\_en* at the Schwule Museum. December 2015. [https://www.abject.de/homosexualitaet\\_en/](https://www.abject.de/homosexualitaet_en/)

Upon closer examination of the individual drawings, many of Kromminga's works comment on the medical field's treatment of intersex people and their obsession with the two-gender system using a touch of humor and horror. Kromminga says, "As an artist, I express myself based on those things that I see. The absurdity of the fixing of genders and the policing that is needed leaves one with a whole host of material for the creation of art."<sup>142</sup> One such artwork is *Genital Accessoires* from their *Prada Series*. The drawing predominantly features a person in the lithotomy position,<sup>143</sup> a common position most people not assigned-male-at-birth are familiar with. It is a position where the legs are above the hips, usually achieved by placing the feet in stirrups so that the medical professional can examine the genitalia. Pairing the person

<sup>142</sup> Arasu.

<sup>143</sup> Seladi-Schulman, Jill, PhD. "Lithotomy Position: Pictures, Birth, Surgery, and Complications." Healthline, September 18, 2018. <https://www.healthline.com/health/lithotomy-position>.

down to only their exposed genitalia, buttocks, and thighs in this image echoes medical textbooks like those featured in Wangechi Mutu's collages. However, instead of the classic exposure of the genitalia like those medical photos, this person's buttocks and genitalia have morphed into a Prada or "Prader" bag. Below the central lithotomy-positioned figure are seven smaller sketches of figures in the same position labeled 6–0. The sketch labeled 6 displays what would be considered a "normal" penis, the sketch labeled 0 displays what would be considered a "normal" vulva, with those in between featuring a spectrum of intersex genitalia. Those born with genitalia matching 5–1 would likely confuse medical professionals as to what gender to declare and likely be seen as something that needs medical intervention.

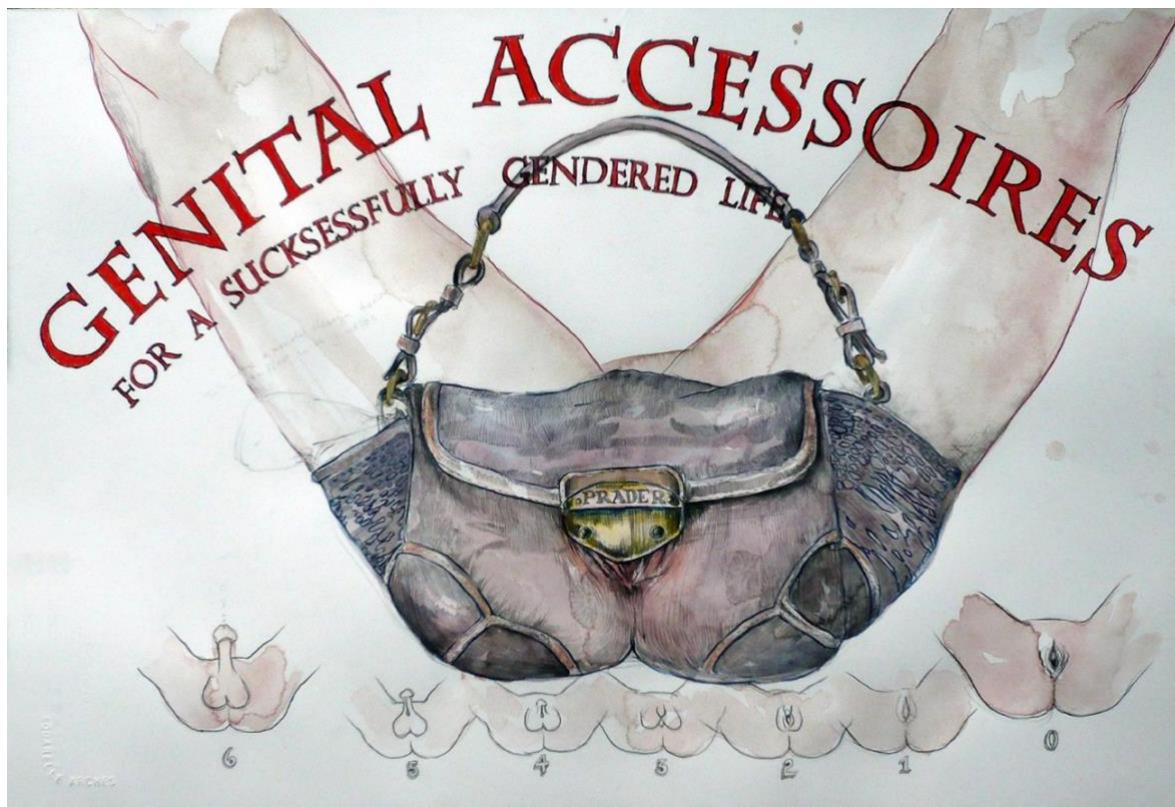


Figure 3.2 Ins A Kromminga, *Genital Accessoires (Prada Series)*, 2009. Pencil, watercolor, and ink on paper, unknown dimensions. <https://www.abject.de/other-drawings-ormston-house-gallery-2/>.

It is unclear as to which of the genitalia labeled 6–0 the central figure falls under, as the buckle of the purse obscures most of their genitals. Maybe a doctor is examining this individual to assign them one of these numbers corresponding to their genitalia, as the 6–0 are lined up like one would do to find a match. The large text curving over their thighs is also the title of the work: *genital accessoires*. *Genital* is in English, *accessoires* is in French, which may be alluding to fancy French brands. Perhaps the individual is trying on different genitalia options like one would try on different purses in a store. Or this use of genital accessories could mean that what genitalia someone has does not matter much, it is simply an accessory to the whole person. The full text on the artwork reads “**GENITAL ACCESSOIRES / FOR A SUCKSESSFULLY GENDERED LIFE.**” Another play on words with spelling successfully SUCKsessfully. Having genitalia like options 0 or 6 would be considered a successfully gendered life but forcing someone into the binary “sucks.”

Other drawings of Kromminga’s also critique medical practices towards intersex people with an element of absurdity, such as *Turtle Seal Parts (Please Doctor)*. This drawing features what might, at first glance, simply appear to be a turtle, but its fleshy color and additional line work causes the viewer to second guess this assessment. The wiggly diagonal line going across the whole paper starts to look more like thighs splayed open, with the turtle’s head poking outside of this line in a phallus manner. With a second look at the title *Turtle Seal Parts*, Kromminga is creating an optical illusion combining human “parts” with a turtle. The strange bend in the turtle’s neck/phallus, along with what could be a testicle just below the turtle with some sort of faint roots growing out of it, makes this anthropomorphized turtle even stranger.



Figure 3.3 Ins A Kromminga, *Turtle Seal Parts (Please Doctor)*, around 2013. Pencil, watercolor, and ink on paper, unknown dimensions. <https://www.abject.de/berlin-art-week-2016-positions-art-fair/>.

Adding more confusion to the image is a drawing of a person splaying their legs open on the right side of the paper, their face blending into the turtle/person's thigh. The inclusion of the entire person rather than just their spread legs is unique here, with the person looking directly at the viewer. A hand comes from the side of the paper, pulling up the person's genitals to expose them further. Below the person are the words "please doctor show my parts with your strong hands!" In medical photographs of intersex people's genitalia, "it was common for a physician's (manipulating) hand to be shown in both photographs and sketches."<sup>144</sup> Kromminga is pointing

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<sup>144</sup> McNay and Stewart, page 331.

out the absurdity of this occurrence with the over-emphasis of the doctor's "strong hands," while giving the examined person more agency by asking for it and meeting the viewer's gaze confrontationally. Rather than a depersonalized and dehumanized image that blocks out the person's face, they stare straight at whoever is photographing or sketching the image, calling out the absurdity and discomfort of this common occurrence.

Another work by Kromminga takes discomfort to another level. *Das Defensive Organ* is a disembodied hole or sphincter with teeth growing towards its center. Its title combines languages like the previous works with "das," which is "the" in German, and then the English "defensive organ." The defense seems to come from its teeth poised to scrape or bite anything that might try to penetrate its orifice.



Figure 3.4 Ins A Kromminga, *Das Defensive Organ*, 2010. Color pencil and ink on paper, unknown dimensions. <https://www.abject.de/ovartestisimilar-until-july-6th-2013-galerie-funke-berlin/>.

It is not inherently obvious what body part the defensive organ is. It could be a vagina—like the myth of the *vagina dentata*, *vagina with teeth*, a “motif that occurs in a widespread geographical area, as well as crosses the lines of social and economic differences”<sup>145</sup>—but the lack of other recognizable parts like the clitoris and labia make that questionable. It could be an anus, with extra ribbing around the sphincter (ignoring the teeth at the moment). This ambiguity is important here because what is taking place is what every doctor, what every person does, whether consciously or subconsciously: trying to gender who or what they see. The ambiguity of the defensive organ makes it clear that the owner of said organ could be any gender. Everyone has an anus after all, whether they are cis, trans, or intersex.

The inclusion of the teeth is what makes this organ a defensive one. This is not a hole that is splayed open to be examined or penetrated but poised to defend itself from such a thing. The fact that this organ must defend, so much so that it has seemingly mutated to form teeth, immediately implies violence. Why would something need to be defensive if not for previous experience or trauma? Looking at *Das Defensive Organ* gives one a sense of pain, of fear, of violence done. This violence happens in the medical field to intersex people on an unfortunately regular basis. If it is not through nonconsensual surgery then it is through probing, examining, diagnosing, and problematizing someone for how they were born, for just existing.

Ins A Kromminga makes the personal public in a consensual way. In contrast, those in the medical field make personal cases public through photographing, drawing, and making a specimen of their patients simply because they are intersex. Kromminga’s work speaks to the trauma, pain, and confusion of existing in such a world as intersex, while simultaneously pointing out the absurdity of it all. The fact that the medical field, and by extension society itself,

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<sup>145</sup> Otero, Solimar. “‘Fearing Our Mothers’: An Overview of the Psychoanalytic Theories Concerning the *Vagina Dentata* Motif F547.1.1.” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 56, no. 3 (September 1996): 269–88. Page 269.

is so wrapped up in the binary of male/female that they will go to such lengths to eliminate, hide, or alienate people whose very existence refutes that. Bodies are bodies, genitals are genitals. That we ascribe so much to a person based on their genitalia is truly absurd and causes real pain and harm to the intersex as well as the trans community.

## Historical Trauma

Another “Visionary queer artist, musician and filmmaker” that was “born intersex in LA in 1969” and has been formative to the queer and punk culture in LA and “wherever she goes”<sup>146</sup> is Vaginal Davis. Davis “self-identifies as an African-Mexican-American transgendered visual and performing artist whose primary artistic tactic is, in her words, ‘the indefinite nature of my own whimsy.’”<sup>147</sup> She dubbed herself Vaginal Davis “because I was into Angela Davis and I thought that sexualizing her name would be funny.”<sup>148</sup> She did not gain much recognition as an artist until she moved to Berlin in 2005, stating that when she was in LA “I was thought of as a complete nutcase weirdo.”<sup>149</sup> She also says she was “too gay for the punks and too punk for the gays.”<sup>150</sup> Her work “always refers to class, race, and gender” and, as she says: “I don’t like to explain myself and my work. I just like to put it out there and let people absorb what they will either good or bad.”<sup>151</sup>

Davis is a queer artist making queer art, but she distinguishes her definition of queer as different from the more recent interpretation being an umbrella term for everyone in the LGBT

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<sup>146</sup> Sprayregen, Molly. “Vaginal Davis’ Queer, Punk Art Is More Relevant than Ever.” them, January 29, 2020. <https://www.them.us/story/vaginal-davis-interview>.

<sup>147</sup> Summers, Robert. “Queer Archives, Queer Movements.” *Radical History Review*, no. 122 (May 2015): 47–53. Page 48.

<sup>148</sup> Church, Lewis, and Vaginal Davis. “My Womanly Story: Vaginal Davis in Conversation with Lewis Church.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance Art* 38, no. 2 (May 2016): 80–88. Page 83.

<sup>149</sup> Sprayregen.

<sup>150</sup> Dunham, Cyrus Grace. “The ‘Terrorist Drag’ of Vaginal Davis.” *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/terrorist-drag-vaginal-davis>. Though she has said this multiple times.

<sup>151</sup> Sprayregen.

community. To Davis—and this aligns with most queer theory as well—queer means being a misfit. There's a difference between a gay/lesbian cis person who can fit into straight people's boxes of what is “normal,” and someone like Davis whose very existence questions what normal even is. As Davis states: “Queer to me means not wanting to fit in *anywhere*. It's relishing in your outsider status as a misfit, weirdo, freakazoid. Always being suspect, perverse, maladjusted. It's not about the mechanism, the nuts and bolts of sexuality. It's more about the aesthetic drive as the principled guideline.”<sup>152</sup> She emphasizes her version of queer, of misfit, through her drag performances that are “about creating an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric” and that embraces negative stereotypes with “the darkest sense of humor and the sharpest sense of parody imaginable.”<sup>153</sup> As José Esteban Muñoz said, “Her blackness and queerness render her a freak among freaks. Rather than be alienated by her freakiness, she exploits its energies and its potential to enact a cultural critique.”<sup>154</sup>

Though Davis has an extensive oeuvre ranging from rock songs to paintings, this paper focuses on a series of works where Davis dabbles in sculpture. Her show *Come On Daughter Save Me* displayed “16 clay-and-nail-polish frieze sculptures” at the INVISIBLE-EXPORTS Galley in New York in 2015. The title of the show was apparently a phrase her mother often said to her growing up.<sup>155</sup> The sculptures “range in width but are uniform in height” at 6 inches tall.<sup>156</sup> She used a wide range of materials in creating these sculptures, some with an obvious function and others without. The full list of their materials are: clay, stucco fragments, Wet n Wild Brickhouse Nail Varnish, neon nail lacquer, Rival de Loop Nylon Nail Enamel, hydrogen

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<sup>152</sup> Sprayregen.

<sup>153</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. “‘The White to Be Angry’: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag.” *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 81–103. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>. Pages 86, 96.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, page 96.

<sup>155</sup> Dunham.

<sup>156</sup> INVISIBLE-EXPORTS. “VAGINAL DAVIS | Come On Daughter Save Me.” Accessed March 29, 2022. <https://invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/vaginal-davis-come-on-daughter-save-me/>.

peroxide, glycerin, witch hazel, Pam, Aqua Net extra-strength hair spray, and Jean Naté perfume. Many of these materials are used in manicures, a stereotypical feminine experience. Witch hazel, cooking Pam, hairspray, and perfume are also stereotypically associated with women. All the sculptures are a bloody red color and depict abstracted forms suggesting faces, genitalia, and internal organs, each with an epochal name like *Sabine Woman*, *Lilith*, and *Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra*. These titles, coupled with the fact that they are relief sculptures, brings ancient Greco/Roman art to mind. The show also had a very faint vinyl LP playing where Davis promised that “sexist racist lackeys of the imperial ruling circles will be vanquished during open revolt.”<sup>157</sup> Adding to the violence of the artworks as well as a call to arms that we will not tolerate the hegemony any longer.



Figure 3.5 Vaginal Davis, *Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra*, 2015. Clay, stucco fragments, Wet n Wild Brickhouse Nail Varnish, neon nail lacquer, Rival de Loop Nylon Nail Enamel, hydrogen peroxide, glycerin, witch hazel, Pam, Aqua Net extra-strength hair spray, and Jean Naté perfume, 6 x 18 x 3.75 inches. <https://invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/vaginal-davis-come-on-daughter-save-me/>.

<sup>157</sup> Cotter, Holland. “Vaginal Davis’s Feminist Wall Reliefs Pledge ‘Open Revolt.’” New York Times (Online), December 10, 2015. [https://search-proquest-com.proxy.wichita.edu/docview/1747786439?dataid=2131&https://ksuc.agshareit.com/ext/validateglobal.php?cid=k\\_suc&lid=kw9&pq-origsite=summon](https://search-proquest-com.proxy.wichita.edu/docview/1747786439?dataid=2131&https://ksuc.agshareit.com/ext/validateglobal.php?cid=k_suc&lid=kw9&pq-origsite=summon)

One sculpture in the series, *Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra*, contains what look like eight little clams or vulvas. They are bendy and malformed, probably pinched into shape by Davis' fingers. The sculpture is named after a real temple built in the 1st century C.E. in what is now Syria, that worshipped Baalshamin—also known as Hadad or Ba'al—a pre-Islamic Sky God.<sup>158</sup> The temple combined influences from both Eastern and Greco-Roman architecture. This mixing of cultures could reflect a personal connection for Davis as an African American Chicana woman. The sculpture could at first glance contain the conflation of woman and goddess, with its vulvas and the title being a temple; vagina as a temple to be entered and worshipped. However, the gore and gruesomeness of the sculpture, with its color and abstractions, refutes this idea. With the unrest in Syria, the Temple of Baalshamin was “blown up” by Islamic State militants in August of 2015.<sup>159</sup> Even if the temple had yet to be destroyed when Davis created this sculpture (the exhibit opened in November of that year), its precarious location amid unrest would have been known. That Davis chose this specific temple, one of an old religion that Islamic militants were actively destroying the evidence of in Syria, Iraq, and other locations, goes along with the bloody horror of her vaginal sculpture. The artwork even has a white discoloration down the middle that looks almost like a crack, like the relief is also precariously close to being destroyed. Not so much a metaphor for vagina as temple, more like vagina as pain, vagina as precarious, vagina as vulnerable.

Another work in the *Come on Daughter Save Me* show is *Cybelle—Demanding your Gonads to make a Necklace of Testicles*. Cybele was a goddess that originated in Asia Minor and spread into Greek mythology, but was much more popular in Ancient Rome with a sect called

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<sup>158</sup> Becker, Jeffrey. “Temple of Baalshamin, Palmyra.” Khan Academy, August 2015.

[https://www.khanacademy.org/\\_render](https://www.khanacademy.org/_render).

<sup>159</sup> BBC News. “Palmyra’s Baalshamin Temple ‘Blown up by IS,’” August 24, 2015, sec. Middle East.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34036644>.

the Cult of Cybele.<sup>160</sup> Cybele was known as “a goddess of fertility, but also cures (and sends) disease, gives oracles, and...protects her people in war...the goddess of mountains...she is also mistress of wild nature.”<sup>161</sup> Her popularity spread west to Gaul and to Africa. Attis, a god of vegetation and resurrection, was her lover, but he fell in love with a mortal woman. She apparently frightened him so much in her anger and jealousy that he fled, castrated, and killed himself<sup>162</sup> (some sources say that the castration is what killed him).<sup>163</sup> Her early priests in Rome, called galli, practiced self-castration. Details on this procedure are scarce, there seems “to have been an initiatory period of unknown length” to complete the procedure, but “the outcome, in any case, was ambiguous.”<sup>164</sup> As Saint Augustine wrote: “Neither is he changed into a woman, nor does he remain a man.”<sup>165</sup> Not only castration, the galli “made themselves alien to masculinity” as Firmicus Maternus said in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century, “with dripping hair and painted faces, with flowing limbs and feminine walk” as Augustine said.<sup>166</sup> The galli are a group that scholars still examine, especially in the context of a contemporary gender lens. Chris Mowat, for instance, compares the galli to contemporary drag queens and says: “There is an incongruity created by a masculine body, albeit modified, in a typically feminine dress. But this incongruity is not merely ambiguity, nor is it an attempt to remain as a man or identify as a woman *per se*. It

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<sup>160</sup> Wasson, Donald L. “Cybele.” World History Encyclopedia, February 4, 2015. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Cybele/>.

<sup>161</sup> Walton, Francis Redding, and John Scheid. “Cybele.” In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, December 20, 2012. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001/acref-9780199545568-e-1970>.

<sup>162</sup> Wasson.

<sup>163</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Great Mother of the Gods | Ancient Deity.” In *Britannica*. Accessed April 9, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Mother-of-the-Gods>.

<sup>164</sup> Roscoe, Will. “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion.” *History of Religions* 35, no. 3 (1996): 195–230. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062813>. Page 203.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, page 196.

is instead, in some ways, a recognition of the limits of the gender binary and the galli's social position outside of it.”<sup>167</sup>



Figure 3.6 Vaginal Davis, *Cybelle Demanding your Gonads to Make a Necklace of Testicles*, 2015. Clay, stucco fragments, Wet n Wild Brickhouse Nail Varnish, neon nail lacquer, Rival de Loop Nylon Nail Enamel, hydrogen peroxide, glycerin, witch hazel, Pam, Aqua Net extra-strength hair spray, and Jean Naté perfume, 6 x 18 x 4.25 inches. <https://invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/vaginal-davis-come-on-daughter-save-me/>.

Davis' sculpture *Cybelle—Demanding your Gonads to Make a Necklace of Testicles* features various shapes that resemble penises and testicles, with two of them protruding off the edges of the relief. The gory nature of her sculptures continues with this work, the same blood red color and messy abstraction as the *Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra*. The epic name alluding to the goddess Cybele is incredibly purposeful with the inclusion of dismembered phalluses, almost like Cybele is collecting them in a bloody pile for herself. What she plans to do with them is decided by Davis in the title: making a necklace. So she is hoarding them to string together and make jewelry for herself. The title implicates the viewer, demanding your gonads.

<sup>167</sup> Mowat, Chris. “Don’t Be a Drag, Just Be a Priest: The Clothing and Identity of the Galli of Cybele in the Roman Republic and Empire.” *Gender & History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 296–313. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12518>. Page 300.

But the collection visible here could be from her galli disciples who have willingly castrated themselves for her.

*Cybelle—Demanding your Gonads to Make a Necklace of Testicles* is an extremely queer piece with its connotations of castration, a procedure many trans women may choose to do and intersex people may receive without consent at an extremely young age. The fact that the title is demanding seems more like Davis is depicting the violence that intersex people often endure at a young age, which aligns with the goriness of the work as well. Its connection to Cybele is extremely purposeful, with the history of her galli castrating themselves and exploring gender identity by cross dressing in antiquity. As mentioned previously, Vaginal Davis takes on many personas in her “terrorist drag”<sup>168</sup> performances, so she may feel some semblance of community with these ancient galli. It could also just be a historical reference to remind people that those who flirt with the line of man/woman, male/female have existed for millennia; they did not come out of nowhere.

Now why include this work when it is clearly not depicting vulvas? With the inclusion of trans and intersex artist’s artwork, we go outside the scope of simply “vagina art.” As previously discussed, many intersex and trans people do not neatly fit within one category when it comes to their external genitalia. By exclusively focusing on vagina art, one can miss an important point: a vagina does not make you a woman. Leaving out the experiences of those who identify as a woman despite having a penis, someone who had a micropenis or large clitoris that was cut off to appear “female at birth,” or any number of other combinations, would leave out an incredibly affected population in the argument of gender disparities in the medical field. One cannot contend themselves with just examining a cis woman’s experience when there is an even more

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<sup>168</sup> Her drag shows were dubbed terrorist drag by Muñoz. For more information on her drag performances and why he dubbed them as such, see his essay “‘The White to Be Angry’: Vaginal Davis’s Terrorist Drag”.

oppressed group of people made vulnerable by the very concept of gender and genitalia itself. Including these voices does not negate vagina art, but adds layers to its meaning. The fact that Vaginal Davis explores both genitalia as an intersex person is important because she may not fit with one or the other, but her voice also deserves to be recognized.

Another work from this series is similar to Kromminga's *Das Defensive Organ* in that it is clearly an orifice but not necessarily vaginal. This artwork, *Fountain of Salmacis*, features the same blood red color and small size as the others in the series, with what looks like intestines arranged in a circle, jutting out from the surface of the work. The center of the circle is hollow and a darker red than the rest, giving the illusion that the hole goes deeper than the surface of the work.



Figure 3.7 Vaginal Davis, *Fountain of Salmacis*, 2015. Clay, stucco fragments, Wet n Wild Brickhouse Nail Varnish, neon nail lacquer, Rival de Loop Nylon Nail Enamel, hydrogen peroxide, glycerin, witch hazel, Pam, Aqua Net extra-strength hair spray, and Jean Naté perfume, 6 x 18 x 5 inches. <https://invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/vaginal-davis-come-on-daughter-save-me/>.

The title, *Fountain of Salmacis*, is another epochal allusion to a story from *Metamorphoses*, an ancient Roman book of poetry with “six stories [that] center on or allude to changes of sexual identity. Only one, however, that of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, results, albeit via a convoluted casual route, in a being that possesses both sexes simultaneously.”<sup>169</sup> This poem clearly resonates with Vaginal Davis, as she also has another artwork in the same series titled *Hermaphroditus*, the main character in the story that involves the fountain of Salmacis. The story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis details Hermaphroditus (son of Venus and Mercury) venturing from his home. He comes upon “a pool of crystal clear water, perfectly transparent and bordered by well-kept lawns,” which is also the home of Salmacis, a nymph.<sup>170</sup> As detailed in the poem, Salmacis:

“would not choose javelin or bow,  
or interrupt her leisure for the chase;  
for she would rather bathe her shapely limbs  
and then spend hours working on her hair,  
using the waters as a mirror to  
reflect the look that made her look most lovely.  
And after that, in a transparent gown,  
She chose between the softness of the leaves  
or the lawn’s softness to lie down upon.  
Often she gathered flowers”<sup>171</sup>

Salmacis is the classic feminine archetype, conceited, focused on her looks and leisure. But the last line, as Zajko points out, “introduces a menacing note, since the picking of flowers in the mythological landscape is associated above all with rape.”<sup>172</sup> When Salmacis sees Hermaphroditus she “swiftly decides that she just has to have him.”<sup>173</sup> She waits until he is

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<sup>169</sup> Zajko, Vanda. “‘Listening with’ Ovid intersexuality, queer theory, and the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis.” *Helios* 36, no. 2 (2009): 175-202. Gale Academic OneFile Select (accessed April 15, 2022).

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A232740708/EAIM?u=ksstate\\_wichita&sid=summon&xid=f93f56ea](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A232740708/EAIM?u=ksstate_wichita&sid=summon&xid=f93f56ea). Page 181.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, pages 187-190.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, page 190. Author translation of the original poem.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

unaware, undressed, and in the pool, then ambushes him. A struggle ensues, “Salmacis prays to the gods that henceforth she and her beloved will not be parted.”<sup>174</sup> The gods grant this request by combining their two bodies into one:

“Now these two figures in their close embrace  
were two no longer, but ere something else,  
no longer to be called a man and woman,  
and although neither, nonetheless seemed both.”<sup>175</sup>

Once combined, Salmacis is no longer part of the story,<sup>176</sup> and it ends with Hermaphroditus praying to his parents:

“O father and mother, after whom I’m named,  
grant me, as consolation, this one boon:  
may any man who sets foot in this pool  
depart from it without virility,  
instantly softened by the water’s touch.”<sup>177</sup>

Venus and Mercury fulfill his prayer, “and they give the waters their defiling power.”<sup>178</sup>

This story and the resulting body of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis are interpreted in two different ways: “either to treat the androgyne, who is the product of the merging protagonists, as characterized by deficiency and lack, or alternatively to regard him/her as a model of plenitude.”<sup>179</sup> With androgyny as lack, it is interpreted as a man losing his masculinity, thus Salmacis ceases to be relevant and their fusion results in a sterile being, “for to have both sexes is to have neither.”<sup>180</sup> With androgyny as plenitude, the story is paired with Plato’s *Symposium* where we are all searching for our other half, and this story is one of the ways to pursue that wholeness. Thus, their fused being is a result of sexual desire and the need to find one’s other

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<sup>174</sup> Zajko.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 192. Author translation of the original poem.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 189. Author translation of the original poem.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 193.

half.<sup>181</sup> The interpretation of androgyny as lack is the common hegemonic response to trans women or intersex individuals today, as taking on or having feminine qualities is seen as losing masculinity, as de-sexing. Switching to seeing androgyny as plentitude today would enable intersex people to be more accepted, regardless of their attributes, seen as whole “rather than incomprehensibly ‘ambiguous.’”<sup>182</sup>

This interpretation of the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis is pulling from Vanda Zajko’s interpretation, but what is Vaginal Davis’s? Looking at the *Fountain of Salmacis* artwork, its color and appearance of internal organs gives it an unsettling edge. This could relate to the fact that the whole story centers around a rape of Hermaphroditus. The joining of their two bodies was not a consensual act but a result of violence. This is further confirmed when examining her *Hermaphroditus* artwork. The small work features what looks like a severely beaten face, with one eye closed like it could be swollen shut, and that same blood-red color as the other works. It is interesting that Davis chose to depict Hermaphroditus and not Salmacis, only her fountain. It is unclear whether the work depicts Hermaphroditus pre or post joining, but the bloodied face makes it clear that the joining is either on the precipice of occurring or freshly occurred. A traumatic experience for sure, with his response to pray to curse the pool for all others who enter it.

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<sup>181</sup> Zajko, 193-4.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 197.



Figure 3.8 Vaginal Davis, *Hermaphroditus*, 2015. Clay, stucco fragments, Wet n Wild Brickhouse Nail Varnish, neon nail lacquer, Rival de Loop Nylon Nail Enamel, hydrogen peroxide, glycerin, witch hazel, Pam, Aqua Net extra-strength hair spray, and Jean Naté perfume, 6 x 6 x 4 inches. <https://invisible-exports.com/exhibitions/vaginal-davis-come-on-daughter-saveme/>.

The *Fountain of Salmacis*, as mentioned previously, features an orifice. We are inclined to see it as a body part because of the strange, intestine-like tendrils it is composed of and the gory color. However, judging by the title, it could also be the fountain itself. This conflation of fountain and body-part adds to the confusion and strangeness of the work, as well as maybe foreshadowing the effects of the fountain. The orifice, if interpreted as a body part, could be an anus, which all people have. Perhaps this focus on the anus references the effects of said fountain. If a man enters the fountain and is demasculinized, “depart[ing] from it without virility,”<sup>183</sup> his sexual option would be the one penetrated, as his ability to penetrate would be “softened.”<sup>184</sup> This goes along with the interpretation of androgyny as lack, as some think the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis “provides an explanation for the phenomenon of passive homosexuality in Rome” meaning “those who preferred to take on the passive role of the

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<sup>183</sup> Zajko, 187.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

penetrated in sexual encounters in Rome.”<sup>185</sup> However, this is not to imply that Davis’s interpretation of the poem goes along with this interpretation, Davis could be poking fun at this interpretation by leaning into it with this artwork.

The unsettling and gruesome nature of these works, combined with the origin of their titles, paints a picture of pain and creates an interesting dialogue of consent. *Temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra* features tiny vaginas equated to a historic temple on the verge of ruin. Vagina as temple, vagina as danger. *Cybelle—Demanding your Gonads to Make a Necklace of Testicles* references a previous consensual act of Cybelle’s priests castrating themselves, yet the title *Demanding your Gonads*, puts that consensual history into question, giving the viewer no choice in the matter. *Fountain of Salmacis* references the horrifying nonconsensual story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, with Salmacis wanting them joined so badly she manages to make them fuse into one being all while Hermaphroditus is kicking and screaming. This play of gender, genitals, and consent may be in reference to the trials intersex individuals know so well, often having to fight for their bodily autonomy after the mutilation has already occurred. Iain Morland writes that “corrective” genital surgeries do not result in “normal” genitalia: “A post-surgical vulva which ‘amounts to being sort of two doughy mounds that have a cleft’, conceded that particular surgeon, ‘doesn’t have a whole lot in common with a natural vagina.’” Morland expands on the effect of mutilation: “Surgically modified, or mutilated, genitals might be reminders only of surgery. These genitalia may commemorate a sexual difference that was, or should have been, in their place, but they do so precisely as a memorialized loss, not a communicated presence. Intersexed writers (e.g. Chase, 1998b, p. 214; Holmes, 1998, p. 225) have chronicled the anguish of trying to choose between an identity based on surgical results and

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<sup>185</sup> Zajko, 192-3.

an identity based on the anatomy that surgery removed.”<sup>186</sup> Morland also quotes gender theorist Morgan Holmes: “Having my genitals mutilated has made me no less intersexual; it has merely made me a mutilated intersexual.”<sup>187</sup> Vaginal Davis is intersex, though “Her mother refused to let doctors operate. So Davis grew up with the word ‘male’ on her birth certificate but with her mother and four older sisters referring to her by female pronouns.”<sup>188</sup> Though Davis accordingly did not undergo nonconsensual surgery like Ins A Kromminga did, Davis was surely aware of the plight of her own community.

This emphasis on consensual surgeries seems to be the key. According to Morland, Cheryl Chase and her Intersex Society of North America held the stance “not that surgery is unequivocally bad; in fact, [Intersex Society of North America] is recuperating surgery for the properly informed intersex patient.”<sup>189</sup> This notion of consent is where trans individuals seeking surgery come into play.

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<sup>186</sup> Morland, Iain. “‘The Glans Opens Like a Book’: Writing and Reading the Intersexed Body.” *Continuum* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 335–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/103043110500176586>. Page 344.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, pages 343-344.

<sup>188</sup> Dunham.

<sup>189</sup> Morland, page 336.

## CHAPTER 4

### TRANS SURGERIES AND CONSENT

Gender critical feminists insist that it is all too easy to receive gender-affirming surgeries. However, that path has never been easy for trans people. So-called “gender dysphoria clinics” sprang up in the 1960s for gender reassignment surgeries. However, they would not perform surgeries on all who asked “because of the professional risks involved in performing experimental surgery on ‘sociopaths.’”<sup>190</sup> In order to avoid this, medical professionals needed a way to diagnose a transsexual, or someone who should have sexual reassignment surgery. Yet “even after considerable research, no simple and unambiguous test for gender dysphoria syndrome could be developed,” thus, the staff of these clinics were deciding based on “individual sense.”<sup>191</sup> They eventually developed a criteria based on Harry Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1996), but the trans people seeking care simply passed the book around to one another and prepared how to answer to meet their criteria, so no further research into motivations or diagnoses were reliable.<sup>192</sup> Sandy Stone points out, “As with males theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency.”<sup>193</sup> So for early forms of sexual reassignment surgery, access to these procedures had little to do with their consent and more to do with whatever diagnoses doctors felt comfortable throwing around.

The medical field’s solution to who should have access to these surgeries was to pathologize being transgender. As Susan Stryker says, “Far too often, access to medical services

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<sup>190</sup> Stone, Sandy. “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 1st edition., 221–35. New York: Routledge, 2006. Page 227.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 229.

for transgender people has depended on constructing transgender phenomena as symptoms of a mental illness or physical malady, partly because ‘sickness’ is the condition that typically legitimizes medical intervention.”<sup>194</sup> The term created was gender dysphoria, which means “Literally, a sense of unhappiness (the opposite of *euphoria*, a sense of joy or pleasure) over the incongruence between how one subjectively understands one’s experience of gender and how one’s gender is perceived by others.”<sup>195</sup> This term was later replaced with the increasingly pathologized Gender Identity Disorder in the 1980s. Trans activists pushed back against this term because of its pathologization of their identities, and it was replaced with Gender Dysphoria in the 2013 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.<sup>196</sup> The criteria for diagnosing gender dysphoria often involves the phrase “born in the wrong body.” As Nikki Sullivan points out, this “reinscribes the trans-body as the body of a poor unfortunate victim whose suffering can (hopefully) be eliminated once-and-for-all in and through surgical intervention” and “enable the displaced person to finally feel at home in his/her body, to become whole. Of course, there are all sorts of problems with this paradigm, not least of all the question of the (im)possibility of such an ideal form of embodied being.”<sup>197</sup>

Attempts to pathologize or identify the “cause” of being trans have continued. Brain imaging technologies, for example, are one of the more contemporary tools used to search for whether there is a biological basis, even though “To date, no consistent evidence of brain-based sexual dimorphism exists, in part because there are no stable criteria that distinguish sexes reliably or concretely.”<sup>198</sup> It seems as though science stretches the concept of gender binarism to

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<sup>194</sup> Stryker, 81.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, pages 33-34

<sup>197</sup> Sullivan, Nikki. “Transmogrification (Un)Becoming Other(s).” In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 552–64. Routledge, 2013. Page 555.

<sup>198</sup> Gauthier, C. Armes. “Brain Imaging.” In *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, edited by Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, 1:42–45. 1-2. Duke University Press, 2014. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/issue/1/1-2>. Page 42.

the point of ascribing gender dimorphism where it does not exist. This could have negative impact on cis people as well as trans people as it is “perceived as part of the structural violence inherent to the social gender order.”<sup>199</sup> C. Armes Gauthier argues: “What is needed is not new data to support current theories, but, rather, new theories that support the data gathered. Critically utilized for understanding sexual dimorphism, gender identity, and sexual orientation, the brain imaging of transgender phenomena is a fertile site for reimagining concepts of embodiment.”<sup>200</sup>

Today, “treatment” of trans patients is little better, as “The contemporary model of trans health care is criticized for limiting trans people’s decisional autonomy by the imposition of an evaluation process and for reducing the diversity of gender transition processes and health care paths through the triadic model of diagnosis, hormone treatment, and surgery.”<sup>201</sup> Activism for trans depathologization has sprung up around the world, like the International Campaign Stop Trans Pathologization (STP), which “introduces a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of gender identities: from conceiving gender transition as a mental disorder to recognizing it as a human right and expression of human diversity.”<sup>202</sup> These depathologization groups also point out the “ethnocentric and neocolonialist character of Western-based psychiatric classifications” have historically and repeatedly “render[ed] invisible the cultural diversity of gender expressions and identities worldwide.”<sup>203</sup> Yet this movement has risks because health care coverage is often only offered when a procedure or drug is “illness-based,” and depathologization could result in

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<sup>199</sup> Suess, Amets, Karine Espineira, and Pau Crego Walter. “Depathologization.” In *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, edited by Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker, 1:73–77. 1-2. Duke University Press, 2014.

<https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/issue/1/1-2>. Page 75.

<sup>200</sup> Gauthier, page 43.

<sup>201</sup> Suess, page 74.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, pages 74-75.

health care no longer covering gender confirming surgeries or hormone replacement therapies, requiring a restructuring of medical care.<sup>204</sup>

Thus, a trans person seeking surgeries still has many hoops to jump through, and trying to assert their right to exist as they are rather than as someone ill can threaten their access even further. Besides the medical issues, there is also governmental issues, as there are often “requirements of a gender-transition-related diagnosis, hormone therapy, and, in some countries, genital surgery, sterilization, and divorce in order to attain legal gender recognition.”<sup>205</sup> Thus, trans people who would rather do without surgery can feel pressure to do so in order to be legally recognized as their correct gender. Consent under pressure is not consent.

Aside from access to/pressure to have surgeries to change their genitals, more surgeries became available over time. Initially, “procedures that aimed to change a person’s sex focused on the genitals as the site of a body’s maleness or femaleness and took the reconstruction of those organs as the means by which ‘sex’ could be changed, that change always from one binarily conceived sex category to the other.”<sup>206</sup> But outside perception of someone’s sex is not based on their genitalia, many other aspects go into “gendering” someone such as body hair, voice register, chest, and much more. As Eric Plemons says: “now sex is both spread across the entire body—with interventions in chests and breasts, bones, hair, voice, and comportment all made available for purchase—and ever more crucially located outside of the body, in spaces of ongoing social interaction and recognition.”<sup>207</sup> The fascination with genitalia that doctors

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<sup>204</sup> Suess, 75.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>206</sup> Plemons, Eric. *The Look of a Woman: Facial Feminization Surgery and the Aims of Trans-Medicine*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017. Page 1.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, page 2.

performing genital surgeries on intersex children seem to have do not realize that our genders are not solely tied to what is between our legs.

To many, the overarching goal of being trans is “passing.” As Leslie Feinberg defined it: “Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility.”<sup>208</sup> Or as Sandy Stone put it: “Passing means the denial of mixture”<sup>209</sup> with the goal being “to erase him/herself, to fade into the ‘normal’ population as soon as possible.”<sup>210</sup> Trans people experience a much higher rate of violence upon discovery. From the 1950s and 60s: “To whatever extent they failed to pass flawlessly as a cisgender person, their very presence in public space was criminalized, and they were at greater risk of extralegal violence from the police and some members of the public.”<sup>211</sup> And what is seen today: “A total of 44 fatalities were tracked by [Human Rights Campaign], marking 2020 as the most violent year on record since HRC began tracking these crimes in 2013.”<sup>212</sup> Passing is a safety measure more so than what the person may want to present. It is also important to note that trans women of color are murdered at the highest rates. This is emblematic of racism compounding the discrimination as well as the fact that people of color are still at a socioeconomic disadvantage and thus more likely to not be able to afford the surgical procedures to pass. The pressure to pass has created a market for surgeries like facial feminization surgeries (FFS), voice feminization surgeries, Brazilian butt lifts, and others. More effort has gone into technology for increasing the capability for passing than addressing the issue of violence towards trans people. Rather than acknowledging the pattern of violence, our society is more likely to

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<sup>208</sup> Feinberg, Leslie. “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come.” In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, 205–20. Routledge, 2013. Page 207.

<sup>209</sup> Stone, page 231.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>211</sup> Stryker, 107.

<sup>212</sup> Human Rights Campaign. “Fatal Violence Against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021.” Accessed June 25, 2022. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2021>.

look at these acts as singular instances of violence: “Thinking violence as individual acts versus epistemic force works to support the normative and normalizing structuring of public pain. This is to say, privatizing anti-trans/queer violence is a function through which the social and its trauma are whitewashed, heterosexualized, and made to appear gender-normative.”<sup>213</sup>

The focus on genitalia is still present, but it can be seen as not enough to fully transition, if that is what someone wants. Even after decades of procedures, genital surgery is extremely arduous, prone to complications, expensive, and not fully functional in the case of a constructed penis,<sup>214</sup> so many trans people may choose the more visible surgeries rather than genital surgeries. Eric Plemons examined Facial Feminization Surgeries (FFS) and saw that early patients and doctors of FFS viewed the procedure as supplementary to transition, but that has morphed to patients and doctors seeing that “FFS itself transforms patients’ bodily sex.”<sup>215</sup> A surgery as subtle as shaving away a sharp jawline or removing an Adam’s apple carries more weight than genital surgery because FFS helps a trans woman pass out in public more so than the genital surgery. Yet society cannot help but be focused on genitalia it seems. Even out trans people who pass are often subjected to invasive questions as to what genitalia they have, whether they have transitioned “all the way” or not.

There are societal pressures, medical pressures, and governmental pressures for a trans person to do a long list of procedures with the ultimate goal of passing as the opposite gender. But for many trans people, this is not their goal. The nonbinary person who wants to appear feminine one day and masculine the next, the woman who wears skirts and does not shave her beard, the man who is on testosterone and body builds but does not want any surgeries to remove

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<sup>213</sup> Stanley, Eric A. “Introduction: River of Sorrow.” In *Atmospheres of Violence*, 1–20. Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable. Duke University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1v7zdjg.5>. Page 6.

<sup>214</sup> Prosser, page 79.

<sup>215</sup> Plemons, page 2.

his breasts or have a penis are all valid and visibly trans. Remember that gender is a spectrum; those in between the poles of man and woman may be on the more masculine or feminine side of the spectrum, but they may not have the end goal of fitting within the binary.

### **Why Does Genitalia Matter so Much?**

One such person is Zackary Drucker, who is an out trans artist, performer, and producer. Drucker's work "always intersects with her own trans identity" and "postulates queer alternatives to the status quo."<sup>216</sup> Her work is directly tied to her identity as a trans woman and her experience transitioning. Drucker says: "eventually, the men who used to call you a faggot are suddenly licking their lips when you walk by and women who were sympathetic become threatened or competitive. It takes a lot of energy to reconcile and overcome this inner voice that is constantly wondering if the people you come across in your daily life are reading you as a man, as a woman, as transgender, or as a non-person. If they are sympathetic, laughing at you, or shit-talking you in another language."<sup>217</sup> Most of her work focuses on herself, where she is able to "construct" herself and "revisit erased histories, perform and inhabit multiple roles and narratives, and document moments of, and in between, gender scripting a narrative that is inherently self-reflexive as it is constructed, deconstructed and experienced."<sup>218</sup> Drucker has found support through her parents, her chosen queer family, and queer "ancestors" to, as she says, "present myself as a subject / object without feeling shamed or disempowered as a trans person."<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Neel, Tucker. "Darling Zackary: An Interview With Zackary Drucker." *ARTPULSE Magazine*, Summer 2012. <https://tuckerneel.wordpress.com/2013/06/12/darling-zackaryan-interview-with-zackary-drucker-artpulse-magazinevol-3-no-12-summer-2012/>.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Luis de Jesus Los Angeles. "Zackary Drucker and Manuel Vason - Exhibitions - *Don't Look At Me Like That*" Press Release," 2013. <https://www.luisdejesus.com/exhibitions/zackary-drucker-and-manuel-vason>.

<sup>219</sup> Neel

The series *Don't Look At Me Like That*, is a collaboration between Drucker and Manuel Vason, where Vason shot the photographs that Drucker composed and modeled in. The series consists of photographs all mounted on lightboxes. Vason considers his “art practice a photographic dialogue with others,” specifically performance artists.<sup>220</sup> The series includes a variety of settings and moods within each photograph. Unlike previous series examined here, there is not an obvious cohesion between Drucker and Vason’s photographs.

The first work from this series examined here shares the series’ title, making it, assumedly, the headliner of the show. The photograph features Drucker casually holding a cigarette, wearing an askew cardigan, pearl necklace and earrings, black bra, and she is bare from the waist down aside from black high heels. She sits astride the chair facing its back, one leg draped over the top. She is positioned precisely so her genitalia is obscured by the thin back of the chair. However, just to the side is a bejeweled vulva stuck to her inner thigh. Her draped position and the cigarette dangling from her fingers along with her expressionless face portrays a sort of blasé attitude. Yet her gaze is trained right on us, very aware that we, the viewers, are looking at her. However, the title is called *Don't Look at Me Like That*. She is aware that we are going to look at this photograph and staged her position just so, trained her gaze into the lens, yet she is simultaneously telling us not to look. The fact that this was the title of the whole show means that viewers visiting the exhibition would have seen the phrase even if they did not read the label of this work, told again to not look at her like that. But what is *That*? In what way?

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<sup>220</sup> Vason, Manuel. “Artist Statement.” Manuel Vason. Accessed June 29, 2022. <https://www.manuelvason.com/artist-statement/>.



Figure 4.1 Zackary Drucker and Manuel Vason, *Collaboration #3, Milan, (Don't look at me like that)*, 2010. Duratrans on LED light box, 36 x 24 inches.

<https://www.luisdejesus.com/exhibitions/zackary-drucker-and-manuel-vason?view=slider#4>.

Perhaps she knows how a viewer will immediately look at this photograph and is telling them not to. The diagonals of her spread legs draw the eye to her obscured genitalia that is almost in the very center of the work. With her genitalia so close to being exposed it is like a tease, the viewer might even pause here to double check that nothing is peaking through. What subsequently draws the eye is the bejeweled vulva on her inner thigh. As though she knows what we would expect to see behind the chair and is presenting an ornate, silly version of it. Why would the viewer automatically assume she is hiding a vagina from view? Her style, jewelry,

heels, and the few clothes she is wearing are all categorized as women's clothing. Maybe if she was in the same pose but completely naked viewers would be less quick to determine what she is hiding from the viewer, but she is using those coded cues to lead us to assume she is hiding a vagina, which she gives us just off to the side. She knows what the viewer will assume and tells them not to assume anything. This precise blocking of her genitalia is key because of the obsession people have with what genitalia someone has. People meet trans women and want to know what genitalia they have, whether they have "gone all the way" in their transition.

Zackary Drucker deals with the concept of passing in another work from the show, called *Playing with the bits you want to transform*. Drucker is naked, scrunched up on an empty bed, her left leg on tip toe with her knee in the air to better pull her right leg towards her face. Her mouth is open as if she plans to put her foot in her mouth. Her position on the bed like she wants to eat her foot is how she is *Playing with the bits*. Besides her nudity, portions of her body are painted gold: her feet, hands, penis, hairline, and neck. These body parts are often considered specific to someone's gender, genitalia being an obvious one, but a receding hairline, Adam's apple, big hands and feet are assumed to be male characteristics as well. These are the *bits you want to transform*. The *you* directly implicates the viewer, she does not want to transform these things, you do. As mentioned, people can be uncomfortable when someone has a blend of male and female characteristics. A person would be more comfortable with a trans woman who completely passes as a woman, because then they do not have to acknowledge that person's trans-ness. When a trans woman still has an Adam's apple for example, that may make that person uncomfortable. Drucker is playing with those bits of herself, making it a *you* problem that you want them to transform, it is not her problem that parts of herself may make you uncomfortable.



Figure 4.2 Zackary Drucker and Manuel Vason, *Collaboration #2, Milan, (Playing with the bits you want to transform)*, 2010. Duratrans on LED light box, 36 x 24 inches.

<https://www.luisdejesus.com/exhibitions/zackary-drucker-and-manuel-vason?view=slider>.

Drucker deals directly with the societal pressures to pass in her work, because passing reinforces the gender binary. The concept of a trans person being born in the wrong body does not feel right to Drucker: “I am one way, but I should have been the other.’ That feels like a very black-and-white way of thinking.”<sup>221</sup> Rather than encouraging people to explore their identities and be their authentic selves, there is this public perception of what a transition should be. As Kate Bornstein puts it: “In the ‘60s and ‘70s, when transsexuals first became known to the mainstream, we were the cultural butts of jokes. When *transsexual*—a binary-identified man or woman who had transitioned out of another gender—became *transgender*, it was a big step so that’s good. But what’s visible again is only the binary. The people who took the place of trans as the butt of the jokes are now the genderqueer folk, the gender fluid, the nonbinary, the gender

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<sup>221</sup> Drucker and Bornstein. Page 28.

nonconforming.”<sup>222</sup> A trans person feeling like they were born in the wrong body and transitioning from one side of the binary to the other makes more sense to cis people, but when a trans person eschews that notion and straddles the line between the binaries, cis people then notice and are uncomfortable. This cis uncomfortablility with the gender spectrum is what leads to more societal pressures to pass, and thus pay for expensive transition surgeries, and what leads to intersex children having their genders forcefully assigned, because not clearly presenting as one gender or the other is seen as something that needs to be “fixed” rather than let it exist as it occurs naturally.

### **Why Representation Matters**

This pressure to pass and thus rendering trans people invisible can be detrimental to the trans community, as it can give a trans person the impression that they are alone. Until very recently, transgender issues were “presented as personal issues—that is, as something that an individual experienced inwardly, often in isolation—rather than being seen in a wider social context.”<sup>223</sup> The only literature on trans topics available was medical or psychological, which were almost always written by cis people and “framed being trans as an individual psychopathological deviation from social norms of healthy gender expression.”<sup>224</sup> The only photographs of transitioning or intersex bodies—bodies that existed beyond male and female categories—were in medical textbooks.<sup>225</sup> This paired people down to their sexual organs rather than their personal identities. As Paul Preciado notes, this “control over sexual and gender codes” passed from the medical sphere to the media with the increase in capitalism.<sup>226</sup> Thus not

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Stryker, 13.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Preciado, Paul B. “The Intersexional Digital Darkroom.” In *Sex Works: 1978-2005*, by Del LaGrace Volcano, 155–59. Tübingen: Konkursbuch, 2006. Page 155.

<sup>226</sup> Preciado, Paul B. “GENDER AND SEX COPYLEFT.” In *Sex Works: 1978-2005*, by Del LaGrace Volcano, 152–54. Tübingen: Konkursbuch, 2006. Page 152.

only genitalia but gendered behavior, style, and actions are publicly reinforced. Because of this, “Gender and sex do not belong to the private body. They are techno-political codes in the public domain.”<sup>227</sup> As our bodies are no longer private and subjected to the gendered codes our capitalist society has created, Preciado argues that making queer bodies and actions more visible is a way to reclaim them for ourselves.<sup>228</sup> One way to do this is by photographing these communities, their actions, and bodies: “We could call political pornography an enterprise of truth production through the process of becoming visible.”<sup>229</sup> Artists like Zachary Drucker, using her body as the site of much of her artistic work, increases trans visibility. Another trans artist who has been doing this their whole career, starting with representing the lesbian community in the late 1970s and then the trans community shortly after, is Del LaGrace Volcano.

Volcano was born intersex in 1957 and raised as a girl,<sup>230</sup> though they<sup>231</sup> knew early on that this was not the case: “Long before I came out as a dyke, queer, trans or inter-anything, my first identity was as an alien sex probe. At five years old I was convinced that a massive intergalactic error had been made and I had been accidentally left behind on earth on an exploratory mission.”<sup>232</sup> They identify most with the label gender queer. Volcano would ascribe with the now prominent nonbinary community, but they say “I will call myself that but, being a non-anything or a non-entity, it’s not my favorite term. So, I guess gender queer is still the term I prefer.”<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Preciado, “GENDER AND SED COPYLEFT,” page 154.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Preciado, “The Intersexional Digital Darkroom,” page 155.

<sup>230</sup> McGlashan, Sean, Fiona MacLeod, and Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art. *Sh[OUT]: Contemporary Art and Human Rights : Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Art and Culture*. Glasgow: Glasgow Museums, 2009. Page 48.

<sup>231</sup> Multiple sources used different pronouns for Volcano, so I contacted Volcano directly through Instagram and they told me their pronouns are they/them.

<sup>232</sup> Volcano, Del LaGrace. “Sex Works.” In *Sex Works: 1978-2005*, 5-11. Tübingen: Konkursbuch, 2006. Page 5.

<sup>233</sup> Volcano, Del LaGrace. Gender Optional. Interview by Anders Wänn. Audio Recording, 2021.

<https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/gender-optional/gopc-del-45468062>.

Volcano notes that “The notion of family has always been central to my visual arts practice.” They started off photographing their family in their home. When they moved to San Francisco in 1979, they were ready to create a found family.<sup>234</sup> While going to art school in the ‘80s, Volcano says, “I discovered that orgasmic sexual pleasure *was* possible with women and proudly declared myself a dyke!”<sup>235</sup> They joined the lesbian nightlife, discovering lesbian bars, SM, and public sex in bathrooms.<sup>236</sup> “I did what I always did. I photographed what was happening in my life. I stuck close to my heart and my politics. I photographed what was around me, what I desired, what I wanted to be. But it is hard to be what you never see.”<sup>237</sup> Volcano found a community with which they felt a kinship, and their photographs are very personal. Most of the photographs from their *LOVE BITES* series from this time all contain the subjects’ names. The series shows people captured in-the-moment in clubs, with a few posed portraits interspersed. However, their art school did not find lesbian nightlife to be a “valid subject” and too marginal, so Volcano “dropped out in righteous indignation.”<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Volcano, “Sex Works,” pages 5-6.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Volcano, Del LaGrace. “LOVE BITES.” Del LaGrace Volcano. Accessed December 4, 2021.

<https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/love-bites-23196221>.

<sup>238</sup> Volcano, “Sex Works,” 6.

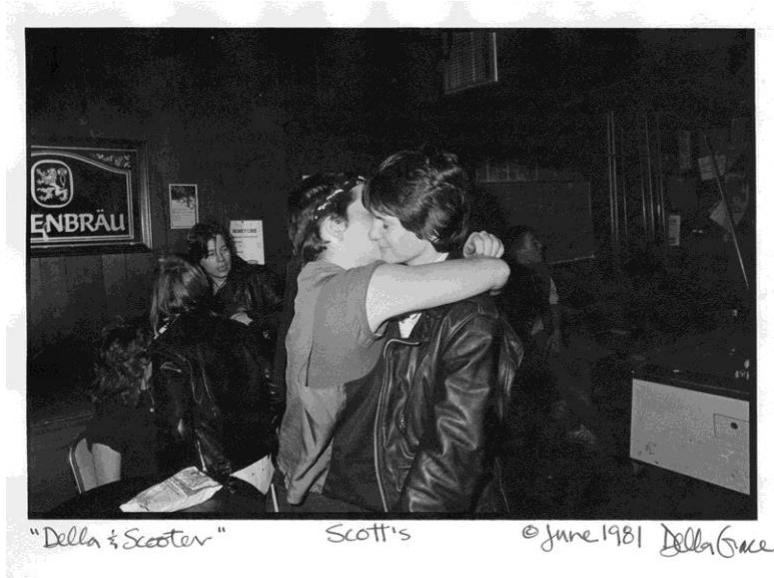


Figure 4.3 Del LaGrace Volcano, *Della & Scooter @ Scott's Bar, San Francisco*, from the series *LOVE BITES*, 1981. Photograph, unknown dimensions.

<https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/love-bites-23196221>.

In the late 1980s London, Volcano lived in the meeting place for Chain Reaction collective, “a lesbian SM, sex and performance club.”<sup>239</sup> Volcano writes: “Chain Reaction was everything I had dreamed of creating in San Francisco but hadn’t managed. It was political, collective and full of hot dykes willing to take their politics out of the bedroom into the streets.”<sup>240</sup> This was a key component to Volcano’s photographs of the group, as they did not bring their camera into the club, “a sacred and profane space,” instead they would photograph the group outside making “public spectacles of ourselves.”<sup>241</sup>

Volcano’s work makes the viewer question their preconceived notion of gender, like *Herm Torso* from 1999. In this case, we are not given the model’s name in the title like Volcano often does, nor do we see their face. This is a less personal work, almost mimicking those in

<sup>239</sup> Volcano, “Sex Works,” 7.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Volcano, “LOVE BITES.”

medical textbooks: black and white, depersonalized, and close-up shots of anatomy. However, there is what seems to be a messy tic-tac-toe game scrawled across the person's chest, something that would not be found on those photographed in medical textbooks. This is evidence of Volcano's more collaborative approach to photography, as the model came in with this already inscribed on their chest, so Volcano just went with it.<sup>242</sup> The markings add a more personal touch, even if the model is anonymous. The image captures the person from thigh to armpit, with their genitalia on display. Despite this, it is not clear what sex this person is. They seem to have a small amount of breast tissue, yet their genitals do not match the classic vulva we have seen in previous artists' works. They have an enlarged clitoris or a small penis. Instead of combining masculine and feminine features, this person's very anatomy questions our notion of gender. It seems to be a blend of penis and vulva. Volcano speaks about this work specifically: “My intention was to problematize the notion of bodily truths and at the same time demonstrate how (physiological) sex is as much of a cultural construct as gender.”<sup>243</sup> This work was originally called “Hermaphrodite Torso,” before the word intersex was the correct term. However, the torso “does not in fact belong to a person who is classified or classifies themselves as a hermaphrodite, but rather to a transsexual man in the process of liminality.”<sup>244</sup> This phrase “in the process of liminality” is a beautiful way of saying that this person is neither entirely male nor entirely female, but purposefully in a moment of in-between. Not all trans people fully transition from one gender to another. Some may only take hormones and never have surgery; others may have top surgery but not bottom surgery. The options are endless, and it is up to the individual and

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<sup>242</sup> McGlashan, 48.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

what makes them feel like their authentic self (though money and resources is also a significant factor, unfortunately).



Figure 4.4 Del LaGrace Volcano, *Herm Torso* from the series *Queering Gender*, 1999.

Photograph, unknown dimensions. <https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/queering-gender-35846711>.

Volcano also takes posed photographs that show sexual encounters. Their book and series *Sex Works* includes such photographs from 1978 to 2005. Volcano has various portraits of individuals or lovers together, and often their bodies cannot be categorized into “normal” gender roles. Two of Volcano’s photographs feature Harry and Simon, one simply titled *Harry and Simon, London* and the other titled *Fluid Fire, Harry and Simon*. In the first shot, Harry and

Simon are on a bed, naked, holding each other. One of them has their eyes closed, while the other gazes in a mirror also on the bed, their reflection looking directly at the camera. Their gaze could be interpreted as confrontational to the viewer, challenging the viewer to question their activities. Or it could be that they are gazing at Volcano behind the camera, making Volcano an active participant rather than a camera-clad voyeur. This inclusion of a mirror on the bed hints at some kinky activities, though compositionally it gives the viewer an almost 360-degree view of their embrace.



Figure 4.5 Del LaGrace Volcano, *Harry and Simon, London* from the series *Queering Gender*, 1998. Photograph, unknown dimensions. <https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/queering-gender-35846711>,

*Fluid Fire* gives us an even more up-close and personal view of what we can assume is happening between their embrace, with their genitals so closely aligned together that you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. This is an extremely personal and sensual image of queer intercourse, with the focus not on penetration (like so much straight pornography) but on the embrace, the touch. Their bodies are so close that where does one begin and the other end?

Whose genitalia is whose? Sure, you could zoom in and try to identify, but why? What does it matter? Sex framed as needing two different genitalia, a penetrator and a penetratee, is not the only kind of sex there is. Volcano is blatantly putting that fact in our face. Making the viewer acknowledge that other combinations, other eroticisms, other bodies exist. The Fire in *Fluid Fire* could be in reference to the flame-like tattoos in the shot, the amber lighting, or their sensual intimacy. The Fluid in *Fluid Fire* could be gender fluidity, sexual fluidity.

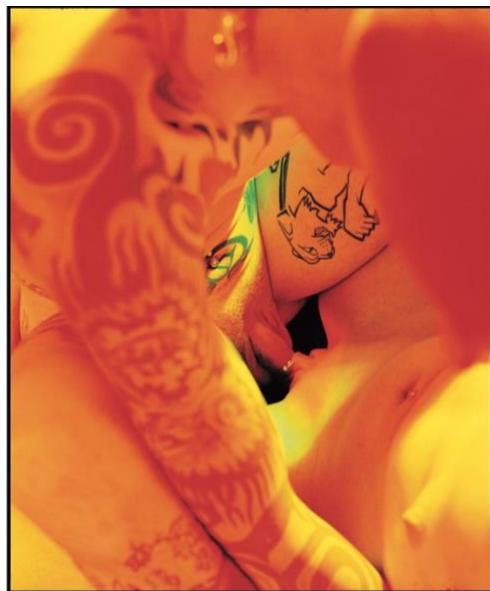


Figure 4.6 Del LaGrace Volcano, *Fluid Fire, Harry and Simon, London* from the series *Queering Gender*, 1998. Photograph, unknown dimensions.

<https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/queering-gender-35846711>.

Another example of someone blatantly challenging the observer and being open about their gender fluidity is *Moises at the Thames*, 1998. Moises stands nude except for a red pair of Chuck Taylors. They gaze directly at the viewer, unapologetic for their body on display. They also seem relaxed, like the photographer, Volcano, is a trusted friend. Moises appears male at first glance with a beard, receding hairline, and flat chest. However, there is a glaring lack of penis one would expect to find nestled amongst their pubic hair. Perhaps Moises has a penis

tucked away, or perhaps they do not have a penis at all. We are not given any further information about Moises, with no clues as to their gender identity. Volcano and Moises seem to pose the question “so what?” to the viewer. They both know that a viewer will automatically start categorizing Moises’ attributes into categorically male or female to try and determine their gender, but why do we do this? Volcano uses their photography to capture intimate moments with their close friends and confront the viewer about their own ideas of gender and why it is there in the first place. So what if Moises has a penis or not? Why would we automatically expect to see one?



Figure 4.7 Del LaGrace Volcano, *Moises at the Thames, London*, from the series *Queering Gender*, 1998. Photograph, unknown dimensions.

<https://www.dellagracevolcano.se/gallery/queering-gender-35846711>.

In these examples, and much of the rest of their oeuvre, Volcano strives to subvert the pre-existing notions of lesbian, queer, and nonbinary bodies as “deviants” with the very medium that early scientists used to document these “abnormalities” to be depersonalized, pathologized, and studied. Work such as Volcano’s can have far-reaching effects on both the heterosexual and queer communities. For one, viewers can look at these works and start questioning their preconceived notions, where they learned such things, and why. Viewers can also see the community, the personality, and the fun in these images. These are not depersonalized bodies for them to gaze at unobtrusively, but people who have a connection to the photographer who are both a part of this queer community and unashamed. Put another way: “Rendering the lesbian and queer bodies visible outside of the domestic and medical institutions, Volcano’s SEX WORKS redraws the political and sexual limits between the private and the domestic spaces.”<sup>245</sup> More recently, Volcano turned to combining their photography with interviews of their subjects, including themselves: “Most of all I wanted to go beyond the kind of semantics or the idea that we are a label, that we are trans or nonbinary or queer, and to look at actually what people do—as their bodies, their nonconforming bodies, move through the world.”<sup>246</sup> Gender nonconforming, trans, intersex people exist in all walks of life, whether a cis person can identify them or not. Volcano displaying their differences and making it abundantly clear these people exist and can be proud of their fluidity confronts preconceived notions and binary boundaries the hegemony prescribes society.

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<sup>245</sup> Preciado, “The Intersextional Digital Darkroom,” pages 157-8.

<sup>246</sup> Volcano, *Gender Optional*.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: UTOPIC GENDER FLUIDITY

What would it look like if society removed this pressure to pass? This need to render both trans and intersex bodies invisible? To propagate the idea that bodies are bodies, with no pathology involved. An equality of representation in media, porn, and medical journals, whether black, white, intersex, trans, cis, post-surgery or no surgery. What would that look like? Artistic representations of out and fluid trans people is incredibly important for spreading the knowledge that they are not alone in the world, just like subRosa spreading the image of diverse vulvas lets those with vaginas know that there is a normal diversity to vulvas.

Ironically, this is something that Holly Lawford-Smith almost agrees with in her *Gender Critical Feminism* even stating, “this may be difficult for gender-critical feminists to swallow.”<sup>247</sup> She sees trans surgeries as a “harmful practice” and to “reduce harms to gender non-conforming girls” we should first “keep working against sex inequality, which creates the understandable response in girls that they ‘are not female’ or ‘are not girls,’ because they dis-identify with negative stereotypes and expectations of femininity.” This assumption is common amongst gender critical feminists, believing that trans men are escaping sexism by transitioning. But her second method is to “support the trans rights movement’s efforts to decouple sex and gender identity. The more the gender nonconforming girls feel that they can be ‘boys’ or ‘men’ without medical or surgical transformations, the fewer harms.”<sup>248</sup> This point of view is eerily similar to the point I am trying to make, that it should not matter what someone’s outward appearance is in terms of gender presentation or genitalia. People should be free to live as their authentic selves and not feel pressure to have or not have surgery, to pass or not pass. I am not on

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<sup>247</sup> Lawford-Smith, 115.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

here advocating that all trans men should get gender confirming surgery, but I also do not see them getting such care as a negative thing like Lawford-Smith does. Gender critical feminists, when it comes to trans men, are tied up in the idea that they are transitioning because they don't feel stereotypically feminine so they must not be women: "Because some women don't fit those norms or find conformity to those norms comfortable, they end up thinking that they are *not women*."<sup>249</sup> My partner did not hate wearing makeup or painting their nails occasionally, they do not have animosity towards femininity. But they did hate their breasts being visible, and having their period made them want to die. So of course they had top surgery, of course they got a hysterectomy. But my partner also should not feel pressure to get a phalloplasty and pass as a man either, because they are not that either.

This notion Lawford-Smith says that gender critical feminists should support trans efforts to separate sex and gender so trans men do not feel pressured to get surgery does not extend to trans women, however. I have already discussed how gender critical feminists do not see trans women as women and that they should not be welcome in women's spaces, even going so far as to claim that is a form of rape. They see trans women as men taking up space, men essentializing what it means to be a woman. As Sandy Stone points out about this argument, "There are no subjects in these discourses, only homogenized totalized objects—fractally replicating earlier histories of minority discourses in the large."<sup>250</sup> Not every trans woman wants to do and show every feminine stereotype, but they often feel they have to for safety (passing) reasons. Also are these gender critical feminists mad when cis gay men exhibit stereotypically feminine traits? When women are hyper feminine? No. It's trans women that get the brunt of this criticism, this is just transphobia.

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<sup>249</sup> Lawford-Smith, 116.

<sup>250</sup> Stone, 232.

Society has a preconceived notion of what is “normal” and “abnormal” from how feminine someone has to be, to the look of their genitalia. We need to focus our efforts on where these stereotypes and notions come from, rather than on the people who adhere to them from societal pressure or for safety reasons. Like the medical field deciding what a “normal” vulva looks like. There is little to no suspicion of a medical field whose roots come from the mistreatment of slave women’s bodies. Rather than increasing sexual health education and normalizing women’s vulvas, surgical centers have fed into this gap in knowledge and created a market for vaginoplasties and labiaplasties. Instead of using the occurrence of people born intersex to reexamine preexisting notions of sex, surgeries are performed on infants to supposedly fix them, while actually traumatizing them and shaming them for their bodies based on a constructed idea of normalcy. Forcing this normalcy to the point that trans people feel the need to pass in order to exist in society safely. Why is gender and sex fluidity so scary? What would happen if the medical field diversified their representation in medical textbooks to include more races, more anatomical differences? The vulva art examined here builds onto the idea that the vulva is not a shameful thing, but a site of protest, of debate, of questioning the preexisting hegemony of the medical field specifically but society as a whole. No one should be ashamed of their genitalia or told that theirs is wrong. No one should be pressured to have surgery. No one should be told they are not the gender they are because of their genitalia.

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