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Post/Porn/Politics Symposium/Reader

DUBER: Feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex_Work as Culture Production.

bibooks Berlin

SBN 978-3-933557-76-6

Edited by:

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JVE

Jan van Eyck Academie

This project was made possible with the support of the Jan van Eyck Academie.

The programme of the Jan van Eyck is financially supported by the City of Maastricht, the Province of Limburg and the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

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Tobaron Waxman

aron Waxman [http://www.tobaron.com]

BriXton Brady
* 3 rd April 1965
† 18th September 2006



Tobaron Waxman Yes, I should clarify something here . . . sometimes I am not the model in the photograph, and I still conceptually call the work a self-portrait. I don't always make it a priority to confirm for a viewer which model is me, or if the model is a transsexual, or what their orientation is, if they are HIV-positive, what they like in a sandwich, etc. If the work is intended as documentary, then the model becomes a subject . . . I have not really been interested in making that kind of work, and I feel there is plenty of that available. The choreography is coming from my own subjectivity of course, and to that extent this is residue of my experience, I was originally trained in portrait painting, figure drawing and theater. I don't really make self-portraits in the traditional sense, but I borrow from the sensibilities and language of this training.

TS In your lecture "The First Time He Tought He Was Beautiful: A Transmasculine Pornographic Sublime," which you held at "Post/Porn/Politics," you very early made it clear that you are not primarily interested in the paradigm of performativity and representation, but in embodiment, which you investigate through performance and video art.

You write about this in relation to pornography, a genre you were interested in experimenting with mainly between 1999 and 2003: "I am interested in pornography as a medium because embodiment is inescapably required. Somewhere between embodiment and social construct the viewer and the maker and the performers experience a physical change. This is not about costume. Gender is embodied and not merely performed."

 $\overline{\text{TW}}$ Embodiment is required of the non-actors I am shooting, they are very much in the scene, they are not acting. If they are "acting" it is in the manner of sexual roleplay, with the ante upped perhaps, because of the voyeuristic element my presence, and ultimately my camera, represents. Still, one goes in and out of awareness of onlookers during the scene. Embodiment is affected in the viewer of the tape, too, not only because they become aroused or have some physical response or symptom as a result of watching, but because at various times they realize how they are implicit in the creation of the image.

TS When you talk about your inspirations, you name artists and teachers, Del LaGrace Volcano, Annie Sprinkle, and Adrian Piper. Another name which popped up in your talk more than one time is Barbara deGenevieve. Can you tell me how you got to know Barbara and what made it so interesting for you to collaborate with her? I remember her doing the post-porn-website "ssspread. com," which doesn't exist anymore. In the "P/P/P" symposium you showed

images from the works "how long has it been" and "True Spirit," which I think also were produced in, or after, a porn seminar Barbara gave. In the works I mentioned, you seem to be interested in FTM-gay sex, SM and age-play. I am also interested why you picked exactly these fetishes, which have their own specific history in FTM culture, as far as I know – and might reference also different states of transition, which also create an ambiguity concerning age.

TW I made the three videos "Self Portrait #1: Reverence," "True Spirit" and "how long has it been" when studying with Barbara deGenevieve at the Art Institute of Chicago. It was a porn seminar; in other words, we were studying the history and criticism of pornography and, in response to it, making our own. I took this class because I was afraid of it. Even within that admission, I was still processing the choice to take it and denying the reality of physical response to the material. But a porn studio-seminar, with mentorship and peer critique, seemed an appropriate place to make work that confronted my own thanatic desires. My own interrogation of gender, in fact, wouldn't let me get away with not doing this work.

Perhaps people at the "P/P/P" Conference would empathize, coming from academy, that in a school context it is dangerous to implicate the body of the spectator. Even though everybody talks about desire and bodies and pleasures and affect all the time; even in the messier media of performance, which is my primary medium, where we already have a tradition of working with the body and all of its memories and excreta, the

school prefers to be a sterile incubator. The lines get blurred when an artwork evokes a sexual response from a viewer, perhaps more so when the viewer is an instructor, or a group of students who have paid tuition in order to be gathered together at that moment. At that moment, what was once a controlled, politically correct, academic structure becomes a taboo space. In this way the student making sexually explicit work infects the whole room. The student making sexual images of the transgendered or transsexual can find themselves wasting a lot of time explaining embodiment. Transmasculine embodiment, the mere locution itself, is anothematized before the critique even gets around to the work. This is why taking a class in which the reality of the living image and my own anxieties about it were already acknowledged has been crucial to my development as an artist.

Barbara is a selfless and inspiring teacher. She also published the article "A pornographic sublime," an idea from which I learned very much and to which homage was paid in the title of my presentation for the PPP audience. I contributed three scenes to her website ssspread.com, which were the first "FTM on FTM" porn scenes on the internet.

The images of bodies I was interested in making at that time incorporated transsexual men, and a range of male bodies. The sex in these scenes is gay and sometimes sado-masochistic. One of the realities of transmasculine embodiment is that the individual finds himself ambiguously aged as well, and can look like a so-called "youth" until he is years into his transition. This evokes complex power dynamics of implied age difference between the people in the video. The resulting image is ambiguously legal, as transgender and gender deviance embodied call into question whether or not someone who looks like a minor has a legal right to be sexualized on camera. I have deliberately interrogated this, and fetishized the youthful quality of the subjects, and have

Tobaron Waxman

done so from a place of empathy. I feel it is my right to do so, and part of my legacy and inheritance as one who queers the queer masculine image.

TS What makes your work post/pornographic, I think, is not only that it goes beyond normative experiences of representations of masculinity and roleplay, embodiment and sex, but it's also the way you reflect the dispositive of a recorded scene. For example, in "how long has it been" you document a roleplay, you include viewers in the scene, reminding us that every porn scene shot has one or many audiences. Or in "True Spirit" after the sex scene has ended, you don't stop the camera; but very touchingly, after acts of strong bodily intensity, you include the aftercare of the non-professional performer: About nine minutes into the tape, an off-camera voice calls "cut." The three performers of the scene then sit down, and a firm voice behind the camera instructs: "Aftercare." This extraordinary situation which is usually excluded from the pornographic construction of a scene's narrative deals with what you call "that last taboo, rarely addressed in sexually explicit video; empathy and intimacy." For me this is not only true, but also a metaphor for all the echoes and emotional consequences that a sex act, especially in role-play, can have. The illusion that a sex act is just a closed compact piece of experience is destroyed.

<u>TW</u> In this tape, I set up a choreography which could incorporate the desires of the people who volunteered to perform in it, a Top, a Bottom, and a Switch: Two guys jump another guy in the stairwell and sexually assault him. About ten minutes into the scene, one of our look-outs called down the stairwell that someone was coming and we had to stop. I called out "cut," and instructed the performers, resigned to sitting down together on the concrete landing, to commence "Aftercare." In the spirit of Dogma, Cinema Verité, and the complexities of a lived transsexual life, I kept the camera on. In the finished edit, an off-camera voice calls out "cut." A firm voice behind the camera instructs: "Aftercare."

Placing the aftercare where it actually occurred in the shoot, i.e. in the middle of the tape and not at the end, gives the viewer access to the private world of these three people. In this way, the subjectivities of the submissive, the two dominants, the director and the viewer are interchanged.

The result is that the viewer simultaneously remembers and forgets that one is watching a tape from a safe distance. This is all complicated by the fact that the players are non-actors, which creates a kind of realism, and that they are all transsexual men, in different states of transition. This means that they to varying degrees appear male, androgynous, and youthful. The viewer is put in a position of questioning their role in violence and consent, as well as their part in determining the gender identity of the players.

This footage was shot with volunteers at an annual event for FTMs which was a community-run information and support exchange conference, and partly an unofficial orgy, called "True Spirit." JJ Bitch, the Bottom in the scene, said that

watching the uncut footage immediately following the shoot was the first time he ever felt beautiful. It's from this that I derived the title for my presentation, and also in light of the sudden death of Brixton Brady.

TS The transgender-activist
Brixton Brady died a few weeks
be-fore the symposium, one of the
reasons why the FTM-audiovisual
artist Del LaGrace Volcano, who was
invited to the event, couldn't come.
So I asked you, not only because
you were FTM and a friend of Del,
but also because Brixton Brady was
somebody you knew. . . .

TW Brixton Brady was a beloved friend to the queer community based in London. She was an amazing gender transcendant person, "a diamond fine cut with many faces," to quote her life partner Boris. Brixton was very gentle, and gifted with the kind of vision ascribed to Tzaddikim in traditional Judaism – Brixton could look right into you and see you for who you really are, and for the potential of who you could be. Brixton was killed a few weeks before the "Post/Porn/Politics" Conference in a road accident in London. Brixton was Del LaGrace Volcano's best friend, and Del was in mourning; so Del cancelled and reccomended I take his place. I really loved Brixton, and as Del is one of my "Uncles" in this life....

TS Another person you worked with is Shannon Bell, who is doing female ejaculation workshops. You helped organize a benefit female ejaculation workshop with the feminist/sex work-activist Liad Kantorowicz in

the queer scene of Tel Aviv. What interests you in female ejaculation, a practice which is not a new one, but still for many – if in theory, representation or practice – quite unknown.

Also, can you tell us a bit about Shannon Bell?

TW Shannon Bell is a fast feminist immersion philosopher who lives and writes philosophy in action. She is an associate professor in the York University Political Science Department where she teaches sexual politics, identity/post identity politics and violent philosophy. Please look at her page at: [http://www.arts.yorku.ca/politics/shanbell/index.html].

Shannon was coming to visit me from Ars Electronica. I requested that she give her workshop, as a gift to the community, during that visit. She agreed that it was not politically viable to visit Israel simply as a tourist. The workshop was held in Beit Nashim Feministi, where they had a framed portrait of Catherine McKinnon on the wall. In attendance were a few FTM and genderqueers, a few Mizrachi women, and the rest were white Ashkenazi women. Very few people in attendance were pointed out to me as having been involved in sex work. The point in the workshop, for me, was to bring the sex work and allied community together with the traditional feminists. It was made explicitly clear by Shannon and I that the proceeds from the event were to be split evenly between Beit Nashim Feministi and an effort by Liad Kantorowicz to make some kind of peer-run initiative for local sex workers, in whatever manner she liked. Liad explained to us that there is little to no opportunity for sex workers to talk with each other. Also safer sex for women is still not very widely practiced or understood. Shannon's lecture includes all of these elements, both in terms of history of the pathologization of women's sexuality and a nuanced safer sex practice. I saw the workshop as activism in terms of women's health and agency, and an interesting historical moment. It

Tobaron Waxman

masculine Pornographic Sublime.

The First Time He Tought He Was Beautiful: A Transı

In honor of the life of BriXton Brady.

Pornographic Sublime.

The First Time He Tought He Was Beautiful: A Transmasculine

In honor of the life of BriXton Brady.

TS Some people in the symposium who didnt know your work were very surprised that you and your work not only thematize sexuality, but also Jewish identity. Can you tell me a bit about your relation to Jewish culture? TW Since 1999 I chronicled my experience as a queer artist enveloped in an Orthodox Jewish environment. Through installations incorporating video, photography, sound, and performance I pose a discursive bridge between what is sacred/intimate and issues such as gender identity, conflict and inscription. I have only ever made work through porn genres as a way to build stronger connections in community, what I call Gender Diaspora, and to triumph a sense of self for the people involved . . . for health.

technique. People were still talking about it for many months afterwards.

TS One work which addresses both gender and religion, including your own bodily presence, is called "Opshernish1" (2000). In what context did the performance take place and how would you explain this multi-faceted ritual? TW My installation began as Tableau Vivant. The original performance consisted of three phases. Visitors cut suspended locks of my hair, then shaved my head with clippers and finally with a razor, until I was bald. An inverted forest of 28 locks hung from the ceiling. Combined with the shorn remains, this constitutes a site of gendered expectation excised. The epilogue, called "Opshernish," after the Orthodox Jewish ritual, occurred two months later at the closing of the installation. It revisited the second and third phases of shaving with clippers and razor. The "Opshernish" or "Upsherin" is an orthodox boy's first haircut, which takes place on his third birthday. The community comes to the family home, and everyone participates by cutting a piece of his hair, until what remains is what will become his Payes (sidelocks). He then recites a short text in Hebrew to commence his life of learning. The community collectively confirms the role of the male child, collectively acknowledges its expectations of him, by cutting his infant hair - the hair he has grown since birth - and shaping it to make him as a male member of the society.

The performance lasted five hours at the opening and three hours at the epilogue. I had not heard of the Opshernish ritual until after the installation opened. I find it encouraging that the image has a complimentary context in my own heritage. In Judaism we do not have a personified god or figure on which to project our desires, anxieties, and so forth. We have the text, and we have the body: either our own bodies as individual Jews or the nation as a body. Much of the practice of Judaism has to do with studying and honoring the text, or with acknowledging the body in time and space, either vis-à-vis other peoples bodies or in relation to the calendar and life cycle. The alleged carnality of Judaism has helped me in many ways. I suppose that my Opshernish has to do with moving away from an infancy of self-awareness and self-conception and moving away from kinship-based models of identity formation altogether. This for me is not a linear progression.

This piece will be revisited and installed at the Jewish Museum of New York in 2009. It was my "Top Surgery." So much was bound up in the meaning of the hair, it has its own life force, like a limb, Judaism sees the body as a series of numerous limbs, and because of the history of my hair both as an organic document and a site of expectation, it seemed the best way to do it would be to hand the cutting implement to the beholder.

> tional religious insights you include in your art, in the Chassidic tradition you have learned that "even the gestures which make each letter are movements that continue. This is the excess of signification, that which has a name which cannot be pronounced, the beyond of language." For me, this sounds also like a comment on transition, that everything is in process and no gesture of the bodies' physicality is a still one. TW In my practice I make work which takes our gender binary and reframes it in a manner which is both literate to traditional sources and astute in terms of a transgendered informed reality. I do not support a gender binary and yet I participate in the gender dyad of the life and languages of traditional Judaism. An example would be the performance for photo "Amidah" or the performance installation "Self Portrait as Pshat." My new conceptual works in progress are about a genderqueer approach to religious architecture as a way to indicate options in thinking about the Middle East peace conflict in terms both corporeal and metaphysicial. I suggest that architecture which separates and con-

> TS As you say, when following tradi-

trols movement in the name of the sacred ought instead to do so in a way that an individual could empathize with, into their own reality, rather than an imposed, immutable structure which has no relationship to the environment around it. Judaism makes distinctions between day and night for example, but we do so at dusk, thereby also acknowledging the space between. Variance in nature. It is necessary to our cosmology to make distinctions, however this need not be done in a way that establishes conflict and opposition. It can be done in a way that honors distinctions. Why not make a semi permeable membrane that acknowledges differences rather than build a wall? The result might be an entire absence of the notion of "sides."

Traditional Jewish metatexts could be read to indicate that the omnipresence of q-d precludes the border as an obsolete, human foible worth transcending, because the same sacred entity is equally present both on, around, and permeating the border. This interrogation indicates the locus of "border" as a conceptual one based only in fear, control, and the human need to establish an order. My experience would indicate that the same rationale is the source of anxiety regarding gender, land, and anything else people feel the need to separate and control.

TS You visited Israel in 2006. Do these experiences still play a part in your work?

TW I have made three works which were in part inspired by experiences during that trip, "Lechem Oni/Prusa," "Block of Ice +1/60," and "Still Life: Israel Eats Itself." None of these involve pornography in the direct sense, but especially "Still Life: Israel Eats Itself" has references to scat and George Bataille.

TS Can you tell me more about seen this striking piece, which can also be looked at on your webpage?

Tobaron Waxman

<u>TW</u> "Still Life: Israel Eats itself" is a 4D portrait of a gendered identity invented and then cannibalized by the state. Incorporating an interview with a PTSD afflicted veteran of 5 wars, this video is derived from a 5.1 surroundsound and performance installation, shot on super 8 and surveillance cam. A nude male applies a black substance to his skin, then scrapes it off and eats it. The imagery references the black paintings of Goya, the scatalogics and "Eye" of Bataille, and the Chassidic concept of "Klippah," the shell that both nourishes the physical world and gives it its shape, while necessitating its own shedding in order to access truth. The human body in this piece is an analogue to landscape, land occupation, and "Holy Land," to interrogate concepts of kinship, nation state, and Middle East border conflict. Mining the intersection of gender formations, cultural identities, and national identities, this work is concerned with the place at which the human body becomes the subject of a state, and citizenship makes moral and ethical claims upon our bodies.

TS Tobaron, thank you for the interview.

The First Time He Tought He Was Beautiful: A Transmasculine Pornographic Sublime. In honor of the life of BriXton Brady.



fig. 01 fig. 02



fig. 03 fig. 04

Tobaron Waxman





fig. 09



<u>fig. 07</u> <u>fig. 08</u>



fig. 10

 $\frac{\text{fig. 01-02 p. 343}}{\text{Still Life: Israel Eats Itself}-\text{concept photo, 2006.}}$ $\frac{\text{fig. 03-04 p. 343}}{\text{Still Life: Israel Eats Itself}-\text{video still. B\&W and colour, dv,}}$

super 8 and surveillance cam, 5.1 surround installation, 2008. ssspread.com – Video still. M and joe, 2001.



<u>fig. 11</u> <u>fig. 12</u>

fig. 05-08 ssspread.com - Video still. joe and boy, 2001. $\frac{\text{fig. }10\text{--}12}{\text{ssspread.com}-\text{Video still. M}} \, \text{and boy, 2001}.$

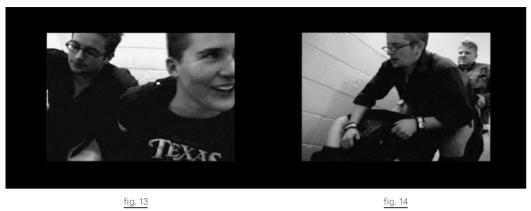




fig. 13



fig. 15



fig. 19 fig. 20

fig. 16

fig. 13-16 True Spirit, Video still, color, dv, 2002.

fig. 17-18 how long has it been. Video still, color, dv, 2002.



fig. 21



fig. 21–23 from Chimera series: "underwater cruising park." Performance for photo.





fig. 23

Tobaron Waxman is a performance artist, specializing in digital media and voice. It also contextualizes gender, embodiment, and the physical experience of time as systems of inscription. His work includes queer elements of Diaspora experience and traditional Jewish texts, music, and philosophy, as well as politics and desire. He is the recipient of a Franklin Furnace Performance Art Award (2004), a Van Leir Fellow at Harvestworks Digital Media NYC (2007) and, to date, three Canada Council for the Arts Grants (2003, 2005, 2006). He completed an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he also taught Voice in the Performance department. His videos have screened internationally, including at Mix New York, Mix Brasil, the Lesbian Film Festival in Berlin, the Frameline Persistent Vision Conference in San Francisco, Intermedia Arts Center of Minneapolis, CoCA Seattle, Kunsthalle Wien, Art Neuland Berlin. He was an invited artist at the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International 2005. He has been published in GLQ, LTTR, and Fuse magazine. He has been invited to conduct workshops and lectures at various institutions, including The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UC Irvine, CLAGS at NYU, Parsons School of Design, and Videotage Hong Kong. His work was recently published among the two-hundred best photo-based artists in Canada in Carte Blanche, the first juried compendium of Canadian photography. He is an invited artist/Fellow 2010 at Palais de Tokio Paris and at Institute for the Cultural Inquiry, Berlin. Waxman also studies and performs Jewish liturgical music as a cantorial soloist.



fig. 24

Feytach Eynayim (the Place of Open Eyes).

Performance for photo, 2000.

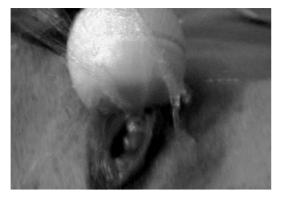


fig. 25



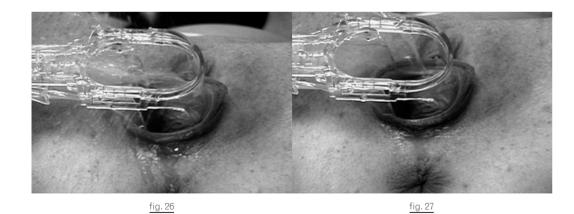




fig. 29



fig. 28

ssspread.com interview with Shannon Bell – ejaculating while emulating the pose of "Arch of Hysteria" by Louise Bourgeois, 2001.