

Anne Koch-Rein

## ***Passing Moments: FTM-bodies in contemporary transgender photography***<sup>1</sup>

Während transsexuelle Sichtbarkeit über Jahrzehnte<sup>2</sup> sowohl im gesamten Medienspektrum als auch in trans\* Kontexten über Darstellungen von Transfrauen organisiert wurde, sind seit Mitte der 1990er Jahre in großer Zahl Bilder von FzM-Körpern insbesondere in photographischen Praxen von und (allerdings nicht ausschließlich) für transgender und queere Subkulturen aufgetaucht. *Passing Moments* fragt vor diesem Hintergrund nach der subkulturellen Arbeit, die diese Bilder leisten. Ihre Strategien des Umgangs mit *passing*, Sichtbarkeit, Blickbeziehungen, Identität und Gemeinschaft (*community*) werden erarbeitet an Beispielen aus dem Werk von Loren Cameron, Dean Kotula und Del LaGrace Volcano. Dabei gehe ich wie folgt vor:

Das erste inhaltliche Kapitel meiner Magisterarbeit (Kapitel 2), das hier als Ausschnitt ausgewählt ist, transponiert theoretische Begriffe und Konzepte in eine transgender Tonart. Dies bedeutet einerseits eine exemplarische Auseinandersetzung mit kanonischer Fototheorie, die, mit Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick gesprochen, „reparative“ Lesarten und Nutzungen von Fotografien in den Vordergrund rückt. Andererseits benötigt das Konzept des *Passing* eine Feinabstimmung für die Diskussion von Fragen der Konstruktion geschlechtlichen „Seins“ und „Scheinens.“ Drittens entwickelt dieses Kapitel mit dem Begriff „subkulturelle Gemeinschaft“ (*subcultural community*) einen definitiven Kompromiss, der es erlaubt, problematische homogenisierende, naturalisierende bzw. oedipalisierende Konnotationen sowohl des Terminus Subkultur als auch des der *Community* zu vermeiden.

Auf dieser Grundlage verbindet das 3. Kapitel theoretische Überlegungen mit der Bildlektüre exemplarischer Fotos und Fotobücher. Dabei werden drei Dimensionen (sub-) kultureller Arbeit herausgearbeitet: Fotografie zeigt sich als gemeinschaftsstiftende Technik auf der Ebene der Blickbeziehungen zwischen Fotografen und Fotografierten, die in transgender Fotografie durch eine Ethik/Ästhetik des erweiterten „Selbst“ portraits umgearbeitet werden. Die zweite Ebene bildet die Blickbeziehung zwischen Fotografie(rten) und Betrachtenden, wobei sich bestimmte Arten der Rezeption als gemeinschaftsbildende Akte verstehen lassen, die durch Adressierung, Implikation und Identifikation angerufen werden. Diese beiden Unterkapitel sind hier wieder gegeben. Im dritten Unterkapitel wechselt der Fokus dann von den Dimensionen subkultureller Gemeinschaft zur Repräsentation von FzM-Körperlichkeit im Spannungsfeld zwischen dem Aufrufen diversifizierter Männlichkeit in einer Ökonomie geschlechtlicher Echtheit (*realness*) und dem Paradox des Sichtbarmachens von Trans-

---

<sup>1</sup> Dieser Artikel basiert auf meiner Magisterarbeit zum Thema „FTM-bodies in contemporary transgender photography“ (HU, Amerikanistik, 2006, 97 S.), die von Prof. Dr. Eva Boesenberg betreut wurde. Sie beschäftigt sich aus amerikanistischer Perspektive mit Repräsentationen von FzM (Frau-zu-Mann) Körpern in zeitgenössischer transgender Fotografie.

<sup>2</sup> Für die USA gilt dies spätestens seit dem Medienecho auf Christine Jorgensen Anfang der 1950er Jahre.

sexualität, das ja gerade auf einem Verzicht auf eine mit *passing* verbundene Art des Echtheitsanspruchs basiert. Im Bereich der Darstellung von Männlichkeit geht es dabei um Privilegien, Diversität und Requisiten, und es lassen sich verschiedene Modi ausmachen, nämlich *ernst/seriös*, *spielerisch* und *ironisch*. Im Bereich der Repräsentation spezifischer Materialitäten von Transmannkörpern treten vor allem Aktfotos in den Mittelpunkt, die dominanten Diskursen von Scham, Hässlichkeit und Defizit eine selbstbewusste Erotisierung und Ästhetisierung entgegenzusetzen. Wie das Abschlusskapitel verdeutlicht, zielt in letzterer Dimension, also der der aufwertenden Repräsentation von FzM-Körperlichkeit, die visuelle Politik dieser Bilder mithin am deutlichsten auch über einen subkulturellen (Rezeptions-)Kontext hinaus.

### Photography: Theory's rituals and reparative practices

*There is no such unitary thing as 'photography'. Photography is a convenient way of referencing the diversity of practices, institutions and historical conjectures in which the photographic text is produced, circulated and deployed.*<sup>3</sup>

Stuart Hall

There might be no such thing as Photography with a capital p, but there is certainly a lot of scholarly writing on photography in general, on its properties as a medium, which has produced something much like it as its object. The objective of this subchapter is to situate transgender photography in relation to said Photography. In other words, I will take stock of some of the more traditional, canonical features of photo theory and their consequences for the photographic articulation of alternative subjectivities such as FTM ones.

Roland Barthes's last book seems a good place to start. No matter how selective or cursory, any survey of canonical photo theory would be incomplete without a reference to *Camera Lucida*. Ribbat even goes so far as saying this work has turned "zu einem fast schon ritualistisch vollzogenen Baustein der Lektüre."<sup>4</sup> But does this ritual lend itself to readings of photos of transgenderism?

Judged by frequency, the terms most (mis-)taken to be operable and inspiring for reading photographs<sup>5</sup> from Barthes's book are the *studium* and the *punctum*. Barthes defines the *studium* as the "average affect, almost from a certain training [...] it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions."<sup>6</sup> The *studium* derives from culture, from "a contract arrived at between creators and consumers."<sup>7</sup> With the *punctum*, on the

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Stuart, "Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-war Black Settlement," *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, eds. Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (London: Virago, 1991) 152.

<sup>4</sup> Ribbat, Christoph, *Blickkontakt: Zur Beziehungsgeschichte amerikanischer Literatur und Fotografie* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink V, 2003) 29.

<sup>5</sup> These are the terms often considered the text's practical substrate, but there is much fascinating and insightful in Barthes's "reflections on photography," if one does not follow an application-oriented dead end.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 26.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, 28.

other hand, he dismisses “all knowledge, all culture”: “I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own.”<sup>8</sup> This is a highly problematic postulation for its construction of a viewing experience that cedes to be socially conditioned or culturally situated. And, I would argue, it makes the *punctum* a concept that is extremely difficult to use, even though there are and continue to be various attempts by other scholars at taking it up in subsequent writings on photography. Much of the difficulty lies in determining what exactly the *punctum* is.

In the first part of *Camera Lucida*, the *punctum* is the “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me [...] this wound, this prick, this mark.”<sup>9</sup> In the second part, another *punctum* comes into play:

I thought I could distinguish a field of cultural interest (the *studium*) from that unexpected flash which sometimes crosses this field and which I called the *punctum*. I now know that there exists another *punctum* [...] than the ‘detail.’ This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation.<sup>10</sup>

This second *punctum* is even more closely related to death, mourning, and nostalgia. In a radically subjective move (not as opposed to objective, but as opposed to inter-subjective), Barthes refuses to include the “Winter Garden Photograph” of his mother as a child.<sup>11</sup> While otherwise, by including the photographs he writes about, he keeps the *punctum* in an ambiguous state as a communicable wound or definable “detail” (which is the point of departure for its subsequent reception and continuous use), the pain over the death of his mother stages it as a radically individualizing, or atomizing experience. Here, the “arguable sentimentalism”<sup>12</sup> of *Camera Lucida* emerges most clearly and, in my view, the *punctum* as a transferable concept evaporates:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; [...] at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound.<sup>13</sup>

Baer picks up some of Barthes’s skepticism towards the *studium* when suggesting that “[t]he potentially rewarding, but often cheerless, emphasis on context and studium, or prior knowledge, might be read as a phobic repression of photographs’ unsettling effects – and affect.”<sup>14</sup> But he does so to facilitate a careful close reading and

---

<sup>8</sup> Barthes, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, 95f.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes thereby left room for speculation on whether or not this picture ever existed – it would make no difference for his argument either way, of course.

<sup>12</sup> Baer, Ulrich, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002) 145.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Baer, 12.

interpretation of the photographs in his study and their relation to trauma theory,<sup>15</sup> and only to the degree that he shifts the “emphasis.” For him, “[t]he medium of photography *always* raises the question of the relationship between seeing and knowing,”<sup>16</sup> and it would be impossible to read something as enigmatic as Barthes’s “the truth for me”<sup>17</sup> (which ostensibly disbelieves in its own communicability, but which is nevertheless addressed to readers) into his approach. In other words, Baer may be dissatisfied with the *studium*, but he seeks no recourse in the *punctum*. Those who do, e.g. by using the *punctum* as a designator of a surplus of signification, create more problems than answers. Prying the surplus from signification and then making sense/signs of it, seems rather illogical. The surplus is “not a possibility beyond culture” (beyond the *studium*), but – at most – on its “constitutive outside,”<sup>18</sup> or at the “unpredictable and inadvertent convergences”<sup>19</sup> of discourses.

This philosophically fleshes out, returns us to, the suspicion that dismissing all knowledge, all culture, as the *punctum* postulates (and, by the way, who/what is this I/eye that sees after having done so?) is impossible. – Take as another example Barthes’s discussion of the portrait of Lewis Payne waiting to be hanged: “The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die.*”<sup>20</sup> Apparently, what makes the photo disturbing is Barthes’s *knowledge* of who is depicted and what happened to this man who tried to assassinate Secretary of State W.H. Seward. Without this knowledge, there would be no *punctum* here. It also means that using the *punctum* to stand in for the surplus of signification is a misnomer.

For a discussion of FTM-bodies in transgender photographs, it would even be ill-advised to search for a *punctum* if one disregarded (or disagreed with) the conceptual breakdown I’ve been trying to trace. What one might call application-oriented reductions usually concentrate on Barthes’s first explanation of the *punctum*. And “this wound, this prick, this mark” in pictures of naked FTM-bodies would end up being what is or is not there to mark the FTM-body. I will return to this point in some detail in chapter 3. For now, suffice it to say that generally, this would be indistinguishable from a boringly predictable shock of heteronormative audiences unfamiliar with transbodies, or that for one reason or another are focused on reinscribing a lack.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> He is concerned with “the constitutive breakdown of context that, in a structural analogy to trauma, is staged by every photograph.” In addition, it is worth pointing out that a “constitutive breakdown” is hardly the same as atomizing a personal gaze. Baer, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Baer, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Barthes, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Butler, Judith, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) 98f. See also Butler, Judith, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) 188.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity 184.

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, 96. Original emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Formulaically, Freudians find castration or penis envy, Lacanians, such as Bernice Hausman, find a manifestation of a doomed desire to become the Woman/Man, to engage “in the semiotics of gender, on the order of simulation, in order to transgress the law of sexual difference that would mandate that [transsexuals] accept and accommodate themselves to the sexual meanings of their natural bodies.” Hausman, Bernice L., Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995) 192.

Therefore, one would invariably (re-)produce a pathologizing focus and a phallic logic that originates in nothing but the *studium* of transphobia (and heteronormativity).

Zooming out of the micro level of Barthes's classic, one finds that capital-p-photography has preoccupied numerous critics as a (gendered) scopic regime, an instrument of a "colonizing eye,"<sup>22</sup> of surveillance, of power and objectification. Ribbat recounts analyses of the camera's power to objectify as follows "der Blick durch die Kamera privilegiere das sehende Subjekt, verwandele das Gesehene in ein Objekt, dessen Differenz, dessen 'otherness' oft als Monstrosität kodiert werde."<sup>23</sup> The focus on these violent dimensions of photography is often implicitly based on an idea of power that renders it oppressive and fixed, rather than dynamic and multi-directional.

The gendered paradigm within which to think photographic practices can seem equally straightforward. Patricia Vettel-Becker starts her book Shooting from the Hip with a focus on the masculinization of photographic practice in America after the Second World War. "Never before had photography been so heavily gendered masculine, so characterized by traits traditionally associated with men."<sup>24</sup> In turn, she claims, "[t]his masculinization of the profession extended to the photograph itself."<sup>25</sup> Through establishing a certain relation (of containing, controlling, keeping at bay)<sup>26</sup> to the world, photography becomes a technology of gender: "by objectifying women, male photographers subjectified themselves, not only as artists but as men."<sup>27</sup> Photography seems to possess many characteristics symbolically associated with traditional masculinity: Susan Sontag finds "an aggression implicit in every use of the camera,"<sup>28</sup> because photographing people turns them into "objects that can be symbolically possessed."<sup>29</sup> She likens the act of photographing with "sexual voyeurism,"<sup>30</sup> and Vettel-Becker, likewise, speaks of "the voyeuristic, violent lens of the camera."<sup>31</sup> The register of sexual(ized) violence is even taken so far as to call the act of photographing "a semblance of rape."<sup>32</sup> In this semantic field, photography turns the globe into a "picture hunting ground,"<sup>33</sup> where the "masculine hero [...] traverses feminine space - that which is to be conquered, mastered, *shot*. The association between the camera and the gun has long been made."<sup>34</sup> It is easy to get carried away by these powerful

<sup>22</sup> hooks, bell, Art on My Mind: Visual Politics (New York: The New Press, 1995) 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ribbat, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Vettel-Becker, Patricia, Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005) 2.

<sup>25</sup> Vettel-Becker, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Vettel-Becker, 15 and 75.

<sup>27</sup> Vettel-Becker, 112.

<sup>28</sup> Sontag, Susan, On Photography (London: Penguin, 2002) 7.

<sup>29</sup> Sontag, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Sontag, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Vettel-Becker, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Sontag, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Vettel-Becker, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Vettel-Becker, 74.

ways of metaphorizing photography. Yet the reference to rape should warn us against thinking of anything as strictly and neatly gendered or heterosexualized along a male-female binary (and, while we are at it, let us be careful when conflating masculine and female). The same scepticism is in order when it comes to martial metaphors. After all, an association doesn't make a gun – as the saying goes: 'Every tool is a weapon, if you hold it right.' It would be foolish to deny that objectification, gendered scopic regimes, and violence are dimensions and properties of photography evidenced by countless examples. But if we always see the camera as a gun rather than a tool, it becomes futile to inquire into how it is being "held"/used. If "images introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds,"<sup>35</sup> one might want to question their specific politics instead of determining them as inherent in the apparatus of photography. In an essay on film spectatorship, Evans and Gamman helpfully "distinguish between the look (associated with the eye) and the gaze (associated with the phallus)" with a quote from Carol Clover "vision is not, cannot be, masculine ... rather, certain ways of using vision (for example to objectify) may confirm and help produce patriarchal power relations."<sup>36</sup> This differentiation allows for the concerns of Sontag, Vettel-Becker, and others, but it can also accommodate work that goes in other directions, like Baer's.

In his careful readings against the grain of Nazi photographs, Baer comes up against the difficulties of prevalent interpretive modes that turn photographs into simple manifestations of a gaze, a fixed relation of power and objectification:

This interpretation neatly divides suffering and guilt according to who was in front of and who remained behind the camera. The desire for such absolute and unambiguous distinctions is understandable; yet the approach inadvertently prevents the photographs from representing anything or anyone not completely governed by the Nazi gaze.<sup>37</sup>

As an approach to photographic looking relations, the gaze yields valuable insights, but it can also be hermetic and totalizing when it fixes meaning and denies the possibility that "something resides 'beyond'"<sup>38</sup> it. Halberstam,<sup>39</sup> for example, has demonstrated this by looking for something in Diane Arbus's photographs beyond what Sontag fixed along Arbus's gaze as "people in various degrees of unconscious or unaware relation to their pain, their ugliness."<sup>40</sup> Baer makes conceptual space for such different readings of photographs, and the same needs to be done for the side of photography-making, of the photographer. For instance, Sontag's claim that "[t]he camera is a kind of passport [...] freeing the photographer from any responsibility

---

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T., *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2005) 92.

<sup>36</sup> Evans, Caroline and Lorraine Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing," *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, eds. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1995) 16.

<sup>37</sup> Baer, 136.

<sup>38</sup> Baer, 144.

<sup>39</sup> Halberstam, Judith, "Hidden Worlds: Photography and Subcultural Lives," Lecture, University of Freiburg, 07/07/2004.

<sup>40</sup> Sontag, 36.

toward the people photographed”<sup>41</sup> has little to say about photographers who are nevertheless interested in responsibility, who are critical of and not engaged in “the broader kind of class tourism,”<sup>42</sup> and see the violence in a photographer’s and audience’s desire for “those being photographed to be unaware of the camera, ‘off guard’.”<sup>43</sup>

All in all, the scholarly attention to scopic regimes, objectification etc. certainly goes a long way to sketching the negative foil against which alternative photographic practices emerge. In this regard, it provides a useful background for a discussion of transgender photography. However, in the discussion itself, it is ill-suited for understanding and addressing uses of photography that e.g. try to carve out subjectification and not objectification and seek looking relations beyond sexist scopic regimes. Ribbat, too, points to the limits of a narrow focus on what following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick he calls ‘paranoid readings’: “the narrow focus on such issues as surveillance and power could have made critics blind to the images’ infinite possibilities, histories, and ambiguities.”<sup>44</sup> Transgender photography brings some of the other potential issues into the foreground, asking for – to borrow Sedgwick’s converse term – attention to “reparative” readings/practices:

What we can best learn from [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.<sup>45</sup>

This quote underscores the value of an approach that considers photographs as objects of sustenance and community.

As Sedgwick reminds us, it is often the more reparative uses of photography that lend themselves to articulations of alternative subjectivities and positions, that are “useful in the production of counterhegemonic representations.”<sup>46</sup> Yet at the same time, these tend to be critically relegated to the amateur realm, the realm of popular use. Per definition, an amateur is not a professional, but more importantly, an amateur is not an artist: In Sontag’s view, for instance, photography is not practiced by most people as an art,<sup>47</sup> but “mainly a social rite [...]. Memorializing the achievements of individuals considered as members of families (as well as of other groups) is the earliest popular use of photography.”<sup>48</sup> If one is to make sense of uses of photography by those that have small (if any) stakes in feeding into hegemonic power relations and scopic regimes of objectification, it is actually a very good idea to look at photography as a

---

<sup>41</sup> Sontag, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Sontag, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Sontag, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 55.

<sup>44</sup> Ribbat, Christoph, "Queer and Straight Photography," *Amerikastudien* 46.1 (2001): 39.

<sup>45</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," *Touching Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 150f.

<sup>46</sup> hooks, 60.

<sup>47</sup> See also Sontag, *On Photography* 148.

<sup>48</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* 8.

“social rite,” a means of negotiating group-membership, chronicling appraisal and, in short, a practice that has much to do with community. Interestingly enough, it is thus often in moments when canonical photo theory casts a look at what is deemed ‘amateur,’ ‘outdated’ or ‘popular’ that it yields insights productive for readings of photographs of FTM-bodies. For instance, Barthes, when wondering about the relation of photography and art, drew an interesting comparison having to do with bodies: “Photography is an *uncertain* art, as would be (were one to attempt to establish such a thing) a science of desirable or detestable bodies.”<sup>49</sup> Making allegedly ‘detestable’ bodies desirable is an important function of photography, and, as will become apparent, one central to transgender photography. In light of the aforementioned focus on objectification and power, it is important to emphasize that with photography, “[w]e are confronting, then, a double system: a system of representation capable of functioning both *honorifically* and *repressively*.”<sup>50</sup> Sontag’s claims that “photography has served to enlarge vastly our notion of what is aesthetically pleasing,”<sup>51</sup> that it “has produced new and more inclusive canons of beauty,”<sup>52</sup> are thus very helpful in understanding the tradition of these photographic practices. Yet with Sontag, beautification (as she calls it) is still “the aim of most amateur photographers, for whom a beautiful photograph is a photograph of something beautiful.”<sup>53</sup> If transgender photographers follow the insight that “to photograph is to confer importance” and “to accord value to their subjects”<sup>54</sup> and produce work that confers importance, accords value to transbodies and trans\* communities, in Sontag’s logic they compromise their status as artists (which, in turn, can have consequences for their possibilities to exhibit, channels of distribution, reception in the art world, and ability to make a living).

One of the major concerns of many “semiotic theories that have dominated photography studies for the past twenty-five years”<sup>55</sup> is photography’s special relation to reality, to the real. As the literal translation of the term photography, *light-writing*, suggests, there is an everyday commonsensical understanding that a photograph seems to have emanated from what was in front of the lens.<sup>56</sup> Thus, while it is not the referent itself, in what Louis Kaplan calls “[t]he indexical approach to photography” it is at least “the trace of the absent referent,”<sup>57</sup> and “trace” means that “there is a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.”<sup>58</sup> Photography

---

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, 18.

<sup>50</sup> Sekula, Allan, “The Body and the Archive,” *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1989) 345.

<sup>51</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* 105.

<sup>52</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* 112.

<sup>53</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* 28.

<sup>54</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* 28.

<sup>55</sup> Kaplan, Louis, *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005) xxii.

<sup>56</sup> Even before the advent of digital photography and manipulation, this was misleading and a denial of the highly mediated technical process of selection, focus, framing, timing, lighting, light-sensitive chemical reactions, exposure, development etc.

<sup>57</sup> Kaplan, xxiii.

<sup>58</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* 5.

and film are “the classic examples of such realist fetishism,”<sup>59</sup> that can easily “masquerade as compelling evidence of the real.”<sup>60</sup> In the wake of the linguistic turn, and its complex deconstruction of the sign, the photographic sign and its masquerade, too, have come under critical scrutiny. There has emerged a broad scholarly consensus that “there is no getting beyond pictures [...] to a more authentic relationship with Being, with the Real, or with the World.”<sup>61</sup> It is common to assert that photography (re-)presents a reality, “die als gegeben anzunehmen unseren Augen bequem ist, mehr nicht.”<sup>62</sup> While this specific formulation might somehow suggest that the eye is lazy, or ill-equipped to keep up with a critical, questioning, ‘enlightened’ mind, it is on the contrary a trained eye, one that has learned to see in a two-dimensional scrap of paper “miniatures of reality,”<sup>63</sup> and is to some, albeit distorted and small, degree familiar with the material process of pre-digital photography – with the idea of *light-writing*. Perception is never a thing of the eye alone: “*what* we see is always a question of *how*, and *from where*, we see it.”<sup>64</sup> In this way, the term ‘documentary’ is academically understood to merely designate a style,<sup>65</sup> and photographic modes of expression are exposed as being always already discursive, i.e. steeped in ideologies, theoretical and academic concepts, belief systems etc.<sup>66</sup> And yet, as Ulrich Baer notes,

[i]n spite of this important critical debunking of photography's claim to be the most accurate, and hence most truthful, mode of representation [...] we continue to perceive photographs as records of what is. [...] In spite of our knowledge, the things we see in photographs seem real to us.<sup>67</sup>

What might be the single most quoted sentence of Camera Lucida succinctly states: “In short, the referent adheres.”<sup>68</sup> If the reality-effect stubbornly prevails, what does this mean for photographic practices and criticism?

For Susan Sontag, it means articulating a special distrust in the photographic as opposed to the narrative: “Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. [...] Only that which narrates can make us understand.”<sup>69</sup> One is inclined to quip that in Sontag’s opinion, photography is ruining reality for everyone:

<sup>59</sup> Tyler, Carole-Anne, "Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference," Feminism Meets Queer Theory, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997) 231.

<sup>60</sup> Bright, Deborah, ed., The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 5.

<sup>61</sup> Mitchell, xiv.

<sup>62</sup> Sachsse, Rolf, Fotografie. Vom technischen Bildmittel zur Krise der Repräsentation (Köln: Deubner Verlag für Kunst, Theorie & Praxis, 2003) 177.

<sup>63</sup> Sontag, On Photography 4.

<sup>64</sup> Baer, 83. Original emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> Barrett, Terry, Criticizing Photographs, 4 ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005) 32.

<sup>66</sup> Holsbach, Susanne, "Einleitung," Diskurse der Fotografie, ed. Herta Wolf (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003) 8.

<sup>67</sup> Baer, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Barthes, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Sontag, On Photography 23.

“Photography is the reality; the real object is often experienced as a letdown.”<sup>70</sup> Photographs, she argues, have become “confirmations of that reductive approach to reality which is considered realistic,”<sup>71</sup> and “the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of realism”<sup>72</sup> – and not for the better. Bemoaning in photographic representation the loss of a reality infinitely more complex, Sontag at times seems overly confident that reality would otherwise be accessible. Her problem with the reality-effect is that it isn’t real enough. What might be considered an apt description of a post-linguistic-turn critical insight into the semiotics of identity, namely that “people in industrialized countries seek to have their photographs taken – feel that they are images, and are made real by photographs,”<sup>73</sup> with Sontag can sound like a diagnosis of false consciousness.<sup>74</sup>

Hand in hand with all these struggles to expose the reality-effect (as either inherently problematic or, following Sontag, as upstaging the truer language of narrative) can go a tendency to expect from photographic practices to do as much, or else be denounced as naïve and compliant.

Carsten Ribbat discusses this as a question of straight versus queer photography “as two interacting schools of camera work.”<sup>75</sup> Straight photography is a concept that was developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by US-American photographers and critics to “denote photographic practices that produced pure, unretouched images” in a modernist tradition.<sup>76</sup> “‘Straight’,” Ribbat goes on to explain, “was about ‘sharpness of focus and realism,’ qualities that became not simply matters of style but moral imperatives.”<sup>77</sup> Ribbat argues that “[s]traight served as the Other against which their own, queer, projects were constructed: ‘Queer and sex radical photography,’”<sup>78</sup> and further that “queer photography has become an accepted school, comparable to straight photography in the first half of the twentieth century,” but acknowledges that the term ‘queer photography’ is not as frequently used.<sup>79</sup> Maybe this is because it is not a good name for the postmodern, deconstructive works Ribbat is trying to address. One is left wondering how the huge acceptance of queer work could have slipped through the radar or whether this ‘accepted school’ is all that queer if nobody calls it that. Queer is hardly the new paradigm of photography just because Cathy Opie’s work has been

---

<sup>70</sup> Sontag, On Photography 147.

<sup>71</sup> Sontag, On Photography 21.

<sup>72</sup> Sontag, On Photography 87.

<sup>73</sup> Sontag, On Photography 161.

<sup>74</sup> In her last book, Sontag not only moved slightly away from rather generalizing claims to being more specific about what kind of photographs she was mainly concerned with (a move, as reflected in the respective titles, from On Photography to Regarding the Pain of Others), she also to a certain degree relativized her earlier position: “The truth is [photographs] are not ‘simply’ anything, and certainly not regarded just as facts [...]” Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others 26.

<sup>75</sup> Ribbat, “AmSt,” 27.

<sup>76</sup> Ribbat, “AmSt,” 27.

<sup>77</sup> Ribbat, “AmSt,” 28.

<sup>78</sup> Ribbat, “AmSt,” 27.

<sup>79</sup> Ribbat, “AmSt,” 33.

exhibited at the Whitney.<sup>80</sup> I would object that the “straight other” of queer photography (whatever that may be) is heteronormativity and not ‘straight photography’ in the technical sense. A case for calling “straight photography” heteronormative can certainly be made, but realist schools of camera work are not all straight, and it is difficult to maintain that queer is a school of camera work at all, much less a non-realist one, in the face of, for instance, the heaps of sex radical work relying on sharpness and realist modes.

What is interesting and important in Ribbat’s essay is not the questionable way he frames and contrasts queer and straight photography, but his argument that categorizing anti-realist style “as a revolutionary, innovative performance itself,” leads to a castigation of all other kinds of camera work as naïve.<sup>81</sup> The benchmark for photographs then becomes whether they are centrally concerned with destabilizing “not only the world of camera work, but, while they are at it, identity, historiography, and epistemology as well.”<sup>82</sup> It is against such notions that Taylor sees a need to defend Loren Cameron’s use of the “arguably outmoded” form of “realist portraiture” because realist modes “are still very necessary to the political and personal recognition of marginalized identities.”<sup>83</sup>

Transgender photography shows that there are many ways to work with, around or against the reality-effect of photography, and anything other than the latter is by no means necessarily naïve or conservative.<sup>84</sup> On the contrary, working the reality-effect is especially complex and challenging for subjects who are confronted with another *real* problem: passing.

### For *real*: Passing

*In the simple sense, a portrait of a man shows us the man as a picture – that is, as a flat piece of paper with clusters of tones from a light-sensitive emulsion. [The portrait] shows the man sitting at a piano. In a more complex way, however, [...] as a brilliant man, or a profound man [...]. The more complex ‘as’ requires interpretation.*<sup>85</sup>

Terry Barrett

The portrait Barrett describes also shows the man ‘as’ a man, but this no less “complex ‘as’” for him seems to be beyond interpretation. It is part of “the simple sense” of the photograph. He takes for granted that there was “a man” before the lens, that this man is now shown as a “flat piece of paper,” and the complex process of photographic signification only goes so far as to occasion different interpretations like “brilliant” or “profound man.” In other words, gender is what’s *real* in this photograph. In the passing moment captured in the photograph (therefore in a sense no longer passing),

<sup>80</sup> It was part of the Whitney Museum Biennial in New York in 1995.

<sup>81</sup> See Ribbat, “AmSt,” 33.

<sup>82</sup> Ribbat, “AmSt,” 32.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, Melanie, “*Peter (A Young English Girl)*: Visualizing Transgender Masculinities,” *Camera Obscura* 19.2 (2004): 6.

<sup>84</sup> Nor is the former progressive, as Stuart Hall insists, there is no “one deconstructivist avantgardism, always-for ever already inscribed in its progressive modes of seeing.” Hall, 160.

<sup>85</sup> Barrett, 44.

what's *passing* is the depicted. Just like there remains something *real* in photographs for viewers, a stubborn reality-effect, gender attribution in Western culture still attempts to read pronouns off bodies, despite the linguistic turn, feminist and queer theorizing, surgical and hormonal bodily modification, intersex activism, and all kinds of gender-bending and transgressions. Passing for real, gendered realness, certain "kind of truths about gender"<sup>86</sup> are still more often than not indispensable to entering the sphere of subjectivity and recognition. In order to be able to discuss how these issues pertain to FTM-bodies in transgender photography in chapter 3, some preliminary conceptual groundwork is needed.

The term *passing* as part of U.S.-American everyday parlance and as a concept in American Studies discourse originated with racial passing, and has since in both discursive arenas been applied to other presumed 'stable' (essentialized) identity categories "including class, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as gender."<sup>87</sup> While all of these passings are passings, they are not identical. Passing as a conceptual term, I am arguing, needs to be explicitly<sup>88</sup> fine-tuned to its specific applications, and is unproductive, if all passings are thought of as analogies of racial passing.<sup>89</sup> Henry Rubin alerts us to the multidimensionality of the "economy of realness" when he writes that

[t]here are so many ways to participate in the economy of realness, even if your body is not white or your sexuality is deviant or your size does not measure up or you cannot afford to keep your wife at home.<sup>90</sup>

The need for fine-tuning then emerges not least because one might be a transsexual woman also passing for white.

Many theoretical concerns and observations doubtlessly apply to various forms of passing, for instance that "both the process and the discourse of passing interrogate the ontology of identity categories and their construction."<sup>91</sup> Consequently, the following discussion of passing in relation to (trans-)gender will at times both draw from more general considerations and lead to insights that might be transferable. But this is merely coincidental to my main purpose here of fine-tuning passing to an analysis of FTM-bodies in transgender photography, and explicating which questions, answers, or problems it might raise.

<sup>86</sup> Halberstam, Judith, "Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography," Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion, eds. Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York: New York UP, 2001) 14.

<sup>87</sup> Ginsberg, Elaine K., "Introduction: The Politics of Passing," Passing and the Fictions of Identity, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996) 2f.

<sup>88</sup> In individual essays in anthologies, a differentiation is often implicit, but it is left to prefaces and the like to spell this out or problematize it. Yet those are mostly focused on similarities, connections, and ways in which their anthologies are coherent. See, for instance, Schlossberg, Linda, "Introduction: Rites of Passage," Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion, eds. Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York: New York UP, 2001).

<sup>89</sup> In addition, we must "recognize that passing's motivations and results are never predictable." Schlossberg, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Rubin, Henry S., "Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man," Men Doing Feminism, ed. Tom Digby (New York and London: Routledge, 1998) 312.

<sup>91</sup> Ginsberg, 4.

Consider the following quote as an example of sweeping or simplistic generalizations from certain forms of passing to all:

In the most general way, it is passing when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be. [...] *Who they understand themselves to be* deliberately sidesteps a more complicated discourse over *Who they are* (and who or what determines who we are anyway?) or even the less complicated *Who others see them as* or even *Who they have become*. Passing never feels natural. It is a second skin that never adheres.<sup>92</sup>

In relation to trans\*, Kroeger's journalistic working definition is exceedingly useless even at first sight. For transgender subjects at least, passing more often than not means precisely presenting as "who they understand themselves to be." If in a 'classic' transsexual narrative, "[p]assing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a 'natural' member of that gender,"<sup>93</sup> passing is prompted by a desire to "feel natural," or at least to enjoy the privileges that come with it. When Kroeger claims that passing "never feels natural," she assumes that something else does, and overlooks the ways in which relations to 'the natural' can be vexed and uneasy, partly because they are also a matter of outward recognition and acceptance. And while transgender passing might, as e.g. the title of Jay Prosser's seminal book Second Skins<sup>94</sup> attests, be construed as a "second skin," it is then usually the first skin that is seen as having failed to adhere in meaningful ways.

Apparently, the "more complicated discourse" of the relation between passing and being that Kroeger wants to sidestep cannot be so easily evaded. Following the theoretical unraveling of any "reality of gender" by Judith Butler<sup>95</sup> and others, it has become clear that "[t]here is no 'other' side, no 'opposite' sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don't, we all wear our drag."<sup>96</sup> Much like the real of photography, the real of gender has become a reality-effect under theoretical scrutiny. But if this is so, if "[a]ll subjects therefore are passing through the signifiers,"<sup>97</sup> what is the difference between being and passing, between what used to be thought of as distinct forms of passing and those attributions and recognitions of identity Kroeger thinks of as feeling "natural"? There is, as Tyler usefully spells out,

<sup>92</sup> Kroeger, Brooke, Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are (New York: Public Affairs, 2003) 7f. Original emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> Stone, Sandy, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory, eds. Katie Conboy and others (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 352.

<sup>94</sup> Prosser, Jay, Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality (New York: Columbia UP, 1998).

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity xxiii. See also: "All gender (not just femininity) and all authorship is increasingly recognized as performance." Seaton, Elizabeth, "Imitating Authorities: Theory, Gender, and Photographic Discourse," Theory Rules: Art as Theory / Theory and Art, eds. Jody Berland, Will Straw and David Tomas (Toronto, Buffalo, London: XYZ Books and U of Toronto P, 1996) 173.

<sup>96</sup> Halberstam, Judith, "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity," Feminist Theory and the Body, eds. J. Price and M. Shildrik (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 126f.

<sup>97</sup> Tyler, 236.

a structured network of (common) sense about the identities of subjects, objects, and acts or aims, policing identities by determining which signs are one's own and which have been stolen. The law tells us what we 'really' are and what we 'really' have (or can have) by naturalizing the arbitrary name assigned us and legalizing some mimicries, which then appear as the real thing.<sup>98</sup>

This has two important consequences for a discussion of transgender passing. First, if one is never *really* any one thing,<sup>99</sup> strictly speaking, passing is the single mode of being. Nevertheless, it continues to be useful to differentiate between these passings, e.g. to criticize the social and political values they are accorded, and the degree to which some are heavily policed ("passing") while others are allowed to go unchallenged ("being").

Secondly, the politics of passing are ultimately not decidable. It can seem like a matter "of survival"<sup>100</sup> or like "the ultimate sell-out,"<sup>101</sup> deemed to be "already complicit with the order of things, prey to its oppressive hierarchies,"<sup>102</sup> as Roen and Tyler summarize its strongest critics. Stephen Whittle has an interesting take on passing that is almost a reversal of the familiar criticism of passing as complicit. He elaborates on it in reference to one of Loren Cameron's self-portraits:

The gender outlaw is nearly always hidden in passing and, as a result, the gender defenders are fucked, in that their rules become meaningless because they are constantly broken, and nobody knows when, where or how that is happening. However, Cameron chooses not to pass. Normally, the nature of 'not passing' means that heads aren't really fucked, because gender rules are not transgressed, they are only highlighted. The transgender person, if they could be a hidden outlaw, has to choose to tell the story themselves, to make the autobiographical statement in order to present the gender fuck.<sup>103</sup>

Whittle presents a scenario in which there is "gender fuck" in passing because it shows the rigid rules of a gender binary to be subvertible and unreliable, but at the same time he also locates "gender fuck" in a choosing not to pass that at the same time provides an autobiographical statement, that refuses to simply highlight gender rules. Whittle argues that only 'not passing' that results in a gender attribution without/against the autobiographical statement highlights gender rules.

Passing also doesn't have a clearly determinable political value, because it is not a simple matter of choice. Whittle's "if they could be a hidden outlaw" is not always an option for everyone. The opposite of passing is being *read*.<sup>104</sup> The word *passing* suggests a certain degree of active doing, of agency. But the passive construction of

<sup>98</sup> Tyler, 244.

<sup>99</sup> Hall, Donald E., *Queer Theories* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 101.

<sup>100</sup> Schlossberg, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Roen, Katrina, "'Either/Or' and 'Both/Neither': Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics," *Signs* 27.2 (2001): 501.

<sup>102</sup> Tyler, 227.

<sup>103</sup> Whittle, Stephen, *Respect and Equality: Transsexual and Transgender Rights* (London, Sydney, Portland (OR): Cavendish, 2002) 77.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Stone, 354.

'being *read*' fully reveals the "unpredictability of social gendering"<sup>105</sup> that makes this a conditioned and precarious agency at best. Tyler calls this a paradox: "Identity is always dependent upon others of whom a demand for recognition is made – paradoxically, in terms one calls one's own."<sup>106</sup> And Judith Butler reminds us that "[t]he body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine,"<sup>107</sup> and so is the way it becomes gendered. Passing subjects "find themselves caught between the rock of structure and the hard place of agency."<sup>108</sup> Passing "can be understood at the most basic level as an attempt to control the process of signification itself,"<sup>109</sup> and this attempt can succeed or fail in various and varying dimensions. It is usually emphasized that passing "is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen,"<sup>110</sup> but it is also, in the words of Linda Schlossberg, "about the creation and establishment of an alternative set of narratives."<sup>111</sup> And if the voice, too, can be a powerful gender marker,<sup>112</sup> there are situations in which it makes sense to think of it as auditory – the list is highly context-specific and open-ended. The possibility of being *read* thus foregrounds the terminability of passing, its situational and potentially unstable character. This is not to say that some do not pass seamlessly most or all of the time, it is just to say that the threat of being read is a constitutive part of passing, and passing's relation to time.

Kath Weston argues that we need to see "[g]ender [...] as a product of social relations imbued with *time*,"<sup>113</sup> and therefore criticizes gender studies for having (over-) emphasized the visual<sup>114</sup> following "the fashions of a visual age."<sup>115</sup> She grants that passing depends "in part" upon "visual signifiers,"<sup>116</sup> but is much more interested in the temporality of the "fleeting interval of violation and interpretation"<sup>117</sup> which she calls "unsexed:"

Unsexed is what you become in the moment of doubt before reclassification.  
Unsexed is what you become in a flash of discomfort before 'oh, I get it' sets you back on familiar terrain. [...] Unsexed is what can happen when a person - any person - gets thrown up against the question that need not speak its name: 'What

<sup>105</sup> Halberstam, Judith, *In a Queer Time & Place* (New York and London: New York UP, 2005) 51.

<sup>106</sup> Tyler, 230.

<sup>107</sup> Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 21.

<sup>108</sup> Weston, Kath, *Gender in Real Time: Power and Transcience in a Visual Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 74.

<sup>109</sup> Schlossberg, 3.

<sup>110</sup> Ginsberg, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Schlossberg, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place* 108.

<sup>113</sup> Weston, xi.

<sup>114</sup> Weston, xi. Weston's reading of Butler and others is somewhat reductive in setting up a bogeyman of alleged visuality against which to overstate her – nonetheless intriguing – point.

<sup>115</sup> Weston, 12.

<sup>116</sup> Weston, 10.

<sup>117</sup> Weston, 32.

are you? [...]’ Unsexed never lasts. Ambiguity resolves back into certainty, doubt into gendered absolutes.<sup>118</sup>

Weston returns to this resolving again when she writes that “[p]resence turns into passing, and even ‘deviants’ find themselves slotted into neatly tagged categories.”<sup>119</sup> This does much to curb enthusiasm over the longevity and alleged subversive powers of “unsexed,” but it also raises questions as to the inevitability of this development. The pivotal problem is how one understands the term “categories” in Weston’s sentence.

So far, my overview here, like Weston, has proceeded as if it was clear what people were passing for, and being read as. This is symptomatic for many considerations of passing. Since gender passing seems to operate as a ‘crossing’ of a binarily structured identity category, it is often conceptualized as equally binary: one, as an FTM-identified person, can either pass for male, pass into the category of man, or, being read, fall back into the category of woman. But the gender binary is a highly complicated production that involves many other moves than ‘crossing,’ and operates in interdependence with age (think e.g. of butches passing for younger males), sexual orientation, disability, race (think of Siobhan Somerville’s call for attention to the “imbrication of racial and sexual discourses”<sup>120</sup>), etc. The unpredictability of social gendering means, for instance, that one can also be read into the category of transman (or even transsexual woman). Even “deviant” might in some circumstances function as a category itself. Weston’s “gendered absolutes” suggest an all-encompassing binary where much else is moving in the semantic field.<sup>121</sup> So one may always end up passing, but this is not the end of gender trouble. While all categories may be equally neatly tagged, they are not equal (in a persistent culture of male supremacy, this would even be true in an absolute male-female binary). Several pages later, Weston points to the power dynamics that render certain people prone to the interpretive scrutiny, the violation of “unsexing,”<sup>122</sup> when she writes that although anyone is potentially susceptible to it, “the process is not random.”<sup>123</sup> In other words, it is not necessarily clear what people pass for and whether this passing dissolves all subversive potential and doubt. Besides, people can end up passing, and then not passing, and then passing again... Time, Weston seems to say, ultimately makes one pass. But following her logic (and even her emphasis as apparent in her interest in the zero moment of “unsexed”), it can also be thought of as bringing new moments of “unsexing.”

<sup>118</sup> Weston, 28.

<sup>119</sup> Weston, 31.

<sup>120</sup> Somerville, Siobhan B., Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000) 166.

<sup>121</sup> “To keep the term ‘gender’ apart from both masculinity and femininity is to safeguard a theoretical perspective by which one might offer an account of how the binary of masculine and feminine comes to exhaust the semantic field of gender. [...] [G]ender has a way of moving beyond that naturalized binary.” Butler, Undoing Gender 42f.

<sup>122</sup> The fact that it works as a violation (an expression of the fault lines of the truth discourse around gender) that transgender people are more likely to be subjected to, makes “unsexing” a somewhat troublesome term. See also Prosser’s reference to ‘unsexed’ as part of the stigma associated with transsexuality. Prosser, 81.

<sup>123</sup> Weston, 50.

It is not merely its “flash of discomfort” that makes Weston’s text on gender and temporality appealing to a project on photography. Dealing with the issue of passing in the photographs at hand, it may be helpful to consider whether (and if so, how) FTM-bodies undergo, confront, negotiate, or avoid interpretive “unsexing” or, to circumvent the fraught term, “moments of doubt before reclassification.” That, in Weston’s formulation, one gets “thrown up against the question [...] ‘What are you?’” conjures up the issue of who is asking/looking/being addressed, and the resultant relativity of the answer (or of whether there is a question at all). All this would be the connection to gender passing. But there are also concerns arising on the level of time. Photography arrests (otherwise – here we go again – passing) moments of time. That, by the way, is the quality many, including Jeremy Hawthorn, see as central to photography’s relation to death. But Hawthorn also says something else: The photograph is, unlike the world, characterized by its ability to “freeze itself for our unhurried contemplation.”<sup>124</sup> It is unlikely that this actually extends Weston’s “fleeting interval of interpretation,” i.e. the attribution of gender. But the interval may have the opportunity of repetition/re-vision and it occurs under the condition of time frozen in representation (bringing shunned visuality back into play very prominently).

My connection of photography and gender (passing) as both heavily invested in discourses of realness in some respects concurs with Jay Prosser’s link between photography and transsexuality in his first book:

Occupying similar ground between referentiality and representation, transsexuality might be conceived as a parallel ‘form.’ As a transformation of the material body, transsexuality is inextricably hooked into the register of the real. [...] [T]ranssexuality is equally bound to representation, dependent on its symbolization to be real.<sup>125</sup>

But it also differs from it in that speaking of reality-claims is not the same as speaking of ‘the register of the real.’ He seems to suggest a kind of linear trajectory in which transsexuality is first represented/symbolized, and subsequently becomes real. But given the complexities of ‘passing’ and ‘being,’ it would be advisable to move beyond a notion of trans\* exceptionalism by recognizing the dependence on representation and symbolization of all gender<sup>126</sup> (and all materiality of bodies) and be more doubtful about being ‘real’ as something to be achieved. Prosser, it must be added, revisits and significantly alters his argument in his latest book, rethinking the notion that the ‘real’ can be achieved and the earlier use he “made of photography as referential.”<sup>127</sup> His two readings/uses of photographs of FTM-bodies will be discussed and elaborated on at some length in subsequent chapters. Here it is important that Halberstam, in response to Prosser’s Second Skins, calls for a helpful distinction

---

<sup>124</sup> Hawthorn, Jeremy, "Death and the Image: Photography, the Gaze, and the Limits of Realism," Against the Grain/Gegen den Strich gelesen, eds. Peter Drexler and Rainer Schnoor (Berlin: trafo, 2004) 161.

<sup>125</sup> Prosser, 208f.

<sup>126</sup> Of course, it plays out differently for different subject positionalities.

<sup>127</sup> Prosser, Jay, Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005) 16.

between 'realness' and the 'real' [...]. [Realness] is not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation, it is the way that people – minorities excluded from the domain of the real – appropriate the real and its effects. Realness, the appropriation of the attributes of the real, one could say, is precisely the transsexual condition. The real, on the other hand, is that which always exists elsewhere as a fantasy of belonging and being.<sup>128</sup>

Exclusion and appropriation in this quote speak to the political dimension and stakes of 'real value.' Butler suggests that transgender enters *into the political field* "by not only making us question what is real, and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted."<sup>129</sup> And here, photography comes in as one of the ways to institute such new modes of reality. I will argue that in the examples of transgender photography at issue here, photography as a technology of embodiment<sup>130</sup> is, in short-circuiting the reality-claims of photography and gender, called upon to award realness to marginalized FTM-bodies, even in photos that trouble a seamless passing for male. They put "the real in inverted (queer) commas,"<sup>131</sup> as Prosser writes about a collection of photographs by Del LaGrace Volcano.

### A Family of *Men*? - Coming to communal terms

*What is a 'subculture'? What distinguishes it from a 'community'? [...] These are obstinate questions to which there is no agreed answer, but rather a debate [...].*<sup>132</sup>  
Sarah Thornton

"The Family of Man," a Museum of Modern Art exhibition, traveled to forty countries between 1956 and 1962 and was viewed by about nine million people, making it perhaps the most widely known and critically referenced exhibition in the history of photography.<sup>133</sup> Roland Barthes was among the first to criticize its underlying

ambiguous myth of the human 'community', which serves as an alibi to a large part of our humanism. This myth functions in two stages: first the difference between human morphologies is asserted, exoticism is insistently stressed, [...] Then, from this pluralism, a type of unity is magically produced. [...] [O]ne hints that there is underlying each one an identical 'nature', that their diversity is only formal and does not belie the existence of a common mould.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Halberstam, "Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography," 17.

<sup>129</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender* 217.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Jones's title: Jones, Amelia, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27.4 (2002).

<sup>131</sup> Prosser, Jay, "The Art of Ph/Autography," *Sublime Mutations: Bodies of Work 1990-2000*, ed. Del LaGrace Volcano (Tübingen: Konkursbuch, 2000) 7.

<sup>132</sup> Thornton, Sarah, "General Introduction," *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 1.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Kaplan, 55ff.

<sup>134</sup> Barthes, Roland, "The Great Family of Man," *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000) 11.

That such harsh criticism of the myth of community is occasioned by photographic practices is indicative of how central issues of community can be to photographs as arguments in the world. They are certainly very central to my reading of the cultural work of FTM-bodies in transgender photography, so the question of how to frame/name these issues deserves some consideration.

The title of this subchapter, "A Family of *Men*," cuts two ways: It intervenes into the myth of unity by inserting transmen into the picture, into the position of the universal, thereby cracking the "mould" (a little). But it also becomes apparent that a mere insertion is not enough to subvert all of the problematic implications of the formulation and its photographic practices. The title limits the transgender 'family' to men (no matter how loosely/queerly the term may be [un-]defined) and arranges its subject in a semantic field, "the language of family,"<sup>135</sup> that tends to be heteronormative, naturalizing, as well as domesticating in its claim to be all-encompassing<sup>136</sup> (as in "The Family of Man") and/or 'nuclear.' Hence, it is not a term I suggest be used metaphorically, but rather remembered as a warning that neither identity nor community membership are ever straightforward or simple.<sup>137</sup>

If terms referencing community are so contested and fraught, how can one speak of transgender photographers and their works on FTM-bodies as members and makers of 'groups,' 'networks,' 'audiences' with a certain situatedness (of recognition, affiliation, identification or interpretation) in relation to these works?

Judith Halberstam's preference in her work on queer subcultures for the term subculture, highlighting "transient, extrafamilial, and oppositional modes of affiliation,"<sup>138</sup> is very suggestive, especially because she uses the modifier 'queer' to attack some of the problematic "biases of the tradition of subcultural studies towards the countercultural, the deviant, the young – and the masculine."<sup>139</sup> Halberstam argues that

[w]e need to alter our understandings of subcultures in several important ways in order to address the specificities of queer subcultures and queer subcultural sites [...] [and] expand the definition of subculture beyond its most banal significations of youth in crisis.<sup>140</sup>

In 'queering' the term subculture, she demonstrates that it, too, carries problematic connotations and is often used in ways one might not want to uncritically fall in line with. Nevertheless, she points more rigorously to "the conservative stakes in community,"<sup>141</sup> a characterization Halberstam shares with Nikki Sullivan, who questions the representation that "community is [...] a source of strength, a safe place

<sup>135</sup> Robson, Ruthann, "Resisting the Family: Repositioning Lesbians in Legal Theory," Sappho Goes to Law School (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 156.

<sup>136</sup> Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" 53.

<sup>137</sup> See Sullivan, Nikki, "Community and its Discontents," A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory (New York: New York UP, 2003) 140.

<sup>138</sup> Halberstam, In a Queer Time & Place 153f.

<sup>139</sup> Thornton, 5.

<sup>140</sup> Halberstam, In a Queer Time & Place 161f.

<sup>141</sup> Halberstam, In a Queer Time & Place 153f.

you share with others like you, a ‘home.’”<sup>142</sup> Thornton means as much when she writes: “‘Community’ tends to suggest a more permanent population, often aligned to a neighborhood, of which the family is the key constituent part.”<sup>143</sup>

But the equation is not as simple as ‘c is for conservative.’ In her chapter on (queer) community and its discontents, Sullivan also rehashes more self-reflexive (or progressive, if you will) conceptualizations of community:

Community, in this sense, rather than denying or covering over differences in the service of unity, is the experience of the impossibility of communion, the experience of radical difference. [...] Consequently, on this model, queer community is less a collection of individuals who share a common sexual orientation (queer), and more a fracturing process that enables difference and diversity and the radical unknowability of such.<sup>144</sup>

Sullivan also notes that community can be conceived of “as something we consciously choose to join,” instead of stable and organic, and that “[s]uch communities often define themselves as opposed to, and autonomous from, ‘mainstream’ culture.”<sup>145</sup>

Apparently, communities can very well be thought of as oppositional. And even though Halberstam’s argument that “[s]ubcultures provide a vital critique of the seemingly organic nature of ‘community’”<sup>146</sup> is very valid, subcultures, too, are sometimes conceived of as “organic.”<sup>147</sup> Thus, an explicit distancing<sup>148</sup> not necessarily of subculture from community (or vice versa), but of both from notions of being organic and other problematic semantic dimensions may always be needed.

There is some value in both of the respective terms for talking about transgender photography’s portrayed, interpretive, addressed, and receptive ‘group(s).’ I therefore propose to think of the formation, the construct,<sup>149</sup> of the subsequent chapters – no matter whether in a specific formulation it may be called only community or subculture – as a *subcultural community* (or as *communities*). Linking subculture and community in this way might seem redundant and pleonastic, when, as we have seen, their referents are considered so close that some “use the terms interchangeably.”<sup>150</sup>

But the link does have several advantages:

Transgender communities are subcultural, in the sense that they are not majoritarian, dominant or mainstream. While this doesn’t necessarily make them oppositional, it at least makes them alternative. If subculture “is often thought of as a social world, a

---

<sup>142</sup> Sullivan, 137.

<sup>143</sup> Thornton, 2.

<sup>144</sup> Sullivan, 148.

<sup>145</sup> Sullivan, 139.

<sup>146</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place* 153f.

<sup>147</sup> Thornton, 4.

<sup>148</sup> This is nicely exemplified in the way Halberstam and Sullivan use ‘queer’ to critically rework subculture and community, respectively.

<sup>149</sup> “[I]n the process of portraying social groups, scholars inevitably construct them” Thornton, 5.

<sup>150</sup> Thornton, 2.

shared perspective, which is not attached firmly to any definite group or segment,”<sup>151</sup> it is also more easily dislodged from fixed notions of identity, it calls forth ideas of subcultural practices and puts less emphasis on belonging. Thinking of a community as subcultural highlights affiliation and practices, the making of community, rather than its givenness, the graduality within which one can be more or less involved.

Holding on to community, on the other hand, avoids subculture’s associations with youth and teenage rebellion,<sup>152</sup> and preserves a stronger sense of materiality, i.e. the practitioners behind the practices, the participants (in short, the people involved), as well as relationships and circulation of information and support. Community calls for solidarity, it opens the semantic field of ‘community service,’ of “sharing”<sup>153</sup> – even though it is important to keep in mind that community means merely the appeal to sociality and commonality (so as to not return to naïve and romantic ideas that overlook fracturing and unbelonging!). Community is a relation, and thus more easily conceived of as constitutive to relational being.<sup>154</sup> Whereas subculture carries less of a burden of fixed identity, community can help to highlight that it is not simply preexisting autonomous individuals who form a subculture (or community), but that the subject is social and dependant:

What this means is that there is not first of all being (or individuals), and then being-with (community or society), but rather, being is always already a being-with, the subject is always already a part of the social, the world of others [...].<sup>155</sup>

Interestingly enough, it is precisely this philosophical notion of community that interests Kaplan in his study of photography and community: “What I am calling community-exposed photography [...] begins with the critique of subjectivity.”<sup>156</sup>

Kaplan also points out that “photographic images have externalized and realized how we imagine community,”<sup>157</sup> i.e. that there are photographic images/-inations of community. Thinking along the lines of *subcultural communities* in addition enables a look at communities of images: Rephrasing W.J.T. Mitchell slightly, it is tempting to say that to live in any *subculture* whatsoever is to live in a visual *subculture*.<sup>158</sup> One of the basic tenets of *Passing Moments* is that photography – production, circulation, and reception – is a technology of community-making,<sup>159</sup> as well as photographs are one of FTM-transgender embodiment.

<sup>151</sup> Irwin, John, "Notes on the Status of the Concept Subculture [1970]," *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 67.

<sup>152</sup> Not least because teenage rebellion comes with a boring Oedipal narrative.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1991) 25.

<sup>154</sup> “And so, Being ‘itself’ comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will – in any case this is what I am trying to argue – *as community*.” Nancy, 6.

<sup>155</sup> Sullivan, 147.

<sup>156</sup> Kaplan, xvii.

<sup>157</sup> Kaplan, xv.

<sup>158</sup> Mitchell, 349.

<sup>159</sup> Nancy insists that community “is not a matter of making,” but he addresses a very general idea of community that might be in less need of ‘making’ (or seem less made) than subcultural ones. Nancy, 35.

Arriving at a definitional compromise like *subcultural community* through a rather longish terminological debate hopefully means to heed Robert Reid-Pharr's warning that one "must approach with the greatest of trepidation notions such as innocence, tradition, community and home."<sup>160</sup> This project's investigation of the nexus between transgender photography and community must walk the fine line of recognizing a (subcultural) "being-with"<sup>161</sup> without forcing a "Family of *Men*."

### Works Cited:

- Baer, Ulrich. Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002.
- Barrett, Terry. Criticizing Photographs. 4 ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
- Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- . "The Great Family of Man." Posthumanism. Ed. Neil Badmington. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000. 11-13.
- Bright, Deborah, ed. The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Butler, Judith. Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex". New York and London: Routledge, 1993.
- . Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. 1990. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.
- . Undoing Gender. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Evans, Caroline, and Lorraine Gamman. "The Gaze Revisited, Or Reviewing Queer Viewing." A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture. Eds. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson. New York: Routledge, 1995. 13-56.
- Ginsberg, Elaine K. "Introduction: The Politics of Passing." Passing and the Fictions of Identity. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996. 1-18.
- Halberstam, Judith. "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity." Feminist Theory and the Body. Eds. J. Price and M. Shildrik. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 125-33.
- . "Hidden Worlds: Photography and Subcultural Lives." Lecture. University of Freiburg, 07/07/2004.
- . In a Queer Time & Place. New York and London: New York UP, 2005.
- . "Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography." Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion. Eds. Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg. New York: New York UP, 2001.
- Hall, Donald E. Queer Theories. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hall, Stuart. "Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-war Black Settlement." Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography. Eds. Jo Spence and Patricia Holland. London: Virago, 1991. 152-64.
- Hausman, Bernice L. Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. "Death and the Image: Photography, the Gaze, and the Limits of Realism." Against the Grain/Gegen den Strich gelesen. Eds. Peter Drexler and Rainer Schnoor. Berlin: trafo, 2004.
- Holschbach, Susanne. "Einleitung." Diskurse der Fotografie. Ed. Herta Wolf. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003. 7-21.

<sup>160</sup> Reid-Pharr, Robert, "Sweet Black Bad Ass, or Who is this Queer Black in Queer Black Studies?," Quer durch die Geisteswissenschaften: Perspektiven der Queer Theory, eds. Elahe Haschemi Yekani and Beatrice Michaelis (Berlin: Querverlag, 2005) 190.

<sup>161</sup> This is Nancy's term. Nancy, 14.

- hooks, bell. Art on My Mind: Visual Politics. New York: The New Press, 1995.
- Irwin, John. "Notes on the Status of the Concept Subculture [1970]." The Subcultures Reader. Eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. 66-70.
- Jones, Amelia. "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment." Signs 27.4 (2002): 947-78.
- Kaplan, Louis. American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Kroeger, Brooke. Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are. New York: Public Affairs, 2003.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. The Inoperative Community. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1991.
- Prosser, Jay. "The Art of Ph/Autography." Sublime Mutations: Bodies of Work 1990-2000. Ed. Del LaGrace Volcano. Tübingen: Konkursbuch, 2000. 6-11.
- . Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- . Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality. New York: Columbia UP, 1998.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert. "Sweet Black Bad Ass, or Who is this Queer Black in Queer Black Studies?" Queer durch die Geisteswissenschaften: Perspektiven der Queer Theory. Eds. Elahe Haschemi Yekani and Beatrice Michaelis. Berlin: Querverlag, 2005. 168-90.
- Ribbat, Christoph. Blickkontakt: Zur Beziehungsgeschichte amerikanischer Literatur und Fotografie. Munich: Wilhelm Fink V, 2003.
- . "Queer and Straight Photography." Amerikastudien 46.1 (2001): 27-39.
- Robson, Ruthann. "Resisting the Family: Repositioning Lesbians in Legal Theory." Sappho Goes to Law School. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. 153-70.
- Roen, Katrina. "'Either/Or' and 'Both/Neither': Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics." Signs 27.2 (2001): 501-22.
- Rubin, Henry S. "Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man." Men Doing Feminism. Ed. Tom Digby. New York and London: Routledge, 1998. 305-24.
- Sachsse, Rolf. Fotografie. Vom technischen Bildmittel zur Krise der Repräsentation. Köln: Deubner Verlag für Kunst, Theorie & Praxis, 2003.
- Schlossberg, Linda. "Introduction: Rites of Passage." Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion. Eds. Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg. New York: New York UP, 2001.
- Seaton, Elizabeth. "Imitating Authorities: Theory, Gender, and Photographic Discourse." Theory Rules: Art as Theory / Theory and Art. Eds. Jody Berland, Will Straw and David Tomas. Toronto, Buffalo, London: XYZ Books and U of Toronto P, 1996. 157-75.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." Touching Feeling. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003. 123-51.
- Sekula, Allan. "The Body and the Archive." The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography. Ed. Richard Bolton. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1989. 343-89.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000.
- Sontag, Susan. On Photography. 1977. London: Penguin, 2002.
- . Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory. Eds. Katie Conboy and others. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. 337-59.
- Sullivan, Nikki. "Community and its Discontents." A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory. New York: New York UP, 2003. 136-50.
- Taylor, Melanie. "*Peter (A Young English Girl)*: Visualizing Transgender Masculinities." Camera Obscura 19.2 (2004): 1-46.
- Thornton, Sarah. "General Introduction." The Subcultures Reader. Eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. 1-7.
- Tyler, Carole-Anne. "Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference." Feminism Meets Queer Theory. Eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997. 227-65.

- Vettel-Becker, Patricia. Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Weston, Kath. Gender in Real Time: Power and Transcience in a Visual Age. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
- Whittle, Stephen. Respect and Equality: Transsexual and Transgender Rights. London, Sydney, Portland (OR): Cavendish, 2002.