

Experiments in living: the value of indeterminacy in trans art

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‘As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them. Where, not the person's own character, but the traditions of customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress’.

John Stuart Mill - *On Liberty*.

‘A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit’. Georges Bataille - *Formless*

Introduction

Consider Hans Scheirl's *Dandy Dust*, a cult film produced in London during the 1990s, which received wide critical acclaim. The film depicts Dandy who, in the film-maker's synopsis, is described as 'a split personality cyborg of fluid gender zooming through time to collect h-selves¹ in the fight against a genealogically-obsessed family'.² No longer capable of living on the planet of Blood & Swelling, Dandy embarks on a journey to planet 3075. Before the journey, his brain memory disc is removed. The film follows his arrival in the new planet, and sees him becoming physically connected to the planet's structure. He then proceeds to 'take his life into his own hands. Through a series of encounters, explorations and plots, aspects of material and psychic reality are skilfully represented. The film ultimately shows that Dandy is unable to find wholeness in a coherent narrative. Instead, 'the plot' presents, in parallel, multiple false beginnings and loose ends.³

Not having a narrative structure and working against conventional video grammars, Scheirl's film asks viewers to contextualise an apparently surreal non-linear amalgamation of scenes, materials and interactions, a collection which requires multiple potential readings often simultaneous and contradictory, to make sense of Dandy's journey. Reading the film, Steinbock (2013) suggests that the difficulty of establishing a coherent reading of the film invites viewers to abandon the need to make sense of the action and instead open up to its haptic interfaces and experiment, just like Dandy, with things to make meaning. For Scheirl, the material, affective and experiential process of art making opens up the body to new hypothetical relations between organs, theories, affects and living processes. As the film comes to an end, Dandy persists in refusing to condense or dehybridize his multiple identities. Making sense of the journey attunes Dandy to almost imperceptible changes, and to the complex relations between scales of embodiment, material and psychic life, the multiplicity and mutability of meaning through which his sense of transness evolves. In 2015, the British Film Institute hosted a retrospective screening of the film, featuring a dialogue with many of its protagonists, which created a new appraisal of its relevance and scope. Jokes were exchanged between artists and audience about the difficulty of making sense of the film's narrative

and message. A participant told Scheirl: 'all these years I thought Dandy Dust was a sophisticated metaphor, now I see how you tricked us: it makes no sense at all!'

If Dandy Dust was about transgender, it aimed to deconstruct familiar ideas about transition as simply moving from one fixed point to another. As such, analysing the film and its reception by many trans artists involved in crafting its message, is a productive way of exploring deliberate engagements with indeterminacy as a perpetual condition of irresolution, an open-ended experimentation with materiality and experience. Instead of accepting taken-for-granted values of body parts, social relations, things and technologies, Scheirl subverts such values through a haptic experiment of re-valuation: body parts and waste products become equivalent in order to reframe the politics of the human form. In an earlier retrospective talk about his work, Scheirl (2004) reflected on his method as a form of psychodynamics, where the artwork disrupts conventional dichotomies, making visible relationships between relationships. Scheirl (2004) later said that Alfred Gell had inspired him to think about the person-making capacities of art, as an agent concerned with doing rather than meaning, a way of creating, not representing worlds. For Scheirl, 'trans' is primarily an adjectival method that connects multiplicity, a compositional form that undoes and re-joins materials and knowledges, producing a new form which is not predictable as a synthesis of previous forms, but is something other. From this perspective, Scheirl defines the accomplishment of the artwork as based on the indeterminacy of a method that allows him to 'get away from the binaries' while bringing a critique of binary thinking to bear in critical descriptions of dynamics that frame relations between the inside and outside of the body, the interior and exterior of the artwork. In this sense, rather than completely rejecting binary distinctions, the artist engages in a process of creative deconstruction of conventions and form by reassembling textual, audio-visual and haptic elements. Ultimately, having lost hope of making sense of the journey, Dandy has no other choice than experimenting, sensing, 'groping' (Steinbock 2013) his way into it.

Scheirl, as well as other trans artists, emphasised the creation of new possibilities via open-ended experimentation. Just as many in the trans art community rejected the medico-legal normative model of recognition, so their practice escaped determinacy by rejecting formal art genres, connecting economies and politics of representation

through arts practice. Some artists, with whom I came in contact during my fieldwork, (2006-to date), had been involved in the production, or post-production, of *Dandy Dust*, which took several years to complete because of its complexity and insufficient funds. Those who knew the film closely told me about the mark it had made on London's art scene during the following decade. For my interlocutors, not only was the allegory it presented a radical metaphor of transition, concerned with exploding a coherent identity narrative, but it presented many of the complexities involved in transitioning, as well as artmaking, without aiming to resolve them. This chapter explores how these frictions continued to shape trans art practice, and how, in many ways, they are still unresolved today.

I am concerned here with exploring the tensions around the recognition of trans art, people, processes and lives. In essence, the conflicts are between recognition and codification, and highlight the difficulties between achieving visibility and being accorded value without becoming determined. Although the medical model of transition in Britain grants recognition to people transitioning from one to the other gender, this model is premised on 'a complete and irreversible' transformation, defined through achieving sets of physical and social standards that can ultimately reveal a person's gender and stand before expert recognition which compares individual gender embodiments to standard sexual characteristics, including voice pitch, appearance of genitalia, dressing style and demeanour. Most people accessing health services need to perform a coherent narrative about their aim to embody the opposite gender in order to obtain healthcare. While this framework offers access to gender affirming treatment in some instances, such access is guarded by psychiatric diagnostic and treatment access requirements. This can make it very difficult for many to gain the right to healthcare, particularly if they lack the resources to go through the bureaucratic referrals process successfully or to use private health services. This model, which has been criticised by trans organisations as being discriminatory and demeaning to trans people, is currently being reviewed in Britain to make it more accessible to those who do not define their trans identities within binary forms.⁴ The reforms plan to introduce a simpler administrative process for gender recognition applications instead of a process backed by medical 'evidence'. However, as yet there is no state recognition of trans identities outside of the model of binary gender.

Against the pitfalls of this model of recognition, this chapter explores two instances that highlight the value of indeterminacy for trans artists looking for inclusive, alternative spaces to be visible while resisting the designation or labels of others. First, I explore the emergence and demise of a trans arts festival, which was envisaged as an alternative platform that aimed to bring together trans artists, curators, activists and thinkers around an inclusive definition of trans art. However, community engagement with the Festival made visible some of the pitfalls of representation, as feedback from those attending the festival highlighted its failure to provide an inclusive platform for the most vulnerable in the community. The critique highlighted the double edge of recognition, noted in the introduction to this volume: while it may be necessary for inclusion, at the same time it raises questions about who recognises whom, and on what basis. For some, the festival raised new questions about how visibility might relate to recognition in practice, and how negotiating visibility as a trans person might not always be possible for those whose very identity comes with a higher risk of misrecognition and permanent precarity, such as some trans women and trans people of colour. Although the Festival aimed to make arts practices and identities visible, the way that new definitions of trans art privileged some forms visibility over others was ultimately seen to recapitulate the politics of recognition it set out to resist.

I then draw on my ethnographic fieldwork among artists in London to explore how they make a living from indeterminacy by imagining alternative lives and social worlds through practice and play. This argument makes connections between arts practice and emancipatory aesthetics which are neither new about art practice nor about queer communities. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam has linked abstract art to forms of activism that stem from creative responses to failure (Halberstam 2005:103, 2011). For Halberstam, abstract art is linked to a 'new vision of life, love and labour' and the practice of queer utopias, it is a possibility that lurks behind constant rejections. Queer utopias rely on manifestos, political tactics and technologies of representation to 'search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject' (2011:2). However, trans artists also engage subversive capacities of art-making in more subtle ways, for example, emphasising immanence and process over determination, and carefully

crafting and framing their practice through resisting formal labels and art canons, yet strategically using them to be able to access basic welfare and healthcare support.

Bringing together queer and art theory, I explore trans art practices that link politics, experimentation and experience, seeking to create ethical living spaces, through practices that blend a critical engagement with visibility and sensoriality through an 'experiment in living', a creative, open-ended exploration of living through form. John Stuart Mill introduced the idea of experiments in living to defend the value of 'embracing the variability of human life', believing that 'the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically' (Mill quoted in Marres 2012: 76). Living experiments have been described across fields from environmentalism to practices of interdisciplinary collaboration. In these contexts, living experiments are seen to implicate both large-scale logics and habits and sensibilities of the everyday (Hawkins 2006) in exploring ethics and the common good without resorting to arbitrary definitions of the good (Anderson 1991, Macbeath 1952). The trans artists I worked with made visible the often multiple and contradictory values of being visible, resisting and being refused categorization, and their engagement with arts practice embraced indeterminacy through a speculative 'infection with abstraction' (Parisi 2013: 153), to open up utopian and ethical fields of action.

Engaging my interlocutors' interpretations of their practice, the chapter explores conceptualism as an ethnographic proxy for life (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013, Valentine 2007). Indeed, the artists I worked with often thought of representation as a practice that did not come out of a pre-existing identity, but as transient form that reinscribed the body through a performative relation. Trans artist and curator Gordon Hall, the indeterminacy of artworks such as Richard Artschwager's Yes/No ball⁵, where perspective and motion determine how the words 'yes' and 'no' printed on opposite sides of the sculpture come into view, provoke engagements with the body as a virtual entity. This may be apply to abstract art more generally, because objects 'do not speak in any language but that of their presence in space' (2013:48). Since these sculptures do not have an intended use, they tend to conjure up the body as an act of imagination based on 'the coexistence of yes and no, almost, in between, not quite, both and neither' (Saltz quoted in Hall 2013:56). In this sense, queer art critics have described abstract

art as possessing a 'transgender capacity': a potential to bring into experience 'gender's dynamism, plurality and expansiveness' (2014: 47). These qualities derive from abstraction, and may be located in 'texts, objects, cultural forms, situations, systems and images that support an interpretation or recognition of proliferative modes of gender non-conformity, multiplicity and temporality' (ibid). My ethnography explores the difficulties of recognition in practice, and frames how meanings of indeterminacy bring forward tensions between its positive and negative values. Thus, by bringing anthropology into dialogue with trans studies, queer and art theory, this chapter explores how anthropology might think through the tensions that emerge from living indeterminacy in practice.

Against Representation

Dandy Dust was shot in London at a crucial time when medical transition shaped trans visibility in the arts and the media. Advocacy organisations such as Press for Change worked to create a socially acceptable image of transgender identities through media interventions and political lobbying, trans visibility permeated popular culture through photography and film⁶. This cultural and media advocacy work eventually led to the normalisation of a model of civil recognition that depended on the medico-legal framework through the Gender Recognition Act (2004), a model that requires an irreversible transition to achieve social integration through binary gender embodiment.⁷ While being 'in the wrong body' was the mainstay of the medico-legal model of transition, and many fought to be recognised as such, the model, and its exclusions, were increasingly questioned in academic literature and cultural production, particularly from the late 1990s (More and Whittle 1999, Prosser 1998). For example, these tensions surrounded definitions of 'transgender art'. Some trans artists I met felt that art was particularly important to survive as a trans person. For some trans artists, their trans identities were the catalyst that led them to engage in artistic production, the need to explain their bodies, identities or transitions to other trans, or non-trans audiences, and to create ways of relating outside of normative gender relations. At the time of my initial fieldwork, cultural production was becoming key to a growing community of people transitioning or questioning their gender. Some of the artists I

worked with performed in community venues and festivals, promoting cultural events and gaining a precarious livelihood by engaging the community in cultural production. At established bars and nightclubs, performance artists thrived in a proliferation of styles, including satire, imitation and parody, gender confessions and disclosure of experiences of trauma.⁸ At the same time, representations of transgender identities by and for non-trans people were also becoming public, 'safe for consumption' versions of transgender. The push to mainstream transgender was the product of an unlikely alliance involving some trans community organisations, corporations and political agents. As social attitudes to gender non-conformity changed, a new wave of self representation, the so called 'transgender tipping point', meant greater acceptance for some trans identities and representations among mainstream audiences. Increasingly, however, such versions were seen not to align with trans community politics, and were oblivious to the consequences that these representations had for underprivileged members of the trans community.

A scene from my early fieldwork stayed in my memory for years, and I revisited it afresh in 2015. In 2006, a group of artists and activists put together Transfabulous, the first national festival of transgender art. The festival evolved from a fundraiser picnic in support of a local charity, to gradually become a formal event with a curated programme of interventions from local and international artists, performers, community advocates, and academics. I met with one of the organisers in 2015 to ask him to recall the early days of the festival, which was based on a collective conviction that the London trans community needed cultural production. I asked my interlocutor why, being a unique offering with wide appeal, the festival had had such a short life, disappearing abruptly in 2008. A decade later, nothing like Transfabulous has emerged in the scene again. He replied that it was difficult to organise a festival of that scale without committed funding resources and that, despite efforts to be inclusive, there had not been enough public recognition of the diversity of trans experiences, nor an acknowledgement of, or critical engagement with, the consequences of representations. Critical audience reactions remarked that the festival provided a platform for forms of trans identity that were already more visible and culturally acceptable, contributing to perpetuating cleavages within the community, as well as creating new ones. After Transfabulous, both trans artists and audiences were invested in opening up definitions

of transgender art to defy the perilous demands of state recognition, but were also seeking to find accurate representations that could speak directly to local issues and identities. Transgender artists often talk about being caught up in this 'double bind', as filmmaker Jules Roskam put it (2014): producing forward-looking work that is effective in identifying conditions other people can relate to, while becoming pedagogical objects for outsiders, 'showing' something new about trans experience to non-trans audiences.

<< insert 3.1 Viva la Trans Revolution about here >>

And yet, as I talked to my interlocutor about the reasons behind Transfabulous' closure, there was a wider issue about the possibility that the arts could uniquely preserve histories that would otherwise easily be lost, or else become normalised and diluted if too quickly mainstreamed. It was the age-old issue, he said, 'about how a story gets to be told, who gets to tell the story, why stories always have their time and how some will never be told'. The indeterminacy of the trans story, told and untold through artistic practice, hinges on relations between arts practices and the politics of their intellectual and institutional formations.

Indeed, the definition of transgender art did not exist in isolation from the festival's wider context. Transfabulous aimed to celebrate a transnational, transgenerational definition of transgender art, but the community found this generic ambition to be at odds with the complex, multiple and unequal realities of gender, migration, employment and privilege that limited access to art and cultural production, and even more, access to the education and resources needed to earn a livelihood in the arts. Some considered that the festival made these differences invisible while appealing to a positive, disembodied, white-by-default representation of transgender. At the time, I read the conflicts that arose around the festival also as a tension between identity and post-identity frameworks, where notions of transsexuality, as opposed to 'transgender', were beginning to be seen as a step backwards. Indeed, transgender appeared as a form of utopianism, which became an area of contention for both trans and feminist scholars, in terms of identity politics, one that could just as easily become a source of death –by negating others who do not make the mark, or by predicating trans visibilities on the

acceptance of global power structures. Haritaworn, Kuntsman and Posocco refer to this kind of erasure as 'queer necropolitics' (2014). Besnier (2002) captured a similar dynamic in his description of the Miss Galaxy beauty pageant in Tonga. Every year the show allowed marginalized *leiti*, a transgender identity category derived from the English word 'lady', to claim a place out of hegemonic gender frameworks, acting as a universalizing force, yet also a crucial site of tension in the staging of local transgender idioms and identities.

Lazar notes that cultural performances produce a sense of 'experiential authenticity: the fleeting feeling of sharing the experience of a performance with others' (2008:125), rooting participants in a shared sense of collectivity, a relation that links people, practice and place. Trans performance traditions in London do not particularly relate to any place beyond the stage, but unite participants in the performance of cultural transgression, oral storytelling and confessional and transition narratives. The festival itself became a key context in which arts practices became relevant without the need to be further explained. They became contexts of transformation that enabled audiences to construct their own forms of agency, and new 'modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there' (Ortner, 2006:57). As Stryker noted, it is in safe, subcultural spaces that trans identities come into being 'gaff and gauntlet rather than scalpel and syringe' (1998:150), through a recursive relation between reality and imagination.⁹

Thus, enacting tensions between identity, post-identity and non-identity, a relation between practice and cosmology emerges as the 'functional site' for trans art. These practices increasingly blur the boundaries between art and life by indexing relations, and exposing an indeterminate relation between practice and meaning that reflects the negative dialectics that characterizes indeterminacy as discussed in the introduction to this volume: a state of radical potential concerned both with change and non-future oriented ways of being, the promotion of multiple, sometimes contradictory forms of value and valuation, and a tension holistic representation and the production of fragmented representational practices. Indeed, the tipping point in the media was surrounded by a critical turn in transgender studies that some have dubbed the 'post-post transsexual':¹⁰ the time when transgender idioms, vocabularies, and material

cultures are no longer concerned with gender, but with critiques of biopolitics, disability, political economy, pathologization, and animal studies that have moved away from identity frameworks. Examples have been received from both recognized and emergent artists,¹¹ from Yishay Garbasz's work on conflict zones, nuclear and post-war landscapes, to artworks and art practices that address scientific and social histories of pathologisation, sometimes becoming alternative forms of gender pedagogy (McNamara and Rooke 2008, Rooke 2010). In the next section I turn to tensions between arts practice of indeterminacy and the experience of such open ended experiments in living.

Experiments in Living

Institutional visibility was often neither easy nor unproblematic for most trans artists I worked with. Rather than fitting particular genres, it responded to challenges posed by materials. My interlocutors routinely spoke about the difficulties of inhabiting heteronormative and gender-conforming art worlds, and how their positions were routinely marginalised when it came to access to funding and exhibition spaces. However, their practices were no longer concerned with addressing the tensions of cultural politics. These artists often had precarious paid employment. In order to make a living they therefore had ceased to be only occupied with cultural politics and reimagining the conditions of the present. Rather, in their lives and their art practice alike, they 'became visible' selectively and strategically, attempting to continue resisting classification. Cultural production was the bedrock of ways of living not concerned with particular futures, but with interrogating relations between practice, aesthetics and visibility.

Consider Sidney's art practice. Her work as an experimental sound artist has featured in arts magazines, sound conferences and exhibitions, but mostly as a 'feminist of colour', a label with which she does not identify, but a label, nonetheless, that she sometimes claims strategically seeking for her work to be visible in some space. Her own description of her art practice is concerned with working through composition through and against interpretation to provide a sense of 'spaciousness, structure and direction', which is accomplished by playing with expectations of context, meaning, and affect. Her

work begins by undoing sound structures by artificially isolating elements through recording and sampling, then through a process of listening, assembling and altering sound sequences to generate a sense of wonder. She describes composition as a process of attunement in which mediations and transmissions take place. Sound is an enclosure that makes knowing social, spatial and temporal; a site of transformation. In this context, Sidney says, it is useful to read transgender, not as a representation but as an unstable form characterised by performative repetition and indeterminacy. Against a priori distinctions between matter and representation, working with sound brings forward material and affective linkages through which relations between material and symbolic worlds come to matter.¹²

This alternative to representationalism invites a reconceptualization of the realm of practice. Indeed, according to my interlocutors, there are reasons that this is needed: lack of access to resources particularly affects people of non-normative genders, who are often also riddled with histories that complicate *how* their practice becomes visible. For example, Sidney regularly expressed concerns about how the practicalities of access to training and studio spaces, grants and resources determined the form of her artworks more than any ideas did. Thinking arts practice through the lens of participation, anthropologists have turned to relations to take the practice of art seriously (Schneider and Wright 2005). Whether language based, gestural, or artefactual, art practices are grounded on histories and materials that contain affordances and resistances. Indeed, as Kuchler (2013) highlights, ‘all made things partake of intentional and systematizing thought’ (2013:25), serving as vehicles of knowledge that bind people through practice. The location and orientation of art depends less on place than it does on an assemblage delineated by a ‘field’ of knowledge, composed of materials, agencies, places, and relations (Kwon, 2002). From this perspective, the biography of Sidney’s sonic objects includes the relational processes involved in their constitution: the context of their production, and the relations involved in their circulation and reception. While her tracks present indeterminate assemblages, their relational constitution and reassemblage on stage opens them to the ‘conditions of possibility of [the public’s] association’ (Kelty 2005), which depend in important ways on various degrees of public engagement, disengagement and non-engagement (Rapport 2016). This indeterminacy of artworks,

marked by contingent happenings and associations has, in other arts contexts, been considered 'form as living', or indeed 'living as form' (Thompson 2012), insofar as in happening, form might reconfigure social orders—through sensoriality, experimentation and participation.

These artworks not only translate particular utopian or dystopian visions, but open up the conditions of interpretation. Sam, who earns a living as a musician and cultural producer describes their musical practice as 'knowing matter'. A musician without classical training, they rely on sound medium to teach them *a posteriori* 'the skill' of sound, and views each of their performances as a contingent process where the body must 'keep up' with music and learn to remember. Sam is now an improvisational musician who sets up monthly music events. At every event, a manifesto hangs on the wall, asking attendees to refrain from behaving like men or like women, so as to let the unexpected find them as the performances unfold. Often, improvisations involving audience and musicians begin after the concert officially comes to an end, as the possibility of improvisation is opened up by unpredicted connections between invited musicians. Voices, instruments and music, take on an agential role to open up an ontological space of music (Born 2013b; Fraser 2005), One could argue that a sense of experimentation and open-endedness makes these artworks topological, in the sense of their capacity to reconfigure space (Born, 2013a), but their expansive ethos also extends by resonance or contagion. In this sense, I think of these artworks as 'trans-objects',¹³ open-ended explorations that may create space for the unexpected by bringing set structures alive in a different context they were originally intended to inhabit, a possibility of the otherwise. Sam's life practice evolved out of a sense that the arts, and perhaps also the possibility of a social identity as an artist, opened up a way to express difference, becoming a space of survival, and a 'queer ecology' (Morton 2010) that invited, by association, alternative worlds into being. Their resistance to be bound by formal musical grammars, instead staging an improvisational open-ended practice which seeks to resist the telos of representation, leaves out past and future to intervene in the present. This resistance relies on practice to change the conditions of the present, working by reference to transferences between living kinds (and kinds of living) and artifacts.¹⁴

In this context, where does the art object end and life begin? Imagining existence at the edge of abstraction is, perhaps, the event value of the occurring arts (Massumi, 2011), but my interlocutors always returned to the value of trans experience as the real value of their art.¹⁵ Wade, a classically-trained musician and illustrator, often talks about a tension between mainstream art and music worlds, where he learnt his craft, and his experience of performing in trans spaces, which was key to his abandoning classical practice to explore improvisation. He frames his practice as a conversion between structures. His practice blurs boundaries of genres, and purposely bends these boundaries through a sense of detachment and play. Although he kept creative practices separate, working as a freelance advertiser and a classical pianist, working with colour, lines and later with texture, over time, music folded into illustration. His trans experience translates a refusal to work towards fitting genres and canons. Instead, trading in 'small stories' outweighs the desire to make the work suitable for larger audiences, blurring distinctions between the artwork as an object or practice and utopian spaces of transformation that are generated collectively as the artwork is received. Involving audiences and art structures in pursuit of transversality (Thompson 2015), he relies on art becoming determinate through the shared collective recognition of lived conditions. Art is, in this sense, a form of make-believe, though it may also create worlds by provoking disengagement from held belief. Wade seeks to make objects that create a systematic gap between the information received and the meaning recovered (Marchand 2010b) which remains 'under-specified' and necessitates inference and context in order to derive meaning. 'There may be an urge to escape and dissociate from some painful or challenging reality', He told me. 'On the other hand, it's fun to dress up the subject and confuse people'.

In this sense, experiments in living connect ethics, aesthetics and life processes, by enabling an exploration of horizons of representation, a process concerned with finding other forms of life through abstract thinking, at borders between categories, genres, media, and method. Instead of staging identity-based concepts and distinctions, the trans artists I worked with understood arts practice as a way to investigate frames of experience which may lead to hyposubjectivity: a multiphasic, plural existential condition of survival (Boyer and Morton 2016). In the context of artistic production, this condition necessitates a re-evaluation of experimentality, and of relations between

materials, form and the conditions of cultural production. As such, these practices relate not to accomplishing a determined programme, but to an existential project that is concerned with the possibility of becoming, to borrow Susan Stryker's famous phrase, 'something more, and something other' (Stryker 1994:242). But, perhaps more importantly, trans abstraction thus invites us to think of arts practices as an interface that reframes physical and propositional domains as equivalent relations. These are prime sites of ontological difference, interfaces that make a difference through practice (Malafouris 2013; Marchand 2010a), which becomes central in both specifying and disrupting cognitive constructs (Toren 1990) that articulate relations between culture, identity and imagination.

Conclusion: trans-objects and speculative futures

This article has provided a reading of arts practices as experiments in living, 'excessive practices' (de la Cadena 2010), grassroots strategies that respond to the failure of politics-as-usual by deploying new logics to mobilise a political sphere. I have discussed trans art practices that deploy indeterminacy to disrupt identity politics, and remake politics of representation against institutional contexts that universalise transgender. Art practices function by obviating taken-for-granted complementarities between physical and psychosocial, material and semiotic realms, providing a basis to think through how 'intrinsic' qualities—for example, aesthetic qualities or the manifest qualities of a body—might not be different from the 'secondary' reactions and impressions they create, the ways through which they become known. Art practices reflect the unfinished constitution of nature, subjectivity, and materiality, which are not only known through, but are themselves relations. This exploration of the material and epistemic frames of experience and transition posits new questions about how anthropology can learn with bodies, their capacities and indeterminacies, to reimagine the method of ethnography. As such, as Gatt and Ingold suggest, these experiments and practices can become a critical research tool of an anthropology that 'seeks to correspond with, rather than to describe, the lives it follows' (2013:144), opening up frictions in categorical thinking to reflect the value of indeterminacy as a way of knowing.

Somewhere between practice and object, the trans-objects I have described are based on a structural search of perceptual concretion, as everyday practices which 'tak[e] on a generative role as a phenomenological, experiential entity' (Small 2016:163), shuttling 'between viewer and maker just as they move between the categories of work of art and ready made thing' (ibid:175). They are, in this sense, both happening and events of the imagination, exaptations 'whereby structures that may have evolved for one purpose are co-opted for quite different functions for which they happen to come in handy' (Ingold in Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009:21). It could be argued, following Wilson and Sperber (2012), that these experiments may not only lead to differentiation at the individual level but also at the social level. Performing translations between materials and psychic experiences, across and beyond forms and feeling, through texture and sensation, art adopts a transmaterial form: it queers materiality to travel across multiple worlds of meaning. This is resonant, of some art, including Scheirl's that may apparently focus on transgender, while in fact also addressing trans-culture, trans-media and trans-class (Scheirl in Erharter *et al* 2015:31 n3). Thus, trans art practices are in many ways 'technologies of existence' (Massumi 2011) through which people understand backwards and live forwards, as the way that objects are 'inter-given' as their potential for transforming experience is relayed from one experience to another. Experimenting with understandings of transition and trans life leads both artists and participants to a 'hypothetical twin world' (Jones 2014), where life, and the social, become newly re-membered. Such practices are, most importantly, social ways to make things happen, implicating practice, methods, and publics in the making of worlds. This assemblage recalibrates retrospectively the value of indeterminacy, producing a posteriori the conditions it presupposes.¹⁶ While escaping formal norms, indeterminacy allows artists make *other* worlds, and while this condition predicates possibility, it can also make everyday survival more difficult. As such art practices are exemplar sites where indeterminacy is reclaimed as a capacity for difference, yet becomes a key site of friction between the idea and everyday practice of difference.

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1 H-selves here is an abbreviation of his- or her- selves.

2 The film's original synopsis, written by the artist is accessible at <http://bak.spc.org/couch/interviews/hansinfo01.htm#top>, accessed 2016.

3 For example, Dandy says to Aunt Theodora: 'I am Dandy Dust'. 'Oh, that makes sense', comes the reply. 'Do me a favour and stay that way for a while'.

⁴ See the UK Government's Transgender Action Plan, accessible online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transgender-action-plan> (Accessed September 2017).

⁵ see <https://mcatchicago.org/Collection/Items/Richard-Artschwager-Yes-No-Ball-1974> (accessed September 2017)

⁶ First, long traditions of photographic representation captured gender variance in ways that words never could (Cameron 1996, Volcano 2001), becoming grammars of possibility that inspired people to transition and to imagine their bodies and their lives, beyond the prejudice of mainstream media representations.

⁷ The Gender Recognition Act (GRA), currently under revision after a 2010 investigation led by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, grants access to a modified birth certificate to those who applied on the basis of recognised standards of medical transition, including having undergone periods of hormonal treatment and/or surgery. The law is premised on binary gender recognition, and on transitioning in one direction only once in a lifetime.

⁸ See also examples elsewhere, including Erharter et al (2015), Ochoa (2013).

⁹ Cultural production frames the conditions in which transgender *becomes* visible, asking viewers to reveal the gaze that frames cultural identity and difference. For Prosser, this question contains others: 'how do you relate to an image and to the (transgender) other? where are you looking from? (Prosser in Volcano 2001:7). Prosser reflects Foucault's (1970) description of painting and perspective.

¹⁰ According to Stryker and Currah (2014), this is the time of the post-post-transsexual, when the 'post-transsexual' critique of an assumed homogeneity of transsexual identities, is extending beyond transgender as a form of cultural critique concerned with social justice. 'Post-transsexual was first described by Sandy Stone (2010) in her critique of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, paving the way for a definition of transgender. Stryker and Currah coined this term to suggest a shift

¹¹ Such as Juliana Huxtable, Tobaron Waxman, Heather Cassils, among many others.

¹² A process which counters the representationalist project, which works through representational homologies. While representationalism is premised on an inherent distinction between matter and representation, Barad highlights how the intra-agential constitution of 'things' is determined by the measurement practices that produce their value (See Barad, 2007:71-94, see also Bal, 2002).

¹³ The term trans-object relates to the work of the visual artist Helio Oiticica (how/why?), and has been described by Ramirez (2007) and Small (2016). The artist Helio Oiticica coined the name *trans-objeto* (Ramirez and Olea 2004; Schneider and Wright 2013) in search of

'parangolés': structures designed to bring alive the practice of painting, for example by setting in motion wearable colour fabrics designed to be inhabited and danced in space, those composing a living picture.

¹⁴ These transferences, according to Bloch, are not unique to arts processes, permeate cultural cognition and are premised on the availability of material symbols that can 'make the jump', based on a recognition of the unity of living kinds (1998:62). My argument is that arts practice in these contexts works as the interface where transferences between living kinds and objects happen.

¹⁵ My use of the term 'semblance' is inspired by Susanne Langer's (1953) and Brian Massumi's (2011), but Posocco (2015) uses Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances' similarly to think through the relation between material remains and knowledge.

¹⁶ Appadurai has shown that relations between a model or meaning and its counterpart activity are not necessarily symmetrical, since models may recalibrate reality retrospectively as well as prospectively, producing the conditions that they also presuppose. Appadurai illustrates this double performativity describing how derivatives contracts, as ritualised performances, produce retrodictively their conditions of their own felicity: 'this retro-creativity of certain performatives (...) exposes the fact that the entire ritual is an exercise in enacting uncertainty in such a form as to increase the likelihood of resolving it' (2016:125), which determines 'the terms in which uncertainty is understood' (Appadurai 2016 138).

Bio

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